



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	580
Ukraine War	580
Middle East	582
Conflict Resolution	587
European Union	589
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	591
Foreign Policy	591
International Relations	593
International Relations	595
Middle East	597
Ukraine War	599
EU Agreements	602
Conflict Resolution	605
Northern Ireland	607
Messages to the Dáil	610
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	610
Forestry Sector	610
Fisheries Protection	612
Food Safety	614
Nitrates Usage	616
Water Pollution	619
EU Meetings	621
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	623
Tillage Sector	623
Animal Diseases	626
Agriculture Industry	628
Food Safety	630

Animal Diseases	632
Environmental Schemes	635
Common Agricultural Policy	637
Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil	639
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	641
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	655
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation.....	657
Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025: First Stage	668
Sudan: Statements.....	670
Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee	700
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	700
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	701
Heritage Sites	701
Schools Building Projects	703
Family Resource Centres	706
Taxi Regulations.....	709
Social Welfare Payments.....	712
Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]	715

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 27 Samhain 2025

Thursday, 27 November 2025

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Ukraine War

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on her Department's recent engagements with the government of Ukraine in relation to the ongoing conflict and efforts made to reach a ceasefire. [66753/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: First, I want to take the opportunity to wish the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the best of luck in her new role. I look forward to working with her on issues of concern to Ireland and our interests.

The question relates to our engagement with the Government of Ukraine and to the ongoing conflict and the efforts made to reach a ceasefire. Unfortunately, some of the discussions in recent weeks and some of the proposals on the table are rather partial and, unfortunately, undermine the position of the Government of Ukraine. That is regrettable, but ultimately we are all hoping for a peace that is sustainable and just. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the Irish Government's assessment of the situation.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy. I look forward to working with him and our colleagues on many matters.

At this critical juncture for Ukraine, after almost four years of brutal Russian aggression, I want to emphasise Ireland's unequivocal support and solidarity with Ukraine. This something I have emphasised a number of times, most recently when I attended the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 20 November where Ukraine's foreign affairs minister, Andrii Sybiha, spoke about recent Russian attacks against Ukraine. A meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council which took place yesterday was also addressed by the foreign affairs minister.

I welcome the ongoing efforts of President Trump and the United States to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to achieve just and lasting peace and security, not just for

Ukraine, but for the EU and Europe more widely. It is more important than ever that Europe and the United States continue to work together to achieve this. The emerging US proposals, as well as plans for further negotiations, represent a step forward. I welcome the progress made at Sunday's meeting between the US and Ukraine in Geneva. We look forward to these talks continuing in a positive manner and to further progress being achieved.

Ukraine is engaging positively and constructively in these discussions despite the ongoing Russian military assault on its towns, cities, ports and critical energy infrastructure. It is crucial that any agreement upholds Ukraine's sovereignty and independence based on respect for the principles of the UN Charter. The fundamental principle that borders cannot be changed by force must be upheld.

Any agreement must also protect Ukraine and Europe's vital security. That means strong, credible guarantees that ensure Ukraine can defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity to avoid a repetition of the past. As the Deputy said, while the proposals in the plan put forward by the United States are welcome, there are very clearly areas that need further work. I am sure that is exactly what is happening at the moment. This is not just vital for Ukraine, it is also vital for the European Union and all member states, including Ireland. It is welcome that assurances have been given that the EU and Europe will be involved in discussions on issues that directly affect us, including enlargement and immobilised assets.

The Taoiseach and I remain in close contact with our European and Ukrainian counterparts. The Taoiseach took part in a meeting of the European Council on 24 November and attended a meeting of the coalition of the willing on 25 November, which was on the margins of the EU-African Union Summit. I will revert to the Deputy on further engagements.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I think it was last week that we had statements on Ukraine. They are now an annual occurrence. Every time they occur, many contributors reflect that they hope the next time such statements happen, there will be a ceasefire. Unfortunately, the war and assault on Ukraine continue unabated. In recent weeks, we have seen some appalling attacks, including on Ternopil, with civilians and civilian infrastructure being targeted. In that context, it is very difficult and almost near-impossible to see that Russia's interest in peace is in any way sincere. For a long time, it has been merely paying lip-service to that.

It is unfortunate the confusion that exists in relation to the role of the United States in mediating. If it is taking on a role in mediating peace, it is welcome. Clearly, it has the potential to play a leadership role. Unfortunately, what has emerged is somewhat confusing in terms of what is being said by Marco Rubio on the one hand and by Steve Witkoff on the other. I think this has made the position of Ukraine difficult. What is the Government's assessment of what is currently being proposed by the US Government?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy's initial comments. My own view, and I think that of many member states, as was reflected in our recent meeting, is that the actions of Russia indicate that it is not a country that is seeking peace. That is very clear, not just from the fact that innocent civilians have been killed in recent days and weeks but also the fact that there continue to be persistent hybrid threats to neighbouring member states. Our friends in Poland told us very clearly of the blowing up of a trainline and only for one device not

detonating, there would have been significant casualties. Similarly, hybrid threats are happening at airports in nearby countries, such as Lithuania and others. These are not the actions of a country that wants peace.

I genuinely welcome the engagement of the United States and its efforts to bring forward a peace agreement. Again, I have to stress that the 28-point plan that we initially saw over the weekend very clearly had elements that needed further work. The engagement of EU member states, the United States, Ukraine and the EU institutions in discussions is welcome, as is the clear indication from President Trump more recently that the deadline of today is no longer a deadline. I think it shows a clear commitment on all sides, separate to Russia, to reach that agreement. We need to make sure all sides are putting pressure on Russia to come around the table to realise that long-lasting peace and to make sure that it is a peace that will not just have strong implications for Ukraine, but for the EU and the European region in general.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Arbitrary deadlines are challenging at the best of times, but arbitrary deadlines when the goalposts keep shifting are even more challenging. It is important that time be taken to properly calibrate realistic proposals. This is about justice, but it is also about sustainability and ensuring a sustainable peace. A peace that is unjust and does not reflect the rights of the people of Ukraine will ultimately fail to be sustainable and will only embolden Russia.

The work that the Irish Government and other governments have done in relation to the several thousand abducted children is very important. I hope they will continue that work. It is a profound crime and a crime against humanity. It is hard to imagine the pain and grief this has caused for individual families. It is also an assault against the Ukrainian people. Will the Minister outline how the Government intends to advance that particular work and ensure that there is justice and accountability for that crime?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We will continue to support all efforts towards a peaceful resolution. In the meantime, and separate to and in conjunction with that, there are other ways in which we can provide support and assistance.

In relation to the forcibly transported or deported Ukrainian children, we will continue to raise this at every avenue possible. We have been clear in condemning what is the absolutely horrific crime of taking young children from their families. We are engaging with UN agencies to try to find other solutions to this issue and I will consistently raise it with my colleagues at the Foreign Affairs Council, through our UN agencies and with the High Representative.

In terms of other ways in which we are providing support, we will continue to provide financial support, making sure that we provide the humanitarian aid needed in Ukraine. We will also provide the non-lethal support that is needed. We are also being very strong in our support for Ukraine's accession. It is really important that Ukraine and others see its pathway towards membership of the European Union. From the outset, we have been very strong in providing that support and we want to make sure that continues. It is something that we will be focusing on very strongly throughout our Presidency.

Middle East

2. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on the Israeli settlements (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66299/25]

4. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the current progress of the drafting of the Israeli settlements (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. [66755/25]

Deputy Duncan Smith: I genuinely wish the Minister, Deputy McEntee, all the best in her new role. I am sure the experience gained in her previous Ministry in European affairs will be a great grounding for the work she has ahead.

My question is seeking an update on the prohibition of settlement goods Bill, which has been the primary Bill in terms of the public's attention during this calendar year. It has been on the books for seven years in some form. I would love an update to see how it is progressing.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 2 and 4 together.

In June, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The main purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. The Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade held a number of hearings on the general scheme and received submissions representing a range of views and perspectives.

Pre-legislative scrutiny is an important part of the legislative process and the Tánaiste thanked the committee for its report on receipt. Detailed work to analyse the report and its recommendations is well underway. The regulatory impact assessment is also currently being finalised by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and will be available on the Department's website when completed, which I hope will be soon. The next steps in the process, including the timeline for the progress of the Bill, are being considered by the Government.

The general scheme fulfils our commitment in the programme for Government to prohibit the import of goods from settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. Trade in services is considerably more complex than is the case with goods and there remains considerable legal uncertainty as to whether the inclusion of services is permissible under EU law. Legal clarity is needed on this point. This is something that I want to receive, but I made it very clear at the very outset when being appointed to this role that I intended to fulfil our commitment in the programme for Government to enact this legislation. We must also take account of practical issues with regard to the implementation should services be included in the scope of the Bill.

It remains the Government's preference that collective action would be taken at an EU level and we continue to pursue this. In this context, Ireland has welcomed the announcements by the Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian and Belgian Governments regarding the banning of the importation of goods produced in illegal Israeli settlements.

9 o'clock

We obviously know that those measures were introduced prior to the ceasefire, but those announcements by the Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian and Belgian Governments were welcome. We are working with all of them.

Notwithstanding the positive and welcome developments with regard to the ceasefire and hostage release deal in Gaza, Ireland has also made clear its view that the EU must keep the package of measures proposed by the Commission in response to Israeli human rights and other breaches on the table. It is an issue that Ireland raised and led the charge on. We want to ensure a significant response and to keep those measures on the table. They are very much firmly on the table.

The primary focus at EU level right now is ensuring the success of the ceasefire and peace deal, and of making a contribution to international efforts in this regard, as well as making sure that the humanitarian aid that is so badly needed does not just continue to flow but increases. There are significant concerns about the number of young people who will face starvation if the number of trucks does not increase significantly. It is essential that peace be given a chance to succeed. It is essential that the humanitarian aid and assistance that are needed are allowed to enter Gaza. The Government in Ireland will do everything in our power to ensure we support both of these objectives.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Pre-legislative scrutiny ended on 31 July and a report was delivered. On 2 October in this Chamber, the previous Minister for foreign affairs said it was his expectation that the Bill would be before the Dáil by the end of November. Today is the last sitting day of November, so that is obviously not happening. Between 2 October and now, what has happened and what has changed?

The Minister said in her initial contribution that there remained legal uncertainty. What work is the Attorney General doing to unravel that legal uncertainty? Has the Minister set a deadline for when she wishes to receive legal certainty on services? We believe there is legal certainty, and this was well-aired and demonstrated during the pre-legislative scrutiny stage. This feels as if it is being delayed unduly.

On the economic impact side, we are awaiting a report from the Department of foreign affairs. Has the Minister set a deadline for when that report will be delivered to her? What pressure is she putting on the Department of foreign affairs in that regard?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The occupied territories Bill still matters. It has always mattered. It mattered long before the last two and half - almost three - years of slaughter in Gaza. It was all the more important during that period. It is important that every state that wants to stand against a genocide uses whatever leverage it can. It mattered before that and it still matters because my position and that of the Irish Government and many other people is that we want to see a sustainable two-state solution. The Israeli Government is continuing its actions, even now, against the backdrop of a ceasefire. It is difficult to call it a "ceasefire" when hundreds of people have been killed by Israeli forces in the period. We have seen attacks on people by settlers. We have incursions and continued undermining of the two-state solution. It cannot be that we freeze here with the ceasefire, insofar as it is a ceasefire, and leave it at that. Clearly, we need to see pressure put on Israel to ensure that the two-state solution is made sustainable.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Government's position has been clear that our overall objective is a two-state solution. We have been working towards that for some time and not just in recent years. It has always been our goal and objective. That is why we recognised the State of Palestine. It is why we are doing everything to ensure that this peace is lasting. It is why we will be hosting a global alliance summit in January, bringing together Heads of State to show how we have, on our own island, progressed a peaceful resolution to what was a long-lasting conflict. We want to do everything in our power to ensure the territorial integrity of Palestine is upheld. That will be our continued goal and objective.

In terms of the legislation itself, I, as Minister, have in the past week given a clear commitment that we will fulfil our commitments in the programme for Government. Deputies will appreciate that I have only been in the Department for a week. I am looking for the advice of the Attorney General on services. We have always been clear that enacting the legislation in terms of services is more complex. I await the advice of the Attorney General. I have not received the draft Bill but anticipate I will receive it soon. I expect the work that is being carried out on the impact assessment to be ready soon.

The Deputies will appreciate that I have only been in the Department for a week. I want to ensure that I have all of the information available to me to be able to progress this legislation. I will work with colleagues on all sides of the House. I am absolutely clear that as a country, we need to do everything in our power to bring what is a very fragile ceasefire to a more permanent ceasefire. We need to ensure that we continue to use whatever levers are available to us to hold people accountable. I acknowledge that, since the ceasefire, there have been killings of innocent civilians. That is why the measures against the EU-Israel agreement are firmly on the table. This issue was raised at the most recent meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council. I am pleased to say that it is still firmly on the agenda. Other colleagues and I made it clear that it needed to remain on the agenda because we cannot have a situation where the ceasefire is broken on either side. Deputies can be assured of my commitment to making sure that we make progress and continue to support the Palestinian people in what is an absolutely dire situation at the moment.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Notwithstanding the short time she has been in the job, this is the only new legislation that has come through the foreign affairs brief this year. It is not a small Bill. It has been well aired. The Minister spoke about it in the national media this year as a member of the Government. At this stage, the people of Ireland and Opposition TDs need more certainty in respect of timelines. It is not good enough for the Minister to say that the legal advice is going to come soon. We would like timelines for where it is going to happen. What are the issues in relation to the legal uncertainty?

The Minister mentioned last week that she may have to have discussions with American politicians. I would like more clarity on her plans in that regard. It feels as if this legislation is being delayed unduly, with a wall of silence at this point.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Following on from that, I think communication with any politicians in America or anywhere else must make clear exactly what this legislation does. It is squarely within the footprint of international law. It is targeting the occupied territories and nothing else.

I will make a couple of points on the legal side of things. I find this debate rather frustrating. We have been told there is legal uncertainty. It is difficult to understand how it was possible to ensure there was an effective ban on trade in goods and services in response to the situation in Ukraine. The fact that it originated at European level does not make a difference to how it is implemented at a domestic level. If it is initiated domestically, the functional way in which it is implemented is much the same. What legal obstacles did not exist in the other case that exist in this one? It is very hard to understand.

I made the point that the Minister was new in the brief. I hope a change of course can happen. It seems to me that the Government has been stuck between deciding to drop the Bill, slow-pedal it or water it down, and has decided to do all of the above, to date. It is hard to justify, given the way it has been articulated for so long, how it has taken so long to get to this point.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I do not think it is any secret that our colleagues in the United States of America do not support this legislation. It is no secret that many states have anti-boycott legislation and have been clear about how this would be enacted. I do not think we should ignore that. At the same time, Ireland has always done what is the right thing in terms of-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We should be clear about what it is.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Ireland has always done what has been the right thing to do, including in recognising Palestine and encouraging other member states to do so. I am pleased that so many other member states have done that. We have provided financial assistance. We were one of the first member states to support the South African case. We have ensured that at every step of the way, we have done the right thing. We will consistently continue to do the right thing.

I intend to write to my colleague, the High Representative, the chair of the Foreign Affairs Council, in relation to humanitarian aid. Given the update I received this week, I am not happy that we are doing enough to ensure more aid is getting to those who need it the most. There is more we can do, and can continue to do, to ensure that those who need our help the most get it immediately and that our actions have an impact.

The Government has not been shy about saying that collective responses have a greater impact. We have been working with our European colleagues to ensure there is clearly an item on the table to remove preferential tariffs from Israel if it continues in the same vein. That needs to remain on the table. Ursula von der Leyen's most recent comments expressed that it was something that must remain on the table.

In terms of the legislation, there are certain things that still need to be completed. I assure Deputies that once I have the legal advice from the Attorney General and the results of the work being done to look at the overall regulatory impact assessment, and once I assess that and the huge body work that was done by the committee - I acknowledge that, and my colleagues who put considerable work into pre-legislative scrutiny - we will be able to work collectively to bring forward legislation and ensure that our overall commitment to support Palestine and a two-state solution, and to bring about a lasting solution, can be front and centre in what we do here.

Conflict Resolution

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the situation in Sudan; her position on same and in particular the need to ensure access to appropriate aid; and her further position on the concerning flow of weapons into the country. [66754/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The scenes we are seeing in the media on our phones and televisions from Sudan are horrific. They are redolent of the kinds of scenes we saw in Rwanda 30 years ago. People are being cut down in the street and being slaughtered indiscriminately and unfortunately it seems to be escalating. Tens of thousands of people in Darfur are unaccounted for. We do not know where they are or whether they have got out of El-Fasher. We will have a debate on it later, but it is vital that we keep focus on this issue. I look forward to hearing about the Government's position.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Deputies Duncan Smith and Heneghan have asked similar questions and we will have a longer debate on it this afternoon.

The conflict in Sudan has resulted in the world's most severe humanitarian and protection crisis, with more than 150,000 deaths, over 2 million forcibly displaced and more than 21 million people facing crisis levels of hunger. Following the appalling recent attacks against civilians by the Rapid Support Forces, RSF, in El-Fasher, violence continues to escalate in north Darfur and the Kordofan regions. Large-scale, ethnically motivated atrocities, including summary executions, civilian detentions and rape and starvation as weapons of war, are unfortunately widespread.

The Government has consistently highlighted the scale of the humanitarian crisis and the urgent need to act to ensure the protection of civilians, particularly women and girls, and safe passage for those fleeing. Also critical is the need to ensure unimpeded humanitarian access in line with international humanitarian law to reach those most in need. This year, Ireland has provided €14.3 million in humanitarian assistance to support the people most in need in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries. This assistance is channelled through trusted UN, Red Cross, Irish NGO and local partners to provide life-saving assistance. We are committed to further increasing our assistance in 2026.

At EU level, Ireland has taken a leading role in initiating discussions on Sudan, including on the establishment of the EU sanctions regime and, most recently, in calling for the implementation of the October Council conclusions. The November EU Foreign Affairs Council, which the Minister, Deputy McEntee, attended, adopted restrictive measures against a senior RSF commander. We are gravely concerned by reports that arms continue to reach parties to the conflict, despite existing UN and EU embargoes and sanctions. Along with our EU and other partners, we have called on all external actors directly or indirectly supplying arms and funds to the parties to cease their support immediately. Ireland, with the EU, will continue to advocate for the expansion of the arms embargo to the whole territory of Sudan.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the statement. It is perhaps more robust than the statements made previously, in the latter part. The people of Sudan have suffered for a considerable period and unfortunately the hope they had a few years ago that a democratic settlement would emerge has not materialised. This appalling conflict is now happening. It is important that all parties to the conflict, the government forces and the RSF, seek peace to the greatest extent possible. The Government just made a good statement about the flow of weapons. It has been widely commented on and is widely believed that the Government of the United Arab Emirates is one of the surrogates. The Irish Government seems to be reluctant to identify that. Has the Government raised directly with those governments that are escalating the conflict our concerns about the flow of arms?

Deputy Neale Richmond: On discussions, as I mentioned, the Government has raised this at EU and UN levels, where appropriate. I have also personally discussed it at a political level with senior officials and ministers from the UAE. That happened at a meeting in Dublin a number of months ago, meetings held in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and at High-Level Week of the UN General Assembly, and I will be meeting the UAE ambassador in a few hours.

We have made it clear to all parties that we do not believe there should be any breaches of the arms embargo. Any allegations of that have been consistently denied by the UAE, as the Deputy will appreciate. However, the UAE, alongside the USA, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, is a member of the Quad, a group formed with the aim of resolving the conflict and we have encouraged all parties with influence to advocate for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and an end to the suffering of civilians. However, substantive political engagement and co-ordination is also needed between the EU, the African Union, the Quad and other international and national actors on de-escalation and mediation efforts.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I appreciate that it is denied. Whether those denials are credible is another question. I welcome that the Minister of State will meet the ambassador later. It is important that this issue is on the agenda. Unfortunately, it seems that the people of Sudan are to some extent pawns in a struggle for regional influence and they are paying a very high price for it. The other humanitarian element of it is the huge refugee crisis. The neighbouring countries, particularly Egypt and perhaps Chad and others, have significant numbers of refugees. I understand from what the Minister of State said that the Irish Government will continue to support investment in ensuring those refugees are supported. It is the largest movement of people in the world at the moment. Literally millions of people are looking for refuge.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Let there be no underestimation. This is the worst humanitarian crisis happening in the world at the moment and it has been for a considerable time. It is the largest displacement of people, and Ireland will not be found wanting.

As I mentioned, so far this year, we have allocated €4.3 million in humanitarian assistance. That included an additional €3 million announced by me and the Tánaiste in September at the UN and we are committed to increasing that in 2026 as needed. We also made sure our payments to UN agency partners were brought forward this year due to the liquidity crisis, to make sure refugees from this conflict and others were not victims of a liquidity crisis. I intend

to visit Uganda, which is home to a lot of refugees, particularly from South Sudan, in February next year and will continue to make sure our support is known about and felt.

Question No. 4 taken with Question No. 2.

European Union

5. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will outline the preparations currently under way in her Department to meet the demands of Ireland's Presidency of the European Union; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66109/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Ar dtús báire, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire ar a ceapachán mar Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála. Go n-éirí léi ina post nua.

My question concerns the significant opportunity Ireland will have this year to help to shape the clár, or agenda, of the European Council. Will the Minister outline the preparations currently under way in her Department?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. As he outlined, Ireland will hold the EU Presidency in the second half of 2026. This is an important opportunity and, as the new Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I am looking forward to engaging actively on our policy and operational preparations. My engagement with officials in the Department has already started. I am determined that we will make the most of our Presidency to shape the EU agenda. The priorities and policy programme for our Presidency will take into account the EU's strategic agenda for 2024 to 2029 and the legislative work programme of the European Commission. They will also be shaped by our own priorities across an array of areas, including but not limited to, the protection of EU values at home and abroad, the enlargement of the Union, European security and the competitiveness and simplification agenda, which covers a wide range of areas including housing, the delivery of infrastructure, agriculture and many other areas. It is important to stress, however, that our policy programme will only be finalised and published shortly before the start of our Presidency term in June 2026. The Deputy will appreciate that many things change, many issues come off the agenda because they are concluded and other issues need to be further addressed. We need to take that into account in setting out our final priorities.

I recognise the importance, in particular, of ensuring that stakeholder groups also have their voices heard. We need to make sure that everyone in Ireland feels they have an opportunity to have their say and be part of the overall discussion and work. A series of consultation meetings with stakeholders from across business, civil society, trade unions and other interest groups has recently taken place. A call for written submissions on the development of Ireland's policy priorities, hosted on *gov.ie*, launched on 5 November and will run until 12 December. I encourage anybody who wants to have their say to take part in that online consultation. Work is also under way to prepare for more than 250 meetings that will be hosted in Ireland during the Presidency. These will include a summit of the European Political Community, an informal meeting of the European Council and up to 22 informal ministerial meetings. The Government has made a firm commitment to resource and deliver a successful Presidency. I am confident

that in 2026, Ireland will be able to make a significant and positive contribution in leading the EU's agenda.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is clear that there is a lot of work already under way on planning. I welcome that. There will be over 250 meetings in Ireland over a short period of time. It is going to be intense, as we saw before, in 2013. It is an opportunity for the country as we take a leadership role in steering the EU agenda for that period of time and dealing with some of the challenges that confront us collectively across the EU bloc. The Minister mentioned stakeholders. At the climate committee yesterday, the question was raised as to how members of the committee could in some way help shape the agenda of those six months from a climate, energy and environmental perspective. The current US Administration has unfortunately turned its face against renewable energy but, in the long term, the European Union could take a leadership position in an area like that. How could an Oireachtas committee or other groups feed into that agenda?

Deputy Helen McEntee: There is still significant time to be able to shape that agenda because we will not have our final policies set out until June. We have six months to make sure that we are clear as to what we want on the agenda and that we are following on from items that are currently being discussed. There have been in-person meetings to date. For example, the Tánaiste had a large meeting with IBEC where there were representatives from climate and sustainability organisations and individual Ministers. The Minister for climate is having meetings and discussions. I have no doubt that each individual committee will be able either to make a submission or have a face-to-face engagement with the relevant Ministers to make sure that, as we develop our policy priorities, the elected representatives in this House have their voices heard clearly on the agenda. Again, I encourage those who perhaps are not in this House to make sure their voices are heard through the online submission process. I will make sure that in my work in my Department - we are co-ordinating all of this - as many opportunities as possible are made available to everyone to be able to shape the overall agenda, including when it comes to climate and sustainability.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: We would appreciate that opportunity from the committee's perspective. I will pass that onto the committee. To come back to the matter of the United States, the US is a long-term ally of Europe and Ireland. Irrespective of what Administration is in place in the United States and the coming and goings of individual Administrations, that relationship is important for Ireland and Europe in the long term. When it comes to formulation, engagement and leadership in the coming period, I ask that Ireland try to take a leadership role in making sure that relationship with the US are maintained and strengthened, so that we continue it long term into the future and the partnership between the US and Europe flourishes once again. The current Administration has changed certain priorities. That is fair enough; it is democratically elected. However, in the long-term that relationship needs to endure. What are the Minister's views on that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I assure the Deputy and others that we will always work hard to maintain, enhance and grow what is a strong and important relationship to us, namely, the Irish-US relationship. We see in that an opportunity to strengthen and grow the EU-US relationship as well. Only this week, at the European Foreign Affairs Trade Council, we had a visit from

Ambassador Greer and Secretary Lutnick and there were warm discussions and engagement, despite the fact that we have had a challenging number of months in our trade and in the overall position we find ourselves in now. What is clear from that engagement is that the relationship between the US and EU is a lasting relationship and one of the most important relationships. Within that, we see our relationship with the US as being a vital support to that and vital for us, not just in economic terms but in cultural terms and in so many other ways as well. Whether it is through the US trade council or our engagement on climate, cultural affairs or other areas, we will ensure that, through the Presidency and at every other stage, we are prioritising and working on that relationship, irrespective of who is in the US Administration.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Foreign Policy

6. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will provide an update on Ireland's current diplomatic priorities in light of recent international developments, with particular reference to Ireland's role in promoting peace, security, and the protection of human rights abroad; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66633/25]

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for his timely question. Ireland's diplomatic priorities are set out in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's statement of strategy for 2025 to 2028, which includes active diplomatic engagement in promoting peace, security and the protection of human rights abroad. We pursue these objectives against the backdrop of a changing geopolitical landscape and a wide range of challenges that require global solutions. In this context, the Government prioritises reinforcing the multilateral system and the international legal order with the UN Charter at its heart. The Government also prioritises developing and maintaining strong and wide-ranging bilateral relations with key international partners.

Our membership of the European Union, the world's longest and most successful peace project, is central to how we ensure our security, prosperity and well-being as a country. As the Minister outlined to Deputy Ó Muirí, our preparations to hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the latter half of next year are well under way.

Ireland is actively engaged in international efforts to bring an end to Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine. The Government is committed to providing continued political, humanitarian, economic and non-lethal military support to Ukraine. Responding to conflict in the Middle East is also a priority. The Government consistently advocates at EU and UN level for the two-state solution and the equal right to self-determination, peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis alike, as well as full adherence to international law and international humanitarian law.

Ireland continues to prioritise the promotion of human rights in a period where human rights norms are facing considerable pushback. Reflecting our commitment in this area, Ireland's campaign for the election to a seat on the Human Rights Council from 2027 to 2029 was launched last week in New York. Ireland prioritises engagement in support of a stable and secure international environment through conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding,

disarmament and non-proliferation, and promoting the resolution of disputes through multilateral diplomacy based on the principles of the UN Charter. The Government also makes sure that we have a full focus on foreign and security policy and common security and defence policy in a range of multilateral institutions, including the UN, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, and the Council of Europe.

Deputy Tony McCormack: The Minister of State mentioned Ireland's commitment to peace and human rights. Given that negotiations between Russia and Ukraine are now under way, can Ireland use its strong reputation for principled diplomacy to support these efforts? Does the Minister of State see a role for Ireland within the EU, UN or OSCE in helping to reinforce the conditions for a credible, just and durable peace, including humanitarian protections and respect for international law?

Deputy Neale Richmond: There are a couple of elements to that. The negotiations under way in Geneva between the US and Ukraine are welcome, but Ireland is not a direct party to them. One issue that came up at the Foreign Affairs Council, which I attended virtually yesterday, was the need for there to be an EU track to the negotiations. While there are three European countries around the negotiations, we want to make sure there is a real EU voice. Within that EU voice will be Ireland's voice. Ireland is clear that we want a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, one that is based on international law and respecting the territorial sovereignty of the people of Ukraine. To be blunt, there can be nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. Equally, there can be nothing about Europe without Europe. Ireland will continue to push at UN level the need to respect international law. There are a number of cases before various international courts that Ireland will be a party to, highlighting concerns in relation to human rights abuses and, as the Minister alluded to, in relation to the forced abduction of children from Ukraine.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Ireland's own peace process culminating in the Good Friday Agreement was built on dialogue, patience, international support and the difficult work of building trust between communities. With negotiations now taking place between Russia and Ukraine, does the Department see scope for Ireland to share the lessons we learned from our experience in areas like mediation, inclusive dialogue, confidence building and reconciliation? Is the Government prepared to offer that expertise through purely civilian and diplomatic channels to international partners supporting this peace process?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Yes, absolutely. When there is a ceasefire and a peace agreement in Ukraine, Ireland is fully prepared to play a real part in that. Just two weeks ago, I was in Colombia, one of 13 Irish Aid countries, and our programme work there is solely in relation to peace. The experience of Ireland has been put into action to uphold the 2016 peace agreement. I visited projects with decommissioned FARC guerrillas who were being supported by the Irish Government to turn their backs on violence, engage on peace and lead far better lives. This is the sort of thing that we can offer to the world. Deputies in this Chamber regularly refer to this in the context of the situation in the Middle East, and that is true too. There are lots of Irish NGOs working in places like Ramallah in this regard.

Ukraine offers us a great opportunity but, first and foremost, let there be no equivocation about our support for the people of Ukraine. We want to make sure that real peace comes to Ukraine and that this happens through an absolute ceasefire as soon as possible.

International Relations

7. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she has engaged, or plans to engage, with the UK authorities regarding the treatment and prosecution of members of Palestine Action and those who have expressed solidarity with the group; if she will raise concerns about the protection of the rights to peaceful protest, fair trial and humane conditions of detention; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66238/25]

Deputy Liam Quaide: Has the Minister, her immediate predecessor or anyone in her Department engaged with the UK authorities regarding the Palestine Action group, which was proscribed as a terrorist organisation by the UK Government in July? The group was blacklisted for instigating a number of direct action protests against weapons manufacturers involved in selling arms to Israel in the context of its campaign of genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza against the civilian population there since October 2023.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Ireland maintains regular and constructive dialogue with UK authorities at all levels on a wide range of matters. In the last week, I have engaged with my UK counterpart since taking up office and I look forward to meeting with the UK's Foreign Secretary, Ms Yvette Cooper, shortly to take forward our co-operation on a range of foreign policy issues.

An important area of engagement between the UK and Ireland is on Middle East policy, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I particularly welcome the British Government's decision in September to formally recognise the State of Palestine and its active engagement in the 20-point peace plan to end the conflict in Gaza, which was endorsed by the UN Security Council on 17 November.

I welcome the ceasefire and hostage release deal in Gaza as an important step on the road to peace. Our focus is now on preserving the ceasefire and ensuring that humanitarian aid flows into and throughout Gaza. Ireland has been clear that all parties must adhere to their commitments in full, desist from any actions inconsistent with what has been agreed and continue to negotiate in good faith to ensure full implementation.

In respect of the British Government's decision to designate Palestinian Action as a terrorist organisation under its Terrorism Act, I understand that this decision is subject to judicial review and is currently before the High Court in London. The Deputy will appreciate that I cannot comment on a live case that is before the British courts, in the same way that I would not comment on something that is before the Irish courts. More broadly, though, the Government remains committed to upholding human rights, including those pertaining to freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest, both domestically and internationally. These fundamental rights are enshrined in international human rights instruments to which both Ireland and the United Kingdom are signatories. These are issues that would regularly be

discussed as part of overall political dialogue between Ireland and all of its partners, including the UK.

My Department will continue to monitor developments in this area, including in respect of any cases involving Irish citizens. The provision of consular assistance to Irish citizens is an important element of the work of my Department. Consular assistance is provided in a strictly confidential manner and, as with all cases, my Department does not comment on the details of individual cases. That said, we are there to support any Irish citizens.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The UK Government has, in an Orwellian inversion of truth, conflated protest against genocide with terrorism through its proscription of the Palestine Action group, placing it, absurdly, on the same blacklist as organisations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. Since the Palestine Action group has been designated a terrorist organisation, at least 2,300 people have been arrested according to the group Defend Our Juries, and a large proportion of these arrests took place at peaceful, sit-in protests in public areas across August and September of this year. Those arrested have included young students, teachers, pensioners and even an 83-year-old retired vicar.

The United Nations human rights chief, Mr. Volker Türk, said that the UK Government's designation is "disturbing" and "disproportionate and unnecessary", while the Council of Europe, Europe's human rights watchdog, criticised the "excessive limits" it places on the right to protest. Does the Minister plan to raise the protection of the right to protest when she next engages with her UK counterpart?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Again, as I said already, as this is before the courts, I will not specifically reference what the Deputy has outlined. What I will do is restate and emphasise Ireland's absolute support for and commitment to a person's right to peacefully protest, which is extremely important. We also place a very strong emphasis on making sure that any Irish citizens abroad who find themselves in difficulty, whether relating to something like this or otherwise, would have consular assistance. Again, I stress that if any citizens need that assistance, it is there and available to them. Of course, in my engagement with Ms Yvette Cooper or anyone else in the UK Government, I will stress that this is an area that Ireland is very clear and very strong on. Individuals have a right to peaceful protest on matters that are concerning to them. Obviously, where that crosses the line and there is violence and use of force, we move into a different space, but we uphold every individual's international right to peaceful protest. That is certainly something that I can and will raise with my counterpart when I meet her, hopefully in the weeks ahead.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The acclaimed and best-selling Irish author, Sally Rooney, was unable to collect her recent Sky Arts award for literature in person as she did not feel safe entering the UK due to the risk of arrest for her public support of Palestine Action. She has even had to cancel all future public engagements in the UK and has expressed concerns that because of her intention to support Palestine Action financially, the availability of her books in the UK could be affected. One of the leading Irish authors of our time does not now feel she can enter the UK because of her support for a group protesting genocide. This is just one example of how the UK's designation of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation begins to

seep into every corner of society and constrains the right of Irish citizens as well as British citizens to speak the truth at this darkest time in our history.

What meaningful engagement does the Minister plan to have with her UK counterpart about the UK Government's treatment and prosecution of members of Palestine Action? Will the Minister push for the UK Government to end its designation of the group as a terror organisation?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Again, as this is currently before the courts, it is not an issue I can raise with my UK counterpart or discuss here today. What I can and will say to my colleague when we meet is that there is an absolute necessity to uphold the individual's right to peaceful protest. This is something that we cherish in this country. More broadly, in terms of our support for Palestine, there has been unanimous support for the need to reach a ceasefire. I very much welcome the ceasefire that has been reached, albeit that it is very fragile and difficult. I also very much welcome the fact that hostages have been released and that humanitarian aid has started to flow into Gaza, albeit, again, not at the level that it needs to be. We need to make sure that every single one of our actions now cements and upholds the ceasefire that is currently in place. I have no doubt that citizens in Ireland will continue to raise their voices, to make sure their concerns are heard and to work collectively continue to do everything we can to ensure that the ceasefire holds. For any citizens of Ireland in the UK or anywhere else who need consular assistance, it is there and available to them. We need to make sure that as a country we reiterate and stress every individual's human right to peaceful protest and that is certainly something I will do with my UK colleague.

International Relations

8. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she has had any recent discussions with her EU counterparts about the situation in Afghanistan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66240/25]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I will avail of this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on her appointment. Foreign affairs has always been an important brief but at this time of international geopolitical flux or chaos, it is a particularly important role to play. Working with the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, I am sure the Minister will do a very fine job for us on the international stage.

My question relates to the situation in Afghanistan and whether the Minister has yet had the opportunity to, or will in the future, engage with her counterparts on the situation there.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the *iar-Cheann Comhairle* for raising this important issue. Afghanistan was not discussed at the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council which the Minister, Deputy McEntee, attended on 20 November. However, the Minister and I believe that the current dire human rights and humanitarian situation in Afghanistan clearly warrants a political level discussion within the Foreign Affairs Council, given that the last such discussion took place in March 2023. Ireland will continue to advocate for this within the relevant Council bodies. We will also continue to fully support the role of the EU, through its special envoy for Afghanistan, in working to address the human rights and humanitarian

situation within Afghanistan, including through the UN-led Doha process. The EU special envoy has recently briefed our ambassador to the EU peace and security committee on the current situation. In line with the commitment in *Securing Ireland's Future*, we will continue to play an active role in seeking to maintain EU and international attention on the appalling human rights situation in Afghanistan and, in particular, the unacceptable restrictions imposed by the Taliban on Afghan women and girls. Along with other EU partners, Ireland played a lead role in pressing for the establishment of an independent investigative mechanism on Afghanistan at the most recent session of the UN Human Rights Council. This represents a significant milestone in the pursuit of truth, justice and accountability for the people of Afghanistan.

The Department also continues to support the Afghan people through the provision of urgent humanitarian assistance, which is principally channelled through the UN, its agencies, and trusted international partner organisations. Since January 2020, Ireland has provided over €20 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan through the Irish Aid programme, including almost €5 million in humanitarian funding this year to respond to needs in Afghanistan and among Afghan refugees in the region, including the specific needs of women and girls.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I thank the Minister of State for that response. I am sure we all remember some years ago when America withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban began to march on Kabul. When Ashraf Ghani ran away and left his people to the fate that awaited them under the Taliban, many of us hoped there might be a more moderate regime than had been feared but it is quite clear from the most recent report from Richard Bennett, the UN special rapporteur, that the situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. One of the reasons for my question is that the two most recent statements from the Council of Ministers came in August 2023 and September 2024. While I know it is inordinately difficult, given the number of conflicts there are in the world at present, we cannot let the real tragedy that is happening in Afghanistan become a forgotten one. It needs to be continuously kept on the agenda.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I fundamentally agree with the Deputy. Although I do not know if the words "moderate" and "Taliban" can ever be used in the same sentence, I understand the point he is trying to make. I absolutely agree that the attention needs to be continued. That is one of the main reasons that there is a specific reference in the programme for Government to protecting women and girls in Afghanistan. We believe we have a responsibility to make sure that Ireland, as a country that has a vested interest in the future of that country, continues to state that. I will undertake to see, along with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, if we can get this on the agenda of the next Foreign Affairs Council meeting, even as a sub-item for discussion. Indeed, we can continue to look at other forums for ways that we can raise this, most particularly through our current campaign for election to the UN Human Rights Council that will sit from 2027 to 2029.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I thank the Minister of State for that response. It is particularly positive. I am very proud of my own local community in Kildare where people came together to welcome two Afghani families into the local community. They have settled in very well but they continue to fear what is happening in their home country. We hear from them of the disasters that are taking place for women and girls - their exclusion from society and relegation

to a form of subhuman living. We are also conscious of the situation developing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, how the Pakistani Taliban is becoming ever more active and the loss of life that is happening in the conflict between those two countries. We should also acknowledge the number of individuals, schools and agencies in the country that are trying to provide educational services remotely to women and girls in Afghanistan. We should use whatever resources we can to assist them in that.

Deputy Neale Richmond: One of the things that was often lost in the public mindset around this discussion is that level of compassion - perhaps eclipsed understandably by the sheer scale of compassion needed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine that led to over 110,000 people coming to this country. However, before that, after the fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban, that level of community-level, driven compassion was there. I know the cases in Kildare referenced by the Deputy. I think of my own sister and my parliamentary assistant, ironically both called Emma, who were very involved in the campaign to bring the Afghani women's hockey team here. We were able to get the entire team out of Afghanistan. Women playing sport is a crime under the Taliban. That is just a particular reference. Obviously, Ireland has a new embassy in Pakistan and we continue to use our resident ambassador to make sure we advocate for peace in that region and ensure Ireland's voice at a community level is heard on an international level too.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Middle East

11. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views and those of other EU ministers for foreign affairs in relation to post-ceasefire attacks in Gaza. [66462/25]

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I simply want to ask the Minister her views, and those of her EU counterparts, in relation to the post-ceasefire attacks in Gaza.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Achieving a just and lasting settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been a priority for this Government, with Ireland's foreign policy on this issue clear and consistent and grounded in the commitment to upholding international law. The agreement on a ceasefire and the hostage deal represents welcome progress. It has brought desperately-needed respite to Palestinians in Gaza and relief to the people of Israel, although we all know it is a very fragile ceasefire and something that needs to be worked on. I commend the efforts of the US, as well as Qatar, Türkiye and Egypt, in securing this much-needed agreement. I also commend efforts to progress implementation of what has been agreed. The international community, Ireland included, must play its part if these efforts are to succeed.

In this context, the adoption of a resolution on Gaza by the UN Security Council, the first in many years, is a further step towards implementation of the peace plan. The ceasefire is nevertheless fragile, as I have mentioned, and must be preserved. All parties must adhere to their commitments in full. It is clear that this is not happening, given the fact that many innocent civilians have been killed, even in recent days. All parties must desist from any actions inconsistent with what has been agreed and continue to negotiate in good faith to ensure

full implementation. Our current focus is on supporting efforts to build up this fragile ceasefire and we call on all parties to work to ensure peace efforts are successful and to refrain from further violence. The primary focus at EU level right now is ensuring the success of the ceasefire and the peace deal and on making contributions to international efforts.

We also must urgently address the humanitarian situation on the ground in Gaza. I mentioned this before. We had an update at the Council earlier last week where we were told that over 40,000 young children are still at risk of starvation. While there is a significant increase in the number of humanitarian trucks allowing aid to flow into Gaza, it is nowhere near enough. I reiterate that I intend to write to the EU High Representative to see what further political pressure Europe and all of our counterparts can put on Israel to make sure it lifts the significant blockade on some of the aid that is due to get in. These were among the issues discussed at the most recent Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels last Monday.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: One could not but be quite surprised at what has happened. We welcome the ceasefire, although it is a ceasefire of sorts, that has happened in Gaza but we are aware of the fact that slaughter of the innocents still continues and we do not, in truth, have a full and total ceasefire. Gaza's health ministry reported that more than 300 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli fire and nearly 900 injured since the ceasefire agreement came into effect on 10 October. The situation needs to be continuously monitored. I mentioned surprise. I refer to surprise that the Trump involvement achieved welcome progress in this particular matter, while the international architecture we have put in place to deal with conflict had failed and failed abysmally. Instead, we see the Trump regime, with all its weaknesses and peculiarities, achieving something in Gaza.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is right to highlight the fact that the ceasefire at the moment is very clearly being breached in some instances but we also need to make sure our focus does not get averted from what is happening in the West Bank. I raised with colleagues last week that the number of people who have been killed in the West Bank in the last two years alone is almost as many as those who have been killed in the last 20 years. There has been an escalation of violence within the West Bank and we need to consistently call this out and do everything in our power to make sure this can be responded to adequately. The suspension of preferential tariffs via the association agreement is still on the table because Ireland and other member states have pushed for that to be the case. We cannot allow either side or party to the peace agreement to breach that in the way they are consistently doing, so we need to make sure that there are levers still available to us to respond to these changes. Of course, from our perspective, we will continue to provide aid that is very much needed, not just in terms of humanitarian aid and the trucks that are flowing in, but also other financing that is now going to be needed to rebuild Gaza. We must make sure that we can focus on that and that it is a priority when we talk about a ceasefire and a lasting peace.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: The question of aid is of vital importance. We cannot ignore the fact, for example, that the Israelis have not yet agreed to open the Rafah crossing, and that the aid is accessing the Palestinian people via a variety of much smaller entry points.

Irish people would like to know if we can be confident that the aid we are providing is getting to the people of Gaza. Irish people have been very generous in their support of the people there and they want to be confident that the aid is reaching those who so desperately need it.

In terms of the pursuit of a long-term solution to this particular problem, it is obvious that the war - the murder and mayhem - has claimed the attention of all entities dealing with this, but how far are we from sitting down internationally to begin to engage on a long-term solution to the problems?

Deputy Brian Brennan: I spoke previously about the fact that I flew to Egypt and met people on the ground. I have kept in touch with these people, including in recent weeks. I am very concerned about the word "ceasefire" because that is not the feeling on the ground.

I have two huge concerns. The first is the level of aid getting through. The second is the rebuilding process. What is the plan to rebuild? We must also look at the rebuilding of the people - the young people - who have gone through this horrific war. We must look at the build-up to this before October. These kids have grown up with the sound of bombs in their ears. If we do not do something about the rebuilding of the young people, we are going to have a major issue around the world. They will be angry young men and women. They will be unleashed on the world unless they get help.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The immediate challenge is that there are tens of thousands of children who will starve to death if we do not increase the number of aid trucks that are flowing through. It is important to say that Irish aid trucks are getting through. Our officials have been on the ground and have been able to verify that, whether it is tents, food or medicine that is being provided, but we need substantially more. There are blockages being put in the way by Israel and we need that to change. I will do everything that I can and use my voice and work with colleagues to ensure that the aid increases.

In terms of the rebuilding of Gaza, in my meeting last week, we also had the first meeting with the Palestinian Authority and the Prime Minister and members of the Palestinian Authority who attended, with members from the Middle East, Europe and beyond. I specifically raised the fact that €3 billion in tax revenues are being withheld by Israel that should be going directly to Palestine, which would significantly help with the rebuilding, the investment in hospitals that is so badly needed and support for schools and young people. I will continue to raise this and many more issues, but we will also continue to ensure that aid is provided. Once the ceasefire agreement was reached, €6 million was committed by this Government to provide aid directly to Palestinian people. That aid is getting through, albeit, again, not at the rate we want it to.

Ukraine War

12. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on whether there can be no peace agreement imposed on Ukraine without its support and the support of the European Union; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66597/25]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I want to return to the question of Ukraine and to ask the Minister if she agrees that there can be no peace agreement imposed on Ukraine without its support and the support of the European Union generally.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As the Minister of State said in reply to an earlier question, there can be nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. That is something that has consistently been said at a European level. At this critical juncture for Ukraine, after almost four years of brutal Russian aggression, I want to again emphasise Ireland's unequivocal support and solidarity with Ukraine. I welcome the ongoing efforts of President Trump and the United States to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to achieve a just and lasting peace and security for Ukraine but also for the wider European region.

It is more important than ever that Europe and the United States continue to work together to achieve this as it can only happen with the support of Europe as well as the US. The emerging US proposals, as well as plans for further negotiations, represent a very welcome step forward. I also welcome the progress made at Sunday's meetings between the US and Ukraine in Geneva. I welcome the fact that EU institutions and member states were also present. We look forward to these talks continuing in a positive manner and to further progress being achieved.

Ukraine is engaging positively - we can see that from the commentary and President Zelenskyy himself. They are engaging constructively in these discussions despite the ongoing military assault on their towns, cities, ports and critical energy infrastructure. I do not believe the actions of Russia are the actions of a country that wants peace. However, we have to work towards that sole objective and goal.

A massive attack on Kharkiv on Sunday resulted in the loss of more innocent lives. This follows an appalling attack on Ternopil in recent weeks that killed 34 people, including six children. It is crucial that any agreement upholds Ukraine's sovereignty and independence and is based on respect for the principles of the UN Charter. The fundamental principle that borders cannot be changed by force must be upheld. Any agreement must also protect Ukraine's and Europe's vital security. That means strong, credible guarantees that ensure Ukraine can defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity to avoid a repetition of the past.

This is not just vital for Ukraine - it is also vital for the European Union and all its member states, including Ireland. It is welcome that assurances have been given that the EU will be involved in discussions on issues that directly relate to it, such as enlargement and immobilised assets.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I am not sure that I agree with the Minister in welcoming the nature of the American involvement in this particular situation. It has been characterised as being on Putin's side, appearing to be on Ukraine's side, and now being back on the Putin side again. Some people think that the current peace plan was written in Russian and translated via Google Translate. I am deeply concerned about many of the provisions in that plan, which seems to have the enthusiastic support of President Trump. One could believe, given recent statements, that Secretary Rubio is perhaps more realistic in his approach and is trying to inject a level of realism into the debate, but the bottom line is that Europe must be involved so as to ensure that, as the Minister quite rightly says, nothing is done about Ukraine without Ukraine's full involvement and without Ukraine being able to benefit at the end of the day.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have to acknowledge that there are very clear efforts on the part of the US to try and bring about a ceasefire, while at the same time acknowledging that elements of the 28 point plan that we saw put forward very clearly need further work. We cannot have a situation where land is ceded by force. That simply cannot be the basis for any type of ceasefire. We cannot have a situation where a country cannot in the future be able to defend itself should something like this happen again. Likewise, we cannot have a situation where Europe is committed to certain things without Europe being around the table. It is really important that Europe is part of the conversations, negotiations and discussions and that Ukraine agrees to whatever is put forward.

There is a recommendation or a proposal for an unconditional ceasefire that has been on the table since March. Ukraine has been very clear that it will sign up to that. It would ensure that all lines as they currently stand would be frozen, that people would come around the table and that negotiations on many of the matters that we have seen in the 28 point plan could be discussed at that stage. I would encourage that it would be something that is still on the table. We need to make sure that we support any discussions and negotiations but that our absolute commitment and priority is that Ukraine is supported and that it agrees to whatever is on the table in the proposals.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: We all want peace, but what is certain is that Russia cannot be rewarded for its crimes. It should not be readmitted to the G8 or reintegrated into the global economy.

The plan, for example, demands Ukrainian denazification, effectively validating Russia's absurd narrative that Ukraine is riddled with Nazis. I have been there, as have other Members of this House, and I do not think there is any evidence available to that end.

10 o'clock

There have been war crimes committed in Bucha, Irpin and other places, forced relocations to Russia of children, repeated strikes on apartment buildings, most recently in the western city of Ternopil, and the torture, abuse and execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war. Despite all this, the plan, as it currently stands, grants the Kremlin full immunity from prosecution. Does the Minister agree that whatever agreement might be reached there can be no normalisation of EU relations with Russia while the monster Putin is president?

Deputy Brian Brennan: I welcome the Government providing over €100 million in non-lethal military support to Ukraine. I welcome 116,000 Ukrainians here under the temporary protection directive, with it being estimated that some 80,000 will stay. I have a huge concern, though, over the peace process itself and the role Europe has played in it. The 28-point plan was made up without the involvement of Ukraine, and that is so wrong. Additionally, could the Minister give us an update on President Zelenskyy's outstanding invitation to Ireland?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I again stress that there are very clearly elements of the plan put forward that are not realistic, not credible and will not be accepted by Ukraine and will certainly not be accepted by the EU. We must, though, use this as a framework and basis for discussions, which, to date, have not taken place. It is very clear that this is an

illegal war, very clear that Vladimir Putin is responsible for war crimes and very clear that these are continuing as we speak, so we need to make sure that Ireland's voice is strong. We must continue to put pressure on Russia. In our conversations last week at the Foreign Affairs Council - and the 19th sanctions package is currently under way - there was a proposal and suggestion on a 20th package of sanctions. It is about how we can make sure we impose as much pressure on Russia as possible to try to bring it to the table, so that any negotiations around a peace process and a ceasefire are fair and balanced. It is important that Russia does feel pressure because, to date, for a lot of this ongoing war, Russia has not felt the pressure that it needs to. In Europe, we need to do everything we can through sanctions, diplomatic channels and our work with the US to make sure we can bring about a lasting peace. Again, this is not just about Ukraine, albeit that country is front and centre. This is already starting to seep into the security of European member states and we need to make sure it does not go any further.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the agreement of the House, I will go back to Question No. 10. Is that agreed? Agreed.

EU Agreements

10. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on the recent engagement at EU level on the EU-Israeli agreement and the Israeli Settlements (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66658/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Go raibh maith agat. I ask the Minister to provide an update on any engagement at EU level on the EU-Israeli agreement. We all know the humanitarian conditions that unfortunately have never been employed. We know what Israel has done. We know that maximum pressure and leverage need to be applied. We know that is probably the only reason we have a peace plan, if we can call it that, at this point in time.

I would also like to get an update, and I understand the Minister did speak about this earlier, in relation to the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. Again, however, it is not much good unless we do the job properly and that it happens quickly, with services included as well.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for the question. On 14 February 2024, the then Taoiseach, along with Prime Minister Sánchez of Spain, wrote to the President of the European Commission requesting an urgent review of whether Israel was complying with its humanitarian rights obligations under the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Furthermore, the letter requested that the Commission propose appropriate measures for the consideration of the Council, should it find that Israel was in breach of its obligations.

A review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, initiated by the Foreign Affairs Council in May 2025, found that actions taken by the Israeli Government represented a breach of essential elements relating to respect for human rights and democratic principles. The European Commission subsequently put forward a number of proposals, one of which was to suspend the core trade-related provisions of the Association Agreement. Ireland has welcomed the Commission proposals and encouraged other member states to support them. Notwithstanding

the positive and welcome recent developments with regard to a ceasefire and hostage release deal in Gaza, Ireland along with other member states, has made clear our view that the proposals should remain on the table. In her state of the Union address, the President of the European Commission was clear on the rationale for tabling the package, which remains valid, as we discussed last week.

The Government has always been of the view that the EU-Israel Association Agreement must be interpreted and applied in accordance with the obligations of the EU and its Member States under international law. In June, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The main purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. It remains the Government's preference that collective action would be taken at EU level and we continue to pursue this. At the EU level, the primary objective right now is ensuring the success of what is a very fragile ceasefire and peace deal.

In addition, the Tánaiste, in his capacity as the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, wrote to High Representative Kallas in advance of the June Foreign Affairs Council to ask how the Commission assesses the impact on the EU-Israel Association Agreement of the International Court of Justice, ICJ, advisory opinion of July 2024. The High Representative responded to his letter on 17 October, indicating the Commission's view that the EU's current approach is in line with the spirit and letter of the ICJ advisory opinion. Our assessment is different, so we are currently studying the detail of the response provided by the High Representative and considering next steps.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Go raibh maith agat, agus comhghairdeachas leis an Aire ar a post nua. Straightaway, we can all see there were particular issues in relation to the EU-Israel Association Agreement, and not only in the sense of the particular deal that was really sweet from the Israeli point of view. We talk of these humanitarian conditions but obviously there was absolutely no power in relation to enforcement. Unfortunately, there was also a lack of will across the European Union. I welcome that we and others have pushed in relation to this matter. I do not think it is an issue we can let slide.

While we have a peace plan, it is a peace plan in which Palestinians will suffer. We have seen that the Israeli regime is absolutely determined to ensure there is no two-state solution. As much as we need to push the EU, we also have to do the work we can do ourselves. Even though it is not everything, it would be good if we could publish the Attorney General's advice, so we could end that particular argument. We really need to see the occupied territories Bill enforced in full. As much as it might not have the impact that people talk about, in terms of it not having an absolutely spectacular impact, it is part of what Spain and Slovenia are doing, and it is similar to what happened with South Africa. I doubt that the action of the Dunnes Stores workers had a real financial impact but it was part of something wider and it made a huge difference in the long term. We need to be part of doing this.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I do acknowledge that other colleagues have made progress in terms of implementing legislation. Some of it did not have to happen in the same way that we have to progress our legislation. I stress also that it happened prior to the ceasefire. I think what is really important and what our focus and priority need to be on, not

just at home but at an EU level and internationally, is making sure that ceasefire holds. It is very clear breaches are occurring. It is very clear more humanitarian aid needs to be let through. This is why it is absolutely essential that in the context of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, the proposal that has been put on the table that would remove those preferential tariffs remains on the table. Ireland is the country that pushed for and initiated that process. I again reiterated the need for it to remain on the table at the Council meeting.

I will not lie. There are other member states and individuals who think we should take it off the table and that that would allow for further progress to be made. While there continue to be persistent breaches of the ceasefire by Israel, however, we need to make sure that every lever available to us is very firmly on the table.

In terms of the legislation, again I have given a very clear commitment that we will uphold our programme for Government commitment that we will progress it. I am waiting on further information and advice, and once I have that, we will be able to make further progress.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Not only do we need the maintenance of the ceasefire and to make sure there are no breaches but we also have to maintain whatever leverage we and the wider international community can on Israel. At this moment, we are somewhat glad it is not engaged in genocidal action but let us be absolutely clear it is determined, at least the regime at this point is, to make sure nobody can deliver justice, freedom, self-determination for the Palestinian people and a two-state solution. The fact is this is one of the few things we can do. We need to make sure we maintain whatever pressure we can. The EU-Israel Association Agreement is a blemish and a further disgrace in relation to how the European Union has dealt with this whole genocidal nightmare for the Palestinians.

Equally, we need to move on the occupied territories Bill. It is the one thing we can do. We need to end this argument in relation to legal matters. As I said, it is about the fact that we are doing this alongside others. This will have an impact. The reason there is a peace plan is that even Donald Trump did not like the idea of what the Israelis were doing, and the killing children and innocent people.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We need to acknowledge and look to the fact that the peace plan, although a lot of work still needs to be done, made reference to a pathway for a two-state solution. That is something Ireland has consistently called for and supports and that many other member states are now supporting. It is something we need to work towards in making sure we have a pathway towards a two-state solution. First and foremost, our priority needs to be ensuring the ceasefire, which is extremely fragile, can hold and that the thousands of malnourished and starving children and citizens more broadly who need aid get access to that aid, and that we ensure that what the Palestinian Authority needs to rebuild Gaza can be provided to it. At the meeting we had only recently, the first meeting of the Palestinian Authority with member states as well as countries in the Middle East and beyond, I restated Ireland's call for Israel to release over €3 billion of funds it is withholding in taxes. That would go a long way towards helping to start rebuilding, whether it is investment in hospitals and schools or shelter for those who need it most, particularly coming into what is going to be a cold winter period.

Conflict Resolution

13. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the steps Ireland is taking to seek to bring about an end to the conflict in Sudan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [65828/25]

35. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will provide an update on the ongoing conflict in Sudan, including the humanitarian impact on civilians, the status of diplomatic efforts to secure a ceasefire, and the supports Ireland is providing through humanitarian and development channels; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66720/25]

97. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on the situation in Sudan; her engagement with allies on the conflict; if Ireland will be providing increased levels of aid; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66301/25]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Question Nos. 13, 35 and 97 are grouped and Deputy Smith is in the House, so he can lead.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I am very thankful we are having statements on Sudan this afternoon. This question was submitted in advance of knowing that. I am looking for any update or information to the Minister can provide the House with in regard to what we are doing as a State in humanitarian terms to help alleviate, tackle, better understand or deal with the genocide, travesty and violence that is taking place in Sudan.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I propose to take Questions Nos. 13, 35 and 97 together.

I thank Deputy Smith, as I did Deputy Ó Laoghaire, for raising this matter consistently. It is going to be a very important debate this afternoon. The Government remains deeply concerned by the devastating conflict in Sudan, which has led to the world's worst humanitarian and protection crisis. More than 150,000 people have already been killed, some 12 million are forcibly displaced and over 21 million people face crisis levels of hunger, including famine. This is a man-made famine. I am appalled by the targeting of civilians by all parties to the conflict. I condemn the atrocities committed in El Fasher by the Rapid Support Forces, RSF, and the escalating violence in North Darfur. Large-scale, ethnically motivated atrocities, including summary executions, sexual and gender-based violence and the detention of civilians are part of a widespread pattern, including the use of rape and starvation as weapons of war.

These actions are unconscionable and must stop. There must be accountability and justice for such atrocities. Ireland, together with Germany, the UK, Netherlands and Norway, succeeded in ensuring the adoption of a resolution on the situation in El Fasher at a special session of the Human Rights Council on 14 November. The resolution requests the independent international fact-finding mission for Sudan to conduct an urgent inquiry into the violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law committed in and around El Fasher. The environment of impunity in Sudan simply must end.

Ireland has taken a leading role within the EU on the establishment of the EU sanctions regime. The EU Foreign Affairs Council in October adopted Council conclusions strongly condemning the ongoing conflict. Ireland successfully called for Sudan to be placed on the agenda at this month's EU Foreign Affairs Council, which adopted restrictive measures against a senior RSF commander.

The international community needs to exert greater pressure on the parties to return to the negotiating table and to engage in dialogue. I welcome the ongoing work of the Quad, including efforts to negotiate a three-month humanitarian truce. It is vital that there is substantive political engagement and co-ordination between the European Union, the African Union, the Quad and other international and national actors on de-escalation and mediation efforts. We will continue to work internationally with our EU and other partners to call on all parties to adhere to their obligations to protect civilians and aid workers, and to ensure immediate, unconditional and unhindered humanitarian access in full compliance with international humanitarian law.

In June, I signed a joint statement by 30 donor countries condemning attacks against civilians and humanitarian workers. I also joined an Australian-led declaration for the protection of humanitarian workers at the UN General Assembly in New York in September. Ireland has provided €14.3 million in humanitarian assistance so far in 2025 to support people most in need in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries. This assistance is channelled through trusted UN, Red Cross, Irish NGO and local partners to provide life-saving aid. We are committed to further increasing our assistance in 2026.

Ultimately, an agreement on a cessation of hostilities must be reached in order to end the suffering of the Sudanese people. This must be followed by a negotiated, permanent, peaceful and civilian-led political settlement that respects the territorial integrity of Sudan.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is clear to me that Ireland is taking this very seriously and is acting in our capacity, as much as we can, to support what is a very complex situation. I read one article that said the history of war in Sudan has both a long history and a short history, and both are very complicated. The numbers the Minister of State articulated in his response are absolutely astronomical. The velocity of violence taking place there is almost beyond comprehension. We have spent the last hour and a half here talking about, among other things, the illegal war in Ukraine and the ongoing tragedy and crisis in Palestine and Gaza, which are not insignificant by any means, but we need to do everything we can with our partners in the EU and the United Nations to ensure Sudan gets the attention it needs and deserves to bring the war, violence and killing to an end.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The history of war in Sudan is awful and bloody. It is also complex with regard to the parties to the war. We can talk about the RSF and the Government but we can also talk about various tribal militias who are agnostic with regard to who they side with in pursuit of their bloody aims.

This conflict is of a scale that is perhaps unfathomable to this House, to be honest. It is as bad as anything the continent has seen and while we are living in really difficult geopolitical times, it is no underestimation to say this is possibly the worst conflict but certainly the worst humanitarian disaster happening in the world at the moment. It is a humanitarian disaster that

is awful but it also having a real impact, materially, on the daily lives of the people who the Deputy and I represent in our constituencies. We should never lose that focus in regard to why it is not only the right thing for Ireland to be involved in this and provide that support but it is also the sensible thing.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is a really good assessment. It is unfathomable and difficult. As complex as any conflict is, sometimes such as in relation to Russia and Ukraine, it is clear who the aggressor is. It is clear who we are supporting and what side we are on. It is far more complex in Sudan with the nature of the belligerents, both the short and long history of conflict there and the nature of the type of violence itself. There are no easy answers here and Ireland certainly does not have the capacity on its own to solve this humanitarian crisis and bring it to an end. We must ensure that people in Sudan and the Sudanese people who are here know that the Irish Parliament, Government and State are doing everything we can with our allies and partner states to try to end the violence and the humanitarian disaster taking place. I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising the very large Sudanese population that lives here in Ireland. When we see things in the abstract and we look at news reports and everything else, we forget that these are people's family members and friends. These are people living in our constituencies who are worried about their family and friends and not knowing what the future holds.

In regard to Ireland's role, there are three major things we will continue to press. One is a call, with our partners, for an immediate cessation of the violence. Second, it will be for the real enforcement of the arms embargoes that have been place. Third and most importantly, it is the maintenance of our humanitarian support. As I said, we have allocated €4.3 million this year. That will include an additional €3 million announced by the Tánaiste and I in New York in September at the UN General Assembly but also real pressure to make sure humanitarian corridors are maintained. I have said it before in the House that 2025 is the most dangerous, deadly year to be a humanitarian aid worker in the world. The deaths of humanitarian workers in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine are unfathomable.

Northern Ireland

14. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she has further plans to engage with the British Government over the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the request for a fresh inquest into the 1973 killing of a person (details supplied), given that a fresh inquest was approved, only for the Act becoming law a few hours later; the support being provided to their family; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [66282/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The family of Michael Leonard have now waited more than 50 years for the truth about how Michael was killed by the RUC on the Donegal-Fermanagh border in 1973. New evidence contradicts the original account and raises serious questions. We now have a change of landscape in Britain. The old legacy Act is being dismantled and new legacy structures are being put in place. In light of these developments, has the Minister raised

Michael Leonard's case with the British Government or does she intend to raise it in a timely fashion?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The case of the person in question, Michael, and the family's desire for answers have been raised on a number of occasions at ministerial level with the UK Government. As the Deputy mentioned, following new evidence unearthed since the dismissal of the initial inquest in 1973, the Attorney General for Northern Ireland ordered a fresh inquest into the person in question's death on 30 April 2024. Unfortunately, this new inquest was never commenced due to the UK legacy Act, introduced in May 2024.

The joint framework on legacy, announced on 19 September by the two Governments, fundamentally reforms the 2023 UK legacy Act. It aims to provide a pathway to truth and accountability and, to the extent possible, justice for those most affected by the violence of the Troubles. It lifts the ban on inquests and provides a way forward for those inquests, such as the inquest of Michael, that were ordered but not commenced before the 2023 Act.

Once the implementing UK legislation has been passed and enacted, Michael's case will be independently assessed by the UK Solicitor General to consider whether it would be most appropriately dealt with by the reformed legacy commission or via the coronial system. This assessment will be carried out on the basis of specific criteria set out in legislation, including the views of families and the next of kin.

Too many families in Northern Ireland have waited for far too long for truth and accountability. My focus is now on making sure that the processes established by the joint framework are up and running as soon as possible. I have already engaged with Mr. Hilary Benn MP on this particular issue but also more broadly on ensuring that we can continue to strengthen and evolve relationships North, South, east and west. I look forward to, hopefully, meeting Ms Yvette Cooper MP soon and to making sure that those relations are strong and all matters can be discussed. I look forward to working with victim and survivor groups closely over the coming months, as well as with political parties in Northern Ireland, to ensure that the reformed legacy commission, once set up, has the ability to command the confidence of victims and survivors of the Troubles.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister. She may be aware that I have raised this issue countless times with the Government and her predecessor. I am sure she is aware of the circumstances of the case. She says she has raised this with Mr. Hilary Benn MP. I think she will agree that it is worth raising again. Michael was a 24-year-old Donegal man. He was shot in the back and killed by the RUC on the Border at Brookhill in Fermanagh near Pettigo. For decades, the official narrative was that he was shot by a single shot that was fired accidentally by the RUC. New evidence uncovered in 2023 in British army logs by researchers has since exposed that at least three shots were discharged by a member of the RUC, contradicting the original account and raising profound questions about the circumstances of his death. At that time in 2023, the Leonard family came here to Leinster House to ask for help from the Government. They deserve to finally have answers to their questions.

I welcome that the Minister says she has raised the case with Hilary Benn. What are the next steps she will take on behalf of the Government in respect of the case of Michael Leonard?

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is a case that has been ongoing for some time. It is important that families, and Michael's family in particular, get answers. Once the commitments in the joint framework are translated faithfully into legislation, the legacy commission will look and feel somewhat different from what we have had in the past. The governance and oversight structures will be much clearer and stronger. They will hopefully lead to greater independence, and then investigations can be carried out to recognised standards with statutory conflict of interest provisions to address real and perceived conflicts of interest. Importantly, a statutory victims and survivors advisory group will be established, ensuring that their voices are heard and they remain very much front and centre in this overall process.

The publication and the second reading of the Bill and the amendment to the legacy Act are moving forward. I welcome the speed at which the British Government has brought forward the Bill. It demonstrates the seriousness with which the secretary of state and his colleagues are approaching this absolutely essential work. The test will be to see if it faithfully reflects the agreement that was reached in September. I have every confidence in my initial engagement with Mr. Hilary Benn MP and others that they are working to ensure that this reflects faithfully the agreement that was put in place. Most important is that we can progress with the elements of the legislation that will hopefully give answers to Michael's family and to many others as well.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: As the Minister is aware, the legacy Act that came into existence in Britain on 1 May 2023 shut down an inquest into Michael's killing, incredibly, just hours after it was granted by the Attorney General. The case was an example of the cruelty of Britain's legacy Act writ large. As well the new evidence, the Attorney General granted the inquiry on the basis that the original inquest did not receive oral evidence from any of the RUC officers involved in the killing. Given the circumstances that this new evidence came too late before the cruel legacy Act was enacted, it is vital that the inquest into Michael's death be reopened. It is important that whatever happens in relation to the negotiations and phases of the framework for dealing with these matters, the inquiry into the killing of Michael Leonard be reopened. As the Minister knows, the family is not looking for special treatment but what they do deserve are answers and justice for Michael.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has raised this and I am asking her to continue to raise it. There are far too many cases where families have campaigned for decades, in this case for half a century, for the truth and justice. I am asking the Government to support them in their quest.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In any engagement with our counterparts in the North or in the UK, we must focus on the fact that these are families and these are tragedies that we have not got answers for. That needs to be front and centre in everything we do. We have turned a corner in our own relations with the UK and I can see that clearly over the last number of years, through my time as Minister for Justice, in the councils I sit on and my engagement to date, in particular with the secretary of state, Mr. Hilary Benn MP.

I stress that the joint framework removes the legacy Act's prohibition on inquests. This will utterly change the landscape that we have been working with and that has prevented so many of these inquests from taking place. Inquests that were halted by the legacy Act will recommence. Inquests that had been ordered but had not begun, such as that into the death of

Michael Leonard, will be subject to a further decision by the UK Solicitor General on whether they would be appropriately dealt with as an ordinary inquest, as I mentioned earlier, via the coronial system or via the inquisitorial mechanism, which will sit under the reformed legacy commission. The important thing now is that the legislation is enacted. We will obviously follow through and enact our own legislation here once that is the case. It is about getting those bodies and institutions set up so that we can provide answers to families.

Messages to the Dáil

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the Credit Review Bill 2024 and has made amendments thereto.

The Select Committee on Education and Youth has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 26.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Duncan Smith has given notice that he will take Question No. 99.

Forestry Sector

99. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to introduce a dedicated support scheme to address the significant and ongoing losses experienced by the forestry sector as a result of recent storms; the expected timeline for the development and implementation of such a scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66951/25]

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I recognise the impact that Storms Darragh and Éowyn have had on the forestry sector throughout the country. This presents significant challenges for the forestry stakeholders. I also welcome the positive progress that has been made by the forestry sector on the mobilisation of windblown materials in forests. The volume of timber normally felled over a 2.5 year period was blown down overnight during storm Éowyn. The latest damage assessment maps show that over 27,000 ha of forests were windblown, with 11,400 ha impacted in private forestry. Following the storms, I quickly established the forest windblow task force and delivered an action plan, created in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, which focused on the mobilisation and processing of windblown timber. To further speed up the process, my Department has allowed the use of both thinning and felling licences in removing storm damaged trees, and our data now shows that over 77% of windblown trees already have a felling licence issued by the Department. All this means is that more than 90% of the harvesting capacity in the country is now working in windblow areas. My Department is currently finalising negotiations of the administration of a reconstitution scheme, which is expected to

provide supports to those affected by windblown sites, and I will make an announcement on this matter in the coming weeks. I would like to confirm again that all forest owners who have been affected will not be disadvantaged by undertaking works to clear windblown material, and if they do not currently have a felling licence, they should consult with a registered forester as soon as possible.

The answer to this is that it was a bad story but it has been dealt with adequately. If it was not, I would tell the Deputy. There is a reconstitution scheme. It is going to be in place. It will be implemented and delivered in the coming weeks. People will know exactly what they can get. However, in terms of going ahead now and working on their forest, the Deputy knows from his time in local authorities that a person should never engage in any work without getting approval. The senior Minister and I have stated clearly and publicly that people can come along and carry out the necessary works but they should do so in a safe fashion, and they will get their reconstitution scheme after.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed and very clear response in relation to this. As he articulated, the storms caused unprecedented damage, felling tens of thousands of hectares, wiping out years of growth and inflicting huge economic losses. There is encouragement in the Minister of State's response. An estimated 26,000 ha of forest has been felled or destroyed, impacting the long-term investment income retirement security of many foresters. They have been severely eroded. The Minister of State can understand that many of them are looking for urgent clarity. I know he said it will be in the coming weeks. I am not trying to pin him down too much because his response was detailed, and I think it will give an awful lot of encouragement. However, does he think there will be greater visibility on how that scheme will look maybe this side of Christmas or are we looking at the first few weeks of January? That is my follow-up question.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I love straight questions, and I like giving straight answers. Yes, absolutely, before Christmas, people will know exactly how much they will be able to receive per hectare to reconstitute so, again, there is no reason in the world anybody should not go ahead and carry out their works. The one thing I would advise people on the record of the Dáil is to please deal with registered people. As the Deputy knows, if someone is selling an animal tomorrow morning, he or she wants to do it in a proper way to make sure he or she will be paid. We have a template for people who are selling and engaging in clearing timber from their forests to make sure they are dealing with reputable people and that they will get paid and, again, carry out their work in a safe fashion. Unfortunately, farm deaths have increased. This is also a type of activity on the land. I just want to make sure because sometimes the forest can be dangerous, so it is to make sure they are dealing with proper registered people and get paid. They will have their reconstitution scheme, and they can have every confidence.

I thank my staff in the Department, the head of forestry, Mr. Barry Delany, and all the others who worked so diligently in this reconstitution scheme and, of course, the co-operation of the Minister and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in ensuring we are able to deliver this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I have no more to add. I brought this up on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Robert O'Donoghue. I thank the Minister of State for his detailed response.

Fisheries Protection

98. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the December EU Fisheries Council to mitigate further losses in fish quota to Ireland's fishing fleet; his engagements over recent weeks with his counterparts in other member states to defend our interests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66298/25]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister of State knows that the Irish fishing fleet took a huge hit as a result of Brexit, and the EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement resulted in a huge loss of fish, but it is about to get a whole lot worse with the imminent cuts to the mackerel quota. Mackerel is a prime fish species, which is really critical to so many jobs in Ireland. I want to get a sense of the Government's plan on how to mitigate this and also to ensure that those who are recklessly overfishing are stopped urgently.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn for raising what is a really significant and very important issue. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the challenges facing the seafood sector in 2026, and the concerns felt across the industry arising from the scientific advice for 2026 for some of our most important fish stocks, particularly mackerel, as Deputy Mac Lochlainn outlined. I am aware of the seriousness and impact this advice will have on the sector.

Ireland has repeatedly raised the overfishing of mackerel by some coastal states outside the EU over recent years. We raised the issue under any other business, AOB, at the October Council of Agriculture and Fisheries Ministers, calling for urgent action at EU level to protect our key pelagic stocks. I reiterated this again last week at the November AGRIFISH Council meeting. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and I will continue to highlight this critical issue for our fishers and engage intensively with the European Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans and other member states on possible actions to protect our stocks. At that November Council meeting, I also confirmed Ireland's intention to invoke the Hague Preferences at the appropriate time along with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. The Hague Preferences give Ireland an increased share of important fish stocks, as the Deputy knows, when total allowable catch, TAC, levels reduce below a specified level. It was made clear to member states at the November Council meeting that the Hague Preferences are a fundamental part of relative stability and have been recognised as such in the legal framework of the Common Fisheries Policy since 1983 when the CFP was established.

Most of the EU fish stocks for which Ireland has quota are shared with third countries. The European Commission has sole competence to negotiate with third countries on behalf of the EU and our priority is that the EU secures the best possible outcome for the Irish fishing community. That is why we continue to advocate. The most important thing we do is use every channel diplomatically open to us to advocate but also explain the impact previous fishing activity has had and what the implications of that are for our fishing industry into next year.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The difficulty is that there are corporations based in the European Union that have invested in the fleets in Iceland and the Faroe Islands that have been recklessly overfishing. My concern is that there has been a lack of political will as a result of

their lobbying skills over the last number of years. We have been watching this slow-moving car crash. Mackerel is a precious species. It is a migratory species. It spawns off the west coast of Ireland and works its way up to those northern waters. To see it recklessly overfished to the point where we could lose it very soon is utterly heartbreaking. There are hard-working people who took chances in this country and who built up a pelagic industry, and they have been betrayed by this failure to deal with this issue. This is a matter of great urgency, and it goes to the heart of the need to really have a Common Fisheries Policy that is just and fair to our people.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I absolutely understand. The Deputy articulated quite clearly the sense of injustice and the upset and concern. What we do is use our voice within the EU because the EU is the competent negotiator in terms of that trade, and there are a lot of negotiations going on with third countries. The EU-UK negotiations began on 4 November and will continue until the first week of December. The EU-UK-Norway negotiations began on 27 October. The second round took place on 17-20 November, and the third round is scheduled for the first week in December. The EU-Norway negotiations began on 3 November, with the second round on 24-27 November in Oslo. At the coastal states consultation on the TAC setting for mackerel, the EU, Norway, Iceland and Greenland were prepared to set the 2026 TAC in line with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, ICES, advice of 174,357 tonnes. However, the UK and Faroe Islands indicated that they needed more time. Therefore, there currently is no agreement for a TAC agreement for mackerel. The coastal states also agreed the TAC for blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring in line with the ICES advice. That is all ongoing, and our job is to input into the EU the very significant impact this is having in Ireland.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I do appreciate the fact that we have a dedicated Minister of State for fisheries, which has been a welcome development, who is engaging and listening to our communities. We now need to use that resource with all the knowledge, working hand-in-hand with the Irish industry, to confront this injustice once and for all and to say to the European Commission that what happened with Brexit was so wrong. We did not have burden sharing and we carried so much of that weight. I am glad the Minister mentioned the UK. It is a party to this recklessness. It benefited from Brexit. It got an agreement that was not based on relative stability or track record. It was based on what is called zonal attachment and those communities closest to the fishing waters. This is what we would love to have in Ireland. It is what Britain got and it cannot have its cake and eat it. This is about countries which I respect, such as Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland. I have nothing against their people or the British people but this is reckless behaviour. It is unjust and unfair. We have to call it out and it has to stop. We need to have fairness and justice. We need to protect jobs in our vulnerable coastal fishing communities.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Commission has indicated its intention to conclude the consultations in time for the AGRIFISH Council on 11 and 12 December. It has yet to be seen whether it will be successful in this. As we move towards the finalisation of setting 2026 fishing opportunities, my focus, and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, over the coming weeks will be to continue to work towards the best possible outcome for Ireland's seafood sector in 2026, one that ensures the sustainability of the stocks and a level playing field

for our fleet. It is also important to recognise the resilience and determination with which the sector has addressed challenges in recent years. The Government recognises that resilience and determination, and funding opportunities for the sector will continue to be delivered in the lifetime of Ireland's €258 million seafood development programme, EMFAF.

I will also continue to work with ministerial colleagues across government to assess what supports may be available to the seafood sector in the context of EU state aid rules, and within the constraints of national and Union funding, to support the sustainability of the sector in 2026 and beyond. To address the core point, I absolutely accept that fishers want a fair deal. I agree that having a Minister of State dedicated to this area is positive. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, has my full backing. We work hand in glove, and we will both be out in Brussels together, to make sure we articulate very clearly the impact of ICES on our fisher communities and to get the best deal possible.

Food Safety

100. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is aware of any Brazilian or South American beef being imported into Ireland that is produced using hormones and antibiotics that are banned in Ireland under food safety standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66303/25]

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister is aware, there is great concern about the Mercosur trade agreement. Even before it comes into place, tens of thousands of tonnes of Brazilian beef are being imported into the European Union. Much of this beef has been produced using hormones and antibiotics that are banned in the European Union and in Ireland. The *Irish Farmers' Journal* and the Irish Farmers Association did great work going out there to investigate this and they have reported on it. Have we done similar investigations in Ireland into beef that has been coming into this State from Brazil and other Mercosur countries and the levels of antibiotics and hormones that are used?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this point. Reports of the *Irish Farmers' Journal* investigation into the sale of hormones and antibiotics in Brazil raise important issues and merit careful examination. We know that Brazilian beef already enters the EU market and it is, therefore, important to ensure that none of the unregulated products referenced in the investigation are used in its production. While there is no evidence that this is the case, these reports reinforce the need for continued vigilance.

According to Central Statistics Office data for the last number of years, Ireland has not imported beef product in any significant quantities from Brazil. In 2024, imports from Brazil amounted to 97 tonnes of a total of 34,000 tonnes imported. Beef imports from other Mercosur countries were virtually nil. The EU has very stringent standards, known as SPS, sanitary and phytosanitary, standards, to protect human, animal and plant health. These are among the highest standards in the world and the European Commission has insisted they are not negotiable. These SPS standards remain unaltered, regardless of any trade agreement concluded by the EU.

This is something that came up during my trade mission to America in April, when the insinuation was made that our blocking of hormone-fed beef into the EU was a non-tariff trade barrier. It is not. We do not want hormone-fed beef in Europe, European consumers do not want it and the European Union is opposed to having it in here. America has access to supply 35,000 tonnes to the EU, which is a small amount relatively, but it is not filling it because it is not interested in the difficulty in supplying it. It just goes to show the context of SPS standards, which are different from environmental standards. They are non-negotiable and the Government is very firmly of the view that these EU SPS standards must continue to be rigorously upheld for the benefit of European consumers. It is also important that the European Commission continues to engage with the Brazilian authorities to ensure this is the case. We will continue to make that point with officials across the EU.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. I am aware there are very small amounts of Brazilian beef coming into Ireland, of course, but quite large amounts are coming into the European Union as a whole. As the Minister said, the standards we expect Irish and European farmers to meet are not being met by the Mercosur countries, in particular Brazil, in respect of beef. We also have a problem with chicken and other products. To focus specifically on the beef issue, the reality is that Irish farmers and Irish consumers will be put at risk if we have a food safety issue whereby the beef and products coming in from these countries are not to the same standards and are using hormones, pesticides and antibiotics that are banned in the European Union.

There is a great deal of evidence, and not only from what has been uncovered by the *Irish Farmers' Journal* and the IFA. For a long time, it has been widely known there is no traceability, there is widespread mass vaccination of animals in these countries, and there is no way they can possibly meet the same standards that European consumers expect for their food. In this context, will the Minister ensure the Irish Government blocks the trade agreement at the European Council meeting and forms a minority there to do so? France is already interested in doing this, as is Poland. I understand that Hungary announced this morning it will do so. If Ireland is on board with this, we are very close to a position where we can block this agreement.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am happy to discuss the proposal on the trade agreement. I have held the Government position, as outlined in the programme for Government, to work with like-minded countries, as I have done since 23 January, which share similar concerns about the Mercosur trade deal and the impact it could have on trade. It is a different point from the question. The Mercosur trade agreement is about tariff rates. It is about the point at which it comes in and whether it gets preferential tariff rates. SPS standards and food safety standards are non-negotiable. For product coming into Europe already, and Deputy Kenny made the point that very little of it comes into Ireland but plenty of it comes into the EU, it is a non-negotiable standard.

I do not accept that it has been known for a long time that there are lower standards there. No more than we do not get hormone-fed beef from other member states, we do not accept it into the EU from Mercosur countries either. There are very clear audits. We need to double down with the European Commission to make sure the audits, checks and testing of product coming in are rigorous, and that the tests in Mercosur countries and here are rigorous, because

this is non-negotiable. The concerns I have on the trade side are about environmental standards but they are very different from SPS standards.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister's answer is concerning. Basically he is saying he wants to shift the responsibility over to trade, and that it is a trade negotiation.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will answer on the trade agreement.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The reason I asked the question in this context is that I was afraid if I tabled it to the Minister as a trade question, I would be told it should go to the Minister with responsibility for trade. This is why I asked it in the context I did, as the Minister will understand. The Minister mentioned the programme for Government and working with like-minded countries. There are already at least three, and maybe more, like-minded countries that are prepared to form a blocking minority. Is Ireland prepared to be part of that and to block the trade deal, not only to be there to stand firm for Irish farmers but also for European consumers faced with the huge negative health consequences of importing very dangerous product into the European Union, which is produced using products that are banned in the European Union?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I was answering the specific point on SPS first and I am happy to discuss the trade agreement also. Throughout the EU Mercosur negotiation process, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, who has lead responsibility for trade agreements policy, and I have actively engaged with the European Commission and other member states to voice Ireland's concerns about the EU-Mercosur agreement. While I am not the Minister with lead responsibility for this, the impact of it would be greatest on our beef farmers so, of course, I have an interest. That is why, since my appointment as Minister in January, I have raised these concerns at every AGRIFISH Council I have attended. Trade is on the agenda of every meeting and I have raised our concerns about Mercosur at every meeting. I have also raised them with like-minded counties through bilateral meetings on the margins of these Council meetings. In recent months, I have met with my French, Italian, Austrian, Latvian and Polish counterparts to exchange views. Most recently, I have met with my Italian and French counterparts *en marge* of the November AGRIFISH Council meeting in Brussels, which was only ten days ago. We continue to engage and share these points, for the very reason Deputy Kenny has outlined.

Nitrates Usage

101. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has developed a contingency or plan B in the event that Ireland is not granted a further extension of the nitrates derogation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65973/25]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: A week is a long time in politics and it seems my question could be out of date. It is on whether the Department has developed a contingency or plan B in the event that Ireland is not granted a further extension of the nitrates derogation.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The nitrates derogation has been my number one priority since I was appointed Minister at the beginning of this year, and for very good reason. Our derogation farmers are making great efforts and strides around improving water quality, operating to a higher standard of conditionality. Our pasture-based system is very different from the rest of Europe. These have been very challenging and sensitive negotiations and there has been much at stake.

We have had three meetings of the nitrates technical committee so far this year, in March, June and September, and Ireland has been on the agenda and presented at each of them. I have dealt with and met Commissioner Roswall on several occasions. At a meeting in Brussels in September, I invited the Commissioner to visit Ireland, which she did, with her officials, in recent weeks. I met her again subsequently in Europe as we continued to engage back and forth. Throughout that time, we have sought to have the Commission put forward a proposal for implementing a decision to the next meeting of the nitrates committee, on 9 December, giving us an extension. The Commission wrote to us in June, highlighting the need for us to address the habitats directive as part of this process. This placed a significant extra burden on us to work through a process as to what that would look like and to have a negotiation in that regard.

I can confirm to the House today that the Commission has finally agreed to put a proposal to the nitrates committee for an extension of the existing derogation. It is not a new derogation; it has different terms and conditions around time and conditions. These have been very sensitive negotiations. The proposal is that the nitrates derogation extension will be for a three-year period, with new conditionality. I have worked very closely with many key stakeholders on this but it is sensitive issue. This is still only a proposal going to a technical committee that has a vote on it. We will not have a derogation on 1 January unless that committee votes to approve this proposal from the Commission. In the intervening period, my focus has been to continue to work with member states to make sure we get the result we need for Irish agriculture and our overall economy on 9 December.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Minister mentioned the habitats directive has been a key part of these negotiations and that he had discussions in the summer with the Commissioner regarding incorporating the habitats directive into the plans. Can he give more information on exactly what that will mean for farmers, and what supports will be provided to ensure they can comply with that? The habitats directive is a robust compliance measure, so this is going to be very hard. This has been one of my arguments all along. We have had the derogation for 20 years but we have never once met any of the environmental conditions placed by Europe. Our water quality has never improved. Certainly, in the last report from the Environmental Protection Agency, they had not improved. What conditions will be placed on us as regards the habitats directive? What will that mean for farmers? How will the Minister support them in meeting those conditions?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Farmers are on that journey already in a variety of ways, particularly in the area of water quality. Requirements include the need for Ireland, as outlined during the summer, to conduct environmental assessments to address the habitats directive at catchment level in order to demonstrate compliance with the directive. This is a massive undertaking. It will require significant investment of time and resources to complete these

assessments for all 583 catchments. That is why the Commission has agreed to propose a three-year derogation to facilitate the completion of this work. The issue with time was something I continuously raised. Four years is the maximum time allowable under that, and we looked for the maximum. There was very much a desire for much less time to be given but we had to clearly outline, based on the science, how much time the process would take, both to be fair and to allow our farmers to work through that process and to allow the Department to assess those 583 catchments. That is very onerous and there are other conditionalities too. I want to be fair to all stakeholders and Government colleagues by briefing them properly. The stakeholders have been very constructive in their engagement throughout this process.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: My understanding is the nitrates action plan has screened out appropriate assessments. Is that correct? How does the habitats directive fall into that action plan? The Minister is saying appropriate assessments may be part of this for farmers. I do not know whether that is on a catchment level or an individual site level.

Our concerns have always been that farmers were being led to a cliff and there was a level of uncertainty for them. There is now a three-year gap but, unfortunately, I imagine we could be back into this situation again in three years, where farmers are at the end of their tether and wondering what will happen in a number of months. I ask that the Minister completely avoid this.

It is also interesting that when the nitrates directive is mentioned, whether it is the Taoiseach or the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, the immediate response is to deflect to Mercosur. It seems there is a conflation of Mercosur and nitrates in the minds of some Government TDs-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: Where did the Deputy get that from?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, was asked about Mercosur on the TV during the week and he immediately went to the nitrates derogation. Can the Minister confirm there has been no deal done in Europe that the nitrates derogation would be given, contingent on his support for the Mercosur deal or not fighting or opposing it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am happy to confirm all my engagement with Commissioner Roswall has been around the substance of the nitrates derogation. It has a very important role here and the Commissioner saw that first-hand when she visited. The Deputy will forgive me in not taking her direct advice because if I had taken that earlier in the year, the Social Democrats and the Deputy would have had us wave the white flag and concede the nitrates derogation. We have a strong case, based on science, that we have a very different farming system here.

This is a sensitive topic. There are other countries in Europe that would like to have a proposal for a derogation and are looking at this. For this reason, I commend farm organisations, the industry and key stakeholders impacted by this across the board on their patience and trust in allowing me to work through this process. My hope had been to bring this

to Cabinet and to engage with stakeholders in a way that allowed me to continue to engage with other member states, which will vote on this proposal on 9 December. The technical committee will vote on it.

All our focus has been on the habitats directive and water quality. The nitrates action plan 6, which is currently out for public consultation, has new conditionality on water quality. We had to make a detailed proposal on assessments to address the habitats directive, outlining the time they will take. It is not practical to talk about doing that on a farm level, and we have always been clear on that. That is why I am talking about it on a catchment and sub-catchment basis.

Water Pollution

102. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is aware of the report undertaken by the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy regarding pollution in Lady’s Island Lake; the measures his Department or agencies related to his Department are undertaking to respond to the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66952/25]

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: Senator Noonan and I have raised the environmental damage at Lady’s Island Lake on several occasions in both Houses. I welcome the recent announcement of funding by the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, for Wexford County Council to help tackle the issue. What is the Minister’s Department and the agencies associated with it doing in response to the report of the joint committee regarding the pollution in Lady’s Island Lake.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy O’Gorman for raising this point.

I am aware of the joint committee’s report regarding Lady’s Island Lake and I am working closely with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O’Sullivan, who is leading the Government’s engagement in this area. My Department, along with Teagasc experts, are centrally engaged in the interdepartmental Lady’s Island oversight group led by Wexford County Council, which also involves the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the local authorities waters programme, LAWPRO, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS.

Wexford County Council, with the guidance of the interdepartmental group, has developed a site-specific action plan to address the challenges faced by Lady’s Island Lake within the framework and mechanisms of the water action plan 2024. The recent announcement of funding by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support this work aims to support development of the Lady’s Island Lake sustainable farming and communities water quality management plan, which will facilitate a holistic approach to improve water quality in this coastal lagoon.

In the Lady’s Island Lake catchment, my Department, along with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is funding free confidential advisory support for farmers through the agricultural sustainability support and advisory programme, commonly known as ASSAP. Under that programme, ASSAP advisers are working in the lake’s catchment to identify appropriate on-farm measures to address the challenges faced by the lake. The farming for water European Innovation Partnership, EIP, led by LAWPRO, is working in partnership

with Teagasc and Dairy Industry Ireland in the lake's catchment area. Through this EIP, my Department is providing €50 million nationally in funding for specific targeted on-farm actions which go beyond regulatory requirements.

11 o'clock

A significant number of farming for water EIP applications have already been completed in the lake's catchment area.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The problems in Lady's Island Lake are not new. The reports of pollution there go back as far as the early 1980s. Every few years it seems the problems get so big that there is a call for action and that is usually dealt with through the breaching of the sand spit at the southern end of the lake. The EPA report from January, which the Green Party would credit with sounding the alarm, could not have been clearer about what is needed, namely, enforce existing regulations on agricultural nutrients entering the lake, help farmers change practices and improve the buffer zones around the water sources that flow into the lake. Will the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, be taking a leading role in engaging with local farmers? I was glad to hear the Minister mention the European Innovation Partnership. This was quite successful nearby, at Duncannon beach, in dealing with pollution. I ask the Minister for some detail about the innovation project that is being designed to support farmers specifically around Lady's Island Lake?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Yes, I can confirm that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, is taking the lead on this but we are working closely in consultation. I am not deflecting in saying this, but it will be worth raising this point with the Minister of State as well because he is dealing with it on a day-to-day basis. We are providing, as I said, financial support of €50 million through the ASSAP programme. I agree with the Deputy that it is a really positive programme. It is leading to great work being done, not just in the Lady's Island catchment area but by thousands of farmers all over the country taking on voluntary additional conditionality.

In addition, EU and nationally funded schemes, such as the agri-climate and rural environmental scheme, ACRES, and the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, are available to farmers in the catchment. Again, these benefit water quality by incentivising farmers to go above and beyond regulatory requirements. We see the demand for TAMS, with 6,100 applications in the most recent tranche, which is double the number traditionally. Farmers are investing in water quality, increased nutrient storage and low-emission slurry spreading, and we are supporting them to do those things through TAMS.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I just would like to bring the discussion back to Lady's Island Lake specifically because there is a real opportunity here to take measures that will restore the lake to a functioning ecological system. We are still in the dark about some of the specific details about what is happening. Have farming inspections around Lady's Island Lake increased? Have there been inspections of septic tanks? Has there been engagement with Irish Water about the treatment plant at the lake? I know people are concerned about that as well. Local campaigners are worried that in a couple of years' time, we will be back here making the same points across the floor. We have a model that works, the innovation partnership model funded by the EU. It has worked in other areas, and it also is effective in that it does not

scapegoat farmers. It recognises that they are stewards of the land and it helps them to adapt without risking their own livelihood. We have the willingness to draw together the relevant actors here, but we need clarity on the steps that have been taken so far. If the Minister does not have all that information here, he can come back to me in writing with the extra detail, which would be appreciated.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will do so. I agree with the Deputy that this is about partnership. As with all areas related to addressing environmental challenges, the partnership approach is what works really well. As I stated, Wexford County Council, with the guidance of the interdepartmental group, has developed a site-specific action plan to address the challenges faced by Lady's Island Lake within the framework and mechanisms of the Water Action Plan 2024. The recent announcement of funding by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support this work aims to support the development of Lady's Island Lake sustainable farming and community's water quality management plan. That is the very specific approach the Deputy is talking about. Separate from that, my Department is working closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to develop Ireland's next nitrates action programme, which is due to apply from January 2026, with the objective of reducing and preventing water pollution caused by nitrates from agricultural sources. These proposals for the next nitrates action programme are currently out to public consultation and that is due to be completed on 1 December.

EU Meetings

103. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide an update on his recent meeting at the European Agriculture and Fisheries Council, AGRIFISH, in Brussels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67158/25]

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Burke for raising this important issue. Once a month, I go to Brussels to meet the other 26 ministers for agriculture at what is known as the AGRIFISH Council. The most recent meeting took place in Brussels on Monday, 17 November. With Ireland's Presidency of the EU commencing in less than eight months, I took the opportunity to continue my proactive engagement with ministerial colleges to ensure that Ireland delivers an impactful Presidency for all of the EU. At the Council, I took the opportunity to raise a number of important issues for Ireland. In the round-table discussion regarding the post-2027 CAP, I stressed the importance of the CAP continuing to remain a fully funded policy capable of delivering a viable income for our farmers, as well as ensuring food security and promoting rural resilience. The future of the CAP is extremely important in safeguarding the viability of our farmers and rural communities. It is, therefore, important that the specifics of the CAP are provided for the next EU budget, our multi-annual financial framework, MFF, and the CAP is sufficiently visible as a discrete entity within the overall budgetary structure.

Challenges facing EU trade were also on the agenda and I raised a number of important issues in this regard. Regarding the carbon border adjustment mechanism, known as CBAM, I stressed the real challenges that this regulation poses in the context of its potential impact on the fertiliser costs for EU farmers. I highlighted the importance of working together to provide

certainty for affected operators and to monitor closely any impacts on the Irish and EU agricultural sectors.

I have also raised Ireland's concerns regarding preferential EU market access being given to Mercosur countries if South American farmers are not subject to the same sustainable farming standards as our own farmers, particularly when it comes to the beef sector. I also reiterated Ireland's unwavering support for Ukraine.

In relation to fisheries, I outlined Ireland's concerns and priorities regarding ongoing negotiations on fishing opportunities for 2026. I will continue to work with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to articulate the importance of supporting our fishers at this difficult time of negotiations.

Deputy Colm Burke: Where are we with the Mercosur issue? The Minister outlined that the same level of regulations do not apply. We in Ireland have strict protocols and regulations in place, yet we are allowing products to come on the market that will not necessarily have the same level of scrutiny. If this goes ahead, we will be in a situation where there is an unfair set of regulations for Irish and EU producers compared to producers from outside the European Union. Are we satisfied with that? Is enough analysis being done on the regulations in place for those countries?

Deputy Martin Heydon: As a proposed trade agreement, Mercosur is the responsibility, first and foremost, of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. As Minister for the agriculture sector and farmers, I continue to highlight the sensitivities of this trade proposal for our beef sector in particular. I believe strongly that Ireland and our agriculture sector benefit greatly from our open trade policy and from being part of the EU, including, in general, the trade agreements it concludes. This does not mean we have to support every single trade deal. In alignment with the programme for Government, we work with like-minded countries because we have those concerns and sensitivities. We have also analysed the safeguards that have been put in place by the EU. The proposals around how they would be implemented and interact with the legal instrument is a really important consideration as well. To stop this deal would require a blocking minority of at least four member states, with at least 35% of the population. That is why I have engaged with key colleagues. At the most recent meeting, I met my French and Italian counterparts, continuing the commitment in the programme for Government to work with like-minded countries that share those concerns around the proposal.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Minister referred to the period post-CAP 2027 and the challenges there. CAP has given support to farmers in Ireland and across the EU. The question now is what will happen post 2027. There is also a scenario arising with those involved in farming. We have an older age profile. What is being done to try to keep people in the sector across Europe? This is not just an Irish problem but one right across Europe. The issue is that if we do not have people involved in agriculture, we then have a difficulty with food security. Is enough being done at European level to make sure we have a sufficient number of people producing the goods in order that we have food security for all member states?

Deputy Martin Heydon: These are the pertinent points for all the negotiations on the new CAP. We are aligning that discussion on what the new CAP will look like with the proposals

around the multi-annual financial framework at the same time. Ultimately, at the heart of what the CAP can deliver beyond 2027 is the question of how much money is in the pot for it. We know Commissioner Hansen secured a ring-fenced commitment of 80% of the existing budget. That is not enough; we need more. Ireland has a key role to play in the Presidency from July of next year for six months. It is 13 years since we had this role. What I am doing at present at AGRIFISH council level is building that engagement with other member states, colleagues and counterparts, and, through bilaterals, understanding what their priorities are for the CAP.

From my perspective, the EU is a very successful peace project. The Common Agricultural Policy was one of the first initiatives at the heart of the then EEC and this was because it was recognised that hunger was one of the biggest causes of conflict. No more than we have become a bit complacent about peace in Europe, we have become complacent about food security as well. That is why we argue really strongly that while there are new demands for increased spending on defence, climate and different areas, and that will put the budget under strain, they cannot come at the cost of investing in the Common Agricultural Policy and in our farmers who produce the top-quality, safe and nutritious food that is needed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Byrne.

Deputy Colm Burke: I am still to come back in. To come back to the issue of the age profile of the people in farming, I am not sure at European level we are doing enough on that. From an Irish point of view, this is a huge challenge. I was talking to someone recently who lives in an area where there are four major dairy farms within a mile of one another and all of them will be gone within the next five years. I am not sure we are doing enough forward planning on that area.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Very quickly, Commissioner Hansen has expressed in his draft proposals really strong ambition on the area of generational renewal. I want to be able to design approaches in the new CAP that address the issue of generational renewal. However, what I have just talked about in relation to my efforts and the ongoing efforts across the Department of agriculture to retain the nitrates derogation is key for generational renewal and giving certainty and confidence to young farmers. My new bovine TB action plan, funded to the tune of €157 million next year, gives certainty to young farmers who are thinking of investing but are afraid of getting a breakdown in their herd. My support for the tillage sector is about giving certainty-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Generational renewal is at the heart of everything we do and will be at the heart of negotiations for the new CAP as well.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Tillage Sector

104. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider introducing an insurance scheme or a guarantee of a basic income for the tillage sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66245/25]

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Byrne for raising this point because under the current proposals for CAP post-2027, there is a mandatory requirement for member states to put in place risk management tools. Risk management tools were optional in the current CAP strategic plan, running from 2023 to 2027, and the case for inclusion of crop insurance was examined in its preparation. However, its inclusion was not supported by stakeholders. The issue of risk management has since been discussed by the Food Vision tillage group, which included a recommendation in its final report to promote existing risk management tools and examine opportunities for an Irish model of crop or price insurance. My Department will consider potential risk management measures as part of the strategic planning for the next CAP strategic plan.

In recognition of the tillage sector's importance, my Department provides substantial direct support to tillage farmers. In 2026, €50 million will be made available through the protein aid scheme, the straw incorporation measure and a new tillage support scheme. Having secured this additional funding in budget 2026 to further support the sector, I intend to consult stakeholders on how this funding will be utilised. My Department has also provided significant direct supports to tillage farmers in recent years. This year, the budget for the protein aid scheme is €10 million, having increased from €7 million to €10 million annually from last year. Applications for approximately 66,000 ha of cereals and oilseed rape straw were submitted for chopping and incorporating under the straw incorporation measure this year. I made the decision to pay all eligible applicants under the scheme.

In February of this year I announced €32.4 million of payments under the tillage and horticulture support scheme, which was the Government's response to the difficult position tillage and horticulture farmers found themselves in due to exceptionally poor weather and continued high input costs in the spring of 2024. The tillage sector is also being supported under other schemes, including the tillage capital investment scheme, ACRES and the organic farming scheme and, indeed, tillage farmers have availed of the water quality EIP, with significant areas committed to cover crops, which are a really effective tool. I will continue to work with the tillage sector and provide targeted support where possible given the strategic importance of this sector to the wider agriculture community.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister. He and I do not need to discuss the challenges facing the sector; I know he is very much aware of them. What farmers are looking for is a guarantee of a basic income. Obviously we already have the BISS scheme in place. I welcome the fact that as part of the CAP negotiations the Minister is looking at trying to provide some floor for farmers. It is not just important for the sustainability of farming, as the Minister mentioned, it is also important to us being able to tackle climate change and meet our environmental obligations. It is critical to be able to support farmers in those areas. We can certainly look at linking payments to food security and sustainability goals. That would be a very positive measure. It is critical that guaranteeing a basic level of income to tillage farmers is core to the CAP negotiations the Minister will enter in Brussels.

Deputy Martin Heydon: There are many different tools in our armoury to be able to support the tillage sector as part of the CAP negotiations. I attended a meeting with the Irish Grain Growers and the IFA in Killashee Hotel to which more than 1,000 tillage farmers turned up. Deputy Byrne and I know tillage farmers do not protest much or in those kinds of numbers but they did on this occasion, such is the level of desperation after three really difficult years. After that meeting, it was very clear to me that there was a need for short-term financial support to give farmers the confidence to put seed in the ground again next year. That is not the long-term solution, however. The long-term solution is the value-added piece. The dairy industry has been very successful in identifying product such as whey proteins as the value-added piece. Unfortunately, our tillage sector is currently at world market prices and that is really hurting it. What we need to do, while having the short-term financial support I have committed to for next year and on the design of which I will work with farming organisations to make it most targeted, is to work on the value-added piece around our native grains, which I am happy to expand on in my next answer.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The Minister is aware that in the US there is a federal crop insurance programme which was introduced during the time of the depression. I was with the Canadian ambassador when he spoke to the IFA about guarantees, insurance and a basic income scheme that operate in Canada. It continues to be a concern that 1,400 tillage farmers have left the sector in recent years. I know the Minister is committed to this and I very much welcome his support for flour production in Ireland, bringing that back and diversifying markets. There are all of those measures. However, until we can guarantee our tillage farmers that if they plant in the autumn, they will get a reasonable income when they reap in the spring, it is going to be a big challenge for the sector. I know the Minister is aware of this but it is critically important to address it as part of the CAP negotiations.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We absolutely need to design this scheme and make sure the €30 million I have secured for budget 2026 is targeted at the farmers. I want to do this differently from the last scheme. The last scheme provided a much-needed €100 for every hectare that had seed in the ground, with no capping or conditionality around it. We can be more targeted with this €30 million, get it to those who need it the most and increase the value of it for those farmers as well. That scheme will buy us some time.

The broader issue is that I want to work with the farm organisations and industry to identify how we get that value-added piece. There are things we can do in respect of native grains in our feed. The Irish whiskey file needs to be examined in terms of how we use our native grains in that or what its requirements are. The use of quality assurance schemes in other sectors has been really successful. It is challenging, it is not simple and it requires leadership from stakeholders. I want to work with people on that. We will get certainty into the sector in the medium term and beyond by moving to a value added-piece and not being dependent on world market commodity prices, which is a very vulnerable position for our tillage sector to be in.

Finally, as to the efforts I am making on nitrates and other issues, land availability is a key issue, as is the price of rented land for tillage farmers. It is not an island or a silo. Irish agriculture is all interlinked. The success of how I get on with nitrates will determine and have an impact on the tillage sector as well.

Animal Diseases

105. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of tests his Department's laboratories have carried out for suspected HPAI H5N1 since 1 September 2025; and, of these tests, the number that were positive for HPAI H5N1; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66460/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: With the increasing incidence of bird flu in the wild bird population and, more recently, a fourth turkey farm, it is a concern for flock owners and people who have an interest in wildlife. Will the Minister give an outline of the level of testing that is being conducted and the support that will be there for people whose livelihood has been impacted by the restrictions and the outbreaks?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important point. Since early November, there have been four outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza, HPAI, caused by the H5N1 virus in turkey flocks in counties Carlow, Meath, Monaghan and, most recently, unfortunately, Laois.

My Department has been implementing disease control and eradication measures in line with the EU animal health law provisions and national legislation. This includes the placing of 3 km radius protection zones and 10 km radius surveillance zones around each holding where an outbreak has occurred, and implementing surveillance and disease control measures within these zones. Prior to this, an outbreak of HPAI occurred in a confined establishment in Cork in October. That establishment was closed while disease control measures were implemented in line with the legislation.

The H5N1 virus has been circulating in wild birds throughout the country during 2025, as we know, creating a serious and ongoing risk of infection to poultry and captive bird flocks. My Department's laboratories have completed 821 avian influenza PCR screening tests for suspected HPAI, H5N1 in poultry, captive birds and wild birds, since 1 September. Of the samples tested, 199 tested positive for some form of avian influenza.

My Department carries out avian influenza surveillance testing throughout the year in targeted dead wild birds to understand if avian influenza is circulating in the wild bird population. Strict biosecurity measures remain the best way for poultry and captive bird keepers to protect their flocks from the disease. Flock owners should remain vigilant of any signs of the disease and report any suspicion to their local regional veterinary office without delay.

I work closely with the Minister in Northern Ireland, Andrew Muir MLA. This is one epidemiological island. The virus does not recognise invisible borders. Introducing a housing order and strict biosecurity measures together is important, particularly when we consider the importance of our commercial poultry flock in the Border regions.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Poultry farmers are obviously concerned. Where there are outbreaks, even where there are restrictions, it is challenging and very difficult for poultry farmers. There needs to be a realistic support or compensation package in place.

As the Minister said, Fota Wildlife Park has been closed since October. It is losing out on income. It has also lost some of its birds. The impact on staff, people around there and the wildlife is significant. Has the Minister engaged with them? What kind of support will be available and relevant to the likes of the wildlife park? I know that a lot of the emphasis on compensation packages up to now has been on situations where a cull has taken place in a commercial setting. What level of engagement has the Minister had? What opportunities will be there for the likes of Fota Wildlife Park?

Deputy Martin Heydon: In terms of compensation in general, the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides that compensation to owners of animals may be payable if a cull of those animals is directed by the Department of agriculture in the event of an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza. The compensation may relate to the animal that is culled, or to an animal product, animal feed or similar item that is destroyed in relation to the outbreak. The compensation may not exceed the open market value of the animal or item. My compensation scheme is very much targeted towards the commercial sector. My responsibility is for the commercial sector. We monitor the wild bird population, but it is the responsibility of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Deputy asked a specific question about Fota Wildlife Park. I share great sympathy with those involved and the impact this has had on them. This virus is obviously very easily transmitted. We could not possibly have members of the public walking into an area where the virus has been and taking it out on their shoes or whatever else. When we talk about strict biosecurity measures, this has been reflected in the process across government.

Since 2017, my Department has employed the services of an external consultancy firm with specialised knowledge of the poultry industry to develop valuation tables relating to the most common species and types of poultry in Ireland. As I say, compensation, from my perspective, is for the commercial and forestry side. The Government is, however, very much aware of the challenges for Fota.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The compensation package is very focused on the commercial sector where a cull has taken place. The example I outlined of the wildlife park does not fit neatly into that situation. Thankfully, a minimal number of birds will be lost there. However, there are many other instances where the restrictions themselves are putting a cost on the likes of poultry farms. They have to keep a house warm when they do not know how quickly a new flock will be coming in. There are costs associated with the restrictions. The Minister needs to look beyond the immediate package that is there for compensation where there is a cull.

Four instances have emerged on turkey farms. There is the obvious question that so many people want the Minister to reassure them about. Will there be turkey available for Christmas?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I confirm it is very possible that the Deputy will be able to eat turkey on Christmas Day. I very much hope that will be the case. We all know how important that is. I do not jest. This is important to our turkey farmers. I have huge sympathy for the four flocks that have been impacted. It is a devastating blow to an individual flock owner. On the broader scale, it is important to reiterate to the public that it is safe to eat properly cooked poultry and egg products. The measures being taken are to stop the spread. I commend the

four flock owners because their actions and those of the affected owners in the surveillance zones and restriction zones are for the greater good of the country so we can get back to disease-free status as soon as possible. We in the higher-risk period and there is no doubt about that. It starts in November with migratory birds coming in. This has been a bad start to what is a high-risk period that will run until approximately next April. Through the enhanced mandatory biosecurity measures, the implementation of the housing order, which helps, and the strong vigilance of our industry and flock owners, in close consultation with my regional veterinary officers, we can stay on top of this so fewer people are impacted into the future.

Agriculture Industry

106. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there is a strategy for succession planning for farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66716/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: I offer the Minister my best wishes for his role, which is not so new anymore. His is a very important role, particularly at this critical time. We are in different constituencies but are near neighbours where south Kildare meets west Wicklow.

Agriculture in Ireland is ageing fast. Currently, the average age of a farmer in Ireland is 59. Only 4% are under 35. This imbalance poses risk to long-term food security and to this important sector, which exports 90% of what it produces. The programme for Government commits to a farm succession scheme. Is there a strategy for succession planning for farmers?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this point. While he is in a different constituency, he is the TD who lives closest to me, as we straddle the border between Kildare and west Wicklow.

The challenge of generational renewal in farming has been widely recognised at both national and EU level. The programme for Government prioritises supporting intergenerational farm succession. Food Vision 2030, our shared strategy for the agrifood sector, states that generational renewal in farming is critically important to ensure the future viability and social sustainability of the Irish agrifood sector and of rural Ireland.

Ireland provides a range of supports, including initiatives under the current CAP strategic plan, a suite of strong taxation measures and access to finance, as well as advisory and education and training supports. Despite this support, the average age of farmers continues to rise. The most recent figures show that only 4.35% of farmers are under 35 years of age and some 37% of farmers are over 65.

In September, I launched the report of the commission on generational renewal in farming. Generational renewal, including farm succession, is a complex issue and there are many factors involved. The commission on generational renewal in farming was established to examine this issue and has produced a thorough analysis and made 31 recommendations across a wide range of areas, including CAP supports, pensions, taxation, access to finance, access to land, collaborative arrangements, advisory services, education and training, the important issue of gender balance and the overall attractiveness of the sector. These recommendations will be carefully considered. They are contained in a report that runs to 180 pages. The

recommendations will be considered by an implementation group in my Department who will engage with agricultural stakeholders and the relevant public bodies. While some recommendations are for consideration in the context of the next CAP, it is hoped that others can be progressed in a shorter timeframe. Some of the taxation recommendations have already been considered and progressed in budget 2026, with those extended for a longer period than had been requested or anticipated.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I have read most of that document and most of those 31 recommendations are very worthy. I would like to see a lot of them being implemented.

On a slightly related matter, I worked most of my life in small and medium sized businesses. The thing that strikes me most about farming is the huge fluctuation in prices from year to year. Most businesses face increases in costs or sales prices in single digit percentage changes. It is not so in farming. This makes it difficult to plan and means people have to build up large reserves to be confident of being able to continue to trade or else they will run out of cash. We need to take measures to make it financially attractive to run a farm business. We need to reduce red tape, which is a turn-off for many farmers, and make all schemes much simpler. Many of the recommendations of the commission on generational renewal in farming will help.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I agree with the Deputy in many ways. The question I am most often asked about generational renewal is whether there will be a scheme in the next CAP or what it will look like. I want to be able to develop a succession scheme and I hope to have the resources to do that, but young trained farmers will not make life-long decisions based on whether they get one grant in 2028 and put everything on hold until then.

Generational renewal gets to the heart of everything I do. The efforts we are making to try to ensure we have a derogation for nitrates for the next few years is critical to giving certainty to young trained farmers to invest and take the plunge into full-time farming. My new bovine TB plan is a massive issue for the Deputy's constituents in west Wicklow, as it is in Kildare and across the country. Having certainty that we will get on top of that perennial issue, which has been around for 75 years, with a new approach is a key measure. My support for the tillage sector is a key measure in giving confidence for generational renewal, as is making sure farmers have a good solid income. When we talk about sustainability as a three-legged stool, the economic sustainability is every bit as important as being able to deliver the environmental and societal sustainability.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I bring the Minister's attention to another matter related to generational renewal. I will highlight an unfair flaw in the operation of the fair deal scheme relating to land transfer, for example to a grandchild, which is causing huge financial hardship for families. I will explain how it operates. This rule must be changed. If a family transfers land within five years of the owner entering a nursing home, this land is valued. If the recipients lease the land, they must pay the nursing home 7.5% of the value of the land on an annual base, with no three-year time limit like there is for the family farm. This could go on for 14 years until the total value of the land is paid over. This is completely unfair.

There is no possibility of deferring the payment, as there is for the family home. It is therefore a huge financial burden. Where is the family to get the funds? I know of a case in which a

family or young person is being assessed to pay €23,000 per year and the income the person is getting from leasing the land is only €5,000. The person has nowhere to find the cash and it is putting them under huge financial hardship. I am sure the Minister will agree that this is totally unfair. I would like it to be looked at and changed immediately.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The fair deal scheme has had a specific impact on farmers. While it is not under my remit or that of the Department of agriculture, I have engaged with previous Ministers for Health on it and I would be happy to work with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this area as well. The last Government made changes around it and we want to be able to give certainty, clarity and comfort to people who are planning the transition of land in the most difficult of circumstances. We want to make sure the fair deal scheme is fair in how it does it. I will be happy to work with the Deputy and colleagues across the House on that issue, because how it affects farmers and how it affects small businesses more broadly is a key consideration.

Food Safety

107. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on his engagements with his European counterparts regarding food safety and public health. [66730/25]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am taking the question on behalf of Deputy Carthy.

This goes back to my question at the beginning about food safety and public health. The Mercosur deal is at the core of this but it is broader than that. We have an issue across Europe in that we are importing a lot of product from different parts of the world. In particular, the question about grain earlier was interesting because a lot of feed comes into the country from tropical climates. A situation could happen in the future - it is one of the things we need to be vigilant about - where we could bring in a parasite, or whatever it is, that causes a problem for our native species of grain or other products. That is one example. There are a lot of other examples of it.

It is important that the Minister reassure the public that the quality of food we get in Europe is up to the standard and is not being contaminated by food from other countries that is of a lesser quality.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising an important point. It gets to the heart of what we do. From a food safety and public health perspective, a lot of the conversation in Ireland has tended to be about sustainability in recent years, what our farmers are doing, producing food sustainably and profit. When we travel abroad on a trade mission, the first thing that is mentioned, particularly in places like Asia and beyond, is our safety credentials. They are second to none and it is something the Department never takes for granted. However, as farmers we might. We almost never mention it any more because food safety is not an issue unless there has been a scare. In countries that do not have confidence in food safety, it is the number one priority. That is why we will never be complacent about this. It is the number one selling point of Irish agrifood products and as a country we export 90% of the food and drink we produce.

Food safety and public health are fundamental to Ireland's agrifood industry, as I said, and to the protection of consumer health and safety, but also consumer confidence. My Department plays a central role in implementing and enforcing EU food safety rules across primary production, processing, official controls, imports and exports. As Minister, I routinely attend the European Council in its agriculture and fisheries formation to engage directly with my European counterparts on food safety, public health and other issues. My Department also regularly attends EU meetings on issues regarding food safety and public health to present the Irish position on the legal and technical issues under discussion. This ensures that Ireland remains compliant with and, in co-operation with other member states can shape, European Union legislation in this area.

Reports of the *Irish Farmers' Journal* investigation into the sale of hormones and antibiotics in Brazil raise important issues and merit careful examination, as I said previously. Brazilian beef already enters the EU market, and it is therefore important to ensure that none of the unregulated products referenced in the investigation are used in its production. While there is no evidence that this is the case, these reports reinforce the need for further vigilance.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister mentioned in a previous reply that quite a small amount of beef from Brazil comes into Ireland and that there is no evidence of this issue. Is the evidence being looked for? What kind of investigations are we carrying out into that, from an Irish and European perspective? Similarly, we have a large amount of poultry coming in under the Mercosur deal. I think it is 180,000 tonnes. We need to be vigilant in respect of that. We have a large poultry industry in Ireland and we eat a lot of poultry so we need to ensure it is of the highest quality.

I will go back to the issue raised earlier about feedstuffs. A lot of feedstuffs are imported into this country from Latin America and other tropical climates. That is displacing Irish grain and feed and if we are to be authentic about the quality of our food, we need to ensure that the authenticity can be stood over. For example, people were before the committee recently to speak about growing grain and, in some cases, the only thing that is Irish in Irish whiskey is the water. That is a very bad situation. We need to be authentic about the products we produce and to do so not only from the point of view that they are what they say on the label, but also that we can guarantee their quality. The only way we can guarantee their quality is if we produce the ingredients as well as the finished product here.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Trade is two-way. In response to the Deputy's original question, I said clearly that we are in a space where we need to have absolute confidence that any food that comes into the EU meets our standards. Our sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, food safety standards are non-negotiable. They are the standards to which we expect our farmers to produce food in the EU and we do not accept secondary standards for anything that comes in from outside the EU. Should we produce everything here? That is a different argument in a way. We could get very protectionist. There was a time when Ireland tried to be self-sufficient in its food production system. We were a poor country back then. The highly integrated nature of trade around the world is here to stay.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is balance.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is about balance but we benefit largely from it because we export 90% of the food and drink we produce. We absolutely need it to be a level playing field. We need to make sure those standards are there, that there is confidence in our products, whether the food is produced in Europe or comes in. We will reiterate those points, but the checks and balances are there. This is non-negotiable for the EU. It is strong on that and we will look for further assurances to make sure our consumers, as well as our farmers and primary producers, can be reassured about it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I accept that. I understand the point that we cannot produce everything in Ireland. That goes without saying. However, there is an issue regarding the authenticity of the product that we produce if we are labelling it and selling it as Irish and as having that authenticity around it, yet everything that goes into it is coming from somewhere else. We need to find that clear balance in respect of that.

Regarding Mercosur, safeguards have been put in place. They have been voted through. There were no amendments made to those safeguards, yet a lot of countries, including Ireland and others of like mind, have expressed sincere difficulties with how far those safeguards go. That raises a red flag for a lot of people out there. How genuine is this Government and the other governments that it is meeting with around Europe in making sure that we block this trade deal and find a way forward to protect consumers and farmers in Europe?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I cannot be any clearer than I have been. At every AGRIFISH Council meeting, I have raised Mercosur and our concerns about it. I am not the lead Minister with responsibility for that; it is the responsibility of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, who has that key consideration. I take my role at the Cabinet table seriously. I use my role as a representative and custodian of our farmers and food producing industry to highlight points. I recognise that the vast majority of trade deals benefit Irish agriculture, our farmers and our rural economy, but that does not mean we have to accept every single part of every single trade deal that is put forward. We have continuously highlighted and raised our sensitivities around the Mercosur trade deal. In line with the programme for Government, I have continuously worked with like-minded countries. Most recently, on 17 November, I had bilateral meetings with the French and Italian ministers for agriculture. Previously, I have met the Austrians, Latvians, Polish and many others. I continue to have that level of engagement where we discuss our mutual concerns and engage in the process as it is ongoing.

Animal Diseases

108. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has received applications for compensation for the loss of animals, or animal products and animal feed, in relation to the current strain of avian flu circulating in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66456/25]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cleere is taking this question on behalf of Deputy Brabazon.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. Unfortunately, there have been four outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza in turkey flocks since early November, one each in counties Carlow, Meath, Monaghan and, most recently, Laois. I express my sympathy to the flock owners concerned. I acknowledge the worry this situation is causing to all those in the poultry industry in Ireland. These outbreaks follow the detection of the H5N1 avian influenza virus in wild birds across the country throughout 2025. It is this ongoing circulation in wild birds that is posing such a risk to poultry and captive birds. Biosecurity is the most effective way to prevent the virus infecting flocks, and this is why I implemented mandatory poultry biosecurity regulations on 1 November and a housing order for poultry and captive birds from 10 November.

The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides that compensation to owners of animals may be payable if a cull of those animals is directed by my Department in the event of an outbreak in that herd or flock of certain diseases, including highly pathogenic avian influenza. The compensation may relate to the animal that is culled, or to an animal product, animal feed or similar item that is destroyed in relation to the outbreak. The compensation may not exceed the open market value of the animal or item. Since 2017, my Department has engaged an external consultancy firm with specialised knowledge of poultry to develop valuation tables relating to the most common species and types of poultry in Ireland to be used to determine compensation payable in the case of an outbreak of poultry disease that necessitates a cull. These valuation tables are updated on a six-monthly basis.

It is important that this be taken on a case-by-case basis because no two cases are the same. The impact on the financial viability and valuation of the birds at a set time is continuously upgraded. It means that, where a flock owner enters the worst case imaginable of having to have their entire culled, there is a process there for them to engage with that is fair and up to date. My Department is engaging with owners impacted by recent poultry outbreaks in assessing the compensation due to them where depopulation of their flocks and destruction of related material has been directed to control the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: The Minister will be aware that the financial loss will not just be limited to those farmers who have unfortunately had their flocks culled. As these outbreaks are confirmed to be highly pathogenic avian influenza, there are restrictions on poultry, poultry products and eggs from within the 3 km restriction zone and 10 km surveillance zone in respect of both the EU and UK markets. A total of 94% of our poultry exports by value - around €280 million - are to the EU and UK markets. Will the Minister make provision for compensation to be payable to farmers who lose access to their export markets in this current outbreak? The currently held advice is that consuming poultry or eggs from an infected animal once cooked does not pose a risk to public health. That said, consumers may now be reluctant to buy poultry products, given what has been said in the media.

Has the Minister considered that there may be a decline in the number of consumers buying poultry or a fall in the numbers of Christmas turkeys ordered this year? Will the Minister consider a compensation scheme for those farmers who are impacted by this?

Deputy Martin Heydon: To reiterate, the Animal Health and Welfare Act provides that compensation to owners of animals may be payable if a cull of those animals is directed. It is specific. It has clear criteria, and rightly so. If a flock owner or farmer is being asked to remove

their entire herd or flock for broader national reasons in the best interests of stopping the spread of disease, that is the most important thing. We do all of that as well as a mandatory biodiversity measures and housing measures to get ourselves back to a disease-free status as soon as possible. The 3 km restriction zone and 10 km surveillance zone remain in place for three months after a positive case. At that point, we can get back to having disease-free status in that area. We are lucky that the vast majority of our product that is exported goes to countries that accept regionalisation. They will only ban the export of product from that restriction zone and surveillance zone, not for the whole country. Some markets ban it for the whole country and do not differentiate. That is a broader challenge. The compensation model that is set out in the Act from 12 years ago is very much targeted at those flock owners.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: This morning, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet Commissioner McGrath. I welcome the positive news that the European Commission has recommended the extension of the nitrates derogation. I acknowledge the Minister's role in fighting for Ireland. I said numerous times that we as a country were going to have to go into the trenches on the nitrates derogation, and we did. The devil will be in the detail. That will be made available over the next couple of weeks. However, this gives a bit of clarity and certainty to farmers. We do not know the specifics yet. It has been well received out in the community and by farmers whom I spoke to this morning. It is important to acknowledge the Minister's role, the Commissioner's role, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach. It has been a united effort. Everybody has been on the same page. This is a positive day for Ireland. Hopefully, we can get it through in the next couple of weeks.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. Ultimately, it is an important step in a process. The process now is with the technical committee that meets on 9 December. It was always our intention and ambition in all of our negotiations to get the best possible proposal agreed by the Commission and then put that on the agenda for the 27 member states and that technical committee to hopefully vote on. We still do not have a derogation. As of now, we do not have a derogation on 1 January. It is in the hands of that committee. I negotiated in good faith. There was detailed engagement between my officials and EU officials. I pay tribute to Commissioner Roswall, who came over at my invitation to visit an Irish farm - the Durkin's farm just outside of Kilcullen in County Kildare - to see at first hand the intergenerational work that was at play. The engagement of her officials who have been over here and I have met in Brussels numerous times has been important. It is fair to say that their starting point and our starting point were two different positions.

We have a proposal now that I have confirmed to the House is for an extension of the existing derogation for a three-year period, with other new conditionalities that I will confirm closer to the time. All of my focus now is on engaging with colleagues across the member states so that if there are any concerns or issues ahead of that vote, we give ourselves the best chance possible. This is not done yet. It is at a sensitive point. I look forward to the engagement.

I also recognise the constructive role that the stakeholders, farm organisations and industry have played throughout this process and their patience at a stressful time for everybody involved.

Environmental Schemes

109. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when outstanding farm payment issues under the ACRES scheme will be resolved; the steps being taken to ensure timely payments in future cycles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65229/25]

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising the important matter of the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES, which is the flagship environmental scheme provided under the 2023-27 CAP strategic plan, with €1.5 billion in Exchequer and EU funding allocated over the course of the scheme. There are currently just under 53,700 participants in ACRES.

ACRES payments issue on a scheme year basis, with 2023 being the first scheme year for tranche 1 participants and 2024 being the first year for those who are in tranche 2. Almost €250 million has issued in respect of the 2023 scheme year, with over 99% of participants paid. A total of €268.4 million has issued in respect of the 2024 scheme year and over 98% have now received the payment. Finally, 2025 advance payments have now commenced, with €179.6 million issuing in the first two payment runs. These payments will bring the amount paid in respect of ACRES since its commencement in 2023 to almost €700 million. This reflects the Government's commitment to achieving a range of environmental, biodiversity, water quality and climate objectives by supporting farm families in their environmental journeys.

ACRES is an ambitious and complex scheme, and there have been challenges as a result. We are overcoming those challenges through the commitment of all those involved in the scheme, including farmers themselves, ACRES advisers and the ACRES co-operation project teams. The main issues that have impacted on the making of payments have been identified and they include contract and ownership or partnership issues, issues with scorecards and the alignment of ACRES data with basic income support for sustainability, BISS, scheme information. My Department is actively resolving the remaining issues through, for example, the development of the required IT functionality and the investigation of issues associated with specific contracts.

In cases such as change of contract, my Department is unable to progress the payment claim until the legal requirements have been resolved. We are working through these issues. We have identified and addressed the issues that arose at the start and the system is functioning much better now. I am happy to expand further in my supplementary response.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for his continuing engagement on this matter. As he knows, a lot of farmers in Cork North-West are involved in ACRES. I know the Minister inherited a lot these issues when he moved into his new role but he has made great strides to ensure that we are now up at over 90% in terms of payments for many of the schemes from 2023 and 2024.

ACRES is not just a scheme but a partnership between farmers and the State to protect our environment, enhance biodiversity, improve water quality and ensure that sustainable farming remains at the heart of rural Ireland. Across the country, farmers are delivering real, measurable

benefits, planting hedgerows, restoring habitats, managing grasslands, reducing emissions and protecting our natural heritage for future generations but for farmers to continue this essential work, the Government must ensure that ACRES payments are made fully and on time each year. Farmers plan their finances around these payments. They rely on them to meet costs, invest in their holdings and deliver the environmental measures expected under the scheme. Delayed payments can create uncertainty, cause cash flow pressures and undermine confidence at a time when farmers are already facing rising input costs and increased regulatory demands.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I completely agree that it is important to get this right. When I got this job on 23 January, there were 14,500 farmers who had signed up in good faith but had not been paid. The problem was on my Department's side through systems failures that had happened. We worked really hard and put extra staff on it. I visited the team in Wexford. We looked at the systems and tried to change them around. There was a lot of overtime and a lot of people put their shoulder to the wheel to get the momentum back up.

At that time, no regular payments were being made but the issuing of payments has gathered considerable momentum this year, as knowledge and experience of the scheme has improved and as functionality has been deployed to address the challenges that were encountered. I appreciate the patience that has been shown by participants as we resolved these issues.

My Department has been developing solutions to solve issues permanently rather than applying quick fixes. It is really important that any solutions developed avoid the same issues and the very concerns that the Deputy has outlined. ACRES has paid out almost €700 million to farmers in this country since 2023. It is a really positive scheme that has delivered massively for our environment and that is what I want to get back to focusing on. We are in that space now.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I very much concur with the Minister on the importance of having permanent solutions in place rather than temporary measures. That is very important. A few prepayments were made previously but getting permanent payments is what it is all about. Timely ACRES payments are not a luxury but a necessity. They uphold trust, recognise the efforts of farmers and allow the scheme to achieve its full environmental and economic potential. There is strong support for the scheme in the farming community of Cork North-West and I will continue to work with the Minister to push for a system that delivers payments swiftly, efficiently and predictably each and every single year.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy O'Shea and colleagues across the House for their support as we worked through the challenges on ACRES. I am committed to having permanent fixes in place so that we can get back to talking about the good things that ACRES is delivering for our environment. More than 54,000 farmers are delivering more than 9,000 km of watercourse protection through buffer strips on areas adjacent to rivers, streams, lakes and wetland riparian zones. More than 500,000 native trees and more than 2,300 km of new hedgerows have been planted. The scheme has seen 14,000 barn owl nest boxes installed and 57,000 hectares of grassland left undisturbed to support overwintering geese and swans. These are the types of measure that are having a real impact and 54,000 farmers put their hands up for that additional environmental conditionality, proving that they can continue to produce top-quality food and supplement their incomes by taking measures that have made a real difference

to their areas. That is what I want us talking about and focusing on in ACRES from next year onwards.

Again, I thank the Deputy for his support in this area.

Common Agricultural Policy

110. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on his engagements regarding the Common Agricultural Policy post 2027. [66741/25]

130. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine for an update on his work in relation to the negotiations for the Common Agricultural Policy post 2027; if he has had meetings with his ministerial counter parts in other EU member states on the matter; if he has had meetings with the European Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66461/25]

146. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide an update on his recent meeting at the European Agriculture and Fisheries Council (AGRIFISH) in Brussels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66669/25]

164. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress to date at EU Council discussions in relation to the need to ensure that adequate funding is provided for CAP in the next Multiannual Financial Framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66609/25]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Farmers are extremely worried at this time and believe that the Minister is going to cut the CAP budget by up to 25%. I ask for reassurance today that the Minister will not do that.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I propose to take questions Nos. 110, 130, 146 and 164 together.

I thank the Deputies for their questions. If what Deputy Bennett talked about is done, it will not be me who does it. I am fighting to try to avoid that happening. I am working really closely with the EU institutions and my counterparts in other member states to influence the negotiations for the next CAP and the next Common Fisheries Policy, CFP. I am continuing to meet my counterparts at monthly meetings of the AGRIFISH Council and having bilateral discussions on the sides of those meetings as well as separately with individual ministers in order to understand their priorities for the next CAP and to explain Ireland's priorities. It is important to note that there is a long way to go in these negotiations and the Commission proposals published in July are a starting point only. There will be ongoing, regular engagement with the Commission and with other member states as the negotiations progress.

My priority is for a CAP that provides stability, fairness and predictability for farmers and rural communities and one that simplifies rather than complicates. At the most recent AGRIFISH Council meeting, held in November, I took the opportunity to underline the importance of a strong CAP budget in delivering on economic, social and environmental

objectives and expressed my concern about the proposed degressivity measures. I emphasised that the CAP must remain a policy that balanced fairness and competitiveness, thereby ensuring adequate support for smaller farms while sustaining viable production at all levels. I also highlighted the need for the careful design of possible measures to address food security risks and the need for reserves to be designed carefully and to remain exceptional, transparent and market oriented. Finally, I sought further clarity on the proposed integration of CAP within a wider national and regional partnership plan structure and expressed my concerns on the level of the CAP budget.

The CAP must remain a distinct, fully funded policy with clear governance, capable of sustaining farm incomes, food security and rural resilience. That requires an adequate and fully funded budget. On the margins of the Council, I have held many bilateral meetings with my ministerial counterparts and have engaged with nearly all member states at this point. These discussions have provided a valuable opportunity to exchange views on the Commission's proposals and to emphasise our shared priorities for a strong, well-funded and workable CAP that supports farm incomes, food security and rural resilience. I am having all of these bilateral meetings and engaging with colleagues to explain Ireland's priorities as well as to understand theirs. From 1 July next year, Ireland will have the Presidency of the EU and if I am still in this role, God willing, I will be in the chair and have the Presidency of the AGRIFISH Council, which will give us an opportunity to really shape this.

At the same time as these discussions are happening, discussions are happening around the overall budget, the multiannual financial framework and where that is at. I am working with colleagues across all levels of Government to make sure that we get the best possible return. The CAP is critical for our overall economy, our farmers, our rural economy and beyond.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Our farming families produce the highest quality food in the world while also adhering to some of the highest environmental and animal health standards in the world. If there is a proposal to reduce the CAP budget, I ask that the Government fill in the vacuum.

12 o'clock

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. It goes without saying that in the negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework, we must ensure that there is robust and ring-fenced CAP funding. As we all know, this is essential for farm incomes. It is essential for investment in rural Ireland and it is also essential for food security. Far too often, we do not talk about protecting food production in western Europe. As the Minister referenced earlier, the Common Agricultural Policy was devised to ensure the citizens of Europe had a secure supply of safe food. We should never lose sight of that aim and that strategy. That is the reason we need a CAP that is properly funded.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I took the opportunity yesterday to meet with Macra na Feirme to discuss its concerns around the new CAP and the impact it would have on farmers and on rural communities. Its members were particularly focused on generational renewal and knowledge transfer, and the CAP was key for funding generation renewal plan. Will the

Minister give members of Macra na Feirme assurance that funding will be available for generational renewal and that action will be taken on implementing that plan?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Minister give a short reply?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputies Bennet, Smith and Moynihan for raising what gets to the heart of the CAP - having enough money in it. What has been ring-fenced is 80%. It is not enough. I agree with Deputies Smith and Moynihan in terms of the importance of generational renewal, the next generation and certainty for all farmers. In direct answer to Deputy Bennett's point around the NRPP and the national regional plan, what Europe is saying is that it has less money than it had the last time and we should go back to our country and fight it out over here. We are all saying there is not enough from Europe. I have sharp elbows and I can assure everyone in the House that when the time comes to fight the corner of agriculture at the Cabinet table, I will do that. However, if I do that now, Europe will say we are grand as we got the money locally. We get as much out of the pot in Europe as we can for our farmers because Ireland is a net contributor to the overall multi-financial annual financial framework. Some 75% of our receipts for the entire Exchequer come back through the Common Agricultural Policy. If we allow that to be reduced, the overall economy, urban dwellers as well as rural dwellers across Ireland, suffers.

Therefore, I am continuing to fight. It is really important that the CAP negotiations continue in line and in tandem with the multi-annual financial framework negotiations as well. We will continue to work across government, as will the Tánaiste as Minister for Finance, the Taoiseach and everybody, to get the most into the Common Agricultural Policy as we can because that matters to Ireland overall. Then discussions at national and regional levels will be down the line. I will do everything in that regard at that point but right now, it is about getting Europe to recognise the importance of food security, as Deputy Smith has said. It is an integral part of everything we do. The EU was a peace project.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Martin Heydon: At its heart was food security. The Common Agricultural Policy has been really successful and we cannot lose sight of that.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: So the farmers have no need to worry.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [\[www.oireachtas.ie\]](http://www.oireachtas.ie).

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand the Chief Whip intends to move a proposal in relation to the adjournment of the House this evening.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until 6 p.m. on Tuesday, 2nd December, 2025.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that proposal agreed?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Not agreed.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Agreed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is the purpose of that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: We are entitled to know.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----there is a motion before us, so can I just address it? The Government Chief Whip cannot say the normal sitting of the Dáil will not happen on Tuesday without any explanation as to why this will happen. Does this mean Leaders' Questions will not happen on Tuesday again? The Taoiseach was not here this Tuesday. He seems to be evading accountability all the time. What is the rationale behind it?

Deputy Mary Butler: I have just left the Business Committee where this has been agreed with all Whips.

Deputy Mark Ward: You could have let us know.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I want to make the point that there was a discussion on this at Business Committee and all parties were involved. That meeting has just finished. Therefore, we do not have any objection to it.

Deputy Michael Collins: Same. I was at the Business Committee meeting too, which just ended a while ago, and there was full agreement at it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Given there has been full agreement at the Business Committee and the Chief Whip has announced the proposal-----

Deputy Mark Ward: Tá an Government as láthair.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is Santa Claus coming?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask that Members agree to the proposal.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Is Santy coming early or something?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The proposal is agreed to.

I ask colleagues to join me in extending a very warm welcome to our Commissioner, Michael McGrath, who has joined us in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery today. Commissioner McGrath, in his role as European Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection, has just come from a meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs and is visiting Leinster House today with a delegation that comprises his Cabinet officials and Mr. Peter Power, head of the European Commission representation in Ireland. The Commissioner is very welcome. We were delighted to have him here for the part of the debate with the Minister for agriculture on our fight in Europe. He is very welcome to a gathering with which he is very familiar. I thank him very much.

Members applauded.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome Commissioner McGrath back to the House. I also welcome the women's Shankill group who are here with us in Leinster House. They are very welcome here today.

Dearbhaíonn figiúirí ón mBord um Thionóntachtaí Cónaithe inniu an rud atá ar eolas ag tionóntaí cheana féin. Is é sin go bhfuil cíosanna as smacht agus iad ar siúl suas 5% arís le bliain anuas. Is polasaithe an Rialtais atá freagrach as seo. Today's Residential Tenancies Board figures confirm what renters already know and that is that rents are out of control and it is the Government's policies that are responsible. This is not something abstract. I spoke to a couple last week who are renting. They both have good jobs. The plan was simple. They were going to save hard, buy their own home and one day start a family here in Ireland. However, they could not take the rent increases any more and they knew more were coming. Last week, they were left with no other option but to move back into his parent's homes, back into his childhood bedroom. Now their plan has changed. Their plan now is to save money, book flights and head to Australia. This couple are 26 and 27 years of age. This is what non-stop rip-off rents have done to their future and it is a direct result of Government policies over decades that have driven this rent crisis to boiling point.

This crisis has now resulted in 5,400 eviction notices being issued in the last quarter alone. The Government's policies are not getting young people out of boxrooms; it is putting them back into them. In the past year alone, both new and existing rents have risen by 5% across the State. In some counties, the increases have been truly shocking. In Leitrim rents are up 16%, in Carlow they are up 15% and in Longford they are up 14%. The average new rent in this State is now €20,000 a year. In Dublin, the picture is even more brutal. The average new rent in Dublin stands at €27,000 a year.

This is not an accident. This is the direct result of Fine Gael's approach to housing and to renters, letting the market run wild, protecting profits and abandoning ordinary people. Average rents were less than €1,000 when the Tánaiste became a Minister and took up his

position in Cabinet. Now, they are nearly double that. That means that people are now having to pay over €9,000 more a year in rent than when he took office, and almost €10,000 more a year in Dublin for new rents.

The Government is going to make matters worse. From March of next year, tens of thousands of renters will see their rent reset to the very top of the market. For some, this will mean a doubling of the rent. How high is the Tánaiste willing to let rents go before he intervenes? Is it €3,000 a month? Is it €4,000 or maybe €5,000? What is his cut-off point? Young people cannot take this pressure any longer. The Government is pricing them out of homes, out of family life and out of their futures. What did renters get in this year's budget? They did not get the promise the Tánaiste made to them that the Government would increase the renter's tax credit. They did not get that but landlords are going to get an increase. They will get €1,000 tax break next year. Workers get no tax cut at all but developers get €250 million of a tax break for apartments that are already under construction. Once again, the Government made clear political choices. It chose landlords and developers over renters.

Our position is clear and simple. The Government needs to end the rip-off. It needs to get rents under control and it needs to make housing affordable. That means cutting rents and freezing any further rent increases for the next three years to give renters breathing space and to stop this relentless upward spiral. Here is the question: is the Government going to finally act by cutting rents and introducing a real and meaningful three-year rent freeze - yes or no - or is it going to continue with Fine Gael's failed approach that has already driven rents through the roof? While the Tánaiste sits at the Cabinet table, rents have gone up, on average, by €1,000 a month to the point that it costs €27,000 for a new tenant in this capital. It is shameful.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: First, I join with colleagues in welcoming our former colleague, Ireland's friend and our Commissioner in the European Union, Commissioner McGrath, and thank him for the job he is doing in the European Commission on crucial areas at this time. I also join with Deputy Doherty in welcoming the group from the Shankill Shared Women's Centre to the Public Gallery. I thank him for the important work he is doing also.

On behalf of Deputies right across this Chamber and the people of Ireland, I send our solidarity and support to the people of Hong Kong and to all of the families affected by the horrific apartment block fire last night. It was truly devastating and is deeply disturbing. We think of all of those impacted at this very difficult time.

There is a kind of rhythm to Deputy Doherty's questions these days, whereby he selectively quotes from publications that have just come out. He may not have had a chance to fully read it yet, but the RTB report out this morning does show something that he chose not to share with Dáil Éireann or with renters, which is that the ESRI's individual property level analysis shows that 62% of properties nationally saw no change in rent year on year. That number is up by 4.8 percentage points compared with the previous year. We have a real challenge in terms of housing - indeed it is an emergency - but we are now seeing a situation where the number of rental properties not seeing an increase has increased further on last year and now stands-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: The law will change in March.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Gould should hang on a second and give me a chance. It now stands at 62% of properties, which affects more than six out of ten people. It also finds the benefit of the rent pressure zones because it finds that, where rents have increased, it is disproportionately in areas not covered by rent pressure zones.

Deputy Doherty likes to talk a lot about what has happened since the election. What has happened since the election is that this Government that was re-elected and reformed took a decision to extend nationwide the rent property zones, including, in the Deputy's own county, Carndonagh, Buncrana, Lifford, Letterkenny, Milford, Glenties and Donegal town, areas that were not covered by rent pressure zones until we brought in those measures in recent times. I have no doubt that is also going to provide much assistance and protection.

I accept we are seeing a churn in terms of landlords coming into the market and landlords leaving the market, but we are actually also seeing more tenancies than before. Nationally, approved housing bodies have seen their registered tendencies grow year on year and quarter on quarter. Private tenancies have also grown annually to 240,751. In Dublin, an area where there is often particularly acute housing pressure, registered private tenancies rose by 4.3% annually to 108,174.

Deputy Doherty says his position on rent and rental protections is clear. I am not sure it is because I genuinely do not know today whether or not Sinn Féin supports rent pressure zones. Deputy Ó Broin did not support them. He said Sinn Féin would get rid of them and replace them with a reference system that the Housing Agency and the ESRI, both independent of Government, said would not work. They said it would be extremely complicated and it would not work. I believe it would have actually pushed up people's rent. Yet, I heard Deputy Doherty's leader say on national radio that scrapping RPZs would remove the only modest protection. I am not sure if that is discontent within the Sinn Féin party. Is Eoin telling the truth or is Mary Lou telling the truth? Which is the policy of Sinn Féin when it comes to renters?

Deputy Doherty mentioned the rent tax credit. When this Government was returned to office, the rent tax credit was due to expire. We took a decision not just to increase it for a year but to increase it and keep it there for the next three years. It was going to go to zero euro and zero cent until we took the decision to put hundreds of millions of euro of taxpayers' money into the rent tax credit. Sinn Féin's position when it comes to rent pressure zones is truly Jekyll and Hyde stuff. We are bringing in a series of rental protections. I want people listening into this debate to know that on 10 June, we brought in a series of new rights and protections for both new and existing tenants-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: The rents are going up though.

The Tánaiste: -----including ending no-fault evictions for larger landlords with four or more tenancies, and bringing in rent controls and extending them nationally through the RPZs for the first time ever, from 20 June. We are already seeing the benefit of that. There is a housing emergency, but there are some signs of encouragement in terms of the number of properties now that are not seeing an increase in rents this year. That is up on last year.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It will be gone in March.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In his heart of hearts, does the Tánaiste believe that is the case for young people who are listening to him? The couple I was speaking to last week, a 26-year-old and a 27-year-old, are back in the box room of their family homes, back in their childhood bedrooms. They were supposed to build a house, start a family and live here in Ireland but they are heading to Australia. The Tánaiste is trying to deny the reality that is out there. The RTB is very clear. Rents are going up. They have gone up over €1,000 in the last year. New rents and existing rents have gone up. Every year since the Tánaiste has been in the Cabinet, rents have gone up by an average of €1,000. They are the bare facts, not my facts but those of the RTB, which has told us very clearly that renters have to find €9,000 more for the average rent now since he took office in the Cabinet. In Dublin they have to find €10,000 more. Does the Tánaiste think it is appropriate that new renters have to pay €27,000 a year in rent in Dublin? Our position is very clear - ban rent increases.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Stop filling the pockets of landlords.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste should maybe tell the truth. Fine Gael made a solemn promise to the public that if they got re-elected, they would increase the renter's tax credit. They broke that promise, like so many others, because Simon says-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----on one hand and Simon does on the other hand. The election is over and Simon does not care. He has prioritised landlords and developers and he has abandoned renters.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty should conclude.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the reality of it. Every year, rents are going up and the Government has no plan to fix it. Indeed, it is going to make it worse because it is going to allow landlords to reset the rents right across the board in March next year. It is appalling. That is why young people have decided to abandon this country in search of a different future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Would Deputy Doherty allow the Tánaiste to respond, please?

The Tánaiste: I will take the same latitude on the clock as well.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Of course you will.

The Tánaiste: Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I do not understand a Sinn Féin policy that opposes every single support for small landlords to try to keep them in the market and then ones to make sure we have more rental properties available. How does Sinn Féin wish to have rental properties without landlords, yet it demonises small landlords across this country and opposes every single measure?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Mom and pop landlords - people in my constituency and Deputy Doherty's - who rent out one or two properties are demonised. We need them to stay in the market. Deputy Doherty wants to drive them out and increase rental property. It does not make sense. It is probably why he is celebrating his 15th anniversary as the Opposition spokesperson on finance. Five finance Ministers later, he is still sitting in the same seat because the people of Ireland do not trust him when it comes to the economy. They know the angry jack-in-the-box routine does not build homes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Government build homes? Seriously.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Fourteen years. The Tánaiste fairly put his foot in that one.

The Tánaiste: Angry Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Take your foot out of your mouth.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: In the extra time available to me that was available to Deputy Doherty, can I point out there is only party in this House that receives very significant financial funding from builders and construction companies?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fine Gael. Thanks for admitting it, fair play to you.

The Tánaiste: The published accounts of Friends of Sinn Féin in the United States of America show that of its €366,000 in donations-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the renters?

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They are back in the box room.

The Tánaiste: -----the bulk of them came from construction companies and builders. Do you know where the biggest donation from?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: It came from one construction company in America that gave Sinn Féin \$20,000. Sinn Féin tells the young people of Ireland it is on the side of the working people and Mary Lou-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is the lack of substance from our new finance Minister.

The Tánaiste: -----flies out to America to take the dollars from the big businesses, big companies and big builders.

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin is the party that takes big money from big American building companies. Deputy Doherty is a hypocrite.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has got his time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sure even Michael McGrath is blushing up there.

The Tánaiste: Funny boy, Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: At this embarrassment from a finance Minister.

The Tánaiste: Funny boy, Pearse. Happy anniversary.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Has the Tánaiste nothing to say to the renters of Ireland?

The Tánaiste: Fifteen years of shouting and roaring, offering nothing positive to anybody. That is you, Pearse. Happy anniversary.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The renter's tax break would not exist if it was not for me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When the two of you are ready, we can continue.

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

The Tánaiste: The rent tax credit and RPZs are benefiting people in Donegal for the first time ever. You are welcome.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies very much.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It will be gone in March. Does the Tánaiste not understand the legislation?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I reassure the Tánaiste and anybody else in the House that where they interrupt and the clock goes on, I am fair in relation to compensating on the other side.

The Tánaiste: You are very fair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is very difficult at times-----

The Tánaiste: You can say that again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----because, well, the show goes on. I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I join others in welcoming the group from the Shankill Shared Women's Centre. It is great to see them. I welcome also Commissioner McGrath. I join the Tánaiste in saying our thoughts are with all those affected by the devastating fire in Hong Kong.

The cost-of-living crisis may have ended for Fine Gael but for ordinary families it is getting worse day by day. Food, heating, electricity, rents and college fees are all more expensive than they were last year. The CSO found recently that food prices alone are up 4.5% in the past 12 months. People are paying more, getting less and wondering how they will stretch their wages to the end of the week. Everybody outside of the Government can see what is happening. The fact the Tánaiste cannot see it is astonishing, so let me spell it out for him. Pricewatch compared 25 supermarket staples over three years. In 2022, a basket of everyday items cost €87. The same basket now costs a whopping €135. That is a 55% jump in just three years. The price of bread is up, the price of eggs has increased by 50% and chicken has more than doubled in price. These are not luxuries; they are basics. Ireland now has the second highest prices in the eurozone, 12% above the EU average. Families are being fleeced.

The skyrocketing cost of food is not just visible in euro and percentages. We can see it in the stress and anxiety etched into people's faces when they are at the supermarket till. People are wondering how much further they can stretch their pay packets. What was once the simple routine of the weekly shop has now turned into a painful choice between essentials, between putting food on the table and heating the home. Impossible choices are being faced daily.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, and the Central Bank have found that food prices are increasing way beyond the costs of producing food. In other words, price gouging is taking place. Somewhere along the supply chain, someone is pocketing the difference and people are left to carry the burden. We have a food regulator whose job it is to

shine a light on this but the Tánaiste's Government has tied its hands. Right now, it can only ask for information. It cannot compel supermarkets or processors to hand over data. Dunnes Stores has already refused to co-operate with the regulator's investigation on the price of eggs, fruit and vegetables. The regulator's chair, Mr. Joe Healy, has pleaded with the Government for stronger powers since last year. He is still waiting. Families are still waiting. We in the Social Democrats are not prepared to wait any longer. My colleague, Deputy Jennifer Whitmore, will be bringing forward a Bill to give the regulator the power it needs. I urge the Government to support this Bill.

Parents are eating less and skipping meals so their children can eat. Pensioners are cutting back on heating and living in fear of the weekly shop. They deserve answers and transparency. Will the Government stop protecting profiteers and start protecting the public? When will the food regulator be given the powers it needs to stop price gouging?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I am very much aware that the cost-of-living crisis is still real for very many families across the country. The Deputy has asked me a specific question, so I am going to spend the time on it. I do want to acknowledge that and I also want outline why the Government has taken a number of measures to protect the most vulnerable, including a very significant increase in the working family payment, an expansion of the fuel allowance and the permanent reduction of the VAT rate on energy bills. There is also the fact the Christmas bonus, which is paid to pensioners and people with disabilities, factually the most vulnerable people from an income point of view, will also be paid in the coming days. I know this makes a real difference to people at this time.

The Deputy has asked a very specific question. I acknowledge the work of my constituency colleague, Deputy Whitmore, in relation to this issue as well. As the Deputy said, an independent Agri-Food Regulator was established back in 2023 under the Agricultural and Food Supply Chain Act 2023. It has two key functions. One function is to enforce the law on unfair trading practices while the other is to perform price and market analysis and reporting functions. The Agri-Food Regulator has reported to my colleague, the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, that it does require more enhanced powers to compel businesses to provide information not in the public domain. I believe this relates specifically to the price and market analysis function. The Deputy referenced some examples where there has been a real challenge or inability to do that so far. The regulator does already have extensive powers to compel information when pursuing complaints under unfair trade and practices legislation but this aspect is more about the broader price and market analysis element as well.

Before I talk about expanding the powers of the regulator's office, I should also acknowledge that it has successfully secured a conviction under the Act. I acknowledge the regulator's work in relation to that. I know the Minister, Deputy Heydon, is fully committed to ensuring the regulator is equipped with the necessary powers to fulfil its statutory function. He has had to go through a consultative and now a legislative process. This is required to ensure the additional powers granted are proportionate. This is somewhat novel, and I only mean novel in a legal sense in terms of trying to get this right, seeking legal advice and making sure whatever we put in place stands up to the scrutiny of the law.

I know the Department of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, has engaged with key stakeholders in the supply chain, whether these are representatives of farm bodies, industry, retail,

Departments, State agencies and, of course, the Agri-Food Regulator himself as part of a detailed consultative process. There has been legal scrutiny now of a draft statutory instrument. As I said, the legislation is novel. It does exceed the requirements under European law. That is not a reason not to do it but it does. Therefore, it is essential that anything we do does stand up to robust legal scrutiny.

I am pleased to assure Deputy O'Callaghan today that the process to deliver on this commitment is significantly advanced. I understand that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, expects to be in a position to sign that draft statutory instrument in the coming weeks and no doubt will engage constructively with the Social Democrats and Deputy Whitmore on their proposals.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The food regulator asked for these powers over a year ago. Why is it taking the Government so long to give it the powers it needs to do its job? When we go into a supermarket, we see people at the checkout not being able to buy items and having to return them or leaving the supermarket stressed and worried about how they are going to meet their other bills during the week. This has gone on for well over a year without the Tánaiste's Government acting. Is the Government going to sign these extra powers in this year? Is it going to happen in the next couple of weeks in this year? Will the Tánaiste give us the detail on this? Are all the powers the food regulator needs to compel supermarkets, processors and anyone else in the supply chain to hand over the data required going to be in place to allow it to do its job? Are all those powers going to be in place in the next couple of weeks? Why has the Government delayed on this? Will the food regulator get the full powers? Will the food regulator now start going after price gouging? There is clear evidence of price gouging and profiteering taking place and of food prices increasing way above input prices. When is the Government actually going to act on price gouging?

The Tánaiste: I tried to largely agree with the Deputy on this occasion too. I accept it has taken a period of time since the regulator said it needed these new powers to get to this point we are at today where we have a draft statutory instrument. I would genuinely point out that those reasons are valid because this is a novel area. We are going beyond the requirement under European law. What we do has to be proportionate. We want to avoid any unintended consequences. In fairness, I know the Deputy wants to avoid that too. There is a whole supply chain here and we need to consult with all parts of it, including with representatives of the farming bodies, industry, retail and relevant Government Departments. We have increased the budget and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, secured this funding for the Agri-Food Regulator in the last budget, which enables it to prepare for and begin the process in terms of those new significant powers and hire the staff necessary to implement them. It is our expectation that this should be signed by the end of the year but I do want to give the Minister the space just to get this right. He is certainly working to try to get this done in a very short period of time. He will engage and keep in touch with the Deputy and his party colleagues on this matter.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Yesterday, we had the publication of the National Development Plan Review 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future Sectoral Investment Plan: Transport. A number of bypasses are needed in County Laois but it looks like the whole county was bypassed for funding. The Tánaiste was down there this week last year, exactly 52 weeks ago, canvassing

for the general election. Huge housing developments are needed in Laois. There has been rapid population growth in the county. It has been one of the top three counties in terms of population growth in the last three years. There is huge pent-up demand for housing and for infrastructure but we cannot have the housing without the infrastructure. Throughout the county, there is a need for roads, water services, wastewater services, sewerage services and electricity services to be expanded. The national development plan review published yesterday has approximately €202 billion in capital funding between now and 2030. On 22 July, the Tánaiste said we were prioritising investment in water, energy and transport and laying the groundwork for 300,000 new homes. That is 50,000 a year. The Government will not be able to do it. It prioritised Laois but I will come back to that.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has set out in its recent national planning framework document the projected need for 1,244 additional houses per annum in County Laois, on top of what is already being provided. This is a huge expansion in population. A 35% increase in population over the next nine years is what is being projected. This comes on top of five years of very rapid growth. As I said, the county is in the top three in terms of population expansion. Now, the local authorities are being asked to zone huge tracts of land. Without it being serviced, this land will be useless. People will have to get in and out by helicopter because there will not be roads. The infrastructure is required or it will stall these housing projects. It is not possible to build 1,200 or 1,300 houses per year unless these projects go ahead. The roads that are critically needed are the Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick relief road, which is critical, as the Tánaiste saw himself when he was down last year. To open up all that land, particularly across the north and west of Portlaoise, the northern orbital route is required. Water services need to be expanded according to Uisce Éireann and the document I have here. All the red lines in this document show where they are needed throughout the county. Graiguecullen, Borris-in-Ossory, Ballinakill, The Swan and Timahoe need wastewater improvements, while Portarlinton, Durrow, Mountrath, Stradbally, Rathdowney and Ballylinan need expansion in water supply. It is critical that we have this infrastructure for the council and private developers to be able to provide the housing.

Will the Tánaiste go back to the drawing board with this review and ensure that Laois receives some funding, particularly for the Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick relief road but also for the expansion of wastewater and water services? We cannot have houses unless we have services. It cannot be done. We also need to relieve the congestion on the N80, and that can only be done by the Mountmellick relief road and the northern orbital route in Portlaoise.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Stanley for raising these matters. I was indeed in Laois canvassing during the election. I was delighted that my new colleague, Deputy Willie Aird, joined the Deputy in Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There were big promises made.

The Tánaiste: They are promises that Deputy Aird is going to keep and he will work with the Deputy constructively in relation to that as well because we have a lot of work we need to do to deliver for the people of Laois and the midlands. The Deputy makes constructive and

fair points. We obviously have to put the infrastructure in place to enable the housing capacity to be delivered. That is a statement of fact.

What the Deputy saw yesterday was another piece of the jigsaw in terms of approval for a sectoral investment plan for transport under the national development plan, NDP. This is a very significant increase with regard to a number of projects. We will be in a position to deliver approximately €9.7 billion in investment in roads, protecting and renewing existing roads, delivering many new national road projects, trying to mitigate seasonal and climate-related impacts, rolling out electric vehicle, EV, charging infrastructure and delivering new strategic regional roads.

The Minister for Transport was at pains to say yesterday and on many other occasions - the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, are here with us also - that this list is not exhaustive. It lists a number of projects that will be delivered. There will also be an annual Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, capital plan and we expect that plan to come early in the new year. There will also be opportunities, specifically in relation to the housing point, to look at how we can work with the likes of the housing activation office. I see this in my constituency where, if key infrastructure is funded through the housing activation office or other structures, it opens up opportunities to develop and deliver further housing supply and crucial infrastructure.

I know that when you publish a list it very quickly becomes about not just what is on the list but what is not on it. That is why I know the Minister for Transport, while welcoming the sectoral investment plan, was clear, as is all of the Government, that this is not exhaustive but it is about moving forward with some degree of clarity. There will be many further opportunities, including in relation to the TII capital plan. We will work very constructively with Laois Deputies in this House and also with the local authority.

Specifically on the issue of water and wastewater, my officials in the Department of Finance met with Uisce Éireann last week, or in the last couple of days anyway. I am certainly very satisfied from my conversations that capital funding is not now the constraint in relation to Uisce Éireann. We have provided Uisce Éireann with billions of euro in additional funding. The capacity constraint here is the planning and regulatory systems and how we can actually get things done more quickly. I will work constructively in relation to the water and wastewater projects that are needed in Laois. I also look forward to next February when the rules change to finally bring a bit of common sense and allow developers on small-scale or relatively small-scale housing developments to put in their own wastewater infrastructure. I believe this will open up huge housing opportunities in many rural towns and villages. I am happy to continue to engage and I will send on the specific projects the Deputy referenced to the relevant Ministers.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Tánaiste. There is no point in the Department of local government, under the Minister, Deputy James Browne, publishing lists like this and projecting huge growth for a county unless the infrastructure goes in along with it. I did not mention the need for health centres, schools - the courthouse in Portlaoise as well, by the way - and many other things, such as flood relief schemes, that are needed in the county. If we are going to have sustainable development, we have to take transport into account. At the moment, with regard to the N80, trucks from the west and everywhere else have to wind their way through

the narrow streets of Mountmellick and around the junction at Pearse Street, Patrick Street and Market Square, which the Tánaiste saw for himself. In Portlaoise, they have to go in under the railway bridge, which they sometimes get caught under, and in by the roundabout in the centre of the town. The road from the Mountmellick Road across has to be connected with the motorway on the north-eastern side of Portlaoise.

I appeal to the Tánaiste to go back to the drawing board with this. I heard him say there may be other measures to come. There is a list on the back page of this document and, as he knows, when something is not listed on that, it is going to be a battle to do it. I ask the Tánaiste to make sure that happens and that the promises made before the election are kept.

The Tánaiste: They certainly will be. When I look at the budget that was introduced just across the Irish Sea yesterday, I am very thankful to be the Minister for Finance in a country where we are able to dramatically increase our capital investment. That did not happen by accident; it happened due to the hard work and ingenuity of the Irish people. It also happened as a result of the policies that my party, Fianna Fáil and others have delivered in government over the past several years, which have resulted in us being able to run budget surpluses, put money into future funds, increase our social welfare payments to look after pensioners, older people, carers and people with a disability, and make real differences in regard to public services too.

I note that in the Deputy's second question he expanded, understandably so, the area of projects across his county to other areas, as is appropriate. We have taken a decision to roll out a series of investment plans so there will be, in the coming days, a number of further capital plan announcements in relation to health and disability and, today, in relation to childcare. There is a very significant amount in public capital funding for State-led public childcare. This is something I talked about a lot in the election and we are determined to deliver it. We will keep in touch on Laois.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The greater Dublin region is grinding to a halt. If you stand on any bridge on the M50 in the morning and look north or south, a stationary line of cars stretches out as far as the eye can see. The cost of congestion is going to reach €1.5 billion by 2040. Dublin is ranked the worst capital in Europe in terms of time and money wasted because of traffic congestion. Incredibly, studies show that the average speed of a car is now 12 km/h. That is slower than the horse-drawn carriages of the 19th century, believe it or not.

Hundreds of thousands of people in this region are living in a commuter hell. Many parents are leaving before 6 a.m. and are not back until 7 p.m. in the evening. They are lucky if they get time to even put their kids to bed. I have no doubt this is leading to the anxiety that many children are experiencing because they are separated from their families for so long. Volunteerism is also dying in many of the commuter hell areas because people have so little energy when they come back from their commute to be able to help in community activities.

Traffic congestion in the greater Dublin area is grinding people down. A return journey for tens of thousands of people in Meath is taking four and a half hours daily, and it is approaching five hours. If we think about it, that is 20 hours a week commuting for a 40-hour working week. Meath is the biggest commuter county in the country, the only county in the country where the majority of workers leave the county every day to go to work. There are 90,000

commuters, 60,000 of whom are forced to use cars because of the lack of public transport. Navan is the biggest town in the country without a rail line.

In 1994, Fianna Fáil's Noel Dempsey promised to build the rail line from Navan to Dublin. Now, Deputy Aisling Dempsey, his daughter, is promising the rail line. The promise is now intergenerational. It is incredible. The current delivery, from concept to completion, is 42 years. That means that a person starting work in their early 20s, when it was announced, will have retired and be drawing the pension before it is actually delivered. In 1862, the same rail line was built in a matter of three years with picks and shovels.

Yesterday, we saw the launch of the national development plan review. There was one mention of the Navan to Dublin rail line, with no mention of any development that would progress it faster and no ring-fenced funds for it. Bizarrely, there was a mention of building the stations on a line where it has not even been decided what direction the line will go.

On Thursday, 4 December, there will be a public meeting of the Meath on Track campaign in Meath. All I am asking the Tánaiste to do at this time is to ask the senior transport Minister to listen to the people of Meath and the frustration in the country around this issue and to attend that meeting and listen to exactly how it is affecting so many people in Meath. Will the Tánaiste commit to that here today?

The Tánaiste: If I start making diary commitments for the Minister for Transport on the floor of the Dáil, I will find myself in a peculiar situation. I will certainly pass on the Deputy's request as I am sure the Deputy will be in touch with the Minister's office also. I live in a county not too dissimilar to the Deputy's in relation to commuter issues. I do take the point that far too many people are spending far too long sitting in traffic. I take the societal points the Deputy makes about the impact it is having on quality of life, childcare arrangements and a whole variety of other things, including emissions in terms of people sitting in traffic. I want to directly address the transport issues but we also need to have a really integrated conversation around work in the 21st century. It is why the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, are leading the consultation on remote working. There is this idea that people have to sit in their car five days a week and travel for hours on end. Not everybody, but some people can successfully work in their community in remote working hubs, connected hubs or indeed in their homes. This can work for some businesses and some public services. I look forward to the outcome of that consultation.

Yesterday the Ministers with responsibility for transport announced the Department of Transport capital ceilings for 2026 to 2030. The Deputy will acknowledge that by any yardstick it is a very significant increase in investment. There is a breakdown in that for active travel, public transport, road networks, road safety, civil aviation, maritime transport safety and ICT. The Deputy will also note that in that, the largest budget for 2026 is in respect to €1.6 billion for the road network, closely followed by €1.4 billion for public transport, rising to €2 billion in 2027, €2.5 billion in 2028, €2.3 billion in 2029 and €1.9 billion in 2030.

Specifically on the issue of the Navan rail line, which I know is very important in the Deputy's constituency, the NTA's transport strategy for the greater Dublin area does set out a framework for transport investment over the 20-year period from 2022 to 2042. The issue of a rail connection between Dublin and Navan was re-examined as part of the development. The re-examination supported the development of a rail line from Dublin to Navan so it is a fact that

it is required. The final strategy includes delivery of the line subject to the various planning and funding approvals. In 2024, the NTA did allocated funding to Iarnród Éireann for the establishment of a design team to commence work on the Navan rail line project. This work involves route option selection, and planning and design phases of the project. Iarnród Éireann commenced the procurement process for the pre-construction phase of the project and issued a tender to pre-qualified consultants at the end of May of last year. In November of last year, about a year ago, multidisciplinary consultants RPS were appointed by Iarnród Éireann for the duration of the project to work with the rail company's in-house project team. It is anticipated that a public consultation on the route options will now take place next year. That process will ultimately recommend the defined route and then allow the project to move forward to the business case stage, which will require it being approved in line with infrastructure guidelines as well. As the Deputy said, the Navan rail line is mentioned in the NDP, under a sectoral implementation plan. We had a debate earlier about what is and is not mentioned. This is mentioned in the plan. We are committed to the delivery of it.

I make one final point. The Deputy refers to times gone past and I know he has a view on this too. In times gone past, I do reckon there was an awful lot less around regulatory, planning, delays and likes as well.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: No landlords.

The Tánaiste: We do need to see how we streamline that for important capital projects.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste mentioned a number of stages in a multi-stage process. Each of those stages is taking longer than it actually took to build it in the 1860s with picks and shovels.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: By the landlords.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The national development plan review means very little. At best it is talking about the rail line being delivered by 2036 but there is already a landowner talking about taking a judicial review against it, which is going to blow that out of the water. This project is in reverse. We were told we were going to have the railway order in 2026 and now it is being pushed back to the end of 2027. The Government has increased the budget, I agree, but those come after this country being second from the bottom in Europe for ten years in terms of infrastructural spend. All the money the Government pushes on this does not matter unless it fixes the disaster in terms of infrastructure builds. Under this Government, we have the slowest planning, permitting, licensing, tendering and judicial review systems in the European Union.

The response to the workers who are stuck in traffic is to hike up their tolls and fuel taxes. Some people in Meath are suggesting a toll strike, refusing to pay tolls on the roads. Some are suggesting they block traffic in Dublin in the same way traffic is being blocked for them on a daily basis. I am against that disruption. Rather than going to those lengths, the Tánaiste must do his best to see if he can get a senior Minister or public servant in the room in Navan on Thursday week, to listen to the people on the crisis they are going through.

The Tánaiste: I generally believe it is very important for public officials to listen and engage, including those who have responsibility for the delivery of the projects in terms of the various agencies. I am sure if the Deputy reaches out to the Minister's office, he can engage with him. I am sure he has done so. I will certainly pass this on as well. I am in a point of agreement. First, I disagree with the idea that the project is going backwards. I very much believe it is moving forward. That is why it is in our national development plan, and the investment plan of yesterday. We will go to consultation on the preferred route in 2026. I think that is progress. I agree with the Deputy on the diagnosis of the challenge in terms of how we streamline infrastructure delivery. The Deputy will remember from our debates on these issues that I ran an election campaign where my party heavily advocated for the need for a Department of infrastructure in our programme for Government. We got a division in the Department of public expenditure and reform on infrastructure delivery. We are going to see the outworkings of that, probably next week and certainly within the next two weeks in terms of how we can streamline processes. As Minister for Finance, I believe funding will not be the major challenge in the delivery of those capital projects. It will be timelines and making sure we can look at running some processes in parallel rather than waiting meekly for this to end, and then this and so on. There are more gates here than you would see in many country estates. We need to look at how we can reduce that as well.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It will be a year to the day this Saturday since the general election. One of the crucial areas that came up time and time again on the doors in Kildare North was the lack of social infrastructure keeping pace with the new houses being built. I am sure the Tánaiste has experienced this as well in his own constituency, the neighbouring constituency of Wicklow. What I would like to raise today is school admissions, particularly for secondary schools. In Maynooth, Celbridge, Leixlip, Clane, Kilcock, Naas, Prosperous and every town in the constituency, we have children in sixth class who have not been guaranteed a place in secondary school. They have applied to and are on waiting lists for numerous secondary schools. This is causing natural worry and fear, particularly running up to Christmas. No child in sixth class should be worrying about where they are going to school in September next year.

It is clear to me that there is a lack of future planning and forecasting when it comes to school places in areas of high growth like north Kildare and indeed the Tánaiste's own constituency, where Greystones Community School has had a particular issue in terms of its expansion. I am thinking particularly of the principals who are trying to tackle this issue and find capacity. I have spoken with Siobhán McCauley, principal of Maynooth Community College, and Johnny Nevin, principal of Maynooth Post Primary, about trying to facilitate the amount of admissions they are getting. Naturally, it happens every single year. Time and again, the Department comes back with "increase enrolment". By increasing enrolment, we are essentially increasing class sizes when we have committed to reducing them. As well as that, we are looking at a capacity issue. These are two new schools, Maynooth Community College and Maynooth Post Primary. It was the largest investment by the State of €30 million at the time, with a capacity of 1,000 pupils per school, and it is far exceeding that.

One method the former Minister for Education, Deputy McEntee, introduced, was a pilot scheme for admissions. I welcomed it at the time. I think it is a great idea in principle, a type

of CAO process. Unfortunately, that has not worked in Celbridge. We have Celbridge Community School, Salesian College Celbridge and St. Wolstan's Community School. In those schools, the pilot scheme has not been working as intended. It has created extreme frustration, particularly when the ethos of the schools are different. Salesians' is an all-boys school, St. Wolstan's is an all-girls school and Celbridge Community School is a mixed school. We need to look at capacity planning linked to demographics, not just based on the census but particularly on cases where we know there are planning applications going through for 500 or 600 houses in locations, to ensure that we have the places at primary and secondary school.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. I have a note here. I am only going to read this bit out to show how frustrating what we receive sometimes is. The note is saying that for 2025, it is estimated that there are around 4,200 first year places available in County Kildare, with 3,794 sixth class pupils in the area, and on this basis the officials estimate a surplus capacity of around 400 places. Whoever wrote that note in the Department of Education and Youth could not be further from living in the real world. That is not the reality we experience in our constituencies in commuter land. It might work on a spreadsheet - there are this many places and this many children. It does not factor in what the Deputy referred to, parental choice and ethos. A parent is the primary educator of their child. A parent has the right to decide the type of ethos they want in a school. We should not have any homogeneous view on that; it is about the parent's choice. As the Deputy said, we can also have a whole variety of different mixtures of schools and differences in population. What the Minister, Deputy McEntee, was trying to do, and I thank the Deputy for acknowledging her work on this, is a reform that he and I welcome. There is a reason it is done on a pilot basis, and it is the very reason Deputy Whitmore and I have seen in Greystones where, quite frankly, there have been real issues with it as well. It is a good idea, and we can see why it was run on a pilot basis. It is so we can actually get the roll-out of this correct. The Deputy has obviously seen that in Celbridge. We have seen it in Athenry, Clonakilty, Greystones and Tullamore. We do need to get to this system. The Government is very committed. The new Minister for education committed to building on the work of the previous Minister, Deputy McEntee, as well.

We have seen and will see a very significant increase in capital funding for education. In fairness to Department of education officials, the Minister for education and successive Ministers - the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is in the Chamber - there have been real demographic pressures and challenges, including trying to quite rightly meet the needs of people with additional educational needs. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is doing excellent work on that too. We will see a very significant increase in capital funding for the Department of education.

However, the Department and the Government have to listen very carefully to communities on this too. We can have all the offices and all the spreadsheets we want but, generally, the local school principal will not be out too far. We should not have to have a battle every year to convince the school principal that he or she is wrong only then to admit a couple of weeks later that, actually, maybe the school principal was right. It does cause too much stress. I join the Deputy in acknowledging the work of school principals - the likes of Ms McCauley, Mr. Nevin and others across the country.

Demographics cannot be seen as one kind of homogeneous thing right across the country. There are certain parts of our country where there are specific demographic pressures and

bulges. The Deputy represents one such county; I represent another. We are absolutely committed to working with the Deputy on this. We are committed to learning the lessons of the pilot and how we can actually get that to the place we all want to get it to. I will ask that the Minister for education work closely with the Deputy in relation to the specific school projects he mentioned today.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: One frustration of school principals as well is that when the Department comes out looking for more spaces, it looks at communal spaces or an office and tries to say they could be classrooms. We have to protect those communal spaces for students as well. Whenever I speak in this Chamber, I always try to come with solutions rather than just raising issues all the time. I have some solutions that I would like the Tánaiste to take back to the Minister. As I mentioned, one is the capacity planning linked to demographics, particularly in the commuter area. A lot of us living in the commuter area experience it. The second is to introduce preference ranking, particularly on that admissions system, with a first, second and third preference. Third is to harmonise admissions criteria. We see different criteria for admissions policies in schools, which can really complicate admissions to most secondary schools and, indeed, primary education as well. There is also the issue of transparent oversubscription management. Anonymised data on applications, offers and waiting lists for each school should be published in order that we can know more. Finally, we need a feedback loop on the likes of this pilot and others to report on their success and, indeed, opportunities and challenges from that.

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy approaches his first anniversary in the Dáil, he has definitely learned how this place works. I think he named every town in his constituency through the two contributions. I hear him. I also want to acknowledge and thank him for the constructive suggestions and solutions he has brought here on behalf of the schools, communities, parents and students he is dealing with in his constituency. They are sensible suggestions that I will feed back directly to the Minister, Deputy Naughton. The Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Moynihan, is also here today and will feed them back. Most particularly, that feedback loop is really important. Principals, parents, schools and everyone else are engaged with this in good faith. Those of us whose areas were chosen to be the pilot towns are all happy, but there is real learning from this to try to get it right. Having that feedback loop so the Department can hear that directly would be a good idea. I will certainly pass on the Deputy's solutions and keep in touch with him on it.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Later today, thousands of taxi drivers will take part in a slow drive protest against Uber's new maximum pricing feature. Taxi drivers say this move is a blatant attempt to undermine the National Transport Authority, NTA, regulations and that it will be absolutely devastating to their incomes and for the future of the industry. They also tell us, and we know from other places where Uber has introduced this model, that it has resulted in a bad deal for taxi drivers, who end up being forced to pay much higher commission, and also higher prices for customers as choice dries up. Taxi drivers have been left with no option but to take to the roads of the capital to confront what they see as a big threat to their livelihoods. They

are calling for the NTA regulations to be updated to capture the impact of dispatch apps on the industry and on income of taxi drivers. The Government needs to get involved now and sort this out. This is a serious issue for taxi drivers right across the State, but it is also a very serious issue for customers who could see higher prices as choice dries up, as we have seen in other jurisdictions where this happened.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Doherty. I am aware of this issue and the significant concern of taxi drivers in relation to this. The factual position given by the Department is that dispatch operators are required to provide bookings to small public service vehicle, SPSV, licensed drivers using SPSV licensed vehicles only. Where taxi drivers choose to affiliate with a dispatch operator, they are free to contract with a dispatch operator of their choice. However, I do understand there is genuine concern and worry in relation to this. The Minister for Transport did issue a letter to the NTA on 19 November asking it to engage and clarify the regulatory position for SPSV operators. I will certainly take the Deputy's request back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: It is my first opportunity to wish the Tánaiste well in his new role. I wish to speak on the secretaries and caretakers talks, which have broken down again, in relation to their pension entitlements and leave entitlements. Mr. Andy Pike from Fórsa said:

The Department's refusal to table a constructive proposal on this point has now brought the process to an impasse. School secretaries and caretakers have shown extraordinary patience. Their determination to secure a just and long-overdue resolution remains unwavering. But if progress continues to be blocked, we cannot – and will not – rule out further strike action.

We do not want to see more secretaries and caretakers outside our door. We do not want to see schools operating with no secretaries and no one at the front door or to do the maintenance work in the schools. This is now an opportunity for the Government and the Tánaiste, as the new Minister for Finance, to step in and make a clear indication to all secretaries and caretakers across this country that he will stand up for their entitlements and give them those entitlements.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his good wishes. I congratulate him on his first year in the Dáil. I think I heard him say the other day that he is the first TD born in the 21st century-

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Absolutely.

The Tánaiste: -----which is a significant milestone.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: We got elected at the same age.

The Tánaiste: Did we? There you go. Well, comhghairdeas, and-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Maybe I will be Tánaiste some day.

The Tánaiste: Maybe you will. I would highly recommend it most days.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: At the rate this Government is going, yes.

The Tánaiste: We will have a discussion offline about that. We used to be in government with the Labour Party. You have to be careful not to get too close to that crowd - I jest.

I thank the Deputy for raising what is a really serious matter because school secretaries and caretakers are the beating heart of our community. We know them; we know them by name. We all want to see this issue resolved. Conscious of my new position, I do not want to over-comment on discussions between parties that remain confidential other than to say that this matter has been referred to the Labour Court. A resolution needs to be found. I understand the Department and the Government remain committed and ready to engage with Fórsa to reach a resolution to this important matter, which, as I said, has been referred to the Labour Court.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am hugely concerned about the lack of ambition in the national transport plan that was issued yesterday. Luas Finglas, which received planning permission this month, will not start construction until 2029. This is not a complicated project; it is a 4 km extension. Earlier this year, the Taoiseach promised to accelerate the Cork Luas. There is no funding for it in this plan. Similarly, DART+ South West is also now on the long finger. That has had full planning permission but it will not start construction until 2030. There is no funding for Luas to Lucan, Poolbeg or, indeed, Bray in our constituency. There is no funding for the reopening of the Waterford to Rosslare rail line, which is a critical project for the development of the south east. That has been ignored.

Incredibly, funding for active travel is not inflation-proofed in this plan, which really just amounts to an effective cut across the next five years. This failure to prioritise public transport means increasing gridlock, longer commutes and higher emissions. We all know why this is happening, and it is primarily so that money can be given to roads over public transport. The last Luas project was delivered in 2017. It will now be at least 13 years before there is a new one, and that is the short extension. How can the Government stand over this plan while claiming it wants to prioritise public transport?

The Tánaiste: There have been eye-watering amounts of public funding allocated to capital, including to the Department of Transport.

1 o'clock

I would make the point, as I made earlier but I want to make it again, there are lots of projects that will be advanced over the lifetime of this Government and beyond that are not included in yesterday's sectoral investment plan. They are generally projects of below €200 million and TII will publish an annual capital plan, likely in and around January, and the Minister will be in a position to publish this also. I know I am being argumentative but I would make the point that I am a big believer in building roads. Public transport needs roads, there are road safety issues, and the electric vehicles we are trying to get people to switch to need to drive on roads. Far too many road projects, including the N11 in our constituency-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The N81 did not get a mention.

The Tánaiste: A minute ago you did not want to spend the money on roads and you criticised us for spending too much money.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is a safety issue.

The Tánaiste: Exactly. Roads funding is important and I agree with Deputy Whitmore on this. This is why we have made sure the N11 will advance and I assure Deputy Whitmore that the N81 will too. The N81 is not a project that is expected to reach the threshold there would have been in the sectoral investment plan. I have discussed this with the chief executive of Wicklow County Council also. My broader point is that I will ask the Minister to come back specifically on the public transport projects, including the Luas projects, to which Deputy Whitmore referred.

Deputy Seamus Healy: School secretaries and caretakers are at the heart of all school communities up and down the country. In September, 2,600 secretaries and caretakers were forced to take industrial action to deal with long-standing inequities, whereby they are excluded from pension parity with other school-based public service staff, including teachers and special needs assistants. They have shown extraordinary patience. They agreed to suspend their strike action and enter talks at the Workplace Relations Commission on the basis of assurances that they would receive pensions comparable to other public sector workers. The Departments of public expenditure and education have now reneged on these assurances and have failed to engage in any meaningful way with the workers' union, Fórsa. The talks have now broken down and schools up and down the country face further strike action and, indeed, closure. We have heard statement after statement from the Government, and from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Deputies, in support of school caretakers and secretaries but talk is cheap. I ask the Tánaiste today to instruct the negotiators to honour the commitments given and grant the comparable public service pensions to school secretaries and caretakers.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Healy for raising a very important matter. Sometimes when you are in my position talk is not cheap and it can be detrimental to very important processes that need to be followed in our labour relations and industrial relations mechanisms in the country. I agree with Deputy Healy's analysis on the hugely positive contribution our school secretaries and caretakers, and the SNAs he referenced in an earlier discussion, make. On Friday, 5 September we had constructive engagement under the auspices of the WRC and agreement was reached that the Department and Fórsa would engage in a process to resolve the issues in dispute. Officials from the Department engaged several times with Fórsa under the auspices of the WRC. The matter has now been referred to the Labour Court. From my experience, in this House and in public life, I hope both sides can get into the Labour Court and engage in a meaningful way to try to find a resolution to this dispute, which we all want to see resolved.

Deputy Michael Collins: Two weeks ago hundreds of people peacefully protested outside Dáil Éireann against CPOs being used to force greenways and walkways through the middle of their farms and property. They included people from Galway, Kinsale and Cooley in County Louth. The Oireachtas transport committee meeting heard evidence from TII, which admitted it was not aware CPOs were being forced on landowners to take their land from them for

greenways or walkways for recreational use. At this meeting TII promised a review will take place on the roll-out of greenways for the thousands in Ireland affected. For those affected throughout the country, living in fear that lands would be taken from them, this was some relief. Fast forward a week later, and much to their horror more than 500 landowners on the Cooley Peninsula in County Louth received the dreaded letter through the letterbox stating the greenway was railroading through their ground. Is Ireland losing its democratic status as TII and the local authorities give themselves ever-increasing powers over the land and property rights of private citizens? Will the Tánaiste communicate with TII and local authorities, especially regarding Cooley in County Louth, on stalling progress on walkways where there is no agreement until the review TII is commissioning is completed and CPOs are taken off the table?

The Tánaiste: I am sympathetic to some of the points the Deputy makes. I have had discussions with colleagues on this also. CPO is a very important tool but it should be used in very specific instances. I am not certain I am comfortable with its use in relation to greenways. The State should not overcomplicate the situation in relation to greenways. They are good things, and they are things that communities generally want, but there does need to be a bit of common sense in terms of the routes. There has been a degree of complexity, perhaps, injected into it. Greenways are great and they have transformed many parts of our country but we do not want to see them become in any way divisive. I will seek an update from the Minister on where the TII's review of the use of CPO is at.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We have heard all the talk about a 12-month anniversary for many TDs but I would like to talk about a 64-year anniversary which was commemorated yesterday. A group of us met the Irish Thalidomide Association in Leinster House. It was a cross-party meeting with Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats, the Labour Party and Independents all represented, and they universally acknowledged the hurt and pain those survivors have experienced for 64 years. I spoke here last year and asked for a State apology. A State apology was given by the British nearly 15 years ago and by the Australians in a similar timeline. For the life of me, I will never understand the legal jiggery-pokery we hide behind inside here and, specifically in this case, in the State Claims Agency. It is universally acknowledged that what happened was wrong and deeply regrettable. To forego the pain the few remaining survivors are experiencing, I am begging again today and pleading with the Tánaiste. A meeting is coming up on 9 December between the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach and the survivors and their legal representatives. I ask the Tánaiste for once and for all to bring it to a head. Do what is right and do what is expected. I could not attend the funeral of 95-year-old Peggy Murphy earlier this year because I felt ashamed as a public representative. I beg the Tánaiste, with the Taoiseach, to bring this to a conclusion once and for all.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: That is genuinely what I want to happen and I know it is really what the Taoiseach wants to happen. I acknowledge and pay tribute to him for the work he is investing in this personally. He and I had a meeting circa three weeks ago, maybe four, and we are due to meet with the representative group again very shortly. It will be either next week or the week after but it is in the month of December. A huge amount of work is under way to try to

get this where it needs to get to. I thank many of the people we know for coming around here, all too frequently, and feeling they have to come around here, such as Finola and others, because this has dragged on a long time. I also want us to get to a point where an apology can be offered in the House. We have seen ways it has been done in the past for a lot of issues and it would be entirely appropriate. I know the Taoiseach is working very intensively on this. I am very eager to work with him on it. We are both directly engaging on it and I really do want us to make progress on this for once and for all.

Deputy William Aird: Rathdowney fire station has been waiting for more than two decades for a replacement. A site was acquired in 2003, Part 8 approval is complete and Laois County Council has prioritised Rathdowney for the 2026 to 2030 fire service capital programme. The current station is outdated, overcrowded and lacks proper facilities for female staff, despite having the largest number of female fire fighters in the county. Rathdowney crews continue to provide an excellent service to a wide area of homes, schools, farms and businesses. A new station is essential to provide proper training conditions, adequate facilities and a stronger response capacity. Will the Tánaiste commit to prioritising and funding the construction of the new Rathdowney fire station? Will he provide a clear timeline for when its long overdue funding will be released? The Tánaiste mentioned that today is our first anniversary of being elected. Would it not be lovely for him to stand up in his response to say "Yes" to me and that he has a clear timeframe for doing something?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No pressure, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Aird for all the work he has been doing over the course of the past year, keeping us under pressure in terms of many projects that are important to the people of Laois, who gave him such a resounding mandate a year ago and I acknowledge this. I thank him for raising this important matter with me. I know it is an issue he has been campaigning on, not only as a TD but during his time on Laois County Council. As Deputy Aird knows, Laois fire service indicated that a new fire station at Stradbally was the council's number one priority, and a replacement fire station for Rathdowney was the second priority. This is the factual position. We saw a situation where the Stradbally fire station project was progressed and has now been approved to tender for the construction phase, and it will have a closing date for submissions on 20 January 2026. The reason I say that is it now means Rathdowney has become the number one priority in this regard for Laois County Council and the Laois fire service.

I am pleased to say that Laois County Fire and Rescue Service has now identified a proposed site that it believes is ideally situated with regard to the road network, traffic flow and central location. Here is the rub, though. The fire service capital programme 2026 to 2030 is being finalised and once it is, we will have a better idea of the timeline. Let me be clear, though. We are absolutely committed, as are the Department of housing and Laois County Fire and Rescue Service, to progressing the proposed new Rathdowney station. The next time we are in Laois, perhaps we will visit it and talk about timelines and moving that forward.

Deputy William Aird: And the Tánaiste will be able to make an announcement.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Bhí sé geallta go dtabharfaí cumhachtaí nua d'Údarás na Gaeltachta. Bhí sé geallta ó 2021 go bhfoilseofaí treoirlínte pleanála do thithe sa Ghaeltacht chomh maith. Dúradh linn ag an am go raibh na treoirlínte sin beagnach réidh, ach fós níl siad ann. Níl ceachtar de na gealltanais sin comhlíonta agus tá muintir na Gaeltachta thíos leis dá bharr gan tithíocht do lánúineacha nó clainne nua. Cén fáth ar gá dúinn fanacht go dtí 2027 ar ráiteas náisiúnta phleanáil Ghaeltachta? Cén uair a bheas Céim na Tuarascála don Bhille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 againn? An mbeidh cumhachtaí breise aige maidir le ceist na tithíochta sna Gaeltachtaí?

The Tánaiste: I will have to check with the relevant Minister on the status of that and will revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: The alignment of route 80 away from the quays on O'Connell Bridge has been identified as the cause of many of the operational issues affecting the operation of that route and the commuters who use it, including my constituents in Palmerstown. While I understand from the belated statement from the NTA yesterday that a review of the route is now underway, something that has been called for by elected representatives for some time now, it may take months. We need to arrive at a sustainable solution much faster, which is something the Tánaiste and the Minister for Transport will support.

This goes to the heart of an issue we have correctly identified in the programme for Government. We have promised to review the structures and operation of the NTA to strengthen its engagement with local authorities, communities and stakeholders. This now needs to happen as a matter of urgency, as it has come to a head in light of the reaction and the way in which the issues around route 80 have been dealt with. While I have engaged with individual operators on individual service matters, I understand that they operate within the parameters set by the NTA.

We need to build confidence in our public transport system. The NTA's statement yesterday that operational data for route 80 showed no major issues did not match the experience of commuters in Palmerstown and Chapelizod, who have been let down in recent weeks. Does the Tánaiste agree that we should make more granular performance data on our public transport systems available for all routes in order to build that public confidence and, as I have previously suggested, enable a traffic light system to show daily performance of individual bus routes around the country? That transparency can only build confidence.

The Tánaiste: That is a very good idea because we need to do two things. As the Deputy has rightly said, for his constituents in Palmerstown, Chapelizod and in general, we need to build the confidence he has talked about but we also need to be able to track performance in terms of return of investment. We have just announced as a Government a major increase in public transport funding and a major increase in capital funding in general. It is right and proper that agencies of the State are able to account not just to their elected representatives, but also to the people on how they are performing in return for that capital. That level of data makes sense.

I will specifically talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in respect of the issues the Deputy has raised regarding the review of the route and the need to arrive at a sustainable solution.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I wish to raise the issue of the upcoming DEIS plus programme that has been announced. I am fearful that it will just be for the major cities. I want to highlight a number of schools, particularly those in Longford town. I ask that schools in towns like Longford, where there are many issues on the ground, are prioritised for the DEIS programme, particularly the national schools of St. Joseph's, St. Michael's and St. Emer's.

Another issue I have raised previously is the lack of special school places. We have several families who have been on a waiting list for nearly 12 months due to the lack of places in the special school within Longford town, which covers not just the town, but the whole county and the counties surrounding it. I ask that we prioritise special school places being made available immediately for those families who do not have them and but badly need them.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising this issue. The roll-out of DEIS and DEIS plus, as we have committed to in the programme for Government, is linked to an educational measure but also a child poverty measure. We all know one of the best ways of lifting people out of poverty, including intergenerational poverty, is through our education system. Tackling educational disadvantage moves children out of poverty in the short, medium and long terms. I am determined, as is this Government, that the roll-out of DEIS plus is based on need, evidence and analysis, not just picking certain parts of the country. Absolutely, Longford will be considered in that context.

As the Deputy will know, there are already 23 schools in Longford in the DEIS programme, with six urban band 1 primary schools, one urban band 2 primary schemes, ten rural DEIS primary schools and six post-primary schools. My understanding is that schools in Longford are now participating in the consultation process to inform the development of a new strategy, and this report will be published shortly. Regarding the special school places issue, I will specifically ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to look at the issues in Longford and link with the Deputy to try to make progress on this.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The Tánaiste's colleague, the Minister for housing, James Browne, has pulled the plans to build nearly 500 units within the Dublin City Council area under public-private partnerships. A total of 1,000 new homes have already been delivered under public-private partnerships and a further 3,500 were in the process of being delivered across the country. However, the Minister pulled the plug on the delivery of these additional homes. These units will primarily not be built because of opposition from the Department of public expenditure two days before construction on the project was to commence. Companies had already put substantial investment into the project in terms of both staff and resources.

We have a lame duck Minister. We need to now redirect moneys to the local authorities, which will deliver housing more cost-effectively than the public-private partnership schemes. Local authorities need to be the lead developers in delivering these badly needed homes.

The Tánaiste: Let me correct the record: we have an excellent Minister who is working very hard but housing is also a whole-of-government issue. The Minister, Deputy Browne, recently published, with me, the Taoiseach and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, a new national housing plan that involves every part of the State, realising everybody has a role to play in the housing emergency, including our local authorities and State agencies.

On this specific project, I am not familiar with it but I will speak to the Minister-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It is being pulled. It does not make sense.

The Tánaiste: I will speak to the Minister because we all want to see more supply and I will ask him to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In the bigger picture, the NTA is not fit for purpose. We have heard about route 26 turning into the route 80 disaster that is affecting Palmerstown and especially Chapelizod. This may be reviewed, but I did a survey of 2,700 bus users who were all wary of it from day 1. I had a meeting with the chief executive but nothing was done at the time. The C2 bus spent so long down a temporary route that all the new houses were built alongside it and a new route is needed that incorporates the L25. The abolition of route 13 in Clondalkin is causing major concerns for certain estates, especially for school kids.

It goes on and on but the big picture is the NTA has absolutely no accountability. You raise an issue with the Minister for Transport, who says it is an operational matter for the NTA, but if you are trying to have political input and do not want political patronage, you need an input and an NTA that listens to the elected representatives who are representing the people on the ground and makes changes. However, it is not making the changes and it is not listening. There is an arrogance there.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for highlighting that. Ultimately, State agencies must always remember that they are agencies of the State. The people in this building and those in local authority chambers are the democratically elected representatives of that State. I am sorry to hear the Deputy is highlighting a real issue in terms of a lack of engagement on this. I will certainly take this back and discuss it with the Minister for Transport more broadly and I will ask him to revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Tánaiste has a pensions double-header coming up from the Labour Party here.

I will be returning to the issue of the An Post pensioners. The Tánaiste will be aware that, in September of this year, An Post management agreed with the Communications Workers' Union, CWU, an increase of pensionable pay by 7%, with 6% backdated to 1 January and 1% to 1 June. The current code of practice for the governance of State bodies requires An Post to obtain ministerial approval before paying the increases mandated by the superannuation scheme rules and for Ministers to consider a review by NewERA before approving the increase. This completely unnecessary review process has been underway since 23 October. As Ministers and NewERA have no authority to disregard the rules of the scheme, why is it taking so long to approve the increases and will the Tánaiste give an unequivocal undertaking that pensioners will receive their increases before Christmas?

The Tánaiste: I will not give any undertaking until I get on top of the facts of it. I will certainly get on top of the facts now and will revert to the Deputy on the issue. I can only

imagine the frustration of those An Post pensioners. Allow me to seek the latest update and I will revert to the Deputy on it in writing.

Deputy George Lawlor: I want to raise the issue of pension abatement. Quite a number of retired public servants who were encouraged back into the service following their retirement are now in receipt of rather large pension abatement bills, so to speak. Retired public servants who had already earned their pensions were basically told that if they worked a certain number of hours, cumulative over the full year, they would not be penalised in any way. However, one man showed me a bill for €18,000 and said that a colleague of his had a bill for in excess of €40,000. These are people who were encouraged back into the service and, to be fair to them, came back into the service at a time when we were really under pressure, which is often still the case. The irony of it is that, if he went to work for an agency supplying work to the public service, there would be no implication for his pension. This is on foot of Circular 24/2022 from the Department of public expenditure. I urge the Tánaiste to intervene with the Department of public expenditure to realistically look at this and to ensure that people who have come back in to give their service to the State again are not penalised.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Lawlor for highlighting this issue. Anecdotally, I have come across this as well. We are asking people who have accrued significant experience and expertise to come back and help out with a specific project, maybe when there are particular times of pressure, such as during Covid and many other occasions. Often, it can be quite a challenge to get people to come back, not necessarily because they do not want to, but because of that interplay in relation to their pensions and pension abatement. It is a complex area, as the Deputy knows, but I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in relation to it and ask him that he revert to the Deputy on it.

Deputy James O'Connor: The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC gave a very stern warning to the Government yesterday about our level of expenditure. What I want to raise is an important project that the Government could get behind to try to grow our domestic enterprise and entrepreneurial activity in Ireland. I gave a presentation to our parliamentary party in relation to having a national, fully supported accelerator grown and developed in a newly redeveloped IFSC. The country needs this to happen. Given my own party leader's disinterest in it, maybe it is something the Tánaiste might take up. It is important because it could grow our tax base in Ireland and support young entrepreneurs, and we could be proactive about how we grow our domestic tax base.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for his constructive contribution and the idea of an accelerator project for the IFSC. If the Deputy sends me on the details of it, I will be very happy to engage with him on it. I suggest that my colleague in the Department of Finance, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, who has responsibility for international services, and I could have a discussion in relation to that. I would be happy to facilitate that.

IFAC has a really important role today. Groupthink brought us to a moment of economic ruination before. It is important to have critical voices but the big learning from IFAC is the need to get the medium-term fiscal framework nailed down before Christmas so that we anchor our spending and taxation plans for the next number of years.

Deputy Colm Burke: I want to raise the issue of building childcare facilities, which are conditional on a lot of planning permissions, especially in major developments. We are finding that facilities are not being built. Even if they are, the rent being demanded for them is too high for people to go in and for it to be viable. It is time now that we looked at this as a Government to see what can be done to make sure we have adequate childcare facilities built, especially in new housing estates. Where planning permission is granted for 40 or 50 houses, there should be co-ordination about putting in place adequate childcare facilities because parents are now finding it extremely difficult. They cannot access childcare facilities, and people who want to provide childcare cannot afford the rents that are being demanded. We need to tackle this immediately.

The Tánaiste: As is often the case, Deputy Burke is correct on this. There is a real blockage here, which is that it cannot all be left to the market. I meet people in my constituency and around the country, often young professional people, who they want to open a childcare facility. They are well up for it, ready and qualified but they have to face upfront costs, startup costs, rents and capital costs. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to specifically consider the Deputy's comments in the context of the new action plan on childcare that will be published early next year. Today, the Minister has, or is about to, announce our capital funding plan for childcare, which will see very significant funding, for the first time really at scale, for State-led childcare facilities. Perhaps we can fold the Deputy's comments into that conversation as well.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I want to raise the crisis facing families seeking special class places in Kildare South. Cian attends St. Conleth's Infant School in Newbridge and ready to start primary school in a special class. His family applied everywhere - Newbridge, Kildare, Kilcullen and Naas - but were refused in all. Harry is 12 years old and despite his family applying to every available ASD class in the Newbridge-Kildare area, he has no suitable secondary school place. Last week, I heard the case of another young boy, 15 years of age, who has never been able to attend a secondary school. His family told KFM that they were heartbroken and felt that they had exhausted every option. The young boy himself has said he feels useless and wants to die.

These children are simply asking for the right to education alongside their peers. South Kildare is clearly and seriously underserved when it comes to ASD provision. Will the Tánaiste ensure that these young people have appropriate school places for September and will he engage with the NCSE to urgently expand capacity in south Kildare? I find it very insulting to these parents that the NCSE is out there practically boasting about the number of free spaces it has when this does not match the reality on the ground.

The Tánaiste: I try to stop myself doing it as well, because I can stand here and point to there being X number of more places. That might be true, but it is also only a cause of frustration for a parent who does not have a place. I take that point, which is a fair one.

In relation to the three specific cases the Deputy raised, I will notify the Minister for education and the NCSE of her intention to follow up on those. On the broader point in relation to the capacity in Kildare South, I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: On Monday night, Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Labour, the Green Party and right-wing Independents all voted to raise rents on the poorest households in Dublin city. These are council tenants, AHB tenants, HAP and RAS tenants who do not even get any maintenance from the council and who are all set to have their rents increased from April. There are plans to do the same across the country. This is pointed towards in the Government's housing plan, including in South Dublin County Council. The rent is being increased for cold, damp, uninsulated and overcrowded homes. This is forcing families with adult children trapped in their childhood bedrooms to pay higher rents. Some 43% of council tenants and almost 60% of HAP and RAS tenants already live in poverty. These increases will put them over the edge. The Tánaiste could stop this. He could talk to his councillors across the country and tell them not to vote for these rent increases. The Government could properly fund our councils. If it does not, it will face a mass campaign of resistance to this. The issue of the rent hikes will become a central issue and the by-election in Dublin Central will potentially become a by-election about these unfair rent hikes.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this matter. These are always sensitive and important issues to try to get right. I know local councillors try to grapple with what the right approach is on this. I note that different parties, including some Opposition parties, have voted in different ways on this on different councils. I think the lead Opposition party voted one way on South Dublin County Council and voted a different way on Dublin City Council. I am not sure what the policy difference was in terms of why it voted in two different ways. We are trying to get the balance right. We are taking a number of measures to try to assist people with housing and poverty. We will continue to trust our councillors to monitor this on a case-by-case basis per local authority.

Sanctions against the State of Israel Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to prevent and address the commission of the international crimes of genocide and apartheid by the State of Israel, by providing for the establishment of economic sanctions.

This Bill, in line with our moral and legal obligations under the Genocide Convention, international conventions on apartheid and international law, calls for a complete boycott of all economic relations with the State of Israel for the crimes of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, genocide and the ongoing persecution and oppression of the Palestinian people. There is a narrative that Israel's only crimes are illegal settlements on the West Bank or that the genocidal slaughter we have seen over the past two years in Gaza is simply the outworking of the extremism of Netanyahu and a few individual ministers. The truth, of course, is something very different. The truth is: Israel is not now or never has been a normal state. The State of Israel is a death machine directed at the Palestinians and whose sole purpose is the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people from their lands. This has been the case since 1948 and the genocidal slaughter we have witnessed over the past two years is simply the outworking of that horrific reality.

It is the failure of the world - the international community, including our own Government, the EU and other governments - to acknowledge the genocidal nature of the Israeli regime and the fact that it is based on apartheid and ethnic cleansing. The continued extension of political cover, arms, economic support and favoured trade status has actually emboldened Israel to commit the genocidal crimes of the past two years.

I have not got time to go into the evidence, but if one looks at the statements of ministers, members of the military and the Israeli Knesset, what one sees again and again are clear statements of genocidal intent. Netanyahu has publicly declared his intention to erase Palestine from the map and that history goes back for the entire history of the State of Israel. Just as we did with apartheid South Africa, the time for treating Israel as a normal state has to an end. It must be isolated from the international community as we did with apartheid South Africa.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are introducing this Bill today because the Government has failed to put its money where its mouth is. On Palestine and Gaza, it is all talk and no action. Sanctions by Ireland on Israel would make a real difference because, shamefully, Ireland is now the world's second largest importer of Israeli goods. During the genocide of the past two years, trade between Ireland and apartheid Israel has exploded from €198 million in 2020 to €3.24 billion in 2024. These are not consumer goods. If they were consumer goods, then the Irish people who have stood steadfast with Palestine, marched week after week and taken direct action would have boycotted these goods. Over €3 billion, or 92%, of this trade is in so-called electronic integrated circuits and micro-assemblies. An excellent investigation by Uplift into Ireland's trade with Israel finds that it is most likely funnelled from Intel's facilities in Israel through Ireland via transfer pricing for tax benefits. There we have it. Just like with the Central Bank's shameful facilitation in the selling of Israeli war bonds, Ireland's complicity in genocide is due to our role as a tax haven for international finance and US multinationals.

The same report provides numerous other examples of this disgusting complicity. One is that Israel's Unit 8200 uses Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, with data stored in the Netherlands and Ireland, for a mass surveillance system that collects recordings of millions of Palestinian phone calls, daily information used to prepare air strikes. This is information held in Ireland in our data centres. UN special rapporteur Francesca Albanese said that US multinationals were embedded in an economy of genocide, and so are we.

The Uplift reports says that the benefits of foreign direct investment, FDI, revenue are achieved at the cost of direct complicity in genocide and human rights violations. These are the wages of FDI, the political and moral price Ireland is being asked to pay for its economic prosperity.

A US secretary of state once said that the deaths of half a million children in Iraq was a price worth paying for US objectives. Our Government is making the same genocidal choice. By refusing to implement sanctions on Israel, it is deciding for all of us that the price is worth it. It is selling our souls for US investment. This Bill would put an end to that by imposing comprehensive sanctions on the State of Israel. It is the minimum we should be doing under the Genocide Convention and it should be done now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): We are not opposing it.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move: "That Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.35 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.15 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.35 p.m. and resumed at 2.15 p.m.

Sudan: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): We now have statements on Sudan. I call on the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, to make her statement under Standing Order 56.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I welcome this opportunity to provide an update to the House on the devastating conflict and humanitarian crisis in Sudan, and to hear the views and concerns of Deputies. Many have described the conflict and its impact as a forgotten crisis. In truth, it has at times been an ignored and sidelined crisis. It is, as we heard this morning, the worst humanitarian catastrophe happening on our planet at the moment. It is welcome that we are having these statements and this prioritisation here today.

I sincerely welcome the sustained interest shown by Members of the Oireachtas. It sends a very important message that this crisis and the plight of the Sudanese people cannot be ignored. It also reinforces the Government's commitment to keeping Sudan on the international agenda at EU level and at the United Nations. It has been over four years since the Rapid Support Forces, RSF, and the Sudanese Armed Forces forcibly halted Sudan's democratic transition and more than two years since conflict erupted, in April 2023, after a brutal power struggle between them. Sudan's conflict is labelled as a civil war, yet the millions of civilians caught between the parties to the conflict, including breakaway armed groups, did not choose to fight each other. Instead, they have been forced to bear the cost of this violent power struggle.

In reality, this has always been a preventable crisis. The conflict has been significantly inflamed and prolonged by foreign interference. It is causing a humanitarian catastrophe exacerbated by the restrictions imposed on humanitarian access to people in need by the parties to the conflict. The conflict has resulted in untold suffering for the Sudanese people, with more than 150,000 people already dead. This is the world's worst humanitarian and protection crisis, with over 12 million people forcibly displaced. Over 21 million people, a shocking 45% of the population, are facing crisis levels of hunger. Famine, which was declared in parts of Darfur

in 2024, has now been confirmed in El Fasher and Kadugli, with over 20 other areas across greater Darfur and greater Kordofan also at risk.

Women and girls have been disproportionately affected. There has been an alarming spike in sexual violence in recent weeks as civilians have fled El Fasher, with egregious accounts of rape, human trafficking, forced marriage and sexual slavery. Sexual assault has been very much weaponised in this instance. These numbers are staggering, but it is important to remember that behind every statistic is a person, a family and a community. These are real people whose suffering cannot be captured by statistics alone. As my colleague reiterated this morning, there are many people in this country whose family members and communities are caught up in the ongoing conflict.

I am appalled by, and strongly condemn, the targeting of civilians by both parties to the conflict, particularly the recent horrifying and brutal atrocities committed by the RSF following its takeover of the city of El Fasher on 26 October. The RSF systematically targeted civilians during the siege and after the city's fall, committing large-scale, ethnically motivated atrocities, including summary executions, the arbitrary detention of civilians and the use of sexual and gender-based violence and starvation as weapons of war.

Too many of those who were trapped in El Fasher are still unaccounted for. Ireland's humanitarian partners, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Rescue Committee, are on the ground and reporting regularly to us on efforts being made to support the population. Our Irish NGO partners are also supporting people in need in Darfur with essential life-saving aid. Many Deputies will have seen or read shocking accounts of those who did manage to flee and the violence which they experienced or witnessed in their flight to safety. The scale of violence is unimaginable and, unfortunately, part of a widespread pattern of harm against civilians in this conflict. These actions are unconscionable and we must do everything in our power to ensure that they stop.

The capture of El Fasher, the last stronghold of the SAF in Darfur, consolidates the RSF's control over that region. This increases the risk of Sudan's fragmentation between east and west and the potential for the partition of the country. The territorial unity and integrity of Sudan must be respected and partition must be avoided. Currently, the SAF holds Sudan's central and eastern regions, while the RSF controls Darfur and most of the Kordofans, which now form the conflict's new front line. Alarming, violence continues to escalate in north Darfur and the Kordofans, further exacerbating an already dire humanitarian crisis. The cities of Kadugli and Dilling in South Kordofan are currently under siege by RSF forces and El Obeid in North Kordofan is at risk of an all-out assault. Reports indicate that civilians along these emerging front lines are subject to similar horrors as those experienced during the battle for El Fasher. Throughout this war, control of territory has shifted repeatedly and with each shift, we witness a familiar pattern of widespread human rights and humanitarian abuses and violations, mass displacement and a rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation.

We in the international community cannot stand back and watch as the suffering of the Sudanese people continues. We have witnessed the shocking and deliberate targeting of humanitarian workers, which is a flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. In addition, both warring parties are shrinking the humanitarian space further by imposing bureaucratic impediments in an attempt to assert authority and consolidate control. This puts

humanitarian actors in a difficult position, as compliance with one party can jeopardise operations in the other's territory.

I acknowledge the local responders on the ground who are operating in hard-to-reach areas, often at immense personal risk. They form the backbone of aid efforts. They have shown unwavering courage and selfless dedication in serving their communities. Local community groups, often led by women, have carried on traditions of supporting one another even in the darkest times. We in turn are doing what we can to support their efforts. There are extensive and well-established rules on the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure, humanitarian access, the protection of humanitarian personnel and the protection of the sick and wounded and those caring for them. Yet we have seen time and again a blatant disregard for these international and legally binding humanitarian norms in this conflict.

A dangerous technology and arms race is intensifying the conflict between the SAF and RSF, with dire consequences for Sudanese civilians. Both sides are employing increasingly sophisticated drone strikes to target civilian areas and infrastructure, a direct violation of international law. For instance, the RSF launched drone attacks on Khartoum and Port Sudan earlier this year. The SAF has similarly used drones to hit targets in Darfur, resulting in civilian deaths and casualties and causing damage to critical civilian infrastructure. The extensive destruction of civilian infrastructure, including energy, food, water and sanitation systems, deprives people of the services essential to their survival. This is why we fully support the critical infrastructure initiative, led by the EU and the EU special representative for the Horn of Africa, Annette Weber. Ireland has consistently highlighted the scale of the humanitarian crisis, the critical levels of hunger and famine, the need for unhindered humanitarian access, and the profound impact of the conflict, in particular on women and girls. It is vital we continue to shine a light on this crisis. It must not slip back down the international community's agenda until the next El Fasher occurs.

On support to address the crisis, Ireland's sustained and substantial humanitarian assistance to the people of Sudan remains at the core of our response. We have provided €14.3 million in humanitarian assistance to support civilians in Sudan and those in neighbouring countries displaced by the crisis. In the current global crisis of funding cuts to humanitarian aid budgets, I assure the House that Ireland will remain steadfast in maintaining our focus on reaching the furthest behind first. Our assistance is delivered through a range of international, Irish and local partners, providing urgent humanitarian relief to the most affected communities and those forced to flee across borders. Many of our multilateral partners, including UN agencies and global funds such as the Central Emergency Response Fund, CERF, to which Ireland provides core, pre-positioned funding to enable swift action, have provided significant funding to Sudan this year. UN CERF has provided \$47 million in 2025 to support the people of Sudan. Ireland is the seventh largest donor to the CERF and has provided €15 million this year alone. Ireland is known for its strong and principled tradition of humanitarian assistance, its sustained support for less visible crises and its track record of providing steadfast, quality funding, with a focus on reaching the most vulnerable. This matters to our partners as it supports effective delivery of aid to those who need it most in Sudan, its neighbouring countries and in other crises where conflict and climate have taken their toll.

On the political track, Ireland has taken a proactive stance within the EU and has consistently advocated for Sudan to remain high on the European agenda. We played a leading role in

initiating discussions on sanctions in 2023, which led to the establishment of the EU sanctions regime, and in securing strong EU Council conclusions on Sudan in October this year. We also successfully called for Sudan to be placed on the agenda at this month's EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting, which I attended last Monday, with a focus on the implementation of the Council conclusions. The Council adopted restrictive measures against a senior RSF commander. We would welcome discussions on further sanctions in line with the Council conclusions, which state that the EU will continue to employ and, where possible, intensify the use of the full range of foreign policy instruments at its disposal, including, where appropriate, targeted restrictive measures to achieve a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

We are clear on our immediate priorities. Civilians must be protected, particularly women and girls who remain at grave risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Safe passage must also be provided as a matter of urgency for those fleeing violence. All parties to the conflict must uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law, including the protection of front-line humanitarian actors and local responders. We need to do everything possible to ensure the protection of principled and depoliticised humanitarian space so that humanitarian assistance and services reach those in dire need. The parties to the conflict must facilitate rapid, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access, particularly in the greater Darfur and greater Kordofan regions.

Another key priority for the Government is ensuring accountability and justice for the atrocities committed. It is crucial that we, the international community, collectively support efforts to document, investigate and address these crimes. To this end, Ireland continues to support the important work of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan, IIFFM. We welcome the recent extension of its mandate and underline the need for all parties to the conflict to provide unhindered access to the fact-finding mission. Ireland supports expanding the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, ICC, to the whole of Sudan, as recommended by the fact-finding mission. This is to ensure the perpetrators of international humanitarian and human rights violations and abuses across the country are held accountable and brought to justice. Ireland works closely with like-minded states to promote accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, and to ensure that those responsible will be brought to justice. As a member of the Sudan core group in Geneva, Ireland led on the adoption of a resolution on the situation in El Fasher at the special session of the Human Rights Council, HRC, on 14 November. The resolution requests the fact-finding mission to conduct an urgent inquiry into the violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law committed in and around El Fasher. The fact-finding mission must be fully supported in carrying out this vital work. We remain committed to ensuring that Sudan is consistently raised and addressed within the Human Rights Council and other multilateral forums. The environment of impunity in Sudan must end.

On the issue of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, there is a responsibility to prevent and investigate, and to hold perpetrators accountable for all forms of gender-based violence in conflict. There can be no impunity for these crimes. All justice and accountability processes must be survivor-centred and survivor-led. A survivor-centred approach must guide us. It must be one that listens to survivors, takes their experiences seriously and upholds their rights and needs. If we are to take seriously the fact we are on day 13 of 16 days of activism, when all individuals across the globe can highlight, raise and put a focus on domestic and

sexual violence, we need to make sure, when we respond to incidents and atrocities like this, that we are taking serious action and putting survivors' needs front and centre.

Ultimately, there must be a durable peace if the humanitarian crisis and the immense suffering of the Sudanese people are to end. There has been renewed momentum internationally to push for a solution to the conflict, which is welcome. The Quad, comprising the USA, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, released a joint statement in September, following visits by the US President's special adviser, Massad Boulos, to key countries in Africa. This created the impetus for a recent meeting in Washington focused on reaching agreement on a humanitarian truce. The RSF released a statement on 7 November agreeing to the proposal, although there appears to be a lack of any meaningful implementation thus far. Meanwhile, the SAF has rejected the proposal, vowing to continue its military campaign against the RSF. We welcome the ongoing work of the Quad, including these efforts to negotiate a three-month humanitarian truce. Resolving this conflict requires significant and sustained political will. It is incumbent on all of us to redouble our efforts in support of the Sudanese people. There must be substantive political engagement and co-ordination between the EU, the African Union, AU, the Quad and other international actors on de-escalation and mediation efforts.

For this conflict to end, external interference and the provision of military support to the parties to the conflict must also cease. This was raised earlier this morning. The conflict would not have persisted if it was not being fuelled by arms and fighters from outside of Sudan. At the May 2025 meeting of the EU-Gulf Co-operation Council political committee, Ireland, speaking on behalf of the EU, stressed the need to use every influence to prevent external actors from providing arms to combatants and to unite in favour of peace. In the statement by the EU's High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy released this month, the EU reiterated the message set out clearly in the October Council conclusions on Sudan and called on all external actors to take the necessary measures to end the sale or supply of arms and related material to all parties, in accordance with the UN arms embargo. Ireland, with the EU, will continue to call for the expansion of the UN arms embargo on Darfur to the whole territory of Sudan.

Ireland remains committed to working with our EU partners and the international community to bring decisive pressure to bear on the warring parties to engage in genuine dialogue and agree to a sustained cessation of hostilities. This must be followed by a negotiated, permanent, peaceful and civilian-led political settlement that respects the territorial integrity of Sudan. This must include full, equal and meaningful participation of women, young people, marginalised groups and Sudanese civil society actors in the political process. Ireland and the EU are supportive of the African Union high-level panel and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, IGAD, in facilitating a number of meetings of Sudanese civilian actors, providing that vital platform for civilian dialogue. I fundamentally believe that to have a stronger, more inclusive and more durable peace, a broad range of civil society actors must be meaningfully involved. Therefore, Ireland fully supports a continuation of this vital dialogue and any other efforts that aim to include a diverse range of civilian voices in discussions on ending this devastating conflict. Once peace is restored, we are committed to supporting a robust, Sudanese-led post-conflict recovery to ensure a peaceful, stable and prosperous future for the people of Sudan.

However, we cannot wait for peace to act when it comes to addressing the humanitarian needs of Sudanese civilians. In the short to medium term, irrespective of any progress in peace negotiations, Ireland will continue to advocate for the de-politicisation of humanitarian assistance, the lifting of restrictions to allow for humanitarian access to reach those most in need, the safe passage of humanitarian workers and the protection of humanitarian space. Reaching those furthest behind first will continue to be our core guiding principle in providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries. Sudan must not be forgotten, condemned to rise and fall on global news cycles, gaining visibility only in moments of catastrophe. We will continue and I, as Minister for foreign affairs, will continue to play a proactive role on the international stage, including at the EU level, in raising the plight of the Sudanese people.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Tá mé ag roinnt ama le mo chomhghleacaithe. I thank the Business Committee and the Minister for agreeing to these statements. Some other parties and I have been looking for it for some weeks. The Minister made reference to it not getting the attention it deserves. That is undoubtedly true. It is probably true in this country too. The situation the people of Sudan are facing does not bear thinking about. One of the journalists perhaps best known for reporting on the conflict in Sudan is an Irishman, Declan Walsh. I read a piece by him in late September or early October. It was before the fall of El Fasher. He interviewed a man, Dr. Selik. He spoke about the things he had seen. He spoke about seeing a pregnant woman bleeding to death for the want of simple medicine. For his lunch that day, the only food he could put his hands on was a lumpy brown mush. It was some type of animal fodder normally fed to camels and cows. Several days later he was killed in an attack on a mosque by a drone. We can multiple Dr. Selik by 100, 1,000 or 10,000 because that is the scale that we are talking about. The number of people who have been killed is unclear. It is difficult to establish exactly. Some estimates have put it up at 150,000 people in the past two years.

The scenes we saw from El Fasher were perhaps the moment that maybe the world began to pay attention but it is far from the first or the only place that this is kind of slaughter has taken place. The scenes are redolent of Rwanda. They remind one of that kind of genocidal behaviour. That is what is going on. People - men, women and children - were being cut down on the street by gun and blade for their ethnicity indiscriminately. That is the situation we are talking about. It has gotten worse; it is escalating. After Rwanda and much the same as after the Second World War, people said that this must never be allowed to happen again. The international community must never turn its eyes away again. Yet, this is what has been happening. To some extent, unfortunately, it is being encouraged by external forces. We have talked about some of them, such as the United Arab Emirates. These are powerful countries with connections to the West. There are others encouraging it as well but it is important that we use our influence with those whom we have influence. Ireland is not a major country but we must use whatever leverage we have. Unfortunately, Europe, the United States and the western world as a whole have not prioritised this appalling stuff. This is the biggest conflict on the face of the planet at the minute.

A total of 12 million people are refugees who have been dislocated from their homes, many of them in neighbouring countries, in other parts of Sudan, such as South Sudan, in Egypt and so on. That is twice the population of this whole island who are after being dislocated and removed from their homes by this conflict. They are very often under the threat of death and

fleeing for their lives. There are tens of thousands of people who are believed to have left El Fasher. It is not known where they are. They have not reached a safe place. We do not know the full picture of what has happened to all those people. I cannot imagine what it must be like for the Sudanese community here in Ireland, across the world and in other parts of Sudan trying to establish what has happened to their loved ones and wondering if they are safe. In many instances, it has been unmitigated indiscriminate killing.

It remains the world's worst humanitarian and displacement crisis because of the ongoing conflict. A total of 21 million people - 45% of the population - are currently facing acute food insecurity. Famine has been confirmed in areas of North Darfur, including in El Fasher, Kadugli and South Kordofan. The intensifying violence and associated issues of concern across Sudan means that the true scale of the food insecurity crisis and the potential famine is likely far worse than reported. Widespread human rights violations are contributing to the severity of the protection crisis in Sudan. Women and children, in particular, are bearing the brunt of the conflict and have been significantly impacted by the use of conflict-related, sexual and gender-based violence. Women and children are being targeted in a way that is vicious and deeply traumatic. Some of the stories coming out of Darfur and El Fasher have been truly appalling and blood chilling.

In addition to the significant food insecurity and displacement, children are at heightened risk of recruitment, trafficking, child marriage and family separation. The OCHA estimates that 10 million children are out of school as of 31 October. I have been raising concerns for a number of weeks and months in the Dáil with the Tánaiste and former Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy Simon Harris, about the situation in El Fasher and the inability to get humanitarian aid into the city and our concerns for the civilian population. Unfortunately, the situation since I first began to raise it got far worse as El Fasher fell and the RSF carried out these appalling crimes against humanity. We can no longer avert our eyes from what is happening in Sudan. This is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. More than a year and a half of siege warfare made El Fasher one of the most horrific places to live in the world in a war that the UN has labelled as the worst humanitarian crisis. Reports from the UN and humanitarian organisations indicate that the RSF is effectively instrumentalising and manipulating humanitarian aid in an attempt to maintain control. The flow of weapons into Sudan continues with the complicity of the UAE and possibly other countries, such as Russia and neighbouring countries. All of them must stop the flow of weapons that is escalating and adding fuel to the fire of this conflict. Whatever leverage Ireland has must be used. Ireland, the EU and the United States all have strong connections and ties to the UAE and every pressure must be put on that country to try to stop the flow of weapons that is adding fuel to the fire.

Realistically, it seems that we are a long way off peace talks, unfortunately. While I welcome any efforts that are taking place, it seems that both sides to the conflict have ambitions to control Sudan so realistic peace talks are a considerable distance away. Even if that is the case, we must do whatever we can to push for a ceasefire. If the international community stands up, as it ought to, then the greatest pressure can be brought to bear in that regard. The enormous flow of sophisticated weaponry to the conflict is very dangerous and a matter of huge concern. The takeover of El Fasher was marked by the use of very sophisticated military technology, clearly well funded, including unmanned aerial vehicles for both surveillance and strikes on civilian areas and infrastructure, jamming technology and more. The Irish Government must continue to call on all external actors directly or indirectly supplying arms and funds to the parties to

cease their support immediately and to restrain from any actions that could fuel further violence.

There is deep concern at the lack of clarity on the huge numbers of people deemed to be missing. It is believed that the RSF is responsible for terrible atrocities and is currently working to hide and cover them up before international observers can get to El Fasher. Both the SAF and RSF must ensure access for humanitarian aid and international observers. The Government must work with its EU partners and the international community to bring decisive pressure to bear on the warring parties to engage in dialogue and to agree to a sustained cessation of hostilities. I echo the point made by the Minister that partition is something that we would not wish to see. We need to see a civilian-led political settlement that respects the territorial integrity of Sudan.

In the short to medium term the Irish Government must advocate for the depoliticisation of humanitarian assistance, the lifting of restrictions to allow humanitarian aid to reach those most in need, the safe passage of humanitarian workers and the protection of humanitarian space. The attacks on civilians that have been taking place are crimes against humanity and must be condemned profoundly. There is no place for the kinds of scenes that we have seen in El Fasher and Darfur. The influence of those powerful actors, including the UAE, who have been fuelling the conflict, needs to be called out. Pressure must be brought to bear and ultimately, we must support the people of Sudan, who desire peace, a ceasefire and a political settlement that ensures a civilian government. In the first instance, we must do all we can to force the conflict to a close. Ireland must use its voice, combined with the much larger voices of the EU and USA, to deliver a ceasefire and peace for the people of Sudan.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There is going to be a lot of commonality in what we are saying here but the main message is that action is needed. I spoke at the OSCE conference in Istanbul recently about the ongoing global refugee crisis, with millions of displaced people fleeing conflict zones such as Sudan, Gaza, the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC, and Yemen. It is a stark reminder of the consequences of the developed world allowing, and even enabling, conflicts in its zones of influence. The global powers have not only failed to prevent the escalation of these crises but have actively facilitated, or ignored, the conditions that led to the deaths of thousands and the displacement of millions.

The conflict in Sudan has escalated dramatically since April 2023. Former allies in the 2021 coup are now at one another's throats and it is the civilian population of Sudan that is suffering. Deep-seated rivalries over power and control of resources triggered a full-scale civil war, leaving the country in a state of chaos. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and millions have been displaced, both internally and to neighbouring countries. The Sudanese civil war has the potential to escalate into a genocide that would dwarf that of Rwanda. As violence intensifies, targeted killings, mass displacement and ethnic cleansing are beginning to ramp up in the most distressing manner. The very real threat of famine would devastate the internally displaced population. There has been an ongoing massacre in El Fasher since its takeover by the RSF last month. An 18-month siege has seen a city of 250,000 inhabitants fall and a drawn-out bloodbath has ensued. At least 2,500 are dead but, with a communications blackout and a civilian population fleeing for their lives, it is impossible to tell how many are dead. Without urgent intervention Sudan could see even more widespread violence and genocide, leaving countless lives destroyed.

The world seems increasingly unmoved by genocide, as tragic events unfold with growing frequency but often receive only fleeting outrage. The global community's response has been marked by political apathy, diplomatic powerlessness and a media cycle that quickly moves on to the next crisis. The normalisation of violence on such a grand scale, coupled with the failure of international institutions to prevent, or effectively intervene in, atrocities has desensitised us to such an immense loss of human life. Instead of provoking widespread action, genocides are often met with brief condemnation, leaving victims to endure suffering while the world moves on, leaving justice and accountability lagging far behind.

While the conflict in Sudan may have started off as a domestic affair, external powers have played a significant role in aggravating the situation. One of the most harmful external influences has been the intervention of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This has made western powers reluctant to involve themselves in a peace-building effort for fear of offending their strategic regional allies. These countries have been engaged in an almost colonial, imperialist exploitation of the resources of Sudan, particularly its gold. Both the SAF and RSF have received financial support from these Gulf states at one time or another and the chaos of civil war has made it all the easier to extract the mineral wealth that belongs to the Sudanese people. The RSF in particular has benefited from UAE backing, largely because of its involvement in the war in Yemen, where it provided mercenary support for the UAE-led coalition. This one group has been instrumental in the brutal oppression of civilian populations on two separate continents. The UAE has been involved in facilitating the illegal export of gold, with the RSF controlling much of the mining operations. This illicit trade has enriched UAE-linked companies, further entrenching the power of the warring factions and prolonging the conflict for the UAE's gain.

Another malign influence in the country is Russia, through its private army, the Wagner group. This interference has further entrenched the power struggle between the rival factions as both vie for favour with Russia to gain military and economic advantage. It is plain to see that this is not just a civil war. It is a war that has opened the door for outside actors to interfere, influence and exploit events. This external involvement has not only prolonged the fighting but has made peace efforts even more challenging as western powers stay away because of Gulf state involvement. The Sudanese people who have long suffered under authoritarian rule find themselves caught again in a vicious cycle of violence and instability, with little hope of a peaceful resolution in sight.

The international community cannot afford to ignore the potential for further atrocities. The risk of ethnic cleansing and of the mass atrocities seen in Darfur in the early 2000s remains a haunting possibility. Western nations with their political and economic leverage must prioritise a robust, co-ordinated diplomatic response. This must include enforcing an immediate ceasefire, supporting Sudanese-led peace initiatives and pressuring external actors such as the UAE and Russia to halt their destabilising support for the warring factions. Western powers also have the responsibility to impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities fuelling the conflict, particularly those involved in war crimes or genocide.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Sudan is a very large country with huge natural resources. It has some of the richest agricultural land in Africa running along the edge of the Nile. It has huge natural resources, particularly gold, and it has been long held that much of this conflict is about those natural resources. Indeed, the influence of outside powers in that and the attempt to try

to plunder the wealth of that nation to the detriment of its people, is one of the age-old stories of conflict around the globe. Unfortunately, that is the same situation we have unfolding here. The RSF, backed by the United Arab Emirates, back in 2003, I think, when it was then called the Janjaweed, ran through Darfur and burned, pillaged and murdered. It was an absolutely catastrophe. For people to get it into their heads, that region of Dafur is the size of France. We are talking about a very large scale. For the people who live there, this has been a tragedy that is going on for decades. Unfortunately, we all watch our televisions every night and see different conflicts in different parts of the world. Unfortunately, many of these conflicts, particularly when they are in Africa, do not get the attention they should get. Many of us meet people from Sudan. There are a number of people I know such as Yousif, a friend of mine, who is from Sudan. There are two families living in Sligo who have family in El Fasher in Sudan and they cannot contact their families. They do not know what has happened to them, where they are or what the situation is. This is a real human tragedy for all of those people. A big part of that tragedy has been the treatment of women and girls in this conflict. When El Fasher fell, the maternity hospital was attacked and 460 women and girls were murdered. That is just one example. Internationally, this has not been given the level of attention it deserves to get. I worry and I am very concerned when we look at the peace programme that has been put in place. When people are talking about peace, we always accept that and want to see that happen. However, when we hear that it is Trump's United States, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, countries which have been up to their necks in this conflict, which are the ones proposing a peace agreement, it should raise concerns. There is a real need here, particularly for the United Nations but also for the European Union, to become involved on a much higher scale. We need positive international influence to bring peace about, not the negative international influence that has been there up to now to try to take advantage of the situation that is to the detriment of the people who live in this magnificent and beautiful country.

The thousands of tonnes of arms that have gone into Sudan over the past number of years is something that has also fed an arms industry that has backed both sides in the conflict. This is also part of the age-old story we have about conflicts around the globe. We recognise something which is a very common story but on which we have a responsibility to stand very firm. The people of Ireland have a great affinity with many countries in Africa, particularly as many of our missionaries in the past went there and were such a positive influence there. We now have an opportunity to be a positive influence again.

I welcome the words of the Minister earlier when she said that Ireland wants to play its part in that. We certainly need to be a loud and solid voice for the ordinary people of Sudan to find a peaceful way out of this conflict and to bring to bear positive international pressure to make that happen. We also have to bring to bear positive international pressure for the malign influence of other countries from outside of Sudan, which have been detrimental to this conflict, to pull back and allow a proper peace process to be established in Sudan.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I am glad to finally, a year in, have the opportunity to speak on the unbelievable atrocities happening in Sudan. The degree, scale and intensity of the violence taking place in the territory is unfathomable. Since the civil war broke out in 2023, over 12 million people have been displaced and, it is estimated, another 150,000 killed. Last month, satellite images showed blood-stained streets and bodies piled high after the city of El

Fasher finally fell to the Rapid Support Forces after an 18-month siege. The siege created gruelling famine conditions for the innocent people living inside the earthen walls built around the city by the paramilitary forces. The violence unleashed by the RSF when they finally beat the Sudanese army and took the city, was even worse than anticipated. There were killing sprees, summary executions, rapes, and civilians shot dead in the street. Some 460 people, including patients, healthcare workers and loved ones, were murdered in cold blood by the RSF fighters. At the main hospital in El Fasher, mere days after the city was captured, the medical facility turned into a human slaughterhouse. This particular tack by the RSF fits as part of a broader strategy of the group since the beginning of the war to target healthcare. Weaponising medicine as a terror tactic, 1,204 health workers and patients were killed and more than 400 were wounded.

The affront on humanity in Sudan knows no bounds. UNICEF released figures in March this year recording 221 rape cases against children since 2024, many of whom were under the age of five and some as young as one year old. These statistics represent only a fraction of the reality. We cannot turn away from what is happening in Sudan. The ongoing humanitarian calamity, the scenes of horror worse than any movie, have become a reality for too many innocent people. We cannot become complacent in the face of war crimes so sinister. Part of the reason this conflict has been so protracted is that it has been eclipsed by the genocide in Gaza and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite the enormous complexity of the situation, a peaceful solution is still possible. With enough international attention, both sides can be pressured to accept a sustainable ceasefire agreement. Let this be a forgotten war no longer. I urge the Minister, as she continues in her new role, to dedicate diplomatic resources to this cause to keep it on top of the agenda. Let us not be complicit in these catastrophic war crimes either. We know the UAE is pouring arms into Sudan, to the RSF specifically. Smuggled via basis in Chad, these include sophisticated Chinese drones that can strike from hundreds of miles away; artillery; and Columbian mercenaries recruited and on the UAE payroll. The UAE is actively trying to back a winner in this war in allowing these horrific acts to unfold. Who is Ireland's new best pal and trading partner? None other than the UAE. Over the past decade, exports of goods to the UAE have grown by 127%, with imports increasing by 3,094%. The total bilateral trade is now valued at more than €2.25 billion annually. We are exponentially increasing trade ties with this country and there appears to be huge oversight when it comes to human-rights due diligence.

I will end with the words of a 14-year-old constituent of mine, Holly, from Newbridge in Kildare. Holly has written to me many times on Palestine, and she is an avid campaigner. I was delighted to receive a handwritten letter from Holly last week. I encourage her to continue in her activism. Holly writes: "Please consider calling Ireland's business and economic ties with the UAE into question, this cannot be swept under the rug."

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Labour Party was calling for this debate for the last few weeks through the Business Committee, along with others. I am happy we are having it today. I also commend the majority of the Minister's statement on this. It was detailed and contained more additional policy coherence in relation to Sudan than we have seen to this point. In that regard, it is interesting to note that the European Parliament today adopted a joint motion for a resolution on the escalation of the war and the humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group, of which my party is a member, voted

in favour of this resolution giving the need for a strong message to the Sudanese people condemning the violence in El Fasher and across the country and urging robust action to stop the war. However, the text omits some of the key reasons and actors responsible for this conflict which have been deliberately left out by the European People's Party - a fraternal group of the Minister's party in the European Parliament - and the far right. Again, unfortunately, we see the main grouping in the European Parliament, the grouping of which Fine Gael is a member, again finding themselves in problematic, to say the least, positional, policy and moral territory when it comes to humanitarian rights, conflict and war.

3 o'clock

Our group deplores that the resolution fails to explicitly mention the United Arab Emirates and its role in fuelling the war in Sudan. This is a crucial demand of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats group, as credible investigations have indicated that external actors, notably networks operating from and through the United Arab Emirates, have supported the RSF through financing and arms supply, thereby violating the UN embargo and EU restrictive measures. This is not unimportant. In her statement, the Minister spoke a number of times about the Quad as a group of states that are trying to broker a peace here, but the United Arab Emirates are part of the Quad and, as such, are a barrier to providing a trusted solution that can deliver peace. It feels as if we are a long way from peace at this point, as the conflict is escalating. The scale of conflicts happening all over the world at this moment is simply horrific.

I was taken with something the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, said this morning during foreign policy questions on Sudan. He said that this had been the worst year for humanitarian aid workers in terms of deaths and violence against them. It is no coincidence that the politicisation of humanitarian aid and its delivery go hand in hand with ensuring safe conditions under which humanitarian aid workers operate. We know those conditions have deteriorated to the point where too many are losing their lives or finding themselves caught up in warfare. That is a key part of the Minister's statement with which I fundamentally agree, namely, the need to depoliticise humanitarian aid and provision of humanitarian support.

That is nowhere more the case at this precise moment in time than in Sudan, where millions of Sudanese civilians are facing starvation, disease and relentless violence. To cite a research group from Yale, the violence is at a velocity not seen since Rwanda. Those of us in this country who are old enough to remember the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 will recall the work of Ireland and our amazing transformative President, Mary Robinson, at that time who highlighted what was going on in that country. It sends chills and shivers down my spine that, in 2025, we are seeing similar levels of catastrophic violence against all civilians, but in particular the impact on women and young girls, who suffer most in all conflicts. That is another point on which I agree with the emphasis of the Minister and the previous speaker from Sinn Féin. The violence, including sexual-based violence, is of such an horrific degree in Sudan that the suffering is at a level that is almost unimaginable. That is why we in the global north need to react in the strongest possible terms. For that reason, it is disappointing that the motion agreed in the European Parliament did not include the calling out of the UAE's role. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, to bring that back through his line Minister to their party group in the EU.

Ireland has long stood for the rule of international law, strong humanitarian principles and the protection of civilians in conflict. Those values cannot and should not be selective. They cannot apply in some regions and not in others. The people of Sudan deserve our solidarity as much as the people who are suffering in Gaza, Ukraine and all over the world do. That is the bargain with which the Irish people stand and it cuts through geography, colour and creed. If you are suffering, dying or the victim of war, then the Irish people will stand with you and the Irish Government needs to back that up.

Analysis shows that roughly 21.2 million people are living in Sudan and 45% of the population are facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Famine conditions are ongoing in El Fasher in North Darfur and Kadugli in South Kordofan. Humanitarian access is being restricted or, indeed, weaponised, which brings us back to the point about the politicisation of humanitarian aid delivery. Disease is spreading rapidly. In just one area of the capital, more than 5,000 cases of malaria, typhoid and dengue fever occurred just a short few weeks ago, accompanied by dozens of deaths. Cholera, measles and other very preventable diseases are now commonplace due to the lack of clean water and the collapse of sanitation and basic healthcare systems. The situation is beyond dire.

While we are getting some images out of Sudan, we are not getting enough. We are getting satellite footage of mass graves and intelligence reports of what is going on but such is the constrictor-like grip that these forces have over their areas, we are not seeing what is actually going on. We can take it that the numbers are being underreported and that the conflict and violence are at a level that is much worse than we are seeing.

The conflict has destabilised the Horn of Africa and threatens to destabilise regions far beyond. Sudan sits at a strategic crossroads politically, geographically and economically. We know all that, but that is not at the core of why we need to act now. We need to act because millions are starving and the violence is growing. When the state collapses, extremism spreads, and that is what we are seeing.

What can we do? First, we must support a substantial increase in humanitarian assistance and work out ways in which we can deliver it. I welcome the funding that we have already given, which amounts to a total support to the people of Sudan in 2025 of €14.3 million. Ireland stands apart and separate - proudly so - from an awful lot of our European Union partner states, who are either freezing foreign aid or reducing it. The common narrative here is that Trump's America is the only state in the developed world that is cutting overseas development aid. However, in Trump's shadow, so are a lot of our European allies. We are not, nor should we, and we should be commended for that, but we should also be striving and pushing forward. The recent allocation of €3 million in funding, from which €1.5 million was reallocated to the Sudan humanitarian fund, which is managed by the UNOCHA, again shows our commitment to the United Nations, and €1.5 million to support the work of the UNHCR is an acknowledgement of the need for decisive action, but it should also be a step on which further steps should follow. Ireland has a respected voice in humanitarian aid. It is often trotted out that we punch above our weight, but that is because it is true. We can lead.

Second, we must firmly and consistently call for a ceasefire - not a temporary or symbolic cessation of hostilities, but a sustained and monitored commitment to end this conflict. Every day we delay, lives are lost in a conflict that has already claimed 150,000 victims. That is a conservative estimate. A ceasefire is essential to help create humanitarian corridors to allow

agencies to reach those who are starving and to provide civilians with the opportunity for safety and stability. Ireland must work with partners in the region, and support partners in the region and the broader international community, to help build diplomatic pressure on the warring parties. A fragmented approach will fail, as we have seen time and again.

Third, we must push for accountability. The world has seen too many conflicts where atrocities are committed without consequences. We see too many conflicts happening today. Violations of international human rights law occur when civilians are targeted, aid is blocked or weaponised, and entire communities are uprooted or massacred. Those responsible must know that they will be held to account. The ICJ has already ruled that war crimes have taken place. How many times will we allow the perpetrator of war crimes to escape the consequences?

Fourth, we must raise public awareness. The Sudanese community in Ireland is demonstrating on O'Connell Street and on the streets of other cities and towns where they live, highlighting what is going on in their country. They are our fellow citizens here - for those who have taken citizenship - and they are sharing our space. They are sharing our towns, contributing to our communities and working in our hospitals and communities, and they deserve our support. We should listen to what our neighbours are saying. Crises that are invisible to the world become impossible to solve. Sudan has suffered from a lack of global attention. It has been overshadowed by other conflicts and political priorities.

The reality is the lack of scrutiny on what has happened in Sudan does not make its suffering vanish, it only facilitates its growth. Everyone in this Chamber needs to speak with greater clarity and urgency. It is welcome that Ireland successfully called for Sudan to be placed on the agenda at this month's EU Foreign Affairs Council where restrictive measures against senior RSF commanders were adopted. The role we played in the formulation of the EU 27 statement issued by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the atrocities perpetrated by the RSF, including following the seizure of the city of El Fasher, is also welcome.

While I was unable to make this morning's briefing from the Department of foreign affairs, to my regret, due to commitments at the Business Committee, I was glad to read of the Government's commitment to pushing for peace in the region. Our work as a member of the Sudan core group in Geneva, which succeeded in ensuring the adoption of a resolution on the situation of El Fasher at the special session of the Human Rights Council on 14 November, which requested the fact-finding mission to conduct an urgent inquiry into the violations and abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law committed in and around El Fasher, is a positive step. It is also a very real example of our diplomats and our diplomatic power at work. We can effect change through our diplomatic corps. Its members do an amazing job. They are anonymous to the public and to many of us in this Chamber but they are the ones who exercise Ireland's real soft and deliberate power in this area.

However, it is just one step of many more we must continue with. Millions of people are fighting for survival. Children are dying before their parents' eyes and families are fleeing or attempting to flee besieged cities and towns with just the clothes they have on their backs. Entire communities are being erased by violence, starvation and disease. Despite the efforts taking place, the world is not doing enough and not acting with the urgency this crisis demands. Ireland's voice, people in this House, our diplomatic corps, every sinew we can strain

diplomatically and internationally must be calling for a durable and just peace in Sudan. Ultimately, resolving the conflict requires significant and sustained political will and a clear voice for peace. The people of Sudan need that voice now. I hope the Dáil will commit today to continue to work and support our diplomatic corps in doing what it can in the EU, United Nations and beyond. The Sudanese people deserve peace, dignity and the chance to rebuild their lives and to know the world has not abandoned them.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: It is good to see Deputy Feighan here as Minister of State. I thank him for being here for this very important debate. I pay tribute to my colleague, Deputy Shane Moynihan, who has been raising this issue during Taoiseach's questions since the beginning of the year. Barry Andrews, MEP, raises it regularly in the European Parliament. This is a very important debate. As colleagues said, it has perhaps been overshadowed by conflicts in Gaza and the Middle East and Russia's ongoing campaign of aggression against Ukraine and its other neighbours.

The scale of what has happened in Sudan, however, is horrific. Just looking at the number of displaced persons, 8 million people have fled from Venezuela because of the economic regime there and 11 million people have been displaced in Ukraine, but over 12 million people have already been displaced in Sudan. It is the largest displacement crisis in the world. This is before we even come to talk about those who have been killed, the tens of thousands of people who have been killed, and those who have had their families taken away from them. Colleagues have also mentioned the horrors of the gender-based violence since this war erupted in April 2023. We have seen gang rapes, sexual slavery and abductions, and UNICEF has reported young children being subjected to sexual violence. All war is horrific but the more I read about what has happened in Sudan, the more inhuman it is. The fact that, as a planet, we have allowed this and, indeed, other conflicts to continue is a stain on all of us.

There are certainly questions for other powers in the region. They will have to be involved in any peace agreement and I am glad they are now coming to the table. We know neighbouring countries, like Chad, Egypt and Ethiopia, are under pressure because of the refugees that have fled Sudan. We need to provide support to those countries as well in assist with their refugees. We do, however, need to call out global actors, and, yes, the United Arab Emirates, UAE, is among them. Unsurprisingly, Russia, which is again supplying arms, is among them. Indeed, Wagner mercenaries have been deployed in the area. China's role in Africa also needs to be examined. While it may not be directly involved in war, China has certainly been involved in economic colonialism in Africa. There is a broader question here, then, than just Sudan. It is about the question of our approach in Ireland and the European Union to Africa and particularly concerning is how we can support Africans being able to make decisions for themselves about their future.

For us, I think it is critical, more than ever before, that Irish values around human rights, the rule of law and accountability are to the fore in any discussion. We also need to insist that it is the Sudanese people themselves who make a decision around their future. I refer to what more we can do, and colleagues have certainly mentioned humanitarian assistance. In Ireland we are right to be proud of the support we have provided. I know an additional package has now been agreed at EU level. This is critical in terms of support for families there. There are also long-term challenges, however, around sanitation and water supplies, for example. We need not just to provide money but to support Sudan with expertise. We are going to need to invest

heavily in providing support for the clearing of mines. Even though conflicts end, problems with mines mean that thousands of people for years afterwards potentially face very serious injuries. We also need to address, as I mentioned, the gender-based violence that has gone on, some of which is particularly horrific.

I pay tribute to the team within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I think we should always be very proud of our diplomats, who are sometimes working in very difficult circumstances. It is why I have never believed in the idea of expelling diplomats or ending diplomatic relations, even with countries with which we very strongly disagree. The role of diplomats is to engage and try to ensure there are still doors open, so people can talk rather than engage in conflict.

We again need to look at the issue of accountability. Too often in all these conflicts, even though peace is finally obtained, those responsible for horrific war crimes are not held to account. There are targeted sanctions against certain individuals in Sudan. I think we need to go further than that. When this war is finished, those who have committed war crimes need to be held to account to ensure the victims see that justice has been done and to demonstrate an example to others in other conflicts that they cannot get away with it. I believe that for too long this has been a problem with many of the conflicts we have faced around the world.

Finally, this is one of those issues we need to talk about more. This issue will not get a lot of media coverage. It will not get the media attention other conflicts rightly get. Given the scale of depravity, though, it is something that we, right across this House, need to ensure we talk about in our own political parties and communities. The values I believe are dear to all our hearts, those Irish values, need to inform everyone in the State and we need to be aware of this conflict. I welcome the statement from the Minister for foreign affairs today. I know she comes from a very good place and any efforts she and the Government can make to end this horrific conflict should be supported.

Deputy Paula Butterly: Today, like many of my colleagues, I would like to raise one of the most important ongoing humanitarian disasters, the unfolding civil war in Sudan and the sheer amount of civilian death and tragedy unfolding in its wake. The war in Sudan is not a simple conflict. It is a catastrophe causing the slaughter of innocent women and children and the starvation of millions. It is a conflict that strikes at the very heart of human dignity and the rights we have fought for for so long and so hard are now under threat. The fear is that we will not be able to uphold them.

Sudan has been marred by decades of war. In recent weeks, the city of El Fasher has been subjected to a siege that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people. Reports from the city are showing evidence of mass killings, sexual violence and vital infrastructure and lifelines for civilians being destroyed. Harrowing and gruesome videos have been doing the rounds but the level of documentation of this ongoing tragedy does not end there. We have now seen satellite images in which the trail of blood from the ongoing slaughter in the city is clear to see. These are war crimes so terrible that they are visible from space. It is truly one of the world's most severe ongoing humanitarian catastrophes.

In the midst of these horrors, I ask that we not forget those who are most vulnerable. I ask that we not forget those women who are victims of this violence and subject to rape and sexual abuse. I ask that we not forget the children who are starving and on the sides of the streets,

their bellies swollen from the denial of food and basic humanities. I ask that, as a humanitarian nation, we continue to persevere through the barriers to aid set by conflict and deliver food to those children and assist those vulnerable women.

A primary access point for our aid to Africa hinges on supports for maternal health. Ireland has championed and led the way on maternal health and sexual and reproductive health rights through our aid to Sudan and other countries such as Ethiopia, Liberia and Gambia. We fund Maternal and Childhealth Advocacy International and work with nurses and midwives to reduce maternal and neonatal deaths across ten countries. Recent aid to Mozambique, for example, has been used to treat conditions like pre-eclampsia, a pregnancy complication that, if untreated, is deadly. An investment there for €4 million was used to train 450 maternal health workers and screened 115,000 pregnant women. One project under our aid for maternal health in Mozambique has saved the lives of 5,000 mothers in one year alone. These are lives saved because we chose to act.

Similar projects in Sudan go against the unfortunate tide of death ripping through that country and give the invaluable gift of life and youth to a nation when it needs it the most in such horrific and tragic times. Access to safe childbirth is one of the primary guarantors for a nation to survive and recover from a terrible tragedy. The ongoing conflict threatens to overturn the progress we have made so far. In Sudan, mothers and pregnant women are under siege. Their survival is threatened and their freedoms are restricted and denied. These freedoms should never be denied and we should always endeavour to ensure they have the aid so that, in the coming years, not only will this conflict end but Sudan can recover and actually hope to be able to rebuild.

As it stands, pregnant women cannot reach clinics. Sexual violence is rampant. Abuse of women is becoming just another everyday occurrence throughout the country. Therefore, I implore the Minister of State to continue to aid these women and to focus on these issues so lives may be saved and further tragedies prevented. Our Government continues - I am very grateful for this - to assist in countries in humanitarian need. Even in times of crisis, we do our best to find ways. Sudan should not be any exception. It desperately needs our help. It is, therefore, imperative that we continue to fund and get these supports through so that these projects can thrive and allow our humanitarian aid to preserve life in war zones and promote peace across the globe.

If our neutrality allows us to afford prosperity, it should also allow us to afford generosity. Humanitarian aid is not just a charity. It is a projection of our values and ideas as a people and a nation. Our opposition to violence and tragedy must be acted upon in ways that have a material effect. Very often, words are not enough. Token gestures do not save lives. Helping hands on the ground are what make the difference and our humanitarian aid is our vessel for supplying that. As Martin Luther King once said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." If we are serious about our commitment to being a bastion of humanitarianism and an example to nations turning ever more inward, we must become an enemy of injustice through our kindness and help. We must become a friend to the suffering through our assistance. We must become a foundation for humanitarian values through our generosity and we must become a contributor to the future of fragile nations through our commitment to peace, equality and respect.

This is a call to conscience and a call to action. We cannot look away. We cannot let fatigue or infighting dull our sense of urgency and duty. If we fail, it is not just Sudan that loses. It is we and society in general that will lose.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeas a dhéanamh leis an Aire Stáit as an bpost nua atá aige. Ádh mór air.

Unfortunately, too many times, we have been in this Chamber while speaking about what we would have assumed was almost in the rear-view mirror of history. However, it seems that whether you look at Gaza, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or what is happening in Sudan, it is geopolitical chaos and could be the annals from the worst parts of global history. The fact is we have seen a move away from multilateralism, international law and the righteousness of international law. At some point, we will need to see the pendulum come back to a more sensible place but at the minute, the people of Sudan cannot afford to wait on that.

Straight away, it is a necessity that we play our part in ensuring that aid workers and a sufficient amount of aid gets to people who are starving at this point in time. We need the SAF and RSF to facilitate this and to allow UN observers in. It is beyond a disgrace what is going on, if we are talking about the year-and-a-half siege of El Fasher. It is like hell on earth and as bad as any place you can think of since the Second World War after what has been done. The UN has rightly labelled it one of the worst humanitarian cases. Just look at the news. How bad does something have to be? We are talking about one of the worst humanitarian crises.

We are talking about a war, a situation and a circumstance that we have been dealing with since April 2023. An awful lot of the time, there have rightly been eyes on some of the other conflict zones but this has been missed out on. It is the depth, magnitude and size of the horror and chaos. What are we talking about? Some 12 million people have been forcibly displaced and 150,000 people have already been killed. Think about that and the impact on that part of the world. Think of the chaos that has been caused. Think of the individual lives that have been lost and the families that have been destroyed. That is before we get into the crimes that have been committed, particularly against women. I do not know how many times in history people said "never again", but unfortunately "never again" seems to actually mean "again and again and again", whether it was Rwanda 30 years ago, the Balkans, what Russia is doing in Ukraine or the genocide in Gaza.

As to the absolute size of this, we have a considerable number of people who will talk about the issue in relation to migration. We have all spoken about the fact that we need systems that work, but just think about 12 million people forcibly displaced. How will that not have an impact in relation to the rest of the world? It is a very much connected world.

As we all know, the United Arab Emirates has been engaged in supplying weapons that have played a major part in the RSF's capacity and in its destruction of human lives and all the other horrors alongside that. This is a proxy war. There are supporters on both sides. I listened earlier to Deputy Ó Laoghaire's interaction with the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, on the need to see pressure being put on the United Arab Emirates. I can accept that in public, the Government cannot say all that needs to be said. Whatever about in public, we must make sure that in private, in every corner where we have an ear that will listen to our voice, it is known that this is not acceptable. It is not acceptable to be facilitating the sale of gold, mining and human misery.

I agree with an awful lot of what my colleagues have said. This will finish, and we need to ensure that those who have been engaged in this horror, this absolute butchery, are held to account. We need to make sure that whatever leverage we have is brought to bear on those powers that have facilitated this and on anyone else who will listen to us in the international community. We need to do this because these people have been through what none of us can imagine. We need to make sure we are not back here at a later stage this year or next year, talking about numbers that are scaled up from what is abject and absolute horror.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Satellite images taken by the humanitarian research lab at the Yale School of Public Health show numerous clusters of ground discoloration across Darfur, consistent with the presence of human bodies. The blood spilled in Sudan is now visible from space. Let us think about that for a moment. The scale of killing is so vast, unrestrained and utterly unhidden that it is visible from orbit. Nobody, no government, institution or leader, can pretend that they do not know what is happening. The horror is in full view of the world. What is unfolding in Sudan is not a distant conflict we can categorise as another human tragedy of the global south. It is one of the most horrifying humanitarian disasters of our time. More than that, it is a moment that exposes something very dark about the direction global politics is taking.

At the heart of this war are two military forces, the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, neither of which can decisively defeat the other. Into that stalemate has poured a global foreign policy environment that has abandoned principle entirely. Where decisions once relied, at least in part, on diplomacy, pragmatism or moral pressure, what we now see in the governments across the world is the naked self-interest of powerful states pursuing business, resources and influence however they see fit. The consequence of this change of tone for Sudan has been catastrophic. Tens of thousands are dead. Over 13 million people have been driven from their homes. Hunger and famine stalk communities already shattered by violence. The very basics of human survival - hospitals, water and sanitation - have collapsed. Civilians are dying, not only from bullets but from starvation, disease and abandonment. In Darfur, long marginalised communities now face a brutal campaign of execution, displacement and terror. The RSF, emerging from the same Janjaweed militias responsible for earlier genocides, now controls cities through fear, violence and mass atrocity.

This is often called a civil war but that phrase hides the truth. This is not a war between communities or opposing cities. It is a war on civilians, a war in which foreign actors have found opportunity rather than obligation. To the fore is the United Arab Emirates with its complicity in this brutality. We know who is funding and arming these groups. We know how gold, oil and geopolitical leverage have turned Sudan into a marketplace for influence. Yet, despite crimes visible from space, the global response has been silence, sidestepping and selective outrage. We have seen the commentary that Sudan does not get the attention Palestine or Ukraine gets. I understand the frustration deeply but I reject the idea that we must choose which horror deserves our outrage. Humanity is not a competition. When a child starves in Sudan, it demands the same moral response as a child bombed in Gaza or displaced in Ukraine. The new world order, this transactional, self-interested, "not my problem" foreign policy, is a terrifying indicator of how the world will respond to the millions of Sudanese who are fleeing in search of safety. If powerful governments can watch atrocities from space and simply shrug, what hope do displaced Sudanese families have when they come knocking on the doors of

nations that now treat asylum and poverty as just an inconvenience? That is exactly why our role matters here, why scrutiny matters and why calling out cruelty matters. Challenging self-interested decision-making matters, every single time it appears, no matter how exhausting it becomes. The moment we stop holding governments to account, the moment we stop naming injustice for what it is, we become part of the silence that lets these horrors continue.

We should continue to demand better - and I urge every Member of the House to continue to do the same - and to demand humanitarian corridors, a ceasefire and an end to the arms flows; to support the Sudanese diaspora and refugee pathways; and to refuse the idea that Sudan's suffering is simply part of the turbulence of our times. This is about more than international solidarity. It is about moral consistency and deciding whether human life actually matters or whether we only defend it when it suits our political convenience. The scale of the crisis is almost unfathomable but silence is not an option, not now when an entire nation is being fractured, starved and terrorised in full view of the world. We owe it to every family torn apart, every child displaced and every community destroyed. If we fail to speak for Sudan now, when the evidence of atrocity is literally visible from space, we are not just failing Sudan; we are failing the very idea that human life has value at all.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I offer comhghairdeas to the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, formally on the record of the House.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on Sudan. It is very important and my colleague, Deputy Shane Moynihan, and others have raised it several times. It is very important that this discussion happens. The ongoing situation in Sudan is one of the gravest humanitarian emergencies in the world. It is a conflict defined by mass displacement, famine conditions and systematic attacks on civilians. It is a crisis that demands far more international attention and co-ordinated action than it has received to date. Sudan is now the largest displacement crisis in the world, with millions of people forced from their homes and millions more living in conditions of acute hunger. Entire regions have been devastated, most starkly in Darfur, and there are credible reports of ethnically targeted killings, sexual violence and deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid. The images and testimonies emerging from El Fasher and surrounding areas are harrowing. They point to widespread breaches of international humanitarian and human rights laws, including acts which, if verified, amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Ireland has played an important role in ensuring these crimes do not go unnoticed. As part of the Sudan core group, we helped secure a human rights council resolution establishing an urgent fact-finding mission for El Fasher and expanding the international investigation of violations. That work must continue because without documentation and accountability, the cycle of violence will persist. We have also supported the EU's targeted sanctions regime, including the recent restrictive measures on senior Rapid Support Forces leaders. That is a necessary step; those fuelling atrocities, whether through command responsibilities, illicit finance or arms flows must face consequences.

However, while accountability matters, it will not in itself feed a starving population. The humanitarian situation in Sudan is catastrophic. Over 20 million people face crisis levels of hunger and aid agencies are warning of famine in several regions. Access for the UN and NGOs remains dangerously restricted. Bureaucratic obstacles, insecurity and deliberate

interference continue to choke off life-saving assistance. Ireland has responded, however. This year alone, we have provided significant humanitarian funding to Sudan and to neighbouring states hosting large refugee populations. Our diplomats, particularly in Geneva and New York, have worked tirelessly in pressing for humanitarian access and a sustained international response. It is clear, however, that other EU member states and global partners must scale up their contributions too.

UN appeals for Sudan remain critically underfunded. Until the gap is closed, conditions will worsen. That is why the commitment made at the recent G20 Summit in South Africa is so important. I welcome the Taoiseach's engagement at that summit, at which he highlighted Sudan directly and joined leaders in calling for a just and lasting peace. International political focus is essential. When the G20 speaks with one voice it strengthens the hand of the UN, the African Union and mediators who are trying to secure a humanitarian ceasefire. A ceasefire is urgently needed. It is clear that the primary responsibility for ending this conflict rests with the leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. External actors have influence, however, and influence must be used to bring pressure to bear. We know that foreign arms and money have sustained both sides in this war. We know that Russian-linked networks, including successors to the Wagner Group, have profited from Sudanese gold and helped fuel instability. We also know that without co-ordinated diplomacy, outside powers will continue to hedge their bets, prolonging the conflict rather than helping to resolve it.

The EU must, therefore, intensify its work to enforce the UN arms embargo, curb illicit financing and press regional actors, particularly in the Gulf and across the Red Sea, to end support that enables further violence. This is also important for Sudan's neighbours because this conflict is not contained within its borders alone. South Sudan, Chad, the Central African Republic and Egypt are all under immense strain as refugees flee the fighting. Supporting those states is not an optional extra; it is central to preventing further destabilisation. The EU should front-load assistance for food, shelter, education and local infrastructure in host communities so that the arrival of large numbers of refugees does not spark new crises.

This debate comes in the same week that we learned of another appalling incident in Africa, namely, the mass abduction of schoolchildren and teachers in Niger State in Nigeria. Over 300 people were taken and while many escaped, more than 260 children remain missing. I raised this issue on Tuesday with the Taoiseach, who expressed his concern for the safety of the children and their teachers. I would welcome confirmation from the Minister that her officials are raising the issue at the EU and UN and, indeed, will raise the issue of religious persecution generally. This issue reminds us that insecurity in one region of Africa can quickly have consequences for its neighbours. Ireland should support efforts to secure the safe release of those children. At EU level, we must continue to back programmes that strengthen school safety, community protection and early-warning systems for violence in Nigeria and the wider region. It is only by supporting stability, from Sudan across the Sahel and into West Africa, that we can prevent these kinds of horrors from recurring.

Sudan is a crisis of unimaginable scale. If the world turns away now, famine will take hold, atrocities will continue and the conflict will spill further across a fragile region. Ireland must continue to play its part by pressing for a humanitarian ceasefire, demanding accountability for those committing violations, supporting UN and African Union efforts to secure access for aid and urging our EU partners to match the ambition and leadership that Ireland has shown.

Above all, though, we must ensure that the people of Sudan and the millions displaced across its borders are not forgotten. Their survival, and their hope for peace, depend on sustained international action. Ireland has been a strong voice on this issue. We should continue to be so.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I start by sending my solidarity to the Sudanese community here in Ireland, many of whom are doing amazing work in so many spheres of life, particularly our health services. They are doctors, engineers and so on and many have lived and contributed here. I send them solidarity because of what they are dealing with, hearing about the absolute horror that has happened at home.

I spoke on Sudan in 2019. It was just after a revolution had taken place to throw out the despot al-Bashir. Unfortunately, that revolution was drowned in blood, and the partners in crime in drowning that revolution in blood were the RSF and the army. The two so-called warring parties were once brothers-in-arms. We have to analyse why this has happened, who is complicit in it and how it can be ended. The genocide in Sudan is still ongoing despite the RSF agreeing in principle to a ceasefire put forward by the US. It is unlikely the peace deal will end the hostilities because the UAE, which is helping the RSF, is very involved in the talks as well.

The World Food Programme has noted that 21 million people face acute hunger, and many of them face catastrophic hunger. The genocide has killed 150,000 people and displaced 13 million people, but many more deaths are probably hidden at this point. The figure is likely to be far higher.

I want to call out the role of the EU in contributing to the problems because it is kind of kept under the carpet. The Save the Children charity has criticised the EU specifically for aiding and abetting the genocide, or allowing the genocide, with its strict border controls, which drives children into the hands of traffickers and smugglers and back to unsafe countries. Some 10,000 refugees from Sudan arrived in Europe and it seems that a minority have been accepted in the EU. However, the EU is also responsible for the crisis by giving support to the RSF and money to assist in holding people in their migration. These are the butchers who have been carrying out these horrific attacks and the sexual violence, and who have been using children - I have seen this in videos - to torture and kill people.

We have also seen that Bulgarian, French and British arms have been found in Sudan. They are wielded by the RSF, probably via the UAE, which is supporting the RSF. France has sold €21 billion worth of weapons to the UAE. These have ended up in the hands of these butchers.

The EU has specifically entered into a financial relationship with Egypt, paying it €7 billion over two years for migration management. The Irish Government has classed Egypt as a safe country to send people back to. Egypt is a brutal dictatorship and it is playing a key role in all of this as well. It has tightened up residency permits and restricted people from entering. This is causing huge problems.

Ireland has a role as well. Ireland has €2.5 billion in trade with the UAE, which is directly assisting the RSF right now in carrying out these atrocities, and the Government is seeking to expand that trade after establishing a joint economic mission. As I said, it classed Egypt as a safe place, providing legitimacy for that regime which treats refugees so deplorably. The EU

has tried to make a point that it is an outside viewer on this, but it is complicit, having boosted and assisted the RSF in the past and also allowing the arms sales I mentioned.

I want to mention briefly what lies behind this and why Sudan is of such interest. Sudan is strategically important because of its access to the Red Sea - it is a vital shipping route - its agricultural land and, of course, its gold. That is what is fuelling all the outside colonial forces that have backed side one or other side, and sometimes both sides, in order to have influence in this region. However, an absolutely crucial reason for UAE involvement is that it does not want to see a democratic regime in this area, one that would expose and give an example throughout the Arab world to overthrow despots, as the Sudanese people did successfully. For more than a decade, the UAE has been a key sponsor of the counter-revolutionary forces in the Arab world and in many other countries as well.

We need to assist the Sudanese people to get rid of the internal despots and outside influence, and let them enjoy, use, democratically control and own the wealth and resources they have. Hopefully, the revolutionary fervour that was so important among young people and doctors across the whole population can be reinstated. Let us support the Sudanese people in any way we can to do this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not often thank the Government but I will do so for facilitating this important debate on the horror that is being inflicted on the people of Sudan. The genocidal horror they are enduring at the moment has led to at least 150,000 people being killed, more than 21 million people, which is 45% of the population, facing hunger and famine, 12 million people being forcibly displaced, and the horrific scenes involving the RSF in the siege of El Fasher, to name some of the atrocities that have taken place.

This is complex and, like Deputy Copping, I remember speaking about it. At that time, I had been briefed but, unfortunately, I did not have a chance to talk to Sudanese people before this debate. I had been briefed by people from Sudan before the previous debate, which was at the time of the revolution by the people of Sudan. That was a revolution not based on siding with either of the two factions responsible for this horror; it was a grassroots rebellion of people against the austerity and poverty being imposed and backed by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, our friends in the IMF, the purveyors of austerity across the world.

There are layers and layers to this but, in essence, it is the old divide-and-rule tactic being used by different factions in the Sudanese ruling class fighting over power against a population that was rising up against them and, in turn, the alignment of both of these factions, which are guilty of the genocide, with external powers which, ultimately, are tied up with big western powers. They are armed, financed and supported by big western powers.

I heard some people say those who are campaigning and advocating for the people of Palestine are not speaking about Sudan. We were, back when the revolution was happening, and we are now, but there is a connection between these two things. The connection is very important and brings it into sharp focus. What is the western agenda in this region and in the wider Middle Eastern region? In the popular narrative purveyed by western leaders over the years, including the US, the European Union and so on, it is to support democracy and be supporters of democracy. In actuality, the entirety of western foreign policy, that is, US and European foreign policy, has been to prevent democracy, back dictatorships and divide and rule

the population to ensure we do not have successful democratic revolutions in places such as Sudan, where ordinary people might take control of their resources and of strategically important areas. Some of the strategically important resources have been mentioned, including gold. The UAE is involved big-time. We have trade relations with the UAE, and it is armed by France and the United States. Europe and America are backing these regimes.

The Egyptian regime has its interests, in terms of plans by Ethiopia to build a dam that will impact on the movement of the Nile and who gets what share of the Nile and so on, so it is backing other forces and particular factions. There is also the question of access to the Red Sea and various battles going on between different states, in turn backed by western governments. Let us remember the el-Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, which brutally crushed the Arab Spring in Egypt. It is backed by the United States and western governments and treated like a normal government, when the people who led the democratic uprising in Egypt are all languishing in jail being tortured, yet we pretend the Egyptian regime is somehow normal.

The policy was summed up by the first governor general of Jerusalem, Ronald Storrs, in 1936, when he was asked why the British were backing Zionism and what would later be the Nakba and the destruction of Palestinians. He said they wanted to create a loyal little Jewish Ulster in the Middle East to guard against a potentially hostile sea of Arabism. It was divide and rule. They did what they did in Ireland, setting the Catholics against the Protestants, in order to make sure they controlled the region and that the people of the region did not democratically control their own resources. This is the same playbook that has been playing out in Sudan and the entire region. They back dictatorships, and back this faction against that faction, as long as they control the resources or their allies get what they want, or Red Sea routes, or whatever it is. Of course, on top of all of this, they are backing governments that are imposing brutal austerity on an incredibly poor country. It is complicated, and too complicated to discuss in the time available, but the hypocrisy and double standards of some of the external players, including western governments here, is stunning. Often, they have done it precisely because some of these disgusting factions were willing to police the migration from these countries of desperate people trying to flee an horrific situation. Honestly, you could not make up the hypocrisy and double standards around this.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Today, the BBC reported on an interview it had with a man who escaped the last functioning hospital in the Sudanese city of El Fasher before a reported massacre by paramilitary troops. Abdu-Rabbu Ahmed, who was a laboratory technician in the maternity hospital, told the BBC, "I have lost my colleagues". He said, "I have lost the people whose faces I used to see smiling" and that it "feels as if you lost a big part of your body or your soul". Other Members have addressed what is happening in Sudan today, which is without doubt one of the gravest humanitarian crises of our time. It is a catastrophic conflict. More importantly, it has been easy to think of it as a distant tragedy but it is not. If anything, it is a moral imperative for all of us who believe in human dignity and international law. Sadly, it is one of many conflicts taking place around the world today that need to be front and centre in our minds.

As other colleagues have noted, the situation in Sudan is the world's worst humanitarian and protection crisis. The numbers have been rehearsed a number of times in the Chamber, with more than 150,000 lives lost, 12 million people forcibly displaced and 21 million facing crisis levels of hunger, including famine. These numbers represent families torn apart, communities

destroyed and people's futures eradicated and disappeared in front of their very eyes. In an age when there is a constant information flow to our phones, sometimes I believe there is a perception that our human sensibilities can become desensitised to unspeakable horror and the inhuman practices and behaviours that seem to be endlessly documented, not least those reported and shown to us from Sudan.

On a personal level, I am sure I share with all colleagues the absolute disdain, distaste and horror at the deliberate targeting of civilians by all parties to the conflict. In El Fasher, across north Darfur and in Kordofan, we have seen appalling atrocities, including ethnically motivated killings, systematic sexual and gender-based violence, and starvation used as a weapon of war. Most chillingly, there is the obstruction of humanitarian aid. These acts are clear breaches of international humanitarian and human rights law. They are war crimes and crimes against humanity and must be called out as such.

Accountability must be at the heart of our response. I am proud to have raised this matter in the Chamber a number of times over the past year. I am happy to see that Ireland, alongside the UK, the Netherlands and Norway, succeeded in ensuring the adoption of a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council earlier this month. This resolution mandates an urgent inquiry into these violations through the independent fact-finding mission in Sudan.

4 o'clock

The impunity that seems to exist must end.

As a country, we have taken a leading role internationally. We were the Government that initiated the discussions which led to the EU sanctions regime and we successfully called for Sudan to be placed on the agenda of the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Last week, the EU adopted further restrictive measures against Abdul Rahim Hamdan Dagalo, the RSF's second in command. I am enthused by the fact the EU stands ready to impose further measures on all actors responsible for destabilising Sudan and obstructing its political transition, but sanctions alone are not enough. We need to ensure unhindered humanitarian access. I am proud Ireland has provided over €14 million in humanitarian assistance this year to support communities in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries. This funding, which is being channelled through UN agencies, the Red Cross, Irish NGOs and local organisations, delivers the food, medical supplies and lifesaving aid that is pivotal to these communities. I am pleased we are committed to continuing this assistance in 2026.

The protection of civilians cannot wait for a ceasefire. Humanitarian and medical workers must be safeguarded and civilians who wish to leave besieged cities must be granted a safe passage. There are obligations under international law and they must be respected and upheld. In the longer term, only a Sudanese-led political process that is inclusive can address the grievances that have led to this conflict. I am sure the EU, with Ireland playing its part, will continue to support the dialogue among Sudanese civilian political groups in close collaboration - and this is important - with the African Union and other partners.

The sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Sudan, like any nation state, must be preserved. Attempts not to address or undermine this will only deepen the crisis, and without doubt, external interference must end. However, this is also the moment when the institutions established to stop this ever happening again must step up. The rules of our international order and our common humanity need to be vindicated and the guardians thereof need to be bold in

that vindication. This is not just about Sudan, it is about the values we stand for: human rights, justice and solidarity.

I am sure Ireland will continue to speak out, to act and lead, to work with our EU and international partners to demand an end to the violence, to ensure accountability and to deliver hope to the people of Sudan in a Sudanese-led process. The violence must end, the suffering must end and we need to make sure we play our part to make that happen.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Tá áthas orm an deis seo a fháil labhairt ar an topaic seo agus ar an méid atá ag baint leis an gcogadh cathartha i Sudan.

What is happening in Sudan is hell on earth. Last year, Aid to the Church in Need released its report on Christian persecution around the globe. Sudan is an area plagued by this issue. I will quote extensively from that report as it specifically deals with some of the desperate problems ongoing for those living in Sudan, especially Christians:

The civil war that broke out on 15th April 2023 unleashed a wave of violence and displacement affecting all communities across Sudan. Several significant churches were among religious buildings targeted in the war's opening weeks. Many churches in the Khartoum area and elsewhere were immediately seized by military forces. By mid-May, this included the Virgin Mary Coptic Orthodox Cathedral and All Saints' Episcopal Cathedral ...

[..]

Many other churches in the capital were seized on the first day of the conflict. That same day, bombers attacked the Catholic Bishop's house ... The bishop took refuge in the neighbouring cathedral.

[...]

In the following months, up to 165 churches were closed and others destroyed.

By early 2024 human rights observers began describing Sudan's internal displacement crisis as "the highest in the world" - with the UN stating record levels of children were suffering malnutrition due to food scarcity. By that time, the Church, which had been 5 percent of the population (2.4 million) before the conflict, was "shrinking away." While many Christians migrated to their ancestral homelands in South Sudan, Church sources reported that the faithful made up the majority of the 750,000 or more people who took refuge in the Nuba Mountains.

In the two years leading up to the civil war, the regime that came to power in a coup in October 2021 began reversing a process towards "liberalisation and religious freedom" undertaken by the transitional government. The transitional government (2019-21) had restored Christmas Day as a public holiday, issued an apology for the country's long record of persecution against Christians and abolished the death penalty ...

It is clear from those quotes that the scale of the challenges facing Sudan and its traumatised people are almost too enormous to contemplate or imagine. I accept Ireland is doing incredible work among its overseas aid partners. I note a recent reply from the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, to a parliamentary question I tabled. The reply confirmed that since the outbreak

of conflict in 2023 Ireland has consistently highlighted the scale of the humanitarian crisis, with a particular focus on the levels of acute hunger and famine, large-scale displacement and the impact of the conflict on women and girls. The reply further stated that the provision of humanitarian assistance was a major priority for Ireland and that, in 2025, the Government has confirmed €14.3 million for the Sudan crisis. Some €10.3 million is committed to support humanitarian work in Sudan and €4 million to support the humanitarian response for displaced populations in neighbouring countries.

I can only add my agreement and support to what the Minister has said regarding the conflict in Sudan being a human catastrophe which risks wider stability in the region, and that Ireland will continue to work to keep Sudan on the international agenda. That is certainly welcome. However, I specifically ask the Minister to ensure the Department will do all it can to protect Christians of Sudan, who are undergoing a living nightmare. Christians are the most persecuted believers in the world. In addition to the report published by Aid to the Church in Need, data from the Pew Research Center has shown that Christians suffered religiously motivated harassment, ranging from verbal abuse to killings, in more countries than ever before, 160 in total, which is a rise of 50 countries since 2012. Not only were Christians experiencing fundamental human rights violations in more countries than any other faith group, the gap between them and the next worst-affected religious group had significantly widened. That is deeply alarming. As I am sure the Minister will agree, perhaps we should have a debate on this specific issue in the near future.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The war in Sudan is the forgotten war. It is just like the conflict; it has slipped from public consciousness. I am really grateful we are doing these statements today as it is something we should be focusing on. The Minister of State has been giving his attention to this and I have spoken to him about it. I am very happy he has been addressing it in the way he can but this is one of the worst humanitarian disasters occurring at the moment, in line with the genocide in Palestine. A total of 13 million people have been displaced, 25 million people are facing hunger and famine and 4 million children are malnourished. I welcome that the Minister of State's Department is looking at this and I look forward to him addressing this afterwards but the genocide is visible from space. Satellite images show entire communities erased, villages burned, blackened earth where families once lived and developed and communities once stood. The ethnic cleansing of local populations is systematic, and we are seeing this across the globe.

We must confront the truth of what is fuelling this horror. External actors are driving this conflict. Such conflicts have been massively expanded through weapons, funding and logistics funnelled from outside states. These interventions are about influence and obtaining critical mineral resources, including gold. Where foreign governments arm militias, civilians always pay the price. Ireland may be small but our voice, values and political strength are how we show our humanitarian leadership. I welcome that the Minister of State has been addressing this in his travels around the globe and I thank him for that. Sudan cannot be allowed to disappear from global attention. Again, I welcome the fact that we are having statements on Sudan in this House. If the world continues to look away, millions more will suffer. We must keep pushing for a humanitarian ceasefire to end all the suffering. Ireland must keep speaking out, it must keep pushing for Europe to act and it must keep standing with the people of Sudan who are fighting for survival, dignity and peace.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I call on the Minister of State to make his concluding statement which shall not exceed ten minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I will try my best with ten minutes but I might ask for a little bit of latitude from the House, given that we are ahead of schedule. A number of pertinent issues were raised by Deputies and by the Acting Chair that I will try to address. I want to address a couple of points raised by Deputies who are still in the Chamber as I think they merit the response. A lot of what Deputy Boyd Barrett raised stuck with me. I want to provide an element of reassurance on how we approach our work in this region from the Irish Government point of view and from an Irish Aid point of view. We have a development programme that is based on values. We have a development programme that is flexible, local led and is enshrined by our document. There is a shift, quite clearly, at a European level by other member states to move to a far more transactional approach to development, similar to the lines historically and in other ways the Deputy referred to. I want to assure him that Ireland is going to make sure that our development programme maintains a very clear path and, equally, we are going to be a very strong voice within the European Union for a values-based development programme that reaches the furthest behind first and that seeks peace, democracy and local empowerment.

I appreciate that Deputies Heneghan and Shane Moynihan have regularly raised this issue, particularly in oral parliamentary questions, along with Deputy Ó Laoghaire, with whom I had a lengthy debate on this issue this morning. I want to assure the Deputies that the Irish Government will continue to raise this issue at every European and United Nations forum.

I would say to Deputy Nolan that everyone in Sudan is persecuted or is liable to be persecuted at the moment. I note the point the Deputy makes in relation to Christians. I met the Church in Chains organisation in a personal capacity in my parish a couple of Sundays ago and I had a lengthy discussion with its director. I am more than happy to discuss the persecution of any minority in any jurisdiction in this Chamber. If the Deputy would like to put forward a debate on the persecution of Christians, I would be more than happy to provide a full response from a Government point of view. We had a similar debate in the Seanad this morning. Senators Mullen and McCarthy raised it in relation to a very worrying attack on an Irish missionary nun and her congregation in Nigeria two weeks ago. Perhaps the Deputy might consider putting forward a Topical Issue matter or seeking a debate. I thank the Acting Chair for her indulgence.

It has been more than two years since the war in Sudan erupted. We are all agreed that the need for international attention and action is more critical now than ever. I want to thank everyone present for their engagement on this important issue and encourage them all to continue to highlight the plight of the Sudanese people wherever possible in this Chamber, in the other Chamber, at local authority level, within party groupings, within European party collectives and beyond. Our collective commitment as a Parliament is vital in this regard. We cannot let this tragedy fade from the international headlines until yet another massacre like that in El Fasher forces the conflict back onto the agenda or into our timelines.

The humanitarian displacement and protection crisis in Sudan is catastrophic in scale. As has been highlighted here today, the level of suffering is beyond measure and it is difficult to imagine or capture. I will attempt to put it starkly. The number of ordinary people experiencing crisis levels of hunger in Sudan is four times larger than the population of Ireland. Those who

are currently displaced due to the conflict represent more than twice the population of Ireland. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has rightly emphasised that these figures are not just statistics. Behind every number is a person, a family, a community whose lives have been shattered by this war. Many of us represent the Sudanese diaspora in our constituencies and who are living in the horror that it is their family that they are waiting on news from.

I am particularly concerned that women and children are bearing the brunt of this crisis, including 12 million at risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Rape is being used as a weapon of war on a daily basis in Sudan. These numbers and each individual story represent the devastating social and economic costs of conflict, the deliberate targeting of civilians, the obstruction of humanitarian assistance and the constriction of the humanitarian space by the parties to the conflict. They have demonstrated a blatant and outrageous disregard for international human rights and humanitarian norms and obligations. In their blood struggle for power the parties to the conflict have imposed a preventable and man-made crisis on the population. This is a man-made famine. The parties to the conflict are responsible for large-scale attacks on civilians, described by the UN as amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity, as I said, including using starvation and sexual and gender-based violence as weapons of war.

We cannot omit the significant role that external actors have played, including in the provision of military and other forms of support to the parties in the conflict, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire and I discussed this morning. I have heard the views of the Deputies in this debate and this morning very clearly. The actions of other states have prolonged the conflict and have fuelled further violence. Too many states are providing arms to the parties and sponsoring fighters from outside Sudan. We will continue to make clear in our multilateral and bilateral engagements that external interference must end and that every available diplomatic lever is utilised to bring the parties to the negotiating table with a view to ending this devastating conflict.

The world in which we find ourselves today is growing ever more complex, more fraught and at times more fragile. Around the globe we are witnessing an increasing number of conflicts, yet, despite this difficult landscape, Ireland remains steadfast in its commitment to addressing the world's most pressing issues through a strong multilateral system and a rules-based international order. Our approach is people-centred, with a firm commitment to human rights and humanitarian assistance for those most in need. To this end, in June, I signed a joint statement by 30 donor countries condemning attacks against civilians and humanitarian workers. I also joined an Australia-led declaration for the protection of humanitarian workers at the UN General Assembly in New York, where I signed it last September. We will uphold these core values and continue to pursue a multilateral approach.

To this end, Ireland will continue to call for greater attention on the conflict in Sudan, ensuring it remains on the international agenda; continue to leverage multilateral bilateral forums, particularly at the EU and the UN, to highlight the urgent humanitarian protection crisis; provide ongoing support to accountability mechanisms for international human rights and humanitarian abuses and violations; continue to provide funding for humanitarian assistance in response to the Sudan crisis - we will increase our funding in 2026; support de-escalation and mediation efforts together with our EU partners, ensuring there is substantive engagement and co-ordination between the various international regional and state actors

involved; and advocate for a political process that is inclusive and civilian-led and support efforts such as by the African Union that encourage civilian engagement and dialogue.

While I welcome efforts by the international community to bring pressure to bear on the parties to engage in dialogue and agree to a cessation of hostilities, it is equally critical that we address these immediate and urgent priorities, regardless of the progression of these mediation efforts. Therefore, Ireland will continue to engage with our EU partners on the effective implementation of the humanitarian aspects of the Council's conclusions.

Accountability and justice remain core tenets of our support. We will continue to offer our unwavering support for international accountability mechanisms, such as the fact-finding mission and the International Criminal Court. We will continue to actively engage with the UN Human Rights Council on this issue. This includes supporting all efforts to thoroughly document, investigate and effectively address these grave concerns. Considering the scale of atrocities committed and the environment of impunity, it is vital that perpetrators are ultimately held accountable and brought to justice.

In a world where conflict and displacement are a daily reality for millions of people, and at a time when official development assistance is being reduced globally, I am proud that Ireland continues to increase its investment in development and humanitarian assistance. Even in such trying times, there are always opportunities to save lives and reach the furthest behind first. Our humanitarian funding is flexible and predictable, enabling partners to respond quickly to sudden and evolving needs. In 2026, we are committed to maintaining a needs-based approach with a focus on the most severe and forgotten crises, and we are firmly committed to increasing our funding to Sudan.

The international community must do more to exert greater pressure on the parties to return to the negotiating table and to engage in dialogue. Crucially, there must be substantive political engagement and co-ordination between the EU, the AU and the Quad and other international and national actors on de-escalation and mediation efforts.

In terms of the peace process, we cannot allow the exclusion of the Sudanese people to occur. When the fighting ends, it is often women who step forward to reconcile, to organise and to restore hope. Civil society actors and local humanitarian workers are vital throughout all stages of conflict, before, during and after. Recognising this, Ireland will continue to call for any negotiated political settlement to be permanent, peaceful, inclusive, civilian-led and one which respects the territorial integrity and unity of Sudan. Looking to the longer term, we will stand ready to support the Sudanese people in their post-conflict recovery. There will be immense humanitarian and development needs. Fragile state institutions will need to be created and strengthened and the nation's economy and infrastructure rebuilt. Crucially, the social fabric must be repaired and a process of reconciliation initiated. This will be difficult, but it is essential. Sustainable peace depends on these efforts.

In conclusion, Ireland remains steadfast in its commitment to keeping this crisis on the international agenda and urging immediate meaningful action from all regional and international partners and actors. We remain sharply focused on our immediate priorities. Civilians must be protected, with urgent attention paid to safe passage for those fleeing violence and to the protection of women and girls, who remain at grave risk of sexual and gender-based violence. The protection of front-line humanitarian actors and local responders must be

guaranteed in line with international law. This year is the most dangerous year in history for humanitarian workers. Between this conflict and the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, more humanitarian workers have been killed than ever before. It is not acceptable and we, the global community, must intensify our diplomatic and humanitarian efforts to bring these conflicts to an end, but also to protect humanitarian workers. I sincerely thank the Chamber for the range of Members' contributions this afternoon and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for her latitude.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): That concludes statements on Sudan. I thank the Deputies and the Minister.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): The Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 34.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss punctuality issues on the 304A bus service in Limerick city.

Deputy Keira Keogh - To discuss establishing an NCT centre in Erris, County Mayo.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack of school places in Scoil Mhuire, Allenwood, County Kildare.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the lack of respite beds available 24-7 to families of children and-or adults with special needs in County Kerry.

Deputy John Lahart - To discuss the need to strengthen taxi legislation and regulation.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss funding for Deansrath Family Centre to build an early childhood and family centre.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss overcapacity and reliability issues on the E1 and E2 bus routes operated by Dublin Bus.

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

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss supports for HSE workers with long Covid.

Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Martin Kenny - To discuss the limits of carer's allowance for carers resident in the North of Ireland caring for residents of the Republic of Ireland.

The matters raised by Deputies Louis O'Hara, Mark Wall, Paul Nicholas Gogarty, John Lahart and Louise O'Reilly and Martin Kenny have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Heritage Sites

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Dungaíre Castle is an iconic cultural and heritage landmark in Kinvara on the Wild Atlantic Way. However, it remains closed off to the public and stuck in limbo. The castle was a real asset and a significant benefit to the community. Its continued closure is a real missed opportunity for the village of Kinvara and the region as a whole. The castle is on the edge of the village, within walking distance from it. Its closure is most definitely impacting on footfall in Kinvara. Throughout the summer months, and even today, we have busloads of tourists driving past the site and they can stop and take photos but that is it. They cannot enter. In the past there were tours, banquets, performances and so on. It really enhanced the tourism offering of the local area and provided a lot of employment.

The fact is that Galway County Council is willing to take ownership of this castle from the Shannon Group, and wants to do so, but requires significant funding to bring the castle up to a safe standard. The council has gone to the Government with a request for the necessary funding but so far it has been turned down. There have been rubbish excuses from Government about there being no specific funding stream available from any of the Departments. The reality is that when Clare and Limerick county councils were acquiring sites from the Shannon Group, they received significant support from Government. In the case of Clare County Council, it received €6 million. Why then are the people of Kinvara and County Galway being treated as second-class citizens in this regard? Why is one of our most cherished heritage assets being left to crumble? Providing the funding to Galway County Council is not an expense; it would be an investment in Kinvara - in local jobs and businesses, tourism and preservation of a heritage site. Can the Minister of State give a commitment today that the necessary funding to reopen Dungaíre Castle will be provided to Galway County Council?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Deputy for his question and the discussion we are going to have on a much-loved and treasured architectural building in his own county of Galway.

In 2020, the Shannon Airport Group informed Government that it was necessary to consider a comprehensive readjustment to its structure in order to ensure the long-term future of the Shannon Heritage business. A number of challenges had presented themselves, including a lack of capital investment and the essential expertise required to maintain the heritage sites. As a consequence of these challenges, the Shannon Airport Group engaged extensively with the relevant local authorities on the transfer of its heritage sites. For instance, King John's Castle was successfully transferred to Limerick City and County Council in April 2022 and the Shannon Heritage business and four sites in County Clare transferred to Clare County Council in May 2023.

Dungaíre Castle is now the only remaining site under the ownership of the Shannon Airport Group, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, understands that Galway Country Council has had

engagement with the group in relation to a possible transfer of the castle. A funding request was received by the National Monuments Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage from Galway County Council in November 2024 in relation to the castle, wherein the local authority sought funding to acquire the castle. The National Monuments Service wrote to the CEO of Galway County Council in December 2024, advising that a voted funding stream to facilitate the purchase of heritage sites by local authorities is not available. The National Monuments Service offered to meet with relevant officials from the local authority to explore options that might be available to secure funding to acquire the castle. However, this offer has not yet been availed of.

As Members may be aware, the Department funds a range of relevant grant schemes intended to support local authorities and other owners in respect of the repair and conservation of archaeological and built heritage sites. Where the structures concerned are protected or within a designated architectural conservation area, the built heritage investment scheme and the historic structures fund can provide support for repair and conservation works. The built heritage investment scheme provides grants of between €2,500 and €50,000, while the historic structures fund offers funding of between €50,000 and €200,000 for works on larger scale projects. Where the structure in question is an archaeological monument, the community monuments fund can provide grants of up to €100,000 for conservation works, where eligible. In 2025, the community monuments fund awarded 122 projects a total of €7.5 million in funding.

The community monuments fund supports a range of initiatives to conserve, maintain, protect and promote local monuments and historic sites. Such investment benefits communities and the public by future-proofing and safeguarding monuments through the funding of conservation works and repairs, building resilience by protecting monuments from the effects of extreme weather and climate change, in addition to supporting public access to monuments and improvements in the presentation of local monuments. These grants help owners and custodians of archaeological monuments and built heritage assets alike to safeguard them into the future. Over the past number of years, these conservation schemes have allocated in excess of €50 million for works to archaeological monuments, historic buildings and public realm schemes. This is a testament to the dedication and hard work of all involved, including local authorities, community groups, private owners, the professional heritage sector and officials in the Department to ensure the ongoing protection, conservation and maintenance of our heritage sites for the continued enjoyment of generations to come.

In addition to the conservation schemes described above, local authorities seeking funding should, depending on the exact circumstances of the structures and buildings in question, engage with the urban regeneration and development fund, the rural regeneration and development fund, the LEADER and Thrive programmes, and Údarás na Gaeltachta funding schemes.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I cannot emphasise enough that this castle is an iconic cultural and heritage landmark and it cannot be left closed any longer. The Government has to recognise the importance of this site to the local community in terms of heritage, tourism and employment. When the Minister of State talks about grant schemes in the region of €50,000, €100,000 or €200,000, those are going to come nowhere near meeting the cost of what is required. The Minister of State's response is not based in reality. She said there was no voted

funding stream available from the Department. That is absolute rubbish. The Government can get these things done if it wants to. That is the reality and people know it. The Minister of State's response is very disappointing.

Representatives of Galway County Council will meet the Department in the coming weeks. They have a specific request for €5 million. They have put together a strong business case. The ball is in the Government's court. It needs to step up to the plate. This is a huge blow to Kinvara. It is very damaging to our tourism reputation locally.

The question that people in Kinvara and across County Galway have is why funding can be made available to other local authorities to allow them to take control of the Shannon group's heritage assets but not to Galway County Council. It is absolutely outrageous. Our local authority is totally underfunded as it is. This is a further insult to the people of County Galway.

People in Kinvara feel neglected in the context of the castle. They have been waiting for years for road safety improvements, including very basic things such as pedestrian crossings. There is very little housing and the local school needs improved facilities. The boardwalk has been held up for a very long time. Our Government needs to start delivering for Kinvara. I ask the Government and the Minister of State to stop the excuses and deflection and to give Galway County Council the capital funding it requires to bring Dunguaire Castle back into use.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. As noted by the Government in its decision of January 2021, the Shannon Airport Group operated Shannon Heritage on a commercial basis, in line with its commercial mandate, meaning that sites were only likely to open on a seasonal basis and where a commercial business case existed. Dunguaire Castle was operated by Clare County Council on a goodwill basis for the summer 2023 season. The group has advised that, given its commercial mandate, it was not feasible to reopen the castle in subsequent seasons.

As discussed today, a wider range of supports is available to assist and support local authorities and private owners to discharge their responsibilities in respect of archaeology and building heritage sites. Investment in our heritage sites delivers broad public benefits by enhancing the character and amenity within our towns, villages and landscapes, bringing back into use buildings and other assets which currently lie vacant and closed.

On a more human level, I appreciate what the Deputy is saying. I appreciate that he feels the community of Kinvara feels alienated over this particular issue. I will convey the Deputy's thoughts and views to the Minister, Deputy James Browne.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Mark Wall: I want to talk about the village of Allenwood, which is in my constituency in County Kildare. It is a beautiful village, not far from Naas, Clane and Rathangan. It is right in the middle of the county. It is a country village, or perhaps I should say that it was a village in 1991, when 303 people were living in it. The latest census, taken in 2022, showed 1,685 people living in the village of Allenwood.

The reason I have raised this Topical Issue is to talk to the Minister of State about Scoil Mhuire Allenwood, an amalgamation of two primary school schools, that opened in 2017. The

census taken in 2022 told us there were 142 children in the village of Allenwood between the ages of zero and four. The problem we have with Scoil Mhuire Allenwood is that there are 42 applicants for a school place in September next year but only 28 places available. Unfortunately, that leaves a deficit for a number of families. We have spoken previously about the stress that many of those families are under. Many of them also have a child - a sibling of the applicant child- already in the school. That is causing distress for parents. Where will their second child go to school?

The school is trying to do everything it can to facilitate new children and to facilitate those who do not have a school place at the moment. It previously put prefabs onto the school grounds. It is using every part of the existing school to accommodate children. There are waiting lists for every class in Scoil Mhuire Allenwood.

The school was granted an extension, which was announced a number of years ago. We have been told lately that the process is at stage 2b. That is where it sits at the moment. That leaves us with a deficit of school places for next September. It leaves us with problems for all those families. At this stage, Scoil Mhuire Allenwood is getting up to 40 applications for primary school places per year. That has been the case for the past four to five years and it has created a problem for the school management. The school management wants to work with the Department of education and the local community to ensure that no child who lives in the Allenwood area is without a school place this coming September.

The school also applied for a prefab to allow it to accommodate those children without a place in September while the new extension is being built or when construction starts. My request is for the Department to allow that prefab to be placed on the grounds. The management will work with that. A prefab would allow those children without a place to have a much-needed place for September while we still wait for the various stages of the new build to go ahead. I ask the Minister of State, on behalf of the Minister for education, to confirm that the Department will allow that prefab to be placed on site to allow those children to have places and to take the stress off working families who do not have that place at the moment and are contacting me and, indeed, every public representative in south Kildare. As the Minister of State knows, the most important thing for children is that they know what school their friends are going to come next September. At the moment, there is too much stress on families in Allenwood and too many families do not have a school place.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It gives me the opportunity to set out for the House the position with regard to school places in Scoil Mhuire Allenwood, County Kildare. The Deputy is aware that Scoil Mhuire Allenwood is a coeducational primary school with a Catholic ethos under the patronage of the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin. The school had an enrolment in September 2025 of 263 pupils. This represents an increase of 7% in the past five years.

I can confirm that Scoil Mhuire Allenwood recently submitted an application for temporary accommodation under my Department's additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme. This application is currently under assessment by the officials in the Department. I know the Deputy wants a concrete answer today, but I can tell him that the application is certainly under consideration.

I am pleased to confirm that the Department approved funding in 2022 to provide three mainstream classrooms, including two replacement classrooms, two special education classrooms and the reconfiguration of four undersized rooms to create two larger mainstream classrooms. This project is currently devolved to the school authority for delivery and approval was given for this ASA project to progress to stage 2b, planning, in November 2024. The Department now awaits a post-planning developed design report from the school for review. The school also received funding in 2022 to purchase a modular classroom to accommodate the 11th mainstream post. In 2024, funding was approved to repurpose a mainstream classroom to accommodate the opening of a special educational needs class, pending delivery of the permanent build project.

Scoil Mhuire Allenwood is located in the Prosperous-Clane school planning area. The Department's projections of primary school place requirements for that area indicate that enrolments at primary level peaked in 2019 and are decreasing, year on year. Given the general downward direction of overall enrolments in the area, the Department's focus for the assessment of such additional accommodation applications will be to analyse the extent to which enrolments at this school and neighbouring schools are serving the local area in the first instance. This will identify if some of the pressures on local capacity are arising from the enrolment of pupils from outside the local area where there may be other school provision opportunities available to them. That is the information I have been provided with. I am sure the Deputy will have more to say.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for the reply, with which I do not agree and with which the school management will not agree. I have talked in the Chamber previously about schools in south Kildare. As we know, it is one of the fastest growing areas in the whole country. Sometimes, I wonder what statistics and census the Department is looking at. I have just told the Minister of State what has happened in Allenwood over the past four to five years. There have been 40 applications for school places each of the past four years. That is the difference when it comes to what is happening in Allenwood where the population has increased to the extent it has. It is not a downward trend; it is an upward one. I am sure the Department is receiving emails, because I have seen it copied on the emails I am getting from stressed parents and the school management. The latter does not know where to turn next because it is also getting the calls from parents who do not know where their children will go to school next September. Will the Minister of State bring my request back to the Minister for Education and Youth? I intend to follow up on this matter again - as I am sure, will every public representative in Kildare - namely that the prefabricated building requested, which the Minister of State said is under consideration, be allocated to Scoil Mhuire in Allenwood. We cannot have the number of children involved not having school places in September.

As stated previously, families meet up with other families whose children have school places. Children are in GAA clubs. There are excellent ones in Allenwood and the surrounding district. The children speak to one another. One child says they are starting in September and the other, as I have stated in this House on other occasions, says they are not. That causes a serious problem for families.

The statistics I have, which were provided by the school management, tell me the school averaged 40 applications for primary school places per year for the past four years. That is not a downward trend. We all welcome the fact that a new school building is on the way, but that

will take a number of years. In light of that, will the Minister of State bring back to the Minister the request to allow the provision of this prefabricated building in order to ensure that those who need school places will have them and that the stress of family life will not come down to the fact there are no school places for many families in the Allenwood area?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am slightly concerned about the difference between the information the Deputy has and the information the Department has, because the figures do not lie. Enrolments are either increasing or decreasing year on year. I do not for one minute question the Deputy's bona fides regarding the information he has brought to the Dáil today, so I ask him to liaise directly. I will reflect what he said today to the Minister for education because the facts are the facts in terms of enrolments. If the facts show that there is an increase in the enrolment and it is not that there is a duplication of applications going into a lot of local schools, that should certainly make a strong case for the school to get the building - the bricks and mortar - it deserves in order to be able to accommodate students and make sure they have school places. We do not want to see parents under the stress of having uncertainty about whether their children will have places in schools.

The Department is aware of enrolment pressures and demand for additional school places in some areas. It is important to note that enrolment pressures can be driven, as I said, by duplication of applications, applications from outside a catchment area and school-of-choice factors. Notwithstanding that, in some areas the demographic pressures and other factors are driving a requirement for additional school places. Major new residential developments - perhaps that is happening in the Deputy's area - have the potential to alter the demand for school places at local level. That can happen quite quickly. In this regard, as part of the demographic demand analysis, the Department monitors planning and construction activity in the residential sector in the local area. This involves the analysis of data sources from local authorities and the Central Statistics Office, alongside engagement with local authorities and the construction sector. In this way, up-to-date information on significant new residential developments is obtained and factored into the analysis that is conducted by the Department. It is necessary to ensure that school infrastructure planning is keeping pace with those changes at local level in circumstances where it is a consistently evolving picture in the context of planned new residential developments.

I appreciate what the Deputy said and will reflect it to the Minister for education.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State.

Family Resource Centres

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Deansrath Family Centre has been serving children and families in Clondalkin and beyond for more than 20 years. It is located in an area of ongoing socioeconomic disadvantage, characterised by high levels of unemployment and poverty, a lot of single-parent households and lower than average levels of education. The centre has evolved over time to cater for these needs and has expanded from solely providing childcare to delivering a range of services under the general headings of prevention and early intervention. It has built up a lot of experience in identifying needs in families early and providing co-ordinated support before problems become more complex. It is the living epitome of the

research done in the Highscope/Perry Preschool Project, which showed that for every €1 invested there is a €7 return. The centre focuses on targeted responses at an early stage and is doing a good job.

Families can access a range of services and supports alongside the early childhood care and education programme, which caters for children, including those with special educational needs. There are parenting programmes, child therapeutic interventions and a range of wraparound supports which ensure that families receive appropriate supports to help to improve outcomes. The centre is not just totting up figures; it is doing something of value and adding value to the community. It has grown substantially over a 20-year period. It is a victim of its own success in one sense. It has consistently adapted its response to the increasing socioeconomic challenges. A greater number of parents have benefited year on year from the centre because of the excellent levels of care it offers and the education, counselling and support that are available for children. The key challenge now is that it has insufficient physical space to accommodate the increased number of families going to the centre, in a single location. It has had to spread out and that involves long walks so it urgently needs adequate premises to extend service provision. Although it does a good job, the service is fragmented.

The centre put in place a plan to enable it to maintain a consistent level of support and increased on-site service provision going forward. South Dublin County Council has provided land for a new centre in the St. Cuthbert's Park area. The park has been separately upgraded by South Dublin County Council. It is a fantastic resource on which to locate such a centre. The centre has been designed to accommodate needs well into the future. At 500 sq m, it would be three times the size of the existing premises and would provide an excellent amount of space to facilitate the delivery of supports and enhance the supports already provided. It would get rid of the need for families and staff to travel to and from other venues. In some cases, these families do not have cars and the bus service is not reliable. It is a long walk. The centre would have additional supports for early years care, family support, staff rooms and a multipurpose recreation and family-focused space. It is a fantastic plan for a one-stop shop of supports. There would be a large early years facility, dedicated rooms, including parent and baby, child and parent, and teenager rooms, therapy rooms, family-staff consultation rooms, family spaces and child cooking facilities and communal areas where families with young children can meet and connect with others. There would be stuff like CoderDojo, an academy space, a staff training room, a parent outdoor space and an outdoor playground.

The centre has written to various Departments looking for funding. That is why I originally put this question to the Department of the Taoiseach. I believe channels of funding may be available through various Departments, but there is no one-size-fits-all scenario. The centre has not been able to get access to someone who will tell the centre how to get the various channels together to provide the funds for the centre. Is the Minister of State in a position to identify credible channels of funding today?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am familiar with the family resource centres the Deputy spoke about in my constituency. They are a valuable gem in any community. They take a holistic approach. They think of every demographic in a family and are a huge resource to have in an area.

The building blocks extension grant scheme was launched in late 2024, and successful applicants are working with the Department in delivering their projects. An application for funding under the scheme was received from Deansrath Family Centre and subsequently that application was deemed ineligible on the basis that the proposed project did not fall within the scope of the building blocks construction strand, due to the value of the project being significantly in excess of the allowed maximum.

As announced in the context of budget 2026, €36 million will be available next year for early learning and childcare capital programmes. This will include acquisitions of new buildings through the State-led early learning and childcare programme, investment in expansion of existing early learning and childcare operators through the building blocks scheme and a number of quality initiatives, including supports for childminders. The Department is currently examining options for future building blocks schemes and the Minister expects to announce details of that in early 2026. The family resource centre programme is a community development programme that is financially supported by many State agencies in a partnership approach. The programme for Government commits to increasing funding and expanding the capacity and network of family resource centres over the Government's term, given the important role these centres play in local communities.

Recent developments in respect of the family resource centre programme include the Department's securing of additional funding of €800,000 in budget 2025, to allow for an expansion of the programme from 121 members to 126. In this context, we have recently welcomed five new members to the programme. Additionally, neither the Department or Tusla currently have capital funding to support the building of new or refurbishment or extension of existing family resource centres. Tusla does not have a dedicated budget for capital or building works for third-party organisations, such as family resource centres. This is the situation where these third-party organisations are members of the national family resource centre programme, or an organisation, such as Deansrath Family Resource Centre, which is not a programme member and separately funded. I hope that answers the Deputy's question in some way. It may not be favourable, but it in some way answers it.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is partially answered but the Departments still does not have the big picture because those behind the centre need funding to build a model of excellence in what will be a first of its kind family and early childhood centre. It will be the first whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families, which is in the State's long-term programme. So far, their vision has been enabled through the land disposal agreement with South Dublin County Council, a bequest of €200,000 from a deceased chairperson of the board of management and some fundraising, including support by the architect who continued to work *pro bono* to secure the planning permission, which has been secured. It is a fantastic plan but it only remains a plan until funding is provided.

Page 147 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030 states that a funding route needs to be found for building like this, which epitomises the first five early childhood and family centres. The build cost was estimated at €4 million last year. They have been able to indicate that they would get some funding. They were informed that the building block strand 2 extension fund has a maximum grant of €650,000 for an individual organisation. That leaves a huge deficit. The services at Deansrath are resourced through service level agreements largely with Tusla, but also through the HSE and Pobal early years funding. The services are

spread across quite a number of buildings. They need to find out where they can get that several million euro. While applying to one channel is welcome, I would like the Minister of State to pass on her colleagues the need to create a pathway because there are similar groups around the country who have similar problems. Can the Government identify a pathway where they can apply for the funding through various Departments and channels because of the multifaceted aspect of the work? They are coming up against a brick wall. They need help from Government sources. I would appreciate if they could get that.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: In my limited knowledge on the funding streams that are available to the centres I know in my constituency, the model is that there is a maximum of what the Department can fund towards it. Any of the projects I am aware of they have had to source other funds. In the Border region, we have had the opportunity to source PEACE and local authority funding. There has always been a jigsaw approach to it to have that overall figure that the Deputy referenced. Was it €4 million?

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: That was last year. It has probably gone up slightly.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I appreciate the request for a pathway to be put in place whereby other agencies can contribute to the overall cost. The Deputy can be sure I will reflect that to the Minister. I thank him again for raising this important issue. It is a priority for the Minister and the Government. The programme for Government commits for the first time to providing capital investment to build and purchase State-owned early learning and childcare facilities to create additional capacity in areas where unmet needs exist. State ownership of facilities is a substantial and significant development and offers the potential for much greater scope to influence the nature and volume of provision available and to ensure better alignments with estimated demand. This work will be supported through our capital investment under the revised national development plan. As part of the recent NDP review, published in July this year, the allocation for the Department has increased to €795 million over the next five years. This increased funding will be used in part to provide additional early learning and childcare places through future capital programmes, including potentially operating a further scheme similar to building blocks to support the expansion of provision by existing operators as well as implementing the commitment to capital investment in State-owned facilities. Once details of the future capital schemes are finalised, the Minister will communicate them with the sector. I will reflect the Deputy's request in finding that multiagency approach to funding projects at the scale he referenced.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Will the Minister of State ask the Minister to try to give me a written response on that?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I will, of course.

Taxi Regulations

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for her presence. I raised this issue with the Minister for Transport last night. I understand that at short notice he cannot be here, but I

would be very much obliged if the Minister of State can convey the importance of this issue, which I know he is aware of. There is going to be industrial action by taxi drivers or as close as they can get to it today either outside at Merrion Square and at the airport on an issue they feel strongly about. I support them on this. I hate to see Dublin city disrupted. I hate to see people who are going about their work, trying to their travel and get home after a busy day disrupted in this way. It is a pity that it has had to escalate this quickly without them being met. The issue is a just issue.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, reviews fares for taxis every two years roughly. Those fares are reviewed and a new fare is brought up relating to the type of car, the cost of the car and those kinds of issues. The NTA arrives at a figure and the taxi meter is recalibrated accordingly. The taxi drivers pay a fee for that. I welcome the apps we all have access to now, including Freenow and Uber, particularly in cities and urban areas. They provide security, a certain amount of predictability and certainty, identification for the drivers and security for vulnerable users and women, especially younger women passengers. They know who their driver is. There is a record kept of the journey. Freenow guesstimates a fare. A person orders a taxi. If he or she wants to go from Rathfarnham to Leinster House, Freenow offers them a guesstimate of how much that will cost, which is useful because passengers the know roughly how much it will cost. They also know that if there is congestion or something like that it is going to cost more than that. Uber wants to move to an accurate fee. If I order a taxi from Knocklyon to Croke Park, it will outline a fare and come what may, it wants me to pay that fare. It means that if the taxi is delayed in traffic or if there are some other circumstances that cause a delay, the taxi driver is not getting paid for that. They want to dictate the fare and circumvent the existing agreement that has been arrived at between the NTA and taxi drivers.

At the moment, Freenow has a taxi saver. If I order a taxi, I pay a €3 fee between the time of ordering and the time it takes for the taxi to come to my house. That into account the distance the taxi driver has to travel to arrive. I may cancel. There is time and fuel used. Through this app, the taxi driver gets €3 before the pick-up. However, now the customer can choose not to pay the €3 fee. They can choose a discount to discount the fare by that €3. This is not part of the deal that was negotiated between the NTA and taxi drivers. We can give out sometimes about the cost of them but we all know traditionally that a taxi fare is about time, distance and pick-up cost. What the taxi drivers are justifiably exercised about is that the new system was introduced, if it can be called a system, without the agreement of taxi drivers. It has caused widespread anger within the industry. Taxi drivers feel that is a kind of divide and rule approach. Under this model, Uber pays the lower of the metered fare or the company's preset fixed price. This means that if there are delays, diversions or traffic issues, the driver loses income even though the meter reflects the legally regulated fare. That is the bones of it.

5 o'clock

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputy Lahart for raising this important issue and will certainly reflect his observations to the Minister for Transport. The Deputy will be aware that neither the Minister for Transport nor his Department are involved in the day-to-day operation of the small public service vehicle, SPSV, sector. The National Transport Authority, NTA, the independent transport regulator, has responsibility for setting taxi fares under the provisions of the consolidated Taxi Regulation Acts 2013 and 2016.

On 3 November 2025, Uber Ireland introduced a new option on its platform providing its customers with a single maximum price for a trip before requesting a taxi. This option is referred to on the platform as a "tax fixed price". Usually, when booking a taxi with Uber or other dispatch operators a price range of the approximate cost of the journey is shown, but the Minister understands that with the Uber taxi fixed price option, the customer is now provided with a maximum guaranteed price upfront. If the final price on the taxi meter is less than the initial maximum price provided, users pay the lower price on the meter. If the final price on the taxi meter is greater than the maximum price, users pay the maximum price.

From a legislative perspective, section 24 of the consolidated Taxi Regulation Acts 2013 and 2016 empowers the NTA board to make a maximum fares order fixing the maximum fare that may be charged by the driver of a taxi for any journey. The current maximum fares order took effect in December 2024 and a maximum fare review is carried out approximately every two years. The NTA has conducted these reviews since 2011. Hackneys and limousines agree their fares in advance and do not use a meter. The NTA's most recent fare review was undertaken between November 2023 and March 2024. During this review, the NTA took account of the most significant economic issues that were relevant to the SPSV sector, which included inflation, the cost of living, fuel prices, energy supply, geopolitical uncertainty and increased public transport availability. Following this review and a public consultation on the matter, the NTA introduced the Taxi Regulation (Maximum Fares) Order 2024, which increased taxi fares by an average of 9%. This came into operation on 1 December 2024 and ensures that taxi fares continue to reflect the rising costs associated with operating a taxi in Ireland. This increase includes a special rate for the weekend peak from 12 midnight to 4 a.m. on Friday night into Saturday morning and Saturday night into Sunday morning, year round, to incentivise more drivers to service the night-time economy. This followed on from the 2022 order in which a 12% increase on fares was introduced.

As set out in the legislation, charging more than this maximum fare can lead to a prosecution. However, charging below the maximum fare is permitted. The Minister understands that the Uber fixed price offer does not breach the maximum fare regulatory provisions for taxis or constitute an offence associated with the misuse of taxi meters. SPSV operators are self-employed and may decide whether to sign up with a licensed dispatch operator such as Uber. They are not obliged to be affiliated with any dispatch operator but, where they choose to do so, taxi drivers are free to contract with a dispatch operator of their choice. Unfortunately, neither the Minister nor the NTA is a party to the commercial or contractual arrangements between SPSV drivers and their dispatch operators. Accordingly, the Department and the NTA have no role in the approval of such matters.

Deputy John Lahart: The piece of the reply that the Minister of State did not reach states that the Minister for Transport issued a letter to the NTA on 19 November last asking it to clarify the regulatory position on the Uber fixed price fare for the information of taxi operators and public representatives alike. We await that clarification because the taxi drivers who have been in touch with me and with colleagues across the House and who have come to my clinics do not recognise the part of the reply which asserts that there is a maximum price that cannot be exceeded. Their interpretation of this is that if a price of €23 for a journey is sent through the app as a guesstimate, that is what the customer will pay, even if the journey is delayed or diverted, resulting in an increase in the fare. In other words, the taxi driver cannot claim that

but the answer the Minister of State has given seems to suggest the opposite. However, it is only referring to Uber. It is not referring to Freenow, for example, another app that is very widely used.

The NTA needs to move very quickly. Another part of the ministerial response states, with reference to the Uber taxi fixed price option, that the Minister understands that the customer is now provided with a maximum guaranteed price upfront. That seems to be the case with one of the apps and while obviously I am in favour of value for money for customers, taxi drivers also need to make a living. Customers are guaranteed a maximum price upfront, and that is fine, but as taxi drivers point out, it does not take into account delays in the journey or other issues.

The Minister is very clear in his reply that neither he nor the NTA is a party to the commercial or contractual arrangements but it is impossible for a taxi driver in Dublin to avoid using the apps now. Otherwise, they will just disappear as taxi drivers, so perhaps the NTA needs to get involved in that. The big piece that is exercising taxi drivers is that this was not negotiated. This has been foisted on them. That is why they are going to be outside the gates at 4.30 p.m. and blocking Dublin Airport as well, creating a bit of a fuss to bring this to the attention of the public.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: As I said, I will certainly bring the Deputy's views to the Minister. As Deputy Lahart quite rightly said, the Minister issued a letter on 19 November to the NTA and we await its response. He also met this morning with the advisory committee on SPSVs, whose role is to provide advice to the Minister and the NTA in relation to issues relevant to SPSVs and their drivers, where the matter was discussed. I have no doubt that meeting will have given the Minister cause for concern and perhaps fuller engagement on the issue is needed to see if it can be resolved.

Social Welfare Payments

Deputy Martin Kenny: Deputy Smyth is a representative of a Border constituency, the same as I am, so she will very much understand this particular issue. A constituent of mine called Majella contacted me. She was born in Leitrim and lived there practically all of her life. She started her career working in the health services. Then she married a man from Fermanagh and moved six miles up the road. She continued to cross the Border every day to work and worked all her life. Now her mother has become ill towards the end of her life and needs care. Majella got carer's benefit based on the stamps she had accumulated during her working life. However, after 104 weeks she was told to apply for the carer's allowance, which is not stamps based but assessed. When she applied she was refused because of the habitual residency condition as she does not live within the State. This is very unfair. It is an anomaly that comes up for a tiny number of people in certain circumstances who are living in the Border area. People in these circumstances are not travelling 50 or 100 miles to care for somebody. It is only people in a small corridor that this would affect. In that context, resolving this issue would not result in a big cost to the State. This needs to happen as quickly as possible.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I agree with my party colleague that given the Minister of State's position as a representative of a Border county, she will be more familiar with this issue than

some in the House. Not that one would guess it from listening to me, but I also grew up in a Border town and I know that people who live along the Border do not recognise it in the same way as those who live elsewhere because they go back and forth across the Border all of the time.

In response to a parliamentary question, I was told that there are only three people resident in the North who are in receipt of carer's benefit at this point. We are not talking about massive numbers here. There are no floodgates opening or anything like that coming down the line. This is also about the fact that the people taking on caring responsibilities are saving the State an absolute fortune. This woman is caring for her mother and then going home to where she lives, which is only up the road.

I am interested in hearing what the Department is prepared to do about this. In our view, it is amenable to resolution by statutory instrument. I ask the Minister of State to request this of the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, who is aware of this issue. As I understand it, there is no hostility towards resolving it; the question is whether we can. As it stands, people who have worked all of their lives and paid stamps are now falling foul of the habitual residency rule. It is very simple. For the purposes of habitual residency, the island should be regarded as one. I am not trying to make a massively political point but it would make sense to regard the island as one. However, there is also a need to resolve these individual cases as well as getting the resolution for us into the future.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputies. I am delighted, as Deputies Kenny and O'Reilly are, that when we live in a Border county like Monaghan and Cavan, we can cross over the jurisdiction. That invisible crossing happens many times. A person could be living 1 mile up the road and be in a different jurisdiction. Deputy Kenny was quite right when he said carers are never going to be living a million miles away from the person they are caring for. I would imagine it could be easily managed. I take the point. I understand the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is very familiar with this and is open and compassionate about the issue. He will certainly be open to trying to resolve this.

I thank both Deputies for raising this important issue. The Government acknowledges the vital role that family carers play in Irish society - that goes without saying - and remains fully committed to supporting them in the role they do. This commitment is reflected both in the programme for Government and in the recent budget, and the Department of Social Protection provides a comprehensive range of income supports for family carers. In 2026, spending on these supports is expected to exceed €2.2 billion, with almost 104,000 carers currently receiving carer's allowance payment.

Carer's allowance is the main scheme through which the Department provides income support to carers in the community. There is no money that would pay them enough for the work that they do. It is so valuable. The allowance only acknowledges, in some small way, how valued they are. It is a means-tested social assistance payment for people on low incomes who are providing full-time care to someone who requires ongoing support due to age, disability or illness. The person being cared for must require full-time care and attention. As part of budget 2026, we are increasing the income disregard for a single person to €1,000 per week and for a couple to €2,000 per week. These are the largest ever increases to the carer's

allowance income disregard and will mean that even households with relatively high incomes will qualify for a carer's payment for the first time.

Like all social assistance schemes provided by the Department of Social Protection, carer's allowance is subject to a habitual residency requirement, which requires the carer to have habitual residence in the Irish State. Where a carer resides in Northern Ireland, they cannot qualify for the carer's allowance because they do not meet that particular condition or tick that box. Carers residing in the North of Ireland may be eligible for the non-means-tested carer's allowance payment but in the particular case Deputy Kenny quite rightly mentioned, the carer has already exceeded that. This scheme is payable to carers over 16 who are providing full-time care of at least 35 hours per week to someone who is in need of care and is in receipt of a specified payment.

To answer the Deputy's question as directly as I can, he has referred to a very specific case. Deputy O'Reilly has a given very low number in terms of the number of people it affects. As I said, my understanding is that the Minister is open to providing a way to give that allowance and to seeking a resolution to this. I will reflect the case study the Deputy has presented here and ask the Minister to consider it further.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister of State. I am aware of all of these circumstances. Yes, there is a payment in the North but the person who is living in the North and can apply for the carer's benefit in the North has to be caring for a person in that jurisdiction.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: It is the same problem.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The fact that they live in two different jurisdictions, although they are only a couple of miles apart, is what gives rise to this peculiarity. This is a carer's case. There are other similar cases where habitual residency comes into play which may affect people's pensions and things like that on both sides of the Border. These are small numbers. We are talking about dozens of people in total. It is something that should be looked at across the whole social welfare code to see if a number of small statutory instruments or amendments can be put in to deal with these circumstances and to sort them out for the people involved. As I say, they are very small numbers. We are talking about people who have, generally, paid into the State because they have been working on this side of the Border. As we know, many people live in the South and work in the North, or live in the North and work in the South. It happens all the time up and down across the Border region. Sometimes, people have two jobs - one in the North and one in the South. It depends on those circumstances. In all of those situations, all we need to do is put something into the regulation that takes care of the problem we have and deals with it efficiently and effectively. This can be done very speedily. I ask the Minister to look at it between now and Christmas and come up with something to resolve the situation before the new year. Go raibh maith agaibh.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Very briefly, to echo the sentiment expressed by my colleague, this impacts a number of social welfare payments but in real life the numbers are tiny. I sent in a parliamentary question about it. I did not expect the numbers would be big. I did not think they would be as low as three but that is where we are at. We are not talking about big numbers but these people are paying into a system. If this cannot be facilitated, then the mother does

not get to be cared for by her daughter, which is her choice, and then someone is going to have to care for her. At the end of the day, a bill is coming one way or the other. It strikes me that the person themselves, the elderly person in this instance, has a right to choose their carer. The carer is available and the only crime that anyone has committed is living 3 miles or 4 miles up the road.

Deputy Martin Kenny: She married the wrong man-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am not getting into that.

Deputy Martin Kenny: -----on the wrong side of the Border.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: She married a Fermanagh man now so that is where she is at. In all seriousness, it is something that will not take the Minister a long time. These are cases that are very real and very live now so I would appreciate if, when Deputy Smyth brings this back to the Minister, she could emphasise that we are talking about small numbers, statutory instruments, co-operation from the Opposition and possibly getting this resolved by Christmas if we could.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I will not commit to it being resolved by Christmas but as we all work and strive towards a united Ireland, this is a very pragmatic request and we should take a very pragmatic approach to it. As I said, I will certainly reflect the views of the Deputies, the particular instances they have outlined today and the facts they have to back them up regarding the small numbers in question that we have to address. Going back to Deputy Kenny's point, we need to look at this broadly in terms of social protection. There are probably a number of payments that are affecting a very small number of people. As we work towards that united Ireland, we should certainly look at this in a pragmatic way.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputies.

Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Brian Stanley: On a point of order, where are the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, and the Minister for the environment, Deputy O'Brien? Neither of them is in the Chamber. That is no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, who is here and is fielding a lot of issues. It is disrespectful to the Chamber that neither Minister is here for an issue as important as this, but that is where we are at. I wanted to express that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I ask the Deputy to move the Bill.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time".

The absence of guidelines or regulations for wind turbines is absolutely scandalous. We have been relying on outdated guidelines from 2006 for over a decade and a half. The Bill is about

putting a proper planning framework in place. It is not about stopping the utilisation of wind but having wind turbines in the right place and at the right scale. Four governments have come and gone. We are on government No. 5 and no action has been taken. We have had paralysis by the Government on this issue for over a decade and a half. This is what Micheál Martin said on the matter in the Dáil in 2013:

There is a fundamental absence of transparency governing these developments. There is an absence of consultation with local residents and communities. [He said this was a scandal] Above all, there is an absence of a legislative framework to deal with the step change in technology and scale of development.

He cited concerns about the health impacts of shadow flicker, noise, and so on. I could keep quoting from his speech from that day, but that is what he said. The replies I am getting here for 13 years are the very same. The most recent one I got from the Minister stated that his "Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines", which is looking at a number of key issues including the noise aspect of the guidelines, which is highly technical in nature. That is the same reply I have been getting for the last 12 years.

Meanwhile, these giant turbines have sprung up all over the country, particularly in the midlands and especially in Laois and Offaly. They cover huge tracts of land and their scale has massively increased since the 2006 guidelines were put in place. At that stage, turbines were 30 m or 35 m in height but they are now multiples of that and reach 185 m in height. Some are located only metres from rural homes. They are mainly owned and directed by large foreign investment funds, which are riding roughshod over local communities. Where they meet opposition, they will often bribe or try to bribe a section of the community and use their clout to browbeat the remainder of the community. They are taking advantage of the absence of regulations or even guidelines. They behave as if it is the gold rush and grab the opportunity. Of course they are going to do that.

This is a huge problem for rural communities. I mentioned Laois and Offaly in particular. At the moment, a huge number of wind turbines are planned right across the area of the south Laois-Kilkenny border. These turbines can be put up in close proximity. People have to put up with the noise, shadow flicker and the sterilisation of surrounding lands. Once the wind turbines are erected, even on their own land a son or daughter cannot get planning permission to build on the family farm because of the proximity of the turbines.

Along with inaction from the Department and the Department of local government, all three of the largest parties have sat on their hands. While the Government has been in a state of paralysis, the largest Opposition party has not moved on it either. When I tried to introduce a similar Bill nearly five years ago, time was allocated on a Wednesday, but it was stopped at that time by the leader of that party. I hope Sinn Féin is able to do better than that today. I hope they can support this Bill. I was told at the time that it was due to the fear of media reaction. It is the people who elect us, not the media and they are who we need to represent.

The Irish Wind Energy Association, which represents wealthy investors, has done an excellent job. The association is regularly in and out of these buildings. The propaganda is all persuasive until we dig deeper. A lot of people seem to be taken in by it. Planning is a balance.

As I said at the outset, this is not about stopping it; it is about having a balance in the planning system which is not there at the moment.

Many constituents have asked me who exactly is in charge. That is an interesting question. Wind energy is important, but we must use it along with other renewable sources. The Government has focused almost exclusively on wind. While it is a good source of clean energy, it is intermittent. That can lead to surges on the grid when there is plenty of wind and turbines have to be shut down. More than 10% of electricity is unused but it has to be paid for and the cost amounts to billions. If we look at the figures for what has been paid over the last five years, it was €263 million in 2021 and last year it was €251 million. It is a sizeable amount of money that is being paid out.

Little effort has been made to develop solar, anaerobic digestion, hydro, hydrogen, or offshore energy. They are only in their infancy, and some have not even started. Regulation for solar energy is being drafted and while that needs to be done, what is happening in terms of wind turbines? At times we were told that the delay in the guidelines or regulations is due to difficulty sorting out the appropriate level of noise to be allowed, but it has been a full decade and a half.

In terms of Ministers, I remember debating this with Phil Hogan in this Chamber, and Alan Kelly, Denis Naughten, Richard Bruton, Eamon Ryan and now Darragh O'Brien. Six Ministers have come and gone and we are on the fifth government and still there are no guidelines. This is inexcusable.

It is fine if people want to amend the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025 that I am bringing forward. I am not saying it is exactly what we need, but a good bit of work has gone into it and it would certainly put some shape on this and go a long way towards what we need.

Section 3 deals with the location of wind turbines. It must be consistent with local county development plans. Despite what Ministers say, that is not happening at the moment. Wind turbines are being put in areas that are not designated under county development plans. Indeed, these companies are riding roughshod over the county development plans. That must happen because as Members know, those plans are made by democratically elected local councillors and it is important that local democracy is upheld.

Section 4 sets out in detail the need for public consultation and a number of measures to be taken in terms of public notices, providing for a non-technical assessment to be made available, the potential impact of the proposed construction on the host community, the measures to prevent and to reduce that effect, the length of time of the construction and the planning gain for the local community. Section 4 sets out in great detail that there must be greater consultation.

Section 5 deals with noise and shadow flicker. This is very important because we know it is a real problem. At the moment there are houses where shadow flicker passes over them. This is unfair to residents. The Bill clearly sets out that they need to be located far enough from dwellings but that is not happening. We must protect the residents.

Section 6 specifies that any turbine over 30 m in height can only be located a distance of not less than 7.5 times the height of the turbine. It is really important that we set that down because

that is not being complied with in any way at the moment. It is really important that what is outlined in section 6 is put in place.

Section 7 deals with transitional matters in terms of the duties of planning authorities. It sets out their responsibilities, including An Coimisiún Pleanála. Section 8 sets out penalties that can be set by the Minister. That is important. The Minister would do that by way of statutory instrument, in terms of setting the level of responsibility.

Section 9 sets out that companies must provide financial evidence in terms of being able to put up bonds. Section 10 deals with responsibility for decommissioning. Very importantly, section 11 provides for co-ownership. Wind turbine developers shall provide an opportunity for local residents to purchase up to a 10% stake in wind turbine developments as part of a community co-operative model of wind turbine. The initial development has to be offered to residents who live within a 4 km radius of the turbines. After that, they can be offered to people outside that radius. It is really important that it happens.

The Bill provides for a number of measures to give people the necessary protections. I will deal first with the noise issue. The World Health Organization, WHO, has guidelines on international best practice. This is the crux of the matter and what is holding things up. In 2017 we had the launch of the preferred draft approach. In 2020, the Government set a target that 40% of renewable energy would come from onshore wind. That is very doable. We could probably do even more than that. In 2021, the Government doubled that to 80% and stated that 80% of all renewable energy would come from onshore wind. That is not doable and it would require standing proper planning on its head. That is what is happening. The casualty there has been the noise limits set by the World Health Organization, WHO, which have been shredded. They could not be allowed to get in the way of totally unrealistic targets. If we were in any doubt about this, we have a letter here from the HSE that set this out very clearly to the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, on 20 November 2025. The letter sets out very clearly what it means.

I also have an exchange of letters between the then Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the then Minister for the environment, former Deputy Eamon Ryan. In a letter of 18 November 2021, it is stated that these noise limits, the WHO ones, were agreed in the context of 2020 targets to generate 40% of electricity from renewable sources. It went on to say that as in so many other cases of public policy, the current context was fundamentally altered in the light of our ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51%, which we all support, over a period from 2018 to 2020. It further set out that to achieve this, the greenhouse gas emissions reductions target we have through the national development plan set out a quota to generate 80% of our electricity from renewable sources. This means that because we have not developed the other sources I mentioned earlier, we are relying almost totally on onshore wind. The correspondence continues by stating that to achieve this target, the 2021 climate action plan set an indicative target of 8 GW for onshore energy by 2030, and that it had to be doubled. This is the crux of what is going on here.

The Government and senior officials in the Department have been hopping from one foot to the other for the last 14 or 15 years on this issue, but particularly in the last five years. Deputies from the Government benches need to take this on board. We have to make a decision on it. When there are no guidelines, never mind regulations, these companies behave as if it is a gold rush. If we have a situation where no system is in place, then anything goes. What is there at

the moment is as weak as dishwater. Do not let anyone ever tell you anything else. These companies, their solicitors, their planning experts and all the consultants they have hired are on top of this game. There is big money in this and big investment firms behind it. Bord na Móna has been somewhat better in taking the concerns of local communities into consideration. Some people might dispute it, but that has been my experience. Deputy Nolan might have a different experience in County Offaly, where some may not have been happy with it. Generally, though, Bord na Móna works better with local communities.

This Bill is what we need to do. If we do not have legislation, we need to put a moratorium on developments until we do have proper legislation, regulations and guidelines in place. I appeal to the Minister of State and the Government to grasp the nettle on this issue once and for all and stop chasing something it cannot do, namely, providing 80% of renewable energy through onshore wind. We need to bring on solar power, hydrogen, anaerobic digestion and all the other methods that can be used. The Government will not be able to achieve its aim without getting the backs up of local communities right across the country, including in County Cavan, where the Minister of State lives.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025 be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for further consideration of the Bill."

This is to allow for sufficient time for full consideration of the Bill and for the development of Government proposals before the end of 2026, specifically the finalisation of the national planning statement on wind energy. I thank Deputy Stanley for bringing forward this Private Members' Bill regarding the regulation of wind turbines. He spoke with passion and a real depth of understanding of the topic itself. This Bill is no doubt well intended and aims to regulate wind energy development by addressing a number of key issues. However, I am this evening proposing a timing amendment as I believe that many of the matters raised in this Bill would be better addressed as part of an ongoing review of the existing 2006 wind energy development guidelines and our intention is to publish a national planning statement on wind energy as part of that process. I am concerned that key provisions set out in the Bill are inconsistent with the State's energy security objectives, climate obligations and the commitment in the programme for Government to accelerate the delivery of renewable electricity.

First, it is necessary to set out the wider context of the issue, which many Deputies here will be more than aware of. The programme for Government has reaffirmed Ireland's target of 80% of electricity demand to be met by renewables in the near future, with plans to move to a net-zero situation by 2050. The speedy deployment of renewable electricity is our energy insurance policy and the foundation for Ireland's transition to a low-carbon, sustainable economy. The accelerated delivery of infrastructure is a major Government priority and our renewable energy programme is central to that.

Regarding the role of wind, we have a target of 9 GW of installed capacity provided for in the climate action plan and the national planning framework to be achieved by 2030. Ireland

is a world leader in the deployment of wind energy, and its integration into our grid and the continued delivery of wind energy onshore and offshore is essential to safeguarding energy security and to supply affordable energy to our homes and businesses. Through the accelerated renewable electricity task force and the offshore wind delivery task force, the Government is committed to a strong delivery programme for onshore and offshore renewables and to supporting infrastructure to ensure there is a clean and flexible energy supply that keeps pace with economic growth and meets growing demand for electricity from new homes, the electrification of heat and transport and from large energy users.

We are committed to the continued sustainable deployment of onshore wind across our region in line with the allocations set out in the national planning framework and supported by strong community engagement, community benefits and planning guidance through a national planning statement. I will explain the planning context more fully in a moment. As Deputy Stanley and many Members of the House will be aware, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 wind energy guidelines, which will inform a new national planning statement under the new Planning and Development Act 2024. The review is addressing a number of key aspects of the guidelines, including setback distance, as well as in relation to noise, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections. The aim of the review is to strike an appropriate balance between addressing the concerns of local communities by ensuring greater and earlier community engagement by wind energy developers while maintaining Ireland's ability to deliver on its binding climate and renewable energy policy obligations.

While the review of the guidelines has been ongoing for a number of years now, which the Deputy eloquently outlined too, significant progress has been made towards concluding the review process. Chapters 1 and 4 of Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 came into effect on 2 October 2025, which provided the statutory basis for the national planning framework and regional, spatial and economic strategies and introduced provisions for the national planning statement. The national planning statement replaces section 28 planning guidance, which the previous wind energy guidelines issued. Therefore, the revised wind guidelines, once finalised, will issue as a national planning statement under the 2024 Act. Further to this, in light of the evolving policy and legislative framework, there is a need to ensure the national planning statement is fit for purpose while having appropriate regard to the impacts of wind energy development, including in relation to matters raised by Deputy Stanley's Bill.

Since the conclusion of the public consultation in February 2020, work on the technical noise elements of the revised guidelines has caused a delay in their finalisation. Ongoing work in relation to the noise elements of the draft guidelines has necessitated a substantial rewrite of the noise guidance issued for public consultation to both simplify the approach and to present it in a manner that is more easily understood and implemented by developers and planning authorities. In this regard, the Department of housing, in conjunction with the Department of Climate, Energy and Environment, in the context of its environmental noise, climate and renewable energy policy remit, has been working to advance guidance on the noise aspects of the guidelines, which is highly technical in nature. This work is substantially completed.

In addition to the work on the noise aspect of the draft national planning statement, the changing and continuously evolving policy and technical context, including the 2024 Act and

the revision of the national planning framework, NPF, reinforces the need to ensure that the finalised guidelines, once issued, are fit for purpose. Both of these contain important changes that wind policy must be cognisant of, as well as European obligations such as the renewable energies directive and other environmental considerations. Work is under way to formulate wind guidelines into the draft national planning statement, which will then be environmentally assessed and informed by a public consultation that will inform the final version submitted to Government for approval and implementation across the tiers of the planning system. It is imperative that a robust and up-to-date policy is provided that will take account of the evolving policy and legislative context of the technological progress of the past decades and of the informed decisions of stakeholders and the public itself.

To conclude, Ireland currently has over 5 GW in onshore wind generation with a target of 9 GW provided for in the climate action plan and national planning framework by 2030. Meeting our national targets for wind energy will require further integration of renewable technologies in an appropriate manner and in full consultation with local communities. The forthcoming national planning statement, NPS, will provide the processes and policies that provide for appropriate regulation of new wind energy development proposals as well as compliance with existing and future national, EU and international renewable energy policies and targets.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: To start, I commend Deputy Stanley for bringing forward this Bill and the huge work that has gone into it so far. The current wind energy guidelines date back to 2006 and in my view, they are, put simply, not fit for purpose. In 2006, wind turbines were 80 m high. Today, in Carlow and Kilkenny, communities are fighting applications against 180 m industrial structures using rules from almost 20 years ago. To put this size in context, it is the equivalent of four Croke Park stadiums stacked on top of each other. Four Croke Parks stacked on top of each other. These are absolutely massive, monstrous structures.

It does not make sense to me that the Department is applying rules from 20 years ago to 2025 technology. To put it another way, 20 years ago, there was no such thing as Facebook. It was just after being launched. There was no such thing as Instagram, WhatsApp or TikTok. Technological advancements have rocketed in this time but the wind energy guidelines have stayed static and have not evolved. We cannot lose sight, or ever forget, that communities are at the heart of this. In towns and villages like Kilmanagh, Tullaroan, Ballycallan, Castlewarren, Dungarvan, Castlebanny, Ballynalacken, Ballyfasy, Oldleighlin and Seskin, all in my own constituency, the people of those communities are all seriously worried and concerned.

My view is simple: the guidelines must protect families and communities, first, through strictly increased setback distances; second, through noise regulation; and third, through the flicker regulation. Only then can we provide the renewables. We cannot continue to regulate modern monsters with obsolete laws. We need to update them and we need to do it now.

This Bill demonstrates that renewable energy can be developed in a way that protects rural Ireland, strengthens public trust and delivers real benefits to those living closest to the turbines. It balances Ireland's climate goals with the rights of communities to fair treatment, meaningful involvement and proper consultation. This Bill is not about stopping wind energy but it is about doing it right. Communities deserve protection, transparency and a fair share of the benefits. Supporting this Bill means supporting rural Ireland, local democracy and responsible renewable development. I am happy to stand with and I fully support communities around the

country and in particular, those I have mentioned in my own constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, who want renewable energy done but want it done fairly and want it done right.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I remind Deputies present that if everybody takes ten minutes - and I know Deputy Cleere has not - we will not get to everybody. I ask Deputies to be mindful of their time. You are entitled to the ten minutes but that might knock someone else out so keep an eye on the time if you can. The next speaker is Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: First, I welcome the Bill and I support it. What we heard from the Government side is just the usual palaver. I remember Sinn Féin bringing a Bill forward on the Shannon, to have one body over it. It was kicked down the road for nine months and we never saw it to this day. That is the reality of what is going on here and I think the people out there should understand this. We are after listening to Deputies speak about places right around this country, in Laois or wherever, where people are in trouble with wind turbines.

The facts are that unfortunately, when what I call vultures come to an area, some people will make money because they will offer €30,000 or €40,000 for the turbine. Undoubtedly, people will accept it but the consequences of what it is doing to communities around this country are unforgivable. I see it in Clonbern and all parts of County Roscommon, where there are 11 different applications in at the moment. We get calls from all over the country. There is a corridor, you could say, from above Tuam and Belclare right down Lavally, Clonbern, heading to Glenamaddy and heading on. What is it doing? Communities that worked together, put football pitches together and helped elderly people together are being split down the middle. Those are the facts of what is going on in every community around this country.

I am here since the end of 2014. I have listened to people say wind guidelines are going to come and come. Let nobody tell me that the Bill that Deputy Brian Stanley put in - I do not know how many years ago it was when he put it in - could not have been looked at since then in order that we would know the types of guidelines, regulations or whatever we are going to do. What we will do now again is say we will have another look at it. The facts are - and people should understand them out there - that the commitment is not in this Dáil to make sure that wind turbines are far enough away from people's houses. I believe in turbines offshore - 100%. There is a huge opportunity but, of course, that opportunity was where the designated maritime area plans, DMAPs, for the west coast were not done, so we cannot kick off the whole process. The former Minister, Eamon Ryan, who was supposed to be a Green Minister, was over it at the time. For four years, those DMAPs were left there and never done. That is the first part of the jigsaw in getting it going.

The sad reality is - and let people out there looking in tonight understand - there is only one way you can do it. You have to, as a community, get together, which is a sad thing for a politician to have to say. Unite as a group in your area. You have to put in objections and do you know what? With the way An Bord Pleanála is granting these turbines or wind farms, as they are called, the only solution people have, which is a sad reality, is try to raise money together and try to fight it in the courts. That is some statement coming from people who are supposed to be legislators. We are supposed to be here to listen to the people and to support them but instead of that, we will kick the ball down the road another bit and sure look it,

something else will crop up then and we will kick it another bit. It is nearly like that game they play in Kerry where they throw the ball down around bends and sure, we will never find it.

Then we have another situation that has developed and is happening in parts of Roscommon. People gave up their bogs to Bord na Móna years ago. Bord na Móna was set up for proper reasons and I have no problem with that. They are going in now and digging up massive areas of bog and are putting up turbines. They do not even want to be talking about how they once used to be at turf or the bog or anything. They are the clean, green company now. The number of turbines they are putting up around the country is phenomenal. In parts of Roscommon, I see some of the crowds that put them up. It is like turning money. They put it up, roll it going for a few years and sell it on. How many of our turbines and wind farms are owned by foreigners at the moment? That is the one thing we need to look at. To people tonight who are looking in, I support the Bill. I ask the Deputy to put it to a vote. Amendments do not wash. The fight will have to go on. The commitment is not there to resolve this issue.

Deputy Pa Daly: Energy is not just about power; it is about sovereignty, security, just transition, the future we leave to our children and fairness to communities. I come from the county of Kerry, which has 15% of the turbines with only 8% of the land mass. I saw the troubles over the years when what Deputy Fitzmaurice described as vultures came in and there was a lot of division in communities. In Sinn Féin, we stand for ending the rip-off and cutting household energy bills, for delivering true Irish energy independence and not a system that currently prioritises the corporate bottom line over the needs of the people. We want to do it in a different way from the Government. Under successive Governments we have had an energy system that treats energy as a commodity, that is, a product to be bought and sold for profit rather than a public good and that is wrong. Energy is essential for every home, business and community. It should serve the people, not shareholders. We have a clear vision that our vast natural resources should create a national wealth for all. We are fortunate in this country that we have some of the best offshore and onshore wind resources in Europe. That means public and community ownership, proper consultation and fair democratic decision-making. It means reforming the energy market so that Government and regulators hold companies to account, not the other way around. It is a far cry from where we are currently. The Government has failed to plan and to provide the clear rules mentioned so many times by other speakers. A vacuum has been created by its complete dereliction of its duties on wind energy guidelines. As the current guidelines are from 2006, they are nearly 20 years old and in 2013, it was recognised that they were out of date. In 2019, updated guideline were produced but where are they now? They are still sitting on a shelf gathering dust. This is unacceptable to communities that deserve clarity. Wind energy providers also deserve certainty and guidelines to level the playing field. Without them, we have ambiguity, frustration, distrust and division. The Government and its supporters, some of whom were the loudest critics of these delays, cannot continue to leave everyone down. The updated guidelines must be published as soon as possible. To have a level playing field, we need proper rules and clarity.

Sinn Féin recognises the uncertainty this situation has created for local communities. I do not think this Bill is the answer. In fairness to Deputy Stanley, he has himself said that he is not saying it is exactly what we need. It could halt the development of renewable energy or risk Irish energy security and could push bills up even higher at a time when Irish households already pay the highest energy prices in Europe. It could also block Ireland's energy

independence and damage our ability to cut emissions and meet climate targets. We are committed to a different path that delivers Irish energy independence, cuts costs, reduces emissions and supports fairness for communities. We believe in renewable energy but it must be done right. It must be done democratically and for the people. The first step is the publication of the guidelines. I hope the Ministers will take that back to Cabinet and make sure they are delivered as soon as possible.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: It is important to be absolutely clear that a wind farm is no small undertaking. These are vast developments that have an enormous impact on communities and the local environment from the moment construction begins throughout their entire lifetime up to the day they are decommissioned. It is beyond me that for projects of this scale we have no up-to-date regulations or guidelines. Frankly speaking, it is an insult to communities across Ireland that have been left high and dry by the Minister of State and her colleagues. I am talking about communities like Oldleighlin, Castlewarren, Durrow, Kilmanagh, Tullaroan, Ballycallan, Ballyhale, Inistioge, Thomastown, Ballyfasy and many more. These communities have been left to deal with these developments by themselves, all too often at the mercy of a developer whose interest is in profit first and foremost.

Sinn Féin's position on this has been clear for years. We believe energy is a public good. It should strengthen our national wealth, not just line the pockets of overseas investors who have little to no regard for our local communities. We are committed to putting communities at the very core of developing wind energy in Ireland, and to ensuring that this area is properly regulated, not left to those seeking profit at any cost. One recent proposed development in south Kilkenny would not even hold a public consultation in the local community. The meeting was held outside of the area by appointment only. Talk about putting hurdles up for people who just want to have their say. I recently raised with the Department the urgent need to publish updated regulations. I have asked for a timeline but time and time again, all I get back from that office is waffle. These communities are not anti-wind. They simply want adequate guidelines to ensure that the wind turbines are not constructed on top of people's homes. I struggle to see how that is too much to ask for. It is worth remembering that the Minister of State's colleagues sat on these Opposition benches and raised these very same concerns. They called for the same actions and many of the Government's backbenchers still do, both here and at local meetings. It certainly does not appear to be a concern for the Cabinet.

Then we have the other elephant in the room, namely, the utter scandal of curtailment payments. People are stunned when they hear about this. It is another clear example of the public being forced to foot the bill for years of under-investment in vital infrastructure like the national grid. We are building wind turbines at such a rate that the grid cannot cope with the supply. Here we are again with the Government putting the cart before the horse. These profit-driven projects are then told to switch off or reduce their generation and they are paid to do it. Last October, that bill hit €115 million, a cost the public had to pay as part of their monthly bills. It is not unique to wind. Solar curtailments in Ireland have increased sevenfold since 2022. We are taxing the public to build infrastructure that works part-time while charging them full-time prices to cover the waste. This is not a green strategy. It is a gold-plated waste of public money. Just like with housing, this developer-led agenda is not for the benefit of consumers nor for the public good. It is designed to ensure high profits for private investors.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I commend Deputy Stanley on bringing forward this very important Bill and for all the work that went into it. It is imperative that we get action and that there is real and true balance for communities. Currently there are no protections for any communities throughout my own county of Offaly or the neighbouring County Laois. It is very unfair. Communities have no say whatsoever and these monstrosities of structures are imposed on them. As I will be discussing, there are serious health concerns and effects from the infrasound. All of this needs to be investigated thoroughly and there needs to be fair play.

6 o'clock

In terms of consultation and engagement with communities, it cannot be a tokenistic tick-the-box exercise. That is what I have seen happening. We are not fools. We can see what is happening. I know from my extensive engagement with communities from north Offaly right down to south Offaly that this is what is happening. It is a tick-the-box exercise and there are bribes thrown out to people in the community to try to divide it. That is what is happening. Meanwhile, as I said, these monstrosities are imposed on communities. It is my firm belief that issues such as this need and command cross-party support, with everybody working together regardless of political allegiances. This is an issue affecting all of our communities the length and breadth of the country.

For the past number of years, I have been engaging first-hand and directly with so many communities throughout my constituency of Offaly and I am very frustrated and disillusioned by the lack of action. I, like many others and like Deputy Stanley, have called for the publication of those guidelines. I was elected in 2016, and I started calling for them to be published at that time. We only have draft guidelines. There are loopholes and there are companies running amok. They are absolutely taking advantage of communities. Are we here to serve those corporate entities that profiteer or are we here to serve our communities? I am elected, and I want to serve my community as do many others here, but it is about time we started listening and acting and not giving the usual waffle that we are in agreement. People do not want sympathy. They want action, and they want proper protections. I will certainly continue to call for those protections. Again, it is rural communities that are being treated so unfairly by Government, which is just not listening and taking action. How long is it going to take? How long more? We all know that the Government can bring in legislation when it so pleases. We all know that because we were locked down more than we should have been in County Offaly. We were subjected to a third lockdown during Covid-19. The Government was able to do that, so why can it not bring in legislation to protect communities? It could be done quickly if the political will was there. I certainly will continue to call for it. In communities like Lemanaghan, where there is a heritage bog with monastic links to Clonmacnoise, we have Bord na Móna coming in and trying to impose a wind farm on that community. There is a community in Stonestown in Cloghan which is suffering terribly from the health effects of turbines that are very close to their homes. I am calling for action. There is a wind farm in north Offaly, and I have had farmers tell me that it is affecting the livestock. The livestock had to be moved from one field into another field well away with the wind turbines. It is affecting everybody. It is not just in one particular area.

All of those communities cannot be wrong. They are not wrong. We need solid actions. As I said, communities are right to be disillusioned, frustrated, angered and, indeed, ignored because there are no protections and their rights are being trampled on. Communities like

Lemanaghan, which I mentioned earlier, strongly object to the wanton destruction of their bog, not just from a heritage point of view but also because of the fact that habitats, flora and fauna will also be considerably destroyed. The fact that the 2006 wind energy guidelines remain in force pending finalisation of the review, which has been ongoing since 2016, is nothing short of farcical and, indeed, borderline contemptuous of communities which have clearly expressed the gross inadequacies of the current regulatory regime.

This is why I recently called again for all wind energy and wind turbine developments to be halted until the guidelines are produced. As I said, why are we just letting these companies trample over communities? I have raised this matter repeatedly through parliamentary questions and most recently with the Minister with responsibility for the environment, Deputy O'Brien, when I asked him if he would provide information regarding the reports on wind turbine noise. I also asked him to clarify his support for increased protections for persons adversely affected by the noise. Again, I want to mention the community of Stonestown, Cloghan, in County Offaly. They informed me that 250 complaint records were submitted in regard to two Statkraft wind farms. They have been lodged with the county council. There does not seem to be anything happening. Again, their concerns are being ignored. As I said, there has to be action.

I also agree with the residents who say it is high time that the Department of Health got involved. I have submitted parliamentary questions to that effect. I want to end to give others time, and I will do so by quoting the following email I received from a resident summing up the nightmare that they are going through with these wind turbines being close to their home. The constituent wrote:

Another two nights from hell here the last 2 nights [were also hell]. Awake all night again, child here crying with frustration as am I, the embarrassment of having to put this down on another email again. The fact that the solution ye see fit is a simple reply email and no action just fills me with anxiety about another winter of this. The house is vibrating here again, I've damage all over the house from the vibrations as well as all my family being sick ... [over the period of time. This is something] ... we didn't ask for or [something we didn't] want in our lives and [we want for nothing more other than to be respected].

This person goes on to say:

It is just so unfair to expect us to continue to live through this nuisance every day and [every] night, it's depressing as depressing can get and still no help. I've to try and work another day tomorrow on empty and I am expected to provide for my family with no energy and eyes falling out of my head. It's just not good enough for ... [us to have this] forced upon us here, trapped under the control of this crap and not being in any control, it's like living with an abuser daily wondering if tonight is ... [another] night again ... [that I will] lay awake. We're being traumatised every minute every day and no one seems to care, or do you have a duty of care [to us communities] at all?

That should give the Minister of State a flavour of just exactly what people are dealing with and the way it is affecting their mental health and well-being and their lives in general. This is not a policy issue that can simply be ignored. It is having real-world consequences of the most awful kind, and I am very concerned about it.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank Deputy Stanley for bringing forward this Bill and giving us the chance and opportunity tonight to discuss the wind turbine regulations.

There is obviously an urgent need to update these regulations. At present, as has been said numerous times tonight, we are operating off guidelines set in 2006, and things have definitely moved on considerably since then. There have been significant advances in technology and so on, but also in the urgency with which we need to decarbonise and transition towards clean renewable energy. That has become a far greater need for the planet on which we live. Put simply, we need to generate a hell of a lot more renewable energy than we do at present, and wind is probably one of the best resources in that regard. Equally, and most importantly, is the fact that communities are brought along with us and, in the context of this Bill, those communities that are playing host to these onshore wind farms.

A basic principle cleared up on just transition is that climate action is something that should be done with people rather than to people. It is important that community voices are heard and that their genuine concerns are addressed. Over the past number of weeks, I have had a number of people and groups getting in touch with me in anticipation of this Bill. They told me about issues affecting them, be it noise pollution, shadow flicker, biodiversity effects and so on. I know exactly the impact that is having.

I have been working closely with the community of Kilberry next door to where I live just outside my hometown of Athy. For decades, members of the Kilberry community have worked in the local Bord na Móna facility, which is now closed, unfortunately, and is to be replaced, be it in part, by a wind farm. There are many genuine concerns about this proposed facility, and the community deserve to be heard and listened to. Likewise, my colleague in County Louth, Deputy Nash, has spoken to me about the widely held concerns in his community over the planned Kellystown wind farm. For years now, he, like me, has been pressing successive Ministers to update and modernise the setback guidance. Many of these rural villages have gotten little support from the just transition fund. That is very important to state tonight. They have done their bit for Bord na Móna and the whole rural economy over the years but they have seen very little payback from the just transition fund.

We are here tonight and the Government obviously recognises the need to update guidance, given that we have had draft proposals sitting idle since 2019. Assuming we are all in agreement on this need, we must ensure that community concerns are heard and addressed. Deputy Stanley has provided a great framework for community consultation, including early structured engagement. It is a very sensible approach. Developers cannot be allowed to treat community engagement as simply a box-ticking exercise, as many of them do at the moment. In many cases, it is a polite announcement of what has already been decided. Communities deserve to be treated as partners and not as obstacles. I have attended so many of these community consultations over the years, and when I left, the box was ticked.

Similarly, I welcome the provisions on community ownership or shared benefit structures. Where renewable projects make tangible contributions to local development, be it through funding amenities, supporting co-operatives or offering community shares as the Bill states, it strengthens the local social licence for a renewable strategy. The Bill also deals with the element that has caused so many communities over the years to struggle, namely, the setback distances. This issue is about finding the balance and bringing the communities with us.

I commend Deputy Stanley for putting this issue on the agenda. He has been talking about the need for this Bill for years. It is important that communities are engaged with in the process and they are brought along in our energy transition. They have to have a seat at the table. We obviously need to have minimum setback distances. Let me be absolutely clear about this - we also desperately need to update the guidelines on wind turbine development. I encourage the Minister and the Department to engage with Deputy Stanley on the Bill. I will work closely with my Labour Party colleague, Deputy Ciarán Ahern, who is our climate and energy spokesperson and a member of the climate committee.

Crucially, and what is the heart of the Bill, is that the Department and other relevant authorities must engage with communities that host or will potentially host wind farms. It is incumbent on us all to find the appropriate mechanism or formula to ensure we can ramp up our onshore capacity in a way that abides by the principles of just transition and does not leave any rural community behind.

In his contribution this evening, Deputy Stanley said he was willing to change and extend the Bill and work with the Government. He does not deserve to have the Bill kicked down the road for 12 months. Unfortunately, as has been said by many contributors, having a wind farm on your doorstep is a daily reality for many communities, as developers bring forward wind farm after wind farm without proper regulation or guidelines. Will the Government consider existing proposals for wind farms without first considering the guidelines we all seek this evening? This simply cannot continue. There is a time and need for proper regulations and guidelines. Each community that has been spoken about during this debate needs a seat at the table. They must be considered first before any wind farm.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: In my constituency, and particularly in the north Galway area, we are facing a tsunami of wind energy developments. These are in communities such as Killimordaly, Clonberne, Barnaderg, Shancloon and Laurclavagh to name but a few, and there would be in excess of 150 turbines if all of the various projects at various stages of development go ahead. It is safe to say that north County Galway would be totally unrecognisable if this were allowed to happen. These are turbines that are 185 m high. The 2006 wind energy guidelines were brought forward when turbines were a fraction of that size. They are totally out of date and do not protect communities from these industrial-sized developments.

My constituents are having their lives turned upside down with these developments being landed on their doorsteps. It is important to say they are in favour of renewable energy but they want to see it done right. The Government has done nothing. It has sat on its hands for years. The failure to bring forward updated guidelines to protect communities has been shameful. We do not have adequate setback distances, noise protection, environmental protection or consultation. The Government has allowed a developer-led free for all, whereby they can land these developments wherever they want with no regard whatsoever for local communities. There is no meaningful consultation, engagement or consideration for the impact on the communities that will have to live with these developments. It is an absolute dereliction of duty by the Government. It is the same with solar energy. There is a very large project in Monivea and Abbeyknockmoy in my constituency. We do not have solar guidelines. There are also large gas plants proposed, and it is the same story for communities in Athenry and Portumna.

Sinn Féin has continuously demanded and campaigned for the Government to produce guidelines that would ensure these developments were not landed on top of people's homes. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, in particular, the former regional Independents, who were some of the loudest critics of this in the previous Dáil but seem to have gone silent now, cannot continue to let everybody down.

The Government is going to kick this to touch for 12 months. Obviously, there are flaws in the Bill, and Deputy Stanley has acknowledged this, but my fear is we will continue to hear excuses as to why new guidelines are not being brought forward. How many years has it been? It is almost 20 years since the 2006 guidelines. We continue to see grandstanding from Government TDs slamming the very same Government they are part of. It is time for the Government to stop abdicating its responsibilities, step up to the plate, stop hiding and get new guidelines in place.

Deputy Sean Fleming: In my role as a TD, I have had direct involvement on behalf of local communities in respect of the location of wind turbines in various locations throughout County Laois, and some of those developments also impacted on neighbouring counties such as Kilkenny and Carlow. Many years ago, the first involvement I had on behalf of a community was regarding a wind farm called Gortahile in Rossmore, which is overlooking County Carlow but very much in County Laois. When that application came through, the developer was proposing to put a wind turbine within 300 m of the nearest house. I objected very strenuously, and the community and I were united at that time. We met the developer and told it two words: "Go away". It went away and came back a year and a half later, by which time it had moved the turbines to well over a kilometre away from any house. It dropped a few of them. It listened and now we have seven or eight turbines in the place, working and generating good renewable energy. The turbines are well over a kilometre from houses. I stress these wind turbines are much smaller as the ones we have now. The community was satisfied and it is working satisfactorily. The developer listened to the local community and is to be commended. This is the only good success we have had with wind turbines in County Laois. It is on the Carlow border and overlooks County Carlow, and I am happy to acknowledge the work Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor from Carlow has done in this regard.

In more recent years, we had a big application for an area called Coolglass, which is between the back of The Swan, up to Wolfhill and across to Timahoe. After a lot of public consultation, it was agreed by the executive and Laois County Council that the area where the application was submitted and other parts of the county were not areas for consideration for wind farms. The regulator looked at the plan, made no comment and was happy with this inclusion. The Minister looked at the plan when it went to the Department and said there was no problem with it. However, a developer came along and made an application for an area that was specifically marked as not for consideration. This shows how little regard there is for local democracy, when this was approved at local level and all the way up the line.

I have noticed something that is a very bad precedent that we have to watch. If a development in future is quite small, it can go through easily but if it is of a particular scale, it might be considered strategic infrastructural development, which involves a different process. I have an example of a number of turbines in one location that were joined by one cable to a number of turbines in another location and they are now considered one application. If this trick is done by the developers, they can have small clusters, link them all with a cable and say those are

national strategic infrastructure. They would then be able to go through a different planning process. This is not satisfactory and we have to be watchful of this.

The public consultation for the wind farm proposal I mentioned was a leaflet drop to some houses in the area. There was no public meeting. No one ever came to a meeting, so they have shown contempt. At that time, I objected strenuously, as did the whole community. Laois County Council refused the application. I went to An Bord Pleanála, which is now An Coimisiún Pleanála, which also turned it down, and rightly so. The developer went for a judicial review. In the court, the judge told An Coimisiún Pleanála - which had refused the application - to go reconsider its decision. He did not overrule it, but told An Coimisiún Pleanála, in the clearest way possible, to reconsider its position. That left An Coimisiún Pleanála in an awkward position because it did not know whether what it came back with would stand up in court, and rightly so. The matter was then referred to the Supreme Court. This is going to set the precedent for all of Ireland in the context of what local authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála should do in respect of these cases in the future. There will be certainty - that might be good or bad, we do not know yet - once the Supreme Court makes its decision on this application. An Coimisiún Pleanála will know how to proceed in the future. This is a very important case that is before the Supreme Court. We all have to watch the outcome of that very closely. Let us hope that it will be in line with what An Coimisiún Pleanála did in the first place by not granting the application.

The most recent case in County Laois relates to the Laois-Kilkenny border. It is called the Seskin application. A great deal of work has been done in that area. Again, my principal objection to this application and all the others relates to the fact that they involve the net export of energy out of Ireland. It is not the function of any local authority, An Coimisiún Pleanála or the Government of Ireland to directly facilitate private investors - Irish, English or those from Hong Kong or wherever - in order that they can make profits on the backs of people in Ireland. The export of energy through the Celtic interconnector to France and Europe is purely for the profit of the developers. There is no gain in this for Ireland. We are talking here about surplus energy that will be exported and that will not be produced for the benefit of Ireland.

This reminds me of what is happening in some places in China where people are working for little or nothing to produce the clothes many of us here are wearing. Those people are being abused, many individuals are making a profit and we are getting the benefit of the cheap clothes. That is the exact situation in this instance. The investors to whom I refer are going to sell a product cheaply into France on the backs of the Irish people who are going to have to tolerate wind turbines, shadow flicker and everything that goes with that. We have to be careful in that regard.

After the 45-year period - ten years for planning to get it directed and a lifetime of 35 years - who is going to guarantee where the turbines are going to go? They will be left like a blight on the landscape for generations to come, and people will be amazed that we facilitated this.

There is a proposal for community ownership of this. There should be a community gain and a community benefit. It should not just be a case of buttering up the local people. I would be concerned that if there is something left in 40 years' time, whoever the trustees or the local investors are could be held liable for the clean-up costs. If you are an owner, you could be caught for costs. Things can go wrong over the years. I would like to see a community gain rather than community ownership.

All in all, I welcome this debate. We have a long way to go. We are not here to facilitate people in benefiting from putting wind turbines in our areas too close to our houses. I am all for turbines in the right locations. To those who say that we are going to have offshore generation, I heard at my committee meeting that it will be 25 years before offshore energy is produced by wind farms. Do not listen to any guff saying that this is a real option in the near future. We have to make sure we have sustainable energy for ourselves. We are not here to export cheap electricity to other countries from which we will get no gain, other than having to tolerate wind turbines, shadow flicker, the noise and everything else. We are not here to allow some people to make a fortune on the backs of the Irish people.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I acknowledge Deputy Stanley for bringing forward this Bill. It is constructive legislation that seeks to strike a balance. As other Members stated, delivering clean, renewable energy will ensure fairness.

As I was sitting here, I heard a Deputy say that the regional Independents are against renewable energy. I was in negotiations for Government. We secured key steps for private wires and renewable developments relating to data centres. As a qualified engineer with a master's degree in sustainability, while we were in negotiations, I pushed for this. In the context of people saying that the regional Independents are against this, when I was at a committee meeting I heard a member of one party state that residents are worried about boiling their kettles. If you do the calculations, you will find that it costs five cent to boil a kettle. I am not here for sound bites; I am here for actual engineering being put down.

Wind energy must be part of our future, that is clear. In that context, however, local communities cannot be an afterthought. I commend Deputy Stanley on bringing this Bill forward.

With regard to onshore and offshore wind, it is a strategic choice. It is very important that the public know the difference in size of offshore and onshore wind farms. It is colossal. In the context of onshore generation, as other Deputies have said, turbines can be 165 m in height. Offshore turbines can be 260 m high. The efficiency is what we should be focusing on. Onshore is, on average, 2.5 MW while offshore can get up to 12 MW, which is huge for Ireland in the context of energy generation. If any other country had the capability Ireland has, it would be seizing upon it. If this was Germany, this would have been done years ago. When I looked back through the Dáil records, I discovered that we had plans for this before the crash. Sadly, the economic crash happened and we were left on the back foot. We did not set up a national fund like other countries, such as Denmark or Norway, built on the basis of publicly owned success stories that create wealth. We are now reliant on foreign direct investment. We cannot change the past, but we can change legislation to make onshore and offshore benefit the Irish people as much as possible. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past.

I am on the climate and energy committee. We have had many groups in. I feel like a broken record talking about this because everyone agrees with regard to what we should do in the context of long-duration energy storage, creating a grid that is decentralised and protecting from curtailment and dispatch down. When you hear stories to the effect that €2.7 million worth of electricity is being lost every day due to dispatch down and our grid not being able to carry the load, it is absolutely heartbreaking. When I knock on doors in my constituency and talk to young mothers and parents who are struggling with the cost of electricity, I come to the

conclusion that it makes no sense that we have the second or third highest energy cost per kilowatt hour in Europe when we have the capability of generating so much energy on our little island.

Deputy Fleming mentioned the sale of energy to France. Solar farms and wind energy facilities - and I have heard other Deputies mention this - are turning off their renewable projects because the grid cannot take the energy. When representatives from EnergyCloud came before the energy committee, they proposed that this wasted energy be used to heat up boilers and be given to areas affected by disadvantage and socioeconomic difficulties. That is something we need to push for, because wasting this energy is absolutely ridiculous.

One of the things I mentioned securing in the context of the programme for Government was private wire legislation. Germany has done it, Denmark has done it and the UK has done it. We clearly do not have the capacity to reach what the grid demands. We need to allow private wire legislation to be fast-tracked. I welcome the work the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and his Department have been doing on this. I look forward to the legislation coming before the House in the new year. What I would focus on when it comes to private wires are quasi-local projects and eco-villages that could benefit from offshore renewable energy.

Deputy Stanley has made provision in his Bill for community benefit, community ownership and a fair share. This is one of the most important parts of the Bill, and I commend the Deputy on it. As I was reading it, I was very impressed with provision relating to the purchase of 10% of projects. Trust is built, not by ignoring people but by sharing benefits. As I have always said, if you put out a contract to the public and stick by it, they will not break that contract.

The public needs to know that this Bill is not about blocking wind energy - far from it. The Bill would create the conditions for sustainable growth and community partnerships. Climate change demands action, but climate action must be taken in conjunction with people. We saw how people reacted when the previous Government brought in stuff without listening to them. An entire party was decimated. We cannot allow that to happen with the current parties and Independents here. We need to listen to the Irish people, conduct surveys and have community engagement. This is about fairness, planning and sense. It is also about ensuring Ireland leads. We did not lead when it came to our oil and gas. We now have a potential with our offshore renewable energy to use the curtailment to make green hydrogen, sell it to the growing market and make it benefit the Irish people. I will say this again, if any other country had this potential, it would have been done 20 years ago. I look forward to this Bill progressing and I look forward to working with colleagues to refine it further.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. It has been a very thought-provoking, pragmatic and respectful debate and I very much appreciate that. I commend Deputy Stanley on raising the matter and the work that he has put into this Bill. I appreciate that it is an area that generates a lot of interest and debate across the country. The Government believes in the importance of public participation within our planning system. Any draft national planning statement, NPS, will be put out to public consultation, whereby all interested parties will have an opportunity to submit observations. The finalised NPS will be prepared following detailed analysis and consideration of submissions received during the consultation phase. The Government is confident that, while the review is being finalised and the planning

system is capable of assessing applications for wind for wind energy development, connection proposals for wind energy development are subject to the same statutory requirements as other forms of proposed development. In making decisions on planning applications for any type of development, including wind energy development, any planning authority or board, as appropriate, must consider the proper planning and sustainable development of the area.

The 2006 wind energy guidelines remain in force and planning authorities and the board must have regard to these guidelines in the performance of their functions. As such, it is considered that the planning policy and the legislative framework is in place to enable planning authorities and the board to make decisions on planning applications in respect of wind energy developments, in line with our planning and sustainable development, pending the finalisation of the revised national planning statement.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is satisfied that the existing and evolving planning system, supported by the Government policy more generally, provides a sufficiently robust policy and legislative framework to facilitate the roll-out of renewable energy development in a sustainable manner and to assist with meeting our needs of renewable energy requirements while balancing the perspective of local communities and allowing for public and stakeholder engagement. There is a need to develop as much onshore renewable energy capacity as possible in the coming years. The proposed restrictions in the Bill are also inconsistent with the work being undertaken by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation on accelerating infrastructure delivery and the expected report with recommendations on same that is due to be brought to Government shortly.

There is an increasingly urgent need to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure, including to ensure that our energy supply and networks can support the additional demands placed on them by the State's continued economic growth. It is important to recognise that there has been opposition to wind energy developments from some communities due to concerns in relation to the scale of proposed developments and the perceived potential impacts. The updated national planning statement will aim to adopt a more balanced approach to addressing local community concerns while also facilitating the roll-out of wind energy development to assist in meeting Ireland's renewable energy targets. This balanced approach is considered more appropriate given current climate concerns and the approach outlined in the Bill.

In conclusion, as my colleague outlined in his speech, many of the provisions in the Bill are already being addressed in the context of the ongoing review of the existing wind guidelines. I also have significant concerns that the key measures within the Bill would jeopardise the State's ability to roll-out renewable energy and meet its legally binding targets in that regard. Accordingly, I wish to confirm that the Government proposes a timed amendment of 12 months.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank everybody for their contributions. I have listened very carefully to what people have had to say. The debate has been constructive but we need to move from discussion and debate to action. I will be pressing the Bill because I think we have kicked to touch too many times on this already. The Minister of State mentioned that significant progress has been made; it has not. She mentioned that the noise issue is causing the delay. I do not have the exact wording but it is in the script. That is the issue. Are we going to ignore

World Health Organization guidelines so as to allow these international investors to plant turbines to export energy overseas? I do not have a problem with exporting energy. If we have a surplus, then by all means we should. I fully supported the Celtic interconnector. I remember going to France seven or eight years ago about it, as part of an Oireachtas delegation, to meet the electric company over there. Representatives from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and I went there. It is a great idea, but the problem is we just cannot keep putting this back.

The Minister of State mentioned that the 2006 guidelines are still there, but they include a 400 m setback. We are now getting to a point where if one of these turbines fell, it would nearly hit a house because they are so high. This is causing real problems.

The reason we have to get this 80% from onshore wind, and I remember arguing this with Phil Hogan in this Chamber, and he is gone out of here a good while, is because we have not developed the other sources. Offshore has not happened, except for the Arklow one, which is there a number of years. The amount of solar is minuscule, and with anaerobic digestion we are only in the thought process part of it, and we have a huge problem with animal waste. The Minister of State knows that from being in government. We have a huge problem. What do we do? We have a very strong agricultural sector and that is good, but we have a problem with agricultural waste. A lot of that waste can be utilised for biogas. That is what they are doing in other countries and we should be doing the same. We have not even really got going with hydrogen yet. Solar, as I said, is really only starting. The top boys and girls in the Department have dismissed hydro over the years, yet we built Turlough Hill in the 1970s and had to pump water up to it, and it provides peak electricity. My point is that we are in a situation where all of these sources have to be used and that is why we have boxed ourselves into a corner where we are being told that, to meet our obligations, we have to produce 80% from onshore wind. That is actually questionable. A lot of this is being done to export.

Deputy Heneghan mentioned how a lot of the excess generation is being wasted when all the turbines are going and the grid cannot take it. That is the nature of the wind: it is intermittent. It is a brilliant source of energy. I support it but it has to be done with other sources. We cannot put all of our eggs into one basket and that is what Government has done. Communities in Wolfhill, Spink, Timahoe, Ballinakill, Durrow and Cullahill and right across north Kilkenny are now facing into these situations. Some communities had to take judicial reviews, costing €60,000 or €70,000, which they had to raise. People had to go to the Four Courts, and that is not a planning system we should have. When we have to go there, it is all over. That is not what we should have to do. We need to have a better system in this country.

If we do it in partnership with people, they can be brought along. If they have a stake in things, it is different. Deputy Fleming mentioned that there may be difficulties regarding the 10% ownership. I take on board what he is saying, but I would also point out that Templederry in County Tipperary is completely community owned. They are not worried about that. They are doing very well out of it. There are 28 shareholders, including the local GAA club and other clubs in the area. The rest of them are local people who invested in it. They are not bothered about that. They know that this is a good bet and it is working out for them. They got in at a time when wind turbines were not as efficient as they are now. They are even more profitable now that the Chinese manufacturers have really upped the game, as they have done with solar panels.

We have not even started with the whole issue of biogas from farm waste. We have not even started to get that now. Farming organisations and the Department are now starting to look at it and I welcome that, but we are coming late to all of these things. These trains were coming down the track at us, and what did we do? We did nothing and the Government is moving too slow on a range of things. The pace is glacier-like. That is the one thing I find frustrating. As a member of a county council, which I know is on a smaller scale, but I could get things done in a week sometimes, or a month or year. In here it sometimes takes forever and a day to get things moving. That is not the way it should be. One of the Sinn Féin speakers mentioned that it would put up the price of electricity but did not explain how. I support the idea mentioned by Deputy Heneghan. Like a lot of other countries, if we had a national energy company, we would be trying to utilise this. Some 40 years ago, 95% of our electricity was in public ownership. My understanding is that is down to 25%. We had one of the lowest electricity prices in the European Union 40 years ago when 95% of electricity was in public ownership. We now hover in the top three or four highest electricity prices in the EU. That has not been very good for customers and householders.

I fully support using renewable energies. I fully support using wind. One speaker said I stated there were flaws in the Bill. I did not say that; I said people might want to amend this Bill. Some Members might have misunderstood what I was saying. No legislation, including what comes from Government is ever perfect on the first draft. However, a lot of work has gone into it. It is not something that was put together in a week or a month or even six months. If Government or Opposition Members want to amend it, I am open to working with them but we have to try to change this and put a system in place.

I cannot figure out what has happened to the Taoiseach. Reading a transcript of his from 2013, he said many of the things I and other speakers, such as Deputies Nolan and Fleming, have said today. As Taoiseach, he has a special responsibility to drive this and push it on.

Local groups have not been a bunch of NIMBYs. Most of the people involved just want a little bit of fair play. Many of those groups have spent nights researching information and putting legal cases together, which they should not have to do. They network and try to fundraise and everything like that. They put in huge work and I want to recognise that. We need to have people spending their time doing better things than that. Guidelines can be twisted and moulded. Stronger, newer, updated guidelines that take account of the advances in the scale and ginormous size of these turbines and the technology available now would be better. The issue of solar regulations came up at a meeting of the Joint [Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage] the other day. If we are going to regulate solar farms, which are less intrusive, why are we not doing it for these enormous turbines?

The Minister of State said she wants me to kick the Bill down the road for 12 months but I am not agreeing to that. I am pressing this Bill. I believe we need to move on it now as we have been dancing around it for long enough. As I said in my opening contribution, what is delaying this is how Government, senior officials and industries are going to explain to communities that they are going to have to scrap the World Health Organization guidelines. That is not good enough. The first job we have here every day is to protect the health and welfare of the people who send us here. We are all Teachtaí Dála, whether we are Ministers, the Taoiseach, backbenchers, in opposition or whatever. That is our first job.

The WHO guidelines are the standard. That is what we should be achieving and we should not be afraid to stick by them. I appeal to Deputies on all sides of the House to work together. If they want to amend the Bill, I am open to doing that. This is my first crack at it. I do not have the resources of a Department to draft this but I think most people will admit it is the best stab at one that has been made here in the past 15 years. Do not kick to touch. I am pressing the Bill to a vote.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.45 p.m. go dtí 6 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 2 Nollaig 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.45 p.m. until 6 p.m. on Tuesday, 2 December 2025.