



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe  
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 3 Nollaig 2025*

*Wednesday, 3 December 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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9 o'clock

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** 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 Albert Dolan - To discuss housing voids across local authority housing.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the Kilkenny institute further education and training campus.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the issue of respite beds for children and adults with special needs in Kerry.

Deputy Fiontán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss the roads budget for Wexford county.

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

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the SEAI warmer homes scheme.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the future of Erkina House, Rathdowney, County Laois.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss appropriate funding and resources for the treatment of allergies.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss changes to bus networks in Dublin North-West.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the parents notify system.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss overcrowding capacity and the status of current and planned capital works at Naas General Hospital.

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

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

Deputies Alan Kelly and Conor Sheehan - To discuss the need for a new model 4 hospital in the mid-west region.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the tender for the building of Cork Educate Together Secondary School.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss solar energy developments in rural Ireland and the need for specific planning guidelines.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the ongoing issues with child safeguarding in Scouting Ireland.

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

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the crisis facing the prison system.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the need for schools in the Kiltarnan school planning area.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the concerns of Dublin Fire Brigade members regarding the national mobilisation and communications system.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Cahill, Colm Burke, Brian Stanley, Sinéad Gibney and Pat Buckley have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Health Services Staff**

**Deputy Colm Burke:** As the Minister of State is well aware, a very small number of staff who worked within the HSE and the medical services during a very difficult time, when Covid was there - 159, I understand - have long Covid. They are getting support from the HSE, but from 31 December of this year, that support will stop. I ask that serious consideration be given to putting in place a mechanism to give these people the support they need. They were the front-line workers. I have one letter here from a lady who wrote to the health committee - for today's meeting, in fact - and she set out that 40 staff members where she was working got Covid. She is now long term affected by Covid. It is clear that there have been a number of decisions internationally whereby recognition has been given to long Covid as an occupational illness. It is not treated as an occupational illness here and it needs to be. A new ILO convention, No. 192, requires benefits and protections for workers who become ill from occupational exposure to biological hazards. There is a European Commission recommendation to recognise Covid-19 as an occupational disease for healthcare and front-line workers. In addition, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has clearly set out its position.

These are front-line workers who gave everything to the system through a very difficult time, and we are now saying, "Not our problem", and that they should go onto a social welfare

scheme, even though a lot of them have mortgages and young families. They are finding it difficult to accept this. It is time we stepped up to the line and gave the necessary support.

It should be remembered that if you are self-employed or privately employed, a lot of companies have illness packages in place in order that if you were to suffer an injury at work, that support scheme would remain in place until such time as you were able to go back to work. That does not apply in relation to the HSE. Yes, it applies for a period, but not after a three-month period. It was extended here in relation to Covid. I think it should be continued after 31 December because these are people who helped and supported patients who had Covid. They had to work through very difficult times providing healthcare to a large percentage of the population when everyone else was required to stay at home, including from schools, which were closed at this time. Yet they still went out to work, took the risks and provided the care. Now they find the State saying, "Sorry, not our problem. We have given as much support as we can but we are not prepared to continue with that support after 31 December."

A mechanism should be put in place for this exceptional circumstance. We always need to change the law. We always need to make sure we can adequately provide for those who have given their all to the system, especially the health system. I ask for the change to be made and for them to be given the necessary support.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** I thank the Deputy for bringing this to the House and raising such an important matter. It gives me the opportunity to acknowledge the extraordinary role our healthcare workers played during the pandemic. They went far beyond the call of duty, working on the front line, treating Covid-positive patients and doing so in those early days when the protections we now take for granted were not yet in place. Their courage and commitment can never be forgotten.

In July 2022, a special scheme was introduced to provide support to eligible public health staff who developed long Covid. This was a temporary, exceptional measure, unique to the health sector, designed to acknowledge the risks faced by staff working in high-exposure environments before PPE, vaccination and widespread community transmission were established.

As I understand, there are approximately 159 employees - the Deputy is right; that is the figure we have also been given - still on this scheme. Most of these staff have been supported with full pay for almost five years. The Department has consistently worked to ensure that these staff were looked after. At our request, the Department of public expenditure agreed to extend the scheme several times since its introduction.

Following a Labour Court hearing in June of this year, a final extension was recommended. The scheme will now run, as the Deputy said, until 31 December 2025, when it will formally conclude.

I want to be very clear: the conclusion of this scheme does not mean that supports will end. Staff who remain unfit to work will transition seamlessly into the public service sick leave scheme, ensuring continuity of care and financial protection.

Under that scheme, staff will receive full pay for three months, followed by half pay for three months. They will then have the option to apply for temporary rehabilitative remuneration,

which can provide up to a further 547 days of paid leave. In addition, the critical illness protocol may provide supports for up to three years.

Beyond financial supports, staff will also be entitled to reasonable accommodations to assist them in returning to work. This may include modified duties or adjusted work patterns while they are rehabilitating. These measures are designed to ensure that staff are supported not only financially but also practically as they recover and reintegrate into the workplace.

While some EU countries recognised Covid-19 as an occupational illness, this applied to Covid-19 itself, not long Covid. To our knowledge, no country provided sustained full pay for long Covid similar to Ireland's special scheme.

The Minister for Social Protection has reviewed the EU recommendation on recognising Covid-19 as an occupational illness. It has been determined that Covid-19 does not meet the criteria required for recognition under the Social Welfare Acts.

I assure the Deputy and the House that while the special scheme will conclude at the end of this year, the supports available to staff will continue under established public service arrangements. I know that was part of what the Deputy had been looking for as well. I can assure him that we are very mindful of this and every help will be provided there.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** For clarification, is the Minister of State saying that in respect of the 159 people getting supports, from 31 December they will be entitled to get pay for a further three months and half pay thereafter? She is. The issue still arises whereby there are occupational illnesses but we have not put long Covid under those criteria. We need to do so because it is something new and we always need to amend definitions as changes arise. This has been a fundamental change.

I will give the Minister of State an example in relation to a member of my own family who got Covid and works as a geriatric psychiatric nurse. She was lucky she had a full recovery. When she went back to work, ten of the patients she had been working with had died in the two weeks she was off as a result of having Covid. That is the kind of difficulty that staff faced. It is not just about suffering the illness, but also about the trauma of dealing with the difficulties during that period. We need to take that into account as well.

I maintain that we should put a scheme in place, because we are talking about a very small number of workers, to give them the support. A lot of nursing staff, doctors and care assistants have young families and mortgages to pay. The insurance companies, where they may have mortgage protection, are not prepared to cover them. Those are the difficulties that some people I have come across have had to deal with. I know the Government seems to have made a decision on this, but I ask that this be reviewed and that we see what further mechanisms can be put in place to support these workers.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I will go back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, with the Deputy's concerns. It is so important that we acknowledge the extraordinary services of healthcare workers during the pandemic. They did a marvellous job and their work was incredible. They would have seen people dying during their work and, as the Deputy said, that probably has affected them. It is important that we work together on this. I will certainly raise the Deputy's issues.

As I said, the scheme is concluding on 31 December 2025, but I assure the Deputy that staff will not be left without support. They will transition into the public service sick leave scheme, with full access to supports that include temporary rehabilitation, remuneration and critical illness protocol. It is important to thank the healthcare services for the work they did over Covid. As I said, I will definitely go back to the Minister with the issues the Deputy raised and we will see what we can do from there.

### **Disability Services**

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I am anxious to get to the root of the numbers of respite beds not only available but also those required to bring us to a position whereby all families can avail of this vital service monthly. Respite is an extremely vital service and a survival requirement for many families, carers and patients. When dealing with patients with special needs, many carers and loved ones have to be available 24 hours a day to attend to all the needs of their charges. Respite gives all involved an opportunity to recharge the batteries with a change of pace. Even going to the shops without worrying about the patient will release tensions, both physical and mental.

People caring for patients with special needs are well entitled to a monthly break as a basic human right. All of us have set hours in our week, even our fantastic front-line healthcare staff, but many who care for special needs patients advise that it has been many months since they have had an overnight break to allow them to massage their brains and relieve all their built-up stress and pressure. Caring for special needs patients is a full-time job in the real sense of the word, in many cases entailing doing and supporting all functions for them, including the most basic. The cost to the Department of Health to provide once-monthly respite to all those qualifying would be negligible in comparison with the cost if these carers were not willing and able to act in lieu of the State, saving costs of hundreds of additional qualified staff and a vastly increased number of full-time residences for a large percentage of these patients.

The number of respite beds available for patients with special needs for use by six- to 18-year-olds in Kerry confirmed to me recently by the HSE is eight on seven nights a week, split evenly between north and south Kerry. The number of respite beds available for patients with special needs for use by those over the age of 18 is ten on seven nights a week and five on three nights a week. It would be extremely helpful if we could know the numbers of families that this level of respite beds are caring for, the average regularity of this care offered to any family and the total number of respite beds required to be in place in Kerry to give every family a monthly break.

In parts of Kerry, particularly the peninsula of Corca Dhuibhne, Dingle, and west Kerry and Uíbh Ráthach, Iveragh, and south Kerry, there are difficulties in attracting suitably qualified staff to operate these respite beds. That is a huge problem. I believe we should now also consider offering added incentives to potential employees to come and work in these lesser populated areas away from the bright lights and also for those who might be persuaded to return home from abroad if circumstances suited. We can also accept that different patients have different requirements, but these are already being cared for, mainly by family members, who in the vast majority of cases have no training or qualification in this field whatsoever.

I thank those staff who operate respite beds in Kerry and the companies that administer them, such as St. John of God's, Orchard Care, T1 Healthcare and the Kerry Parents and Friends Association. Fantastic facilities are being operated in Kerry at Whitefield, Beaufort on the campus of St. Joseph's Special School by St. John of God's. I urge the Minister to use this already owned property and buildings to further develop respite places for the families of Kerry in this wonderful setting, generously donated for a specific purpose by the Doyle family of Beaufort.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Deputy. The Minister thanks Deputy Cahill for raising this important issue and for offering her the opportunity to respond. Respite is a vital support for families and service users and potentially helps prevent out-of-home full-time residential placements, preserves the family unit and supports family stability. In regard to respite services within Kerry, the situation is as follows. HSE south west has made significant additional investment in respite provision in recent years. In 2024, regional health area HSE south west, which extends to the Cork and Kerry area, provided 17,181 respite overnights and 2,833 day-only respite sessions and supported 760 people with a disability.

The type and quantum of respite have been increased each year to meet the assessed needs and preferences of as many people as possible. HSE south west disability services provide a range of respite models for children and adults. These include residential overnight respite centres, after-school clubs for children and young people, in-home respite support for children and adults, outreach day respite supports and holiday breaks for adults. These options ensure that respite is provided in the manner that best meets the needs of people and their families or carers.

Currently, there are approximately 2,800 respite bed nights for children and 4,200 respite bed nights for adults every year. This is of course subject to some variations according to the needs and compatibility of the adults and children availing of these services.

The HSE advises that the number of people a respite centre can accommodate at any given time is not fixed as it varies according to the complexity of clients' needs. Within each centre, groupings and occupancy are determined by both client compatibility and the level of support required to ensure safe and appropriate care. Within that context, HSE south west disability services confirm that in County Kerry, there have been no unplanned closures of existing adult respite beds at any point during 2025. HSE south west disability services are unable to provide a definitive number of respite beds required in Kerry as the allocation of respite beds is based on a number of different factors, although it is accepted that demand is high. In Kerry, there have been two recent developments in respite provision, one for adults and one for children. The adult north Kerry respite house has been allocated additional funding to enable the service to operate on a full-time basis, seven days a week, to ensure the service is utilised to its full capacity. Additionally, several families have been provided with bespoke respite arrangements to support them in response to specific challenges. In terms of future developments, the HSE is progressing on property purchases for respite and residential services in the Tralee area. Additionally, proposals to the capital plan 2026 have been made by HSE south west disability services to fund a number of new-build residential and respite units.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State. We have to do more. These families in Kerry are suffering every single day of the week because of the chronic lack of respite for

both children and adults with profound disabilities. They have been let down by the State. We have to help them and if we do not, we are all failures. Obviously, I welcome the fact that the Taoiseach has made disabilities a priority for this Government, and rightly so. The bottom line is that we have to deliver an adequate number of residential respite beds for all the children and adults with disabilities and their families in County Kerry and throughout the country. It is a priority for the Government and the Minister of State is in a position to deliver this. She might speak to my party colleague the Minister for children and disabilities, Deputy Foley, who is well aware of the problem. I have met people on a number of occasions individually and collectively, particularly the mothers. Their stories are harrowing. It is just not fair. What is happening is illegal. It is criminal. They are at the end of their tether. It is 24-7. They do not get a wink of sleep and a lot of them cannot get respite for five, six or seven months. That is a huge crime and we should be embarrassed about it. I am begging the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Government to make sure that an adequate number of respite beds is provided both for under-18s and over-18s. It is something I made a priority when I was elected to Dáil Éireann on the night of 1 December at 10 o'clock. It is hugely important to me. We have many problems with our health service, but this is an area with chronic issues.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** We need to help them. There is a fabulous facility at St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort. There is already residential care there. There is St. Francis Special School there. There are a lot of facilities. There is a special swimming pool there.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** If I can finish, the land was donated by the Doyle family many years ago for children with special needs and it should continue to serve that purpose.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** Deputy, you are 30 seconds over time.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I am begging. I will keep hammering this. I am a member of the health committee.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** Your time is up, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I will be raising it again down there shortly and in the disability committee.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** Deputy, please, your time is up, and you are delaying other people who have questions.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I am begging the Government and the Minister, my own party colleague, to act here, please.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I can see and hear the passion. The Deputy is right that respite is absolutely crucial for families, whether it is children or adults. I thank him for raising this and can assure him the Government is committed to the continued expansion and development of respite services as set out in the programme for Government and the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. To support the HSE in its work to provide and develop respite services in recognition of the importance of support for disabled people and their families, budget 2026 has provided significant additional funding to support respite service expansion in 2026. I assure the Deputy that this is crucial, and I honestly take what he is saying on board. He can be assured I will be talking to the Minister, as I know Deputy Cahill will be as he is her party colleague. I will ask and find out about the HSE's property purchase for respite. I will check that out for the Deputy and make sure that comes back from the Minister's office. HSE south west has advised it is aware of the importance and value of respite. The HSE's 2026 national service plan will provide greater detail on expected delivery for 2026. That is expected to be published in the coming months. I will keep the Deputy updated and I thank him for highlighting this important issue.

### **Mental Health Services**

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State and am happy she is here as a resident of Laois. I know she is just inside the border, but she is still in Laois. I raised this back in April 2022. On Holy Thursday of that year, I became aware from a source that there were plans to close Erkina House in Rathdowney. Erkina House at that time had 12 residents and €120,000 had just been spent re-roofing part of the building. There was an almighty campaign to keep it open. The decision to close it was not notified to the Minister at the time, and he confirmed that in writing and here on the floor of the Dáil as well. At the time I predicted that the HSE might sit it out, have a war of attrition and let the numbers dwindle down as people passed on, returned to a ward or a nursing home, or were convinced to go somewhere else. Unfortunately, that seems to be what has happened. A consultant was brought in to meet with residents, families, staff and public representatives and we all participated in this. Views were taken, and the view that came back very strongly supported retention of a facility on the site of Erkina House.

The points in favour were the excellent staff in the facility; that it is on a large site in the centre of Rathdowney town with large gardens behind it - it is the old convent house; that it has easy access to shops and a post office directly across the road; and that there is a cafe, local facilities and the health centre, with the library adjacent to it. All of these were used by some of the residents. One person in it was writing poetry. He was moved the other day. Another person who died very recently had produced wonderful artwork, which I have viewed over the years. There is a regular bus service from Rathdowney. An excuse used by the HSE and the Department of Health at the time was that there was no transport in and out. There is a very good bus service in and out of Rathdowney and that will improve further under the rural link scheme, which is a great scheme. I welcome that.

One of the other great points in favour of the facility was the support and acceptance of the residents by the local community. The residents knew local people, and local people knew them and would chat to them. The residents were familiar with the local people and the surroundings. The HSE and the Department produced an order of merit report on the building,

looking at options. Refurbishing and extending it had a projected cost of €5.2 million. Obviously, there was a cost in producing that extensive report. A firm of architects was brought in to do it.

The current situation is that the facility is down to just two residents. This is what I predicted would happen. Some of them have been moved. The HSE and the Department have sat it out. Some residents have moved to a nursing home and some of them have gone to their eternal and just reward. There were a number of meetings with the HSE and various options were discussed. I followed this the whole way along. We were told the preferred option for the HSE was that there would be four of these centres in Laois and Offaly, two in Laois and two in Offaly. There is already Silver Lodge in Tullamore and the one in Borris-in-Ossory. Those are the two in Offaly. In Laois, there is the Maryborough Centre, which was being refurbished at the time. It has been reopened now and is fantastic. There are up to 15 residents in that. That is good, but I pointed out at the time that Rathdowney is ideal because it is at the other end of the county. It provided care for the south of the county. It already owns the site but what we have had since is pussyfooting or deliberately sitting it out. I do not know which it is but no decision has been made. This is not acceptable. How long does it take for decisions to be made in this country? Ministers really need to catch officials and move things on. I ask the Minister of State what is the truth and what is happening. We need an upfront answer.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Deputy from my neighbouring county for raising this important matter. It is a key priority for the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who, unfortunately, she cannot take this Topical Issue, and for the Government that people experiencing mental health difficulties receive the appropriate level of care they require in the most suitable location in the community that best meets their needs. Achieving this involves reform of mental health services and developing fit-for-purpose community services that meet people's needs into the future. This is supported by substantial investment in mental health services each year.

Erkina House is operated by the HSE as a fully staffed community mental health residence. The HSE has advised the Department that there are three remaining residents supported at this residence. Erkina House has provided much-needed mental health support to many people over two decades. However, it is not the type of mental health service we would build today and there are documented issues with the configuration of the building as a mental health service. The HSE has been actively engaging in working towards a solution that meets the long-term care needs of the service users remaining at the facility. The HSE have advised the Department of Health that Erkina House would be significantly non-compliant with forthcoming Mental Health Commission community residence standards and a significant level of investment would be required to develop Erkina House to achieve the additional regulatory standards required.

An independent review was commissioned by the chief officer in the HSE Midlands Louth Meath community healthcare organisation in 2022. The review was completed on the basis of a potential move of services to another location in County Offaly. This is no longer an option being considered by the HSE. The review strongly recommended that the views of residents on their future service provision be the focus of decision-making. This person-centred management model has been undertaken by the HSE which indicated that the remaining residents wish to move to other long-term care facilities in their community. The HSE has

advised the Department that this property is not suitable for upgrade and adaptation and accordingly no new admissions will be undertaken. The HSE has provided assurance to the Department as to the service provision for the existing residents to properly meet their needs. I will not go over these details as the number of people involved is so small that they could be identifiable. The HSE aims to re-provide this service and provision for community-based high support which will be managed in existing alternative mental health residences located within the integrated healthcare area.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State for her reply. As of yesterday, my information is it was down to two residents. We have known for three years that the building will not meet standards. The HSE, the Government and the Department know it. In the meantime, HSE management was clear it needed four centres and the ideal size of those centres was to cater for between ten and 15 people because that provides the best model in terms of efficiency, use of resources and best practice for residents. It outlined in great detail why. Where is the fourth centre going to be? We have three in Laois-Offaly. The Department of Health owns this site. There is a building there. I recognise this building needs an upgrade but if there are going to have four centres, surely one should be located in south of the county along with one up towards the north and the centre in the middle of the county, which is in Portlaoise. That is excellent; I welcome that centre. I visited it and it is wonderful what is happening in it. The Minister of State will know that people being let out of mental health facilities and sent home who really need to be in care. Families contact me about people who are being sent out of the psychiatric unit, brought in for a couple of days and sent out again. Those people need to be in residential care. That is well recognised by medical professionals but there is nowhere to send them. They are not fit to hold down a tenancy in a house or to live in group supported accommodation but in a setting like that, they function. The HSE recognised that at the time so what has happened? The most recent reply I got to a parliamentary question was that no decision has been made regarding the future of Erkina House. We need to get straight answers as to what is happening. I ask the Government to use this resource and opportunity, make decisions and put a facility in place in the south of the county. Utilise the goodwill and staff who are there also.

**Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor:** I thank the Deputy again for bringing this important issue up. I assure the House that I understand, as the Deputy said, how important it is for all persons with mental health difficulties to have the relevant mental health services in place from the HSE in the location that best suits their needs. The Deputy mentioned the four centres and that they should be based in different areas. I will check that out with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. I will also check the site with the HSE. The Deputy said Erkina House is a HSE site. I will also speak to the Minister of State and Department. I assure him someone will come back to him with this information. I note this is a priority for Deputy Butler and I will go back to her with the Deputy's concerns.

### **School Accommodation**

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I would like to discuss the need for schools in the Kiltarnan area of my constituency of Dublin-Rathdown. Kiltarnan is one of the most beautiful areas in my constituency. It is in the Dublin Mountains on the Wicklow border. We have a very diverse

community with more suburban areas like Dundrum and Stillorgan but as one moves up towards Belarmine, Carrickmines, Stepside and Kiltarnan, they are quite different in terms of the topographical area and some of the challenges that brings. Parents are at the end of their tether with no school places for their children for September 2026. Last week, parents from the Kiltarnan community held a meeting to discuss this. There was story after story of frustration, lack of place allocation and endless waiting lists. These families need to know their children will have a school to go to next September. One challenge this community faces is development. There has been huge housing and infrastructure development in Kiltarnan but it has not been matched with school place provision. Of course, we want to celebrate that this is a growing community. It is wonderful to see this beautiful part of our constituency is under development but it has to be matched with the resources that are needed. There are multiple housing projects under construction and commencements due over the period ahead locally. The need for school places will only grow in the area yet the community is already crying out for schools for the children of Kiltarnan.

I will touch on the different needs at primary and secondary level. At present, there is no secondary school in the Kiltarnan school planning area. Children who attend primary school locally have no local secondary school to go to when they finish. They do not receive guaranteed admission to any local secondary schools. As a result, families are facing commutes to different locations outside their area with their children. As I mentioned, that is practically challenging when people are in an area with the topographical challenges Kiltarnan brings, which is a hilly area. I will get onto transport and the challenges around that later. In primary school need, the community is facing an immediate crisis for 2026 for junior infant intake. Families are contacting my office constantly, experiencing huge anxiety over whether they will be able to obtain any place for their children to begin school. I mention specifically Our Lady of the Wayside National School which is trying to accommodate as many students as it can. The school has full planning permission for an extension and new facilities but the Department has not committed to the allocation of funding, which I find bizarre given the reply to a parliamentary question said the preference is always to build on rather than building a new school. I am curious as to why that gap is happening. I urge the Department to reconsider and I invite the Minister of State to meet the principal Fiona Downes on the issue. A site for schools has been reserved in Kiltarnan for many years by Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council but the Department of Education and Youth has yet to sanction the delivery of the required schools.

What metrics are being used by the Department to determine the need for a new school? Will the Department commit to schools for Kiltarnan? When are families going to see the delivery of these schools? They are at the end of their tethers with the frustration, anxiety and stress this is bringing to them and their young children. How does the Government intend to provide school places for the children of this rapidly-growing community in the interim?

As I have not had an opportunity to say it yet, I congratulate the Minister of State on his appointment.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I thank the Deputy very much. I thank her also for raising this very important Topical Issue on the need for schools in the Kiltarnan school planning area. I am pleased to have the opportunity to describe, on behalf

of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, how the Department keeps the requirement for school places under review.

In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a geographical information system with data from a range of sources, including CSO census data, child benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level. Major new residential developments have the potential to alter the demand for school places at a local level. In that regard, as part of the demographic demand analysis, the Department monitors planning and construction activity in the residential sector. This involves the analysis of data sources from local authorities and the CSO along with the 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 demographic analysis exercise. This is necessary to ensure schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes at a local level where there is a constantly-evolving picture with planned new residential development.

Where demographic data indicates that additional provision is required the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the circumstances of each case and may be provided through utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools, extending the capacity of a school or schools and provision of a new school or schools. If additional accommodation is required, the aim is to try and facilitate this as much as possible by way of expansion of existing schools rather than establishing new schools. The expansion of existing schools is consistent with wider Government objectives under Project Ireland 2040 for an increased emphasis on compact growth. In respect of post-primary schools, new post primary schools must have a student enrolment capacity of 600 to 1,000 students and must be coeducational. A lower threshold of 400 students may apply to Gaelcholáistí, having regard to the alternative of establishing an Irish-medium unit in an English-medium school.

There are fewer than 600 post-primary schoolgoing children and young people living in the Kiltarnan school planning area. Capacity has been provided in post-primary schools in neighbouring areas to cater for this demand. The demand for primary school places is being catered for in the three existing primary schools in the Kiltarnan school planning area, including, as the Deputy mentioned, Our Lady of the Wayside National School, which has a capital project to extend from 12 to 16 mainstream classrooms and SEN facilities. Therefore, there are no plans at present to establish new primary or post-primary schools in the Kiltarnan school planning area. The Department is aware of planned residential developments and has regular engagement with local authorities regarding the progress of the proposed developments.

I take on board what the Deputy said about the topographical issue in the area and the fact she has asked the Minister to visit Our Lady of the Wayside National School. Is it Ms Leahy or Ms Touhy?

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** It is Fiona Downes. I will send on the details.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I will pass that on to the Minister as well. I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I thank the Minister of State. There is a lot of detail there about the different demographic data and census data. I am trying to add to that data the voice of the people of Dublin Rathdown and specifically Kilternan. These constituents are, as I said, incredibly frustrated at this. The Minister of State touched on some of the alternatives in other areas but the issue with that is I have just heard this morning that transport is not going to be provided by the Department. Kilternan is already struggling with transport. As I mentioned, those key areas of Kilternan, Stepside, Carrickmines and Belarmine are all disadvantaged. Although BusConnects is going to provide some additional relief it is not going to be enough and it is already not enough. Constituents with children who are already forced to travel for school are experiencing huge difficulty with this so there is no doubt in my mind or that of the community that a new school is needed. I have heard from multiple families that they have been rejected by four local primary schools and are on waiting lists for them with zero guarantees.

It is hugely concerning this shortfall of places has happened under the Department's existing assessment criteria. That tells me these criteria are not working. How is the Department planning on meeting the school place need for children in Kilternan for September 2026? That is the most urgent issue here. What guarantee can the Department give the families of Kilternan their children will have places to start school in September 2026? Once again, if the priority is adding onto existing premises for compact development, as the Minister of State said, why is it that fully capacity of planning permission is not being delivered? What is proposed instead is prefabs and so on.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** Again, many thanks to the Deputy for her best wishes in my new role as a Minister of State.

She has made some very important interventions regarding her area. I am familiar with that area and new schools are only established in areas of demographic growth as the resources available for school infrastructure have to be prioritised to meet the needs of areas of significant population increase to ensure every child has a school place. The Department continues to liaise with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council in respect of the county development plan and any associated local area plans with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across school planning areas. The Deputy has brought very important issues to the House and I will raise them with the Minister.

### **Child Abuse**

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I thank the Minister of State for being here. I want to draw to his attention what is not happening within Scouting Ireland. The problem is this is a legacy issue that goes back to the 1980s. I went to the one of the same schools as many of these people did. It is about abuse and a specific teacher who got ten years in jail for raping young boys predominantly as a schoolteacher, a scout leader and a scout commissioner for the diocese of Cloyne. He also ran the summer camp in Mount Melleray. Back in 2018 or 2019, Scouting Ireland put out a notice asking that anybody who was affected by this should make contact with it so those people who were directly affected by this individual could engage in a process where they might get some solace. However, I met with a survivor very recently and he told me that

back as far as 2019 he contacted Scouting Ireland but he has never heard anything from the organisation. At the time he was a minor so Tusla was involved. The individual told me he would have a better chance emptying the Red Sea with a bucket with no ass in it than getting any help from Tusla. He has told me Scouting Ireland has changed its legal team, possibly twice, since 2019 when he brought the abuse to its attention. His legal team, which he has to pay, feel they have been stalled and they cannot get any answers to this. This was reported on a number of times and I will quote one or two of the headlines to give the Minister of State what was in the public domain. One was "Man repeatedly raped by teacher in classroom as an 11-year-old boy seeks apology over vile attacks". That individual when he was old enough - because, again, he did not get any answers - left the country and tried to make a new life for himself somewhere else. The unfortunate thing is that I know four, possibly five, who left as well over the craic with this, but they left through suicide.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** I wish to advise the Deputy that according to the Dáil Salient Rulings of the Chair, Nos. 467 and 468, Members should not comment, criticise or make any charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way to make him identifiable.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I did not name anybody. I am well aware of that. I thank the Acting Chair. The case about the schoolteacher is well documented. What I am trying to raise here, as the individual asked me to do, is to find out what recourse this person and others have right now. We have learned nothing from the mother and baby home scandal. What can I tell this individual? Somebody is going to tell me that it is a legal issue. Scouting Ireland is being paid taxpayers' money. For starters, I would like to know how much it has spent defending the indefensible. How much has it paid out in legal costs, again trying to bury what has happened?

In 1982 The Stranglers' "Golden Brown" was No. 1. I was not thrown out of the school for standing up, but they said to me that they would much prefer if I did not come back after the Easter holidays. I am speaking from personal experience. I knew this individual. He was a nasty individual. I am not here for kudos for me. What I am trying to get is information on behalf of those who are still alive, and still brave enough to talk up, who are being stone-walled left, right and centre. Scouting Ireland has been deplorable, absolutely diabolical. It has spent more time, energy and money trying to bury this when the person got ten years in jail for it. Scouting Ireland is not doing what it is supposed to do, which is to look after those who were interfered with by this teacher. Where do I go?

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very harrowing and distressing matter, which I am answering on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton.

Child safeguarding in Scouting Ireland is a matter that is taken extremely seriously by the Department. As the Deputy is aware, Scouting Ireland is a voluntary organisation and a registered charity governed by an independent board of directors. It receives an annual grant from the Department of Education and Youth under youth services grants. Scouting Ireland receives the majority of its funding through membership subscriptions and fund-raising. I believe that Scouting Ireland would acknowledge that young people were not always properly protected in the past in the scouting movement. Today, Scouting Ireland has a well resourced

safeguarding office, supported by dedicated funding from the Department of Education and Youth. As a major recipient of funding under the youth services grant scheme, YSGS, officials from the Department engage regularly with Scouting Ireland to ensure proper governance in relation to funding from the Department and to ensure that the organisation has adequate child safeguarding structures in place. Officers from the youth affairs unit, which administers the youth services grant scheme, hold biannual governance meetings with the board and senior management of Scouting Ireland. Safeguarding is a standing item on the agenda for these meetings.

As I mentioned, since 2019 dedicated funding has been provided to Scouting Ireland to support its safeguarding office. In 2025, €251,377 of Scouting Ireland's overall YSGS grant of €1,504,312 was ring-fenced for this safeguarding office. Since 2023, Scouting Ireland has been submitting regular reports to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and, following the transfer of youth functions, to the Department of Education and Youth. The reports received to date have been reviewed by officials and have been deemed satisfactory. Ongoing engagement between officials and Scouting Ireland indicates that safeguarding is a strong focus and priority for Scouting Ireland, and that robust safeguarding structures are in place.

It is a requirement for renewal of funding under the youth services grant scheme that funded organisations, including Scouting Ireland, meet the following conditions: that the organisation adheres to national child protection guidelines and procedures; that the organisation has policies in line with legislation, on the Children First Act 2015 and Garda vetting; that the organisation's recruitment and selection processes are in line with the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012-2016; that the organisation has a child protection policy and accompanying procedures; that the organisation's board review their child safeguarding policy, to ensure it abides by all legal requirements, and have written procedures in place.

Scouting Ireland is an important part of the youth sector in Ireland. Its 2024 progress report showed that 33,985 young people were taking part in scouting as members of 392 groups, led by over 7,000 volunteers. The Department is committed to supporting the important work carried out by Scouting Ireland. I hear Deputy Buckley's message loud and clear. There are some aspects of it that the Department maybe cannot deal with, but I will bring his views back to the Minister.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** I thank the Minister of State. I want to let the Acting Chair know that the perpetrator is now deceased and the name is already in the public domain.

I thank the Minister of State for the response from the Minister's office. Every time I come in here, we do not know everything. I see in the response that €251,000 was ring-fenced for safeguarding. I would say Scouting Ireland has spent a lot more than €251,000 on it.

The response also states that the organisation adheres to national child protection guidelines and procedures. I am going to look at them and see whether that is the case because a lot of people are coming to me saying that they have been ignored for years.

In addition, we are told the organisation's board reviews the child safeguarding policy to ensure it abides by all legal requirements and has written procedures in place. I would like to

see the written procedures because this individual rang seven years ago and was referred to Tusla, and that is where it stopped.

I am concentrating on this one individual because they gave me the most information. Their life has been ruined. The trauma is still ongoing. The person is very happily married and they have children. They are lucky to still be in a good working relationship in life. All this individual and others want are answers to why they were not safeguarded and why they were not facilitated with help once the reporting started and it all went into the public domain. This issue was raised in July 2003, March 2004 and the most recent article was in 2017. It is not a big secret, but what I am trying to find out is who I can go to in order to make sure that Scouting Ireland lives up to its responsibility and gives these people and others a proper response, and stops stalling and wasting money by using senior counsel and stalling the process in court houses and changing legal counsel to take it on again. It is only costing these people money. I thank the Minister of State for his answer. I will get on to the Minister myself as well. I thank him for his response.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** As previously outlined, child safeguarding in Scouting Ireland and all funded organisations working with children and young people is a matter that is taken extremely seriously by the Department. Departmental officials are satisfied that safeguarding is a priority for Scouting Ireland and that the organisation has appropriate safeguarding structures in place. There continues to be ongoing engagement between departmental officials and Scouting Ireland and this engagement, including the continued effective implementation of the processes and governmental structures that I have outlined to the Deputy, provide assurance that robust safeguarding measures are in place in Scouting Ireland.

Deputy Buckley raised some very historical issues. I am sorry that was not the case many years ago. However, I compliment Scouting Ireland. Over many years when I was growing up, I saw the great work that a lot of the leaders did for all the young men. Unfortunately, there were some who stepped absolutely out of line and those issues are being dealt with today. I again thank Deputy Buckley for raising this issue.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.59 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.01 a.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 9.59 a.m. and resumed at 10.01 a.m.*

### **Trans Healthcare: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recalls that it is now a decade since the passage of the Gender Recognition Act 2015;

notes that:

— trans healthcare in Ireland is consistently ranked as the worst in Europe, with over 2,000 people on a waiting list for healthcare;

— stories from transgender people constantly highlight how Ireland's flawed healthcare system is not working, with invasive and insensitive scrutiny from the current National Gender Service; and

— the previous Programme for Government committed to a stronger model for trans healthcare in line with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) international best practice guidelines, but the current Programme for Government has watered down those commitments to the point where they are meaningless;

recognises that:

— there is a need to change the current approach to transgender healthcare in Ireland; and

— the Health Service Executive has initiated a new clinical programme for gender healthcare, is developing an updated clinical model, and has established a Clinical Advisory Group; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide a model of gender-affirming care in primary care settings, with a focus on General Practitioner-led (GP) care, based on informed consent as per WPATH and world Health Organization guidelines, and international best practice;

— replace the National Gender Service with a new national clinical programme for trans healthcare in Ireland, with integrated care pathways, recognising a key role for GPs, and the major need for recruitment of specialists providing gender affirming care;

— ensure that the new national clinical programme:

— is developed in collaboration with transgender people;

— has specific responsibility and oversight for governance and training, alongside ensuring transgender healthcare is based on informed patient consent;

— provides comprehensive training for healthcare professionals in gender-affirming care;

— has a comprehensive network of GP's providing that care in primary care community-based settings; and

— further provides appropriate resourcing of specialist gender affirming care and the expansion of gender affirming surgical services, so that the majority of trans persons requiring surgery do not have to travel abroad;

— confirm a timeline for the introduction of the new clinical programme for trans healthcare;

- establish guidance and facilities to allow for trans healthcare for young people aged under 18;
- implement a ban on conversion therapies that is inclusive of trans identities and healthcare;
- implement the recommendations of the 2018 Government Review of the Gender Recognition Act 2015, including to allow for the recognition of non-binary people and simplified non-medicalised gender recognition for young people under 18; and
- ensure that the bodily autonomy of intersex children and adults is respected.

I am very proud to be moving this motion today on behalf of the Labour Party. It is ten years since the passing of the Gender Recognition Act in 2015, and a decade since the Labour Party in government introduced legislation to formally recognise and afford dignity to trans people in this country. This came after many years of campaigning. I want to pay particular tribute to all those who fought for it over a long period of time. Today, in the Visitors Gallery, we have many guests who have been fighting for better healthcare and human rights for trans people for a long time - BeLonG To, LGBT Ireland, TENI, Trans Healthcare Action, AMLÉ, IADTSU, Mammies4TransRights, Labour LGBTQ+, Spunout, ShoutOut and those from the trans community themselves, who have come here today for this important motion.

It is fair to say that it is far from guaranteed that the 2015 legislation would be progressed so smoothly today. The war on LGBTQ+ rights has taken a devastating and disgusting turn in recent years across the world, with rising hostility by Governments in Hungary and elsewhere across eastern Europe, and attacks here at home and, indeed, within this Chamber and in the Seanad. All of this reminds us that progress cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be actively protected and supported.

For us in the Labour Party, gender recognition was only ever one part of the jigsaw. For us, a compassionate, caring system of healthcare is the other part of the social contract that we owe trans people in this country. While there are many debates about models of care and the rights and wrongs of various institutions, all we want is that young, vulnerable trans people out there are afforded compassionate, appropriate and timely healthcare.

I appreciate that the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Mary Butler, cannot be here today. I pay tribute to her work in this area in recent years. I very much hope that she makes progress.

I know that we stand here today very angry and distressed at what is available in this country. We are angry that vulnerable young people are being forced to wait four and a half years before they can even get an initial appointment with the National Gender Service. That is a lifetime to a young, vulnerable person who desperately needs support. We are angry that so many people had to go down the DIY route. It is estimated that some 30% are self-medicating with medicines bought on the black market, with no proper GP or clinical monitoring, and all the risks that entails. We are frustrated that so much care has been centralised through the National Gender Service here in Dublin and that GP care is non-existent in many parts of the country for trans people. We are aghast that there has been little or no recruitment since 2020.

At the heart of all of this, we are concerned about the actual model of care itself. I have spoken to a significant number of trans people in recent months about their experiences. I have

also reached out to the staff of the NGS to understand their perspective on the service they provide. To be frank, the whole provision of services is an absolute mess. We desperately and urgently need a reset in how those services are provided in this country. The stakes are so high. For too many trans people, the wait time of four and a half years makes them feel like there is no service.

Is it any wonder that so many suffer crippling mental health issues because of the lack of supports? We know from research by BeLonG To and Trinity College in 2024 of the very real impact, which is summed up by that feeling of hopelessness. The lack of supports can have deadly consequences. During the summer, *The Journal* reported research by Trans Healthcare Ireland that 75% of trans people have self-harmed, 82% of trans people have experienced suicidal thoughts and, shockingly, 39% of trans people have had a suicide attempt. For many others, the lack of health and social support is having a devastating impact on their education, work and family and social life. That is why we in the Labour Party are bringing forward this motion today. These are our young people, sons, daughters and siblings, and, for some, it is their parents, colleagues, neighbours and friends.

I know a review of the model of care is currently under way and that the findings will be published next year. I want to set out our belief in the Labour Party about what needs to happen. We need a new model of care, a model that is rooted in informed consent, self-determination and respect for the bodily autonomy of individuals. We do not need to start from scratch. There are models out there in other countries that we can take guidance from. As the Minister knows, there is a lot of hurt and terror out there due to the assessment process and the invasive line of questioning. From a clinician's perspective, I understand that in order to prescribe medication, there has to be a careful process but the current model is simply unacceptable. It makes no sense. We have to start trusting people when they say they are trans. We have to stop traumatising them at the assessment and stop pathologising so much of the trans experience. Yes, it is complicated, and yes, hormonal treatment may not resolve all the issues but we have to move away from what appears to be a paternalistic, judgmental model of care. We have to put forward something that puts the patient at the heart of decision-making. That involves informed consent. All too often, we hear clinicians dismissing informed consent as a person going in there and demanding whatever they believe to be appropriate. That is not what it is about. It is about seeking the appropriate hormonal treatment and being informed about the consequences - not being interrogated but being informed.

There is an irony here that people who have been living as trans for the past four years, waiting for their appointments with the National Gender Service, have had many years to think about what they are, who they are and what they need. They do not wake up some morning and say that this is what they want to be. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, far too often, their experience with the National Gender Service is just that.

Second, we need to ensure that multidisciplinary teams play a much greater role, in particular given the role of psychologists and medical social workers in their interaction with the National Gender Service. Third, we need a continuum of care from teenage years into adulthood. It is a huge dereliction of duty on the part of the Department of Health that there is no service at all for trans youth or adolescents in this country right now, or for their parents who want to support their children. Right now, CAMHS is the only service, and it is so wrong that children would be directed there.

We need GPs to be a critical part of the new framework. There needs to be specific training on the importance of hormonal blood tests, safe prescribing of HRT and the handling of referrals. Far too few GPs are being trained at this point in time, or are showing an interest. We need to actively ensure we have a good distribution of care across the country.

No country is perfect but we can learn a lot from Iceland, Malta, Spain and Australia. Malta is a small country like our own. It has shown the way. Its model is a de-pathologised model, building on maximising the health and psychological well-being of the individual. There is a very similar model in Iceland that operates with minimal wait times. Australia has developed a comprehensive and evidence-based model that puts significant emphasis on multidisciplinary care. It relies on the input and support of GPs, community-based healthcare and telehealth. It ensures a continuum of care, something that is so desperately lacking in Ireland.

I thank all those who have come here today. I am very proud that we in the Labour Party are bringing forward this motion. As I said earlier, I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, because she has played a very important role in the conversation. I will end with the words of Sarah: "If you'd just let us live our lives in peace, with the right medication, with the right time, we would be fine".

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I am delighted that we are able to bring this motion to the House today. As the Labour Party health spokesperson in the last Dáil, I was privileged to receive a number of briefings and to speak to members of the trans community, a community that is so often talked about but never listened to and a community that is attacked by presidents, authors, writers and other privileged people in this world. Trans people are used as a wedge in a culture war that they want no part of. When we listen to the trans community, as we are attempting to do, what do they tell us they want? They want healthcare in their own community, which is what any group or individual would want and what any citizen deserves. That is what they want. In an era when we are trying to decongregate and decentralise and have healthcare in the community for every person and group in society, why are trans people being dealt with differently? Why are we centralising everything through the national gender service at Loughlinstown? Why can trans people not go to their GP, like the rest of us can, and get the healthcare or the direction they need?

The statistics back up this motion and show that trans healthcare in Ireland is consistently ranked as the worst in Europe. There are over 2,000 people on a waiting list. Quite frankly, it is absolutely shameful. When I raised this issue with the previous Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, he agreed with the view that creating a model of care without involving the people directly impacted is neither best practice nor logical but that is what happened with the trans community. Its members have not been listened to or engaged with properly in terms of what is best for them in the context of their own healthcare.

We say, and it is Government policy, that ultimately the State aims to introduce universal healthcare through Sláintecare. One of the most important pull factors towards a universal healthcare system is equality of the care that is provided. A model of care in a universal system that does not hold closely the value of equality is not worth delivering. We have serious concerns about how transgender healthcare is delivered. I would openly label the national gender health service as wholly inadequate in its delivery of services, and that is being polite. The reality is that the inadequate access to healthcare that trans people in this country are

getting is only compounding the existing challenges they face and perpetuating the cycle of marginalisation that they unfairly and unnecessarily have to endure. There is international best practice that we could be following. WHO guidelines are there for a reason and it is a choice not to follow them. People in our medical system can be brilliant. Indeed, they are fantastic people but the system is not delivering for the people who need care.

One of my core beliefs is that the role of a properly functioning Labour Party in any part of the world is to stand up for the vulnerable in society, those who are marginalised and do not have a voice, be they workers or members of the trans community. We have to do that. The truth of the matter is that trans people need a voice in this Chamber and they need action from the Government. They need a healthcare system that is going to deliver for them. I want to acknowledge the work that others in this Chamber are doing. The Chief Whip, Deputy Butler, informed us yesterday that she could not be here today and while we may not agree on all of the minutiae of the issue, she is an important voice in the Government. It must be acknowledged that attacks on her from people in this Chamber have been absolutely disgraceful. We will not tolerate such behaviour towards anyone in this House.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I commend my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, for proposing this important motion. I welcome our visitors to the Gallery. I speak proudly in support of this motion as the leader of a party with a long track record of standing in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community. The Labour Party has a proud record in this area. Indeed, it was one of the first parties to establish a stand-alone section. I want to pay tribute to all our great activists in Labour LGBTQ+ including people like Eddie McGuinness, Bernie Linnane, Aoife Corish, Karl Hayden and so many more who have done so much to progress LGBTQ+ rights. I am also proud that the Labour Party has never wavered or sought to punch down on trans people because we stand in solidarity with our trans and non-binary friends, neighbours, family members and colleagues. Today, as we pay tribute to their bravery, we should recall the path that brought us here. The years from 2015 to 2018 were a period of extraordinary progress in Ireland, with the Labour Party to the fore in bringing about change. Campaigners for trans rights, marriage equality, civil partnership and the repeal of the eighth amendment stood shoulder to shoulder because in Ireland we have resisted attempts from the right seeking to divide us. I speak as a proud feminist. Feminists and LGBTQ+ activists in Ireland know the real enemy. We recognise that there are conservative forces across Ireland who seek to turn back the clock on LGBTQ+ rights and women's rights and we resist those attempts.

Last month marked ten years since the passage of the Gender Recognition Act. I pay tribute to the unyielding campaigning of Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, the Transgender Equality Network Ireland, TENI, and so many others and the courage of people like Dr. Lydia Foy, who we recently honoured at our Labour Party conference. For the Labour Party's part, the former Minister, Joan Burton, and the former Minister of State, Kevin Humphreys, were key to passing the law because they saw the need for change. Ten years on, much unfinished work remains, particularly when it comes to the provision of gender-affirming healthcare. When it comes to trans rights in healthcare, many of the 2018 review's recommendations still sit on a shelf, including recognition for non-binary people, the need for care at home, and protections for the bodily autonomy of intersex people. I am sure the Minister is aware that intersex people remain

invisible in Irish law, unlike in Iceland, as Deputy Sherlock has said, where strong protections exist.

In 2022 Ireland was found to have the worst trans healthcare in Europe. Many of these failings reflect wider systemic issues in the health service which will be very familiar to the Minister and to all of us here including overcentralisation, lengthening waiting lists and regional inequalities but the consequences for trans people can be particularly severe. Trans people have the longest known wait times in Europe. People can be left waiting for three, five and sometimes even ten years and one in five trans adults seeking a referral from their GP never receives one. When access is granted, the process can be invasive, pathologising and contrary to a human-rights based, informed-consent model. These are not abstract policy questions as our listeners in the Gallery know. These are personal and human rights issues and they affect real people. Plenty of people of every gender identity need access to HRT and primary care that is local and integrated. In that sense, this motion is not just about strengthening our health system for trans people but about strengthening it for everyone.

Finally, I wish to speak in support of the motion's call to ban so-called conversion therapy. This is a vitally important aspect of the motion. I co-sponsored legislation with former Senator Fintan Warfield some years ago on this issue and did so proudly. We need movement on it. The notion that so-called therapy could end up doing damage to a client must be tackled. I appreciate that complexities mire the issue of designating the profession of counsellor but the Minister must act with urgency on this. It is nearly a decade since a Labour Party Minister, Brendan Howlin, introduced legislation to regulate rogue crisis pregnancy agencies. We have seen quite a number of Governments falling since the commitment was made to give statutory protection to the title of counsellor. We need to see movement on this and the legislation must have a cross-Border element. The cross-Border nature of these deeply harmful and damaging practices needs urgent attention.

We have made great strides in the past. Between 2015 and 2018 we saw significant, progressive changes for women and for the LGBTQ+ community. On this, the tenth anniversary of the Gender Recognition Act, we need to see more done to address the serious shortcomings in the model of care for trans people.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I formally second the motion. We all would have hoped that ten years on from the Gender Recognition Act, we would be a lot further along in ensuring that trans people can get the care they need and deserve but progress has stalled when it comes to truly vindicating trans people's right to be themselves. In a country that has proudly made such strides forward in so many ways, it is utterly shameful that we are ranked the worst in Europe in terms of trans healthcare. The national gender service, as Deputy Sherlock and others have said, is not fit for purpose. I have heard from trans people that its approach is invasive, demeaning, insensitive and ultimately leaves them feeling they have to prove who they are and justify their existence. An article in *The Journal* earlier this year featured interviews with trans people who felt traumatised by their experience with the national gender service. Is that the kind of healthcare we want to deliver to anyone in Ireland? Do we want to be the kind of society that leaves people who are in need of care traumatised? This motion calls for an informed-consent model. This is the way forward. Such a model includes trans people, does not presume that their identity is something that must be interrogated and supports them in transitioning to who they really are.

We need to situate this in the broader context of how discourse around gender issues and trans rights has developed in the last number of years. We are in a very concerning place. Hate directed towards members of the LGBTQ+ community is on the rise. The level of vitriol towards trans people is particularly vicious, enabled and encouraged by influential and powerful figures globally. Certain Members of this House also have a lot to answer for as they seek to engage in imported culture wars.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I was struck by Kathy Sheridan's piece in *The Irish Times* last week because it summed up my feelings perfectly. She spoke about the absence of kindness in debates around trans people. I hate to use the word "debate" when speaking about the rights of people. This is a group of people - less than 1% of our population - that amounts to an absolutely tiny cohort of marginalised and often vulnerable people. Regardless of how few trans people there are in Ireland or elsewhere, every single one deserves the respect, empathy and dignity we would all hope to receive.

I want Ireland to be a beacon of kindness and compassion towards trans people. I want us to reject the cruel, regressive and bigoted rhetoric that we have seen levelled against trans people here and elsewhere. The Gender Recognition Act was not perfect, but it was a good first step. It sailed through these Houses almost ten years ago, almost without a whimper, much to the credit of the then Minister, Joan Burton, and the then Minister of State, Kevin Humphreys. How is it that, ten years later, the discourse around these matters has become one of such intolerance and exclusion? Trans people have always existed and will always exist. They deserve to live happy and fulfilling lives on the same terms as the rest of us. If we are to really vindicate trans people's rights to be themselves, then we need to put the provisions of the motion into action. I commend the motion to the House.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** I sincerely thank Deputies from the Labour Party for raising this important issue. It is an area on which I and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, are placing a strong and deliberate focus. As I listen to Deputies from the Labour Party going back over the history of this, I recall that they did so in partnership with Fine Gael and that we stood together to introduce many important social changes. In many respects, it might have been slightly harder for Fine Gael to do that with the Labour Party. A broad balance that changed in society achieved the changes we all wanted to make, which brought about a much more compassionate society for women and LGBT people. I am very proud of that work.

I sat beside Deputy Frank Feighan and recalled having a debate with him before I became Minister when he was a Minister of State in the Department of Health. The debate in question took place in March 2022. I asked him what we were doing to support transgender people in terms of healthcare. I decried in particular the divisive debate that seemed to be seeping across from the United Kingdom at that time. We could see it coming. I recall speaking with trans people prior to that debate, who told me about the fearful things that were being touted at that time, namely that people would come into changing rooms, for example, and dress up as men. We all know the sheer nonsense that a man would dress up as a woman and come into a changing room for the purposes of attacking me, as though with all of the conversations we

have had about femicide in this room we ever needed a man to dress up to attack a woman. Did you ever hear such nonsense? Did you ever have examples of it from any time since the Gender Recognition Act was passed? A different movement seeped in somehow in 2021 and 2022 and changed the narrative. It made the narrative cruel for trans people and other people. I have never understood why that happened. I always regretted that such attitudes seeped over here. I hope we can stand together to take steps that help to seep that away and remove any of that divisiveness from the House, as Labour Party Deputies have said.

Notwithstanding the divisiveness in the debate and our desire to set that aside, I recognise that we have an awful lot of work to do on healthcare. I have worked with LGBT Ireland, TENI, BeLonG To and Spunout for many years. I was the vice chair of the Fine Gael LGBTI group. I stand alongside the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who is a leading advocate for change in the approach to healthcare to bring about much more inclusive, compassionate and respectful healthcare provision for gender-diverse people.

Let me be very clear, even if I do not get to all of the points in my speech, that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I are standing together to work in a very practical and pragmatic way to try to re-situate the balance, the dynamic and the compassion in healthcare for gender-diverse people. Along with the Minister of State and the Government more broadly, I recognise that gender diversity is absolutely part of the human experience and that gender-diverse people should be respected in their identities and in their right to express themselves. They may choose to transition from the gender assigned to them at birth to being recognised and identified as another gender. Of course that is what the Act we are celebrating ten years of does today. They may also explore their gender and socially or legally transition without needing healthcare services.

Some people, including children and young people, may experience gender dysphoria, which refers to the psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity. In that respect, we, first and foremost, try to address many of those psychological, anxiety and mental health needs young children have. The debate has swung as though people are trying to treat them in one way when, in fact, they are trying to treat anxiety and psychological distress in the first instance, as is completely appropriate.

Nevertheless, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I are determined to ensure that a comprehensive, appropriate and integrated gender healthcare service is available for those individuals who require it. The Government is committed to ensuring that people of all ages have access to appropriate pathways to gender healthcare for them at the time and space they are in and that they are treated with kindness, dignity and compassion.

As in other countries, it is true to say that demand for gender-affirming healthcare services has risen significantly. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I fully accept and acknowledge that the current public services are not meeting people's full range of needs. We also recognise the urgent need to establish more appropriate and comprehensive services. It is in that context that the HSE has established a new national clinical programme for gender healthcare to develop an updated clinical model of care. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I take a very direct interest in the work that is going on there and the stages and reflections happening throughout the development of that model of care. It aims to design clinical pathways to deliver safe and effective health and social care services for those seeking gender-affirming services. This work will also inform an implementation plan for its delivery. My

Department has provided funding of €770,000 for the development of the model of care for 2025 and the work is expected to conclude in 2026.

The approach to developing the model of care is clear and well established. It involves reviewing the best available clinical evidence, as well as incorporating insights from healthcare professionals, patient advocates and individuals with lived experience. The model of care will consider all available information. It will not be aligned with any one study, report or one way of thinking. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I are very alive to the considerations that have to inform a fully comprehensive analysis.

A cross-speciality clinic advisory group, which was established in collaboration with the RCPI and convened in June 2025, is supporting the design and development of the model of care. In addition, a working group, comprising several representatives with direct lived experience, has been formed and its first meeting was last week. The groups are a standard component of all medical models of care. The clinical advisory group operates as an independent body within the RCPI, reviewing proposals drafted by the working group to ensure they are clinically safe.

To advance the model of care, the HSE has commenced a systematic review of the evidence base with respect to coexisting clinical needs in gender-diverse people, with support from the HSE library service. The interim results of that review were made available for public consultation in August this year. The HSE is now reviewing the submissions and completing the evidence review.

A key aspect of the development process is stakeholder and public consultation. We want to get people's views. Incorporating the views of people with lived and living experience is absolutely essential in any medical model of care that is going to be effective, grounded in evidence and compassionate. Their insights will illuminate gaps that clinical data alone cannot capture, such as the emotional, cultural and practical challenges that people face when navigating any healthcare service, including gender healthcare services.

It is crucial that we avoid developing a model of care for a group of people without involving them and considering their perspectives. Their input is indispensable, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I are firmly committed to ensuring that stakeholders are heard and actively involved in the process. I want to assure the transgender community that all efforts were made to hear from you, that we want to hear from you and we are trying, in every way, to incorporate your perspective directly into the development of the model of care, as we do with every other model of care, as is appropriate.

It is our sincere hope and expectation that this approach will not only strengthen the relevance and inclusivity of the final model but could also lead to improved outcomes by ensuring services genuinely reflect the needs of the populations they are designed to serve. It is a complex process. HSE and Department officials will work closely together to do it quickly, transparently and effectively. Given that it will take some time to complete the work, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I have requested that the HSE examine all avenues to improve interim care options while the model of care is being developed.

In terms of the proposals on conversion practices, I want to emphasise that the programme for Government contains a commitment to advance legislation to ban conversion practices. Very clearly, it is for the Department of Children, Equality and Disability to deal with this, and

it has been carefully reviewing key policy principles to underpin it and to ensure individuals are protected from harmful conversion practices, while safeguarding access to necessary and appropriate services for those seeking support. It is true that, as Deputy Bacik has said, there is complexity to some of the regulation around counsellors and psychologists. We are going through that with CORU. It is very important that these professions are regulated to a particular standard, as would be expected. That work is progressing. I might speak to the Deputy about it separately.

In relation to gender recognition, the Minister for children published the national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy in June 2025 along with the associated plan for 2025 and 2026. The remaining actions from the gender recognition review of 2025 are included in that strategy. A steering committee has been established comprising all of the important representatives. The Department of Social Protection will be participating and progressing relevant actions in line with its strategy and action plan. The national strategy also includes a commitment in the first action plan to develop national clinical guidelines for medical nursing and health and social care professionals delivering paediatric care to infants, children and young people with differences in sexual development. These are due to be published in quarter 2 of 2026.

I am glad to have the opportunity to discuss this issue this morning. Ten years on, it is appropriate to recognise the work that has been done by so many people in this House to advance equality. As we all know, equality is a broad house. Advancing one person's equality beyond where it has been in the past does not mean taking from somebody else's. I reflect in particular on Deputy Bacik's point about feminism and equality more broadly. There is no threat to me or to the Deputy as feminists in advancing somebody else's equality. That is the way we have all come to our work here and I hope it is the way we will continue to work here. I hope we will stand together to continue to work for a compassionate and inclusive society, as we have done over the last ten years.

**Deputy Ged Nash:** At the outset, I will say to the Minister that words count and leadership matters. I thank the Minister for calling out the inhumanity and cruelty that is so sadly being imported into this country and mimicked by some of those who should know better. Those people need to act and behave with more responsibility in respect of their fellow citizens.

As with everyone else in our State, the level of access trans people have to healthcare depends at least in part on the attitude of their medical professionals. We cannot allow that to continue to be the case. Care is not consistent. For example, in my office, we have been dealing with the case of a trans woman who transitioned nine years ago and was discharged from the national gender service post surgery with instructions for her GP to manage her ongoing hormone therapy. That was all fine until she decided to move and had to register with a new GP, who simply refused to continue prescribing HRT unless she saw an endocrinologist, despite her having a stable and long-term prescription. As one can imagine, this threw this woman into a cycle of health roadblocks and frustration. Her new GP refused to prescribe HRT and passed the buck to an endocrinologist. In turn, the endocrinologist at her new hospital passed the buck and demanded unredacted psychiatric reports from almost a decade ago that included all kinds of deeply private and traumatic details of her history.

This is not an isolated case. It is all too common and it is not on. Barrier after barrier was put in front of this trans woman to simply continue the treatment she had been properly

prescribed for the previous nine years simply because she decided to move to a new area. Doctors are judging patients when they should be caring for them. She tells me that if she does not continue her hormonal treatment, she risks a range of severe health risks ranging from osteoporosis to cardiovascular issues, depression and cognitive decline. Like many caught in the same position, she is actively considering sourcing her hormones online, with all of the risk and lack of regulation that entails. That is not something anyone can stand over but she is being driven to at least consider doing it. There can be no postcode lottery when it comes to access to healthcare, nor can it depend on the whim of any one medical professional.

As the Minister has heard from my colleagues, this one case is unfortunately broadly representative of many people's struggles to access basic decent healthcare with dignity and equality. As was said earlier, our record in this country in this area is appalling. We are well behind our European neighbours. We need to do better, as the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, have acknowledged. This is not only a trans issue; it is a human rights issue. We either believe in equal access to appropriate healthcare for all our citizens or we do not. Rights are not to be debated. They are inherent. The Minister accepts that the situation needs to change. She has outlined the process we are in at the moment. This is welcome. We in Labour will work with her to deliver a better system of healthcare for trans people in our society, the kind of system this Republic and its citizens demand.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** The Labour Party has a very strong tradition in this area. I am the only remaining Member who was a Cabinet Minister in the Government that brought in the Gender Recognition Act 2015, although my party colleague Deputy Nash was a Minister of State attending Cabinet. The Minister has spoken. Words are one thing but it has now been ten years and actions are now far more important than words to many people across this country who are in real need of compassion, support and a pathway to healthcare to help them. To speak frankly, what is going on in our country in this area is not compassionate.

The pathways we all hear about through our work with a great many people, including some of those in the Gallery, and the stories we hear from them are simply not acceptable. The way trans people are being treated in healthcare, the inconsistency in that treatment, the invasive way in which they are being questioned, the process they have to go through to get healthcare, those abroad having to start the process of invasive questioning all over again, and, as my colleague has mentioned, the issues that arise when people change healthcare professional are all completely wrong. The inconsistency, the lack of decency and the manner in which people are being treated really need to change in a fundamental way.

To put it simply, the national gender service is not fit for purpose. That needs to be said. It needs to be completely and utterly changed. In our country, those who are strong enough will fight and go through this current system, but those who are not strong enough will not. That is a huge issue. While supports to help people are provided through various organisations, through ourselves and so on, many people will unfortunately just not face into it. There is another very pertinent point that needs to be made. If you have financial well-being and capacity, you may be able to get through this a lot more easily than those who do not. In a republic, that is also unacceptable. While I welcome the Minister's words, I have to tell her straight that she will be judged by her actions and not by her words.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I am delighted to speak on this motion. It is timely in that it has been only a matter of weeks since we had homophobic attacks on the streets of my home city of Cork. This behaviour is repulsive and should be roundly condemned by all in this House. No one should walk our streets in fear, no matter who they are.

One of the best things this Government could do to address issues of homophobia and transphobia would be to address the shortcomings in our public services. If our State treats the LGBTQI+ community with less regard and less focus, this lesser regard will be mirrored in our society. We see big gaps in the provision of healthcare services and it is no different for trans people. In 2024, we had the longest known waiting times in Europe for trans healthcare. Even people who were receiving gender-affirming healthcare in other countries and then move to Ireland must go through the initial process before accessing the same services here. The reliance on private healthcare either via the national gender service or as an alternative to it creates class disparities and puts further financial pressure on trans people.

I also want to speak to the broader issue of transphobia and transphobic abuse in Ireland and further afield. I do not understand where the hatred of trans people and the scaremongering about them come from. There is no need for this level of hatred. Trans people simply want to live their lives happy and comfortable in themselves. They want dignity and respect. They want to be able to receive healthcare just like anyone else. This year, we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Gender Recognition Act. It is a progressive beacon to Europe and the rest of the world. It shows that we can be progressive, inclusive and ahead of the curve. I must call out the nonsense we hear when we raise trans issues, particularly from Deputies in certain quarters of this House, on the Independent Ireland benches.

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

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** It has been suggested that this motion is not called for and that other, more important issues should be raised. To that, I tell Deputies to look around them. This is a big Chamber with over 170 Deputies. The spectrum of issues we all raise is massive. I have spent my time in this Dáil raising various issues that affect this country. I would never suggest that one of these issues is more important than another because any one of those issues is the biggest issue someone in this country is facing today. It was referenced that our party has somehow turned its back on the people we represent. What a stupid comment. Every single one of my colleagues sitting around me and our councillors in local authorities know exactly the issues facing people across this country. Trans healthcare is an issue. The difference between our party and theirs is that we are not afraid to stand up to support marginalised trans people. They are, because bigotry outweighs genuine concerns. I do not have to put on a political caricature to pretend I understand the issues that people across this country face. Some do. In fact, the shared issues across healthcare are apparent in the motion before us. Trans people are facing severe delays and regional inequalities just like many cisgender people across the country trying to access healthcare. Trans healthcare in Ireland is not up to standard and it is vital that these issues are raised in this House. This House is representative of the people of Ireland, and trans people in Ireland are just as entitled to have their public services and the lack thereof raised in this Parliament. The Labour Party will never apologise for standing up for the most marginalised in our society. I urge our colleagues across this House to support the motion.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins):** I welcome the members of the finance committee from Greenland, who have just arrived in the viewing Gallery.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I welcome the opportunity to set out Sinn Féin's position on gender identity and trans healthcare. I welcome all of the guests in the Public Gallery as well. Too many trans people in Ireland are being left waiting years for care. This is not about numbers or statistics. It is about people's lives, well-being and dignity being put on hold. The delays, the uncertainty and the sense of being bounced around a system that is not fit for purpose cause real harm and distress. We cannot, should not and will not stand over that.

Let us be clear about the scale of the crisis. Trans people in this State can be left waiting years and years for appropriate healthcare - not days, weeks or months but years. I know of some people who were on waiting lists for 14 years or more. Over 2,000 people are now on a waiting list for gender identity healthcare. The national gender service in 2024 had a wait time that could range from between three and ten years and, as I said, I know of people who have waited longer. This is the reality that trans people and their families are living right now, and we should and must say it plainly. Those waits are completely unacceptable. They are a form of denying healthcare by delay. They push people into a prolonged period of uncertainty, distress and avoidable harm. What does it mean to a person who is added to a long list? It means that if a trans person is added to a list today, they tell us and they feel genuinely a sense of hopelessness. They know they are going onto a list where they may not ever be seen or will certainly not be seen for years. It leaves them in limbo and without adequate supports in the meantime.

This cannot be described as a humane system. In fact, it is the opposite. It is not a healthcare system worthy of the name and is certainly not an equal system. I say clearly that Sinn Féin approaches this issue from a foundation of equality, rights and compassion. Trans people are entitled to live safely and openly, to have their identities respected and to access healthcare on the same basis as everyone else. Our health policy in Sinn Féin is explicit about that. We recognise transgender people's right to recognition and to the best possible supports and care.

We recognise that healthcare is a fundamental right for every citizen, including trans people, and we recognise that adult trans people must be able to access evidence-based gender-affirming care in a timely and respectful way. For me, this point really matters. Appropriate healthcare is not some optional extra. For many trans people, gender-affirming healthcare supports their physical health, their mental health and their ability to participate in daily life. When people can access timely and well-supported care, it is in the best interests of that person, their families and society as a whole, but it also improves outcomes. This is what evidence-based healthcare is meant to do - help people to live healthier, safer and more fulfilling lives. We approach this as we should approach every healthcare issue, from the standpoint of need, evidence and human dignity.

I support reform in this area, as does my party, and I support a new model of care for gender identity services. I want to see an holistic, properly resourced, modern service that is safe, accessible and delivered closer to people in their own communities. I support an expanded role in primary care in this area, but I also know it has to be resourced to meet the needs of the trans community. We want waiting lists to be cut dramatically. We want more specialist capacity, more trained clinicians and clear national pathways so that people are not left in limbo. That

has to mean concrete change, not some vague aspiration as was talked about earlier. It has to mean properly staffing specialist teams so that the national gender service is no longer a barrier to care. It has to mean regional and community-based healthcare so that care is not centralised into a single overstretched pathway that simply does not work. It means equipping primary care with training, clinical guidance and the resources needed to support trans people safely and respectfully from the first point of contact. For many trans people, that is not the case, and they are not treated with respect. It also means publishing clear national standards so that people are not left guessing how the system works or where they stand within it. We would not accept that in any other part of the health service.

I recognise that a clinical review of the model of care is under way and I commend everybody involved in that. I have also met senior officials involved in this area, so I know there is a significant body of work under way. I welcome that. It is crucial that this review, and any review, into gender identity services and healthcare be carried out on the basis of genuine consultation and listening to the lived experience of the trans community. This review must be completed and its findings, where appropriate, implemented. However, we cannot allow review to become a substitute for action. I welcome the Minister's comments that interim measures can and should be taken as we await a new model of care. I understand that will take some time, but we can take steps now to improve the situation because the situation right now, today, is unacceptable. We need reform urgently. We also need investment and delivery, because any plan is only worth the investment that is behind it.

I also underline the importance of listening. Consultation cannot be a box-ticking exercise. Trans people are experts in their own lives. They know where a pathway breaks down. They know what it feels like to be delayed, dismissed or treated as if their reality is up for debate. If we want a service that works, we must build that service with the people who rely on it. Listening also means recognising the emotional aspect of their lived experience. When trans people tell us the current pathway feels like gatekeeping, which it is, and feels unsafe, which for many it is, and feels designed to slow down rather than support them, we do not and should not argue that out with them. We have to accept what has been said, learn from it and fix it. At the same time, reform has to be done right. Healthcare must be guided by clinicians and grounded in evidence. The pathway for any person must be respectful and dignified but also clinically robust. I do not see this as a contradiction. The Minister made similar points earlier. It is what good healthcare looks like. Some people experience the current system as gatekeeping, as I said, and certainly distressing and very slow. We must listen to this, and we must act. I hear that clearly. I have met many trans people, groups that represent trans people and others. Those experiences we hear have to shape how services change. They have to be at the heart of how those services change. Clinical assessment is a legitimate and necessary part of healthcare, especially where decisions involve life-altering or irreversible interventions. This is not about denying care and should not be about that. It is about ensuring the right care delivered safely for each person. Part of having a respectful debate is being honest about what good healthcare requires. This is why my party takes a measured position on the model of care. Informed consent is an essential principle in healthcare. People, of course, must have autonomy, clear information and real choice, and today trans people very clearly do not have that.

It must never be the case that someone is put through needless barriers or treated without respect. However, informed consent on its own cannot replace clinical judgment. The best

approach from my perspective is shared decision-making where a person's autonomy is, of course, fully respected and clinicians still determine what is clinically appropriate and safe. This is how we build services that are both compassionate, which they should be, and clinically sound, which they should be. It means clear timely information. It means assessments that are designed not to delay but to improve. It means clinicians who understand trans lives and people, and provide care without stigma.

I also want to address the important issue of international standards, which is subject to ongoing debate. I share the ambition to align Ireland with best practice which is what we should always do in any element of healthcare. However, we must be honest that there is active international clinical debate about elements of care particularly for young people. I do not believe we should lock Ireland into any one international model uncritically. Our job is to ensure that the Irish model, our model, is evidenced based, listens to the lived reality of trans people, is guided by clinicians and built on the outcome of Ireland's own ongoing review, alongside evolving international evidence. It should never be about resisting progress. It must be about ensuring progress is durable and safe for all. Respectful dialogue matters here which is why we need discussion that is calm, evidence based and rooted in rights. Trans people deserve to be heard in that debate. Families deserve clarity. Clinicians deserve space to do their job properly and society as a whole deserves public discussion that is humane, truthful and responsible.

We need to be especially careful with children and adolescents. I recognise the profound distress that some young people experience. We recognise the services for young people are inadequate and need urgent development because nobody benefits from a vacuum of care which is what exists at the moment. Under-18 pathways must be built with stronger safeguards, specialist oversight and an evidence-led approach reflecting the seriousness and complexity of these decisions. Our position is to ensure that the care offered is the most protective and clinically sound pathway possible. We also understand the impact that these long waiting times can have on the mental health of young people. We need services that are available, safe, specialised and properly supported. Those services need to respond quickly while ensuring appropriate safeguards.

The motion also refers to conversion therapy. Sinn Féin supports an effective ban on conversion therapy, including coercive practices targeting trans people. This is a rights and protections issue. Legislation must be drafted precisely and clearly. It must target abusive or ideological conversion practices while not creating unintended consequences that criminalise legitimate clinical practice or parents supporting a child through distress. I believe that a strong ban is achievable, desirable and should be put in place. It must be tightly drawn so that it protects people and supports appropriate healthcare.

On the wider issue of legal recognition, we must be clear that the proposals set out in this motion go well beyond healthcare - I am sure the authors would agree with that. They raise serious legal and policy issues that have to be properly worked through. In particular extending legal recognition to minors and introducing new statutory categories for non-binary recognition cannot be treated as add-ons to a health debate. These are changes with broad implications for law, education, data systems and the rights of others. They require very detailed legislation and careful whole-of-government consideration. We will not support sweeping legal changes brought forward without fully considering all potential consequences. Recognition matters and

dignity matters but so do clarity and legal certainty. If reform was or is being considered in this area, it must form part of a separate robust piece of work that can be properly and fully scrutinised rather than through a healthcare motion.

For me the central point is this. Ireland's gender-identity services are failing people. They are certainly failing the trans community and others. This failure is not abstract as was said earlier. It is measured in years of waiting, in distress and in lives put on hold. We need to support a new holistic model of care that is properly resourced, clinically led, community delivered and grounded in rights and compassion. We support timely evidence-based gender-affirming care for adults. We support making the system more respectful, more assessable and far faster than it is today. We insist that reform must also be safe evidence based and built with appropriate safeguards for young people.

I say to the Government that we have to stop the drift. We need to complete the review and not to rush it because it is important work. We must listen to the trans community. We also have to listen to clinicians. We have to publish clear guidelines and timelines, and expand capacity now. This is an urgent issue now for people. We need to train and recruit clinicians who understand the needs of trans people and build a modern service that trans people in Ireland deserve. I think we can do this with empathy, with respect and with a commitment to healthcare that is both compassionate and safe.

I will finish where I began with people living this reality. Behind every number that we talk about is a person waiting for a first appointment, a person trying to get on with their education or job, a person trying to hold a relationship together, a person doing their best to stay well, a person just trying to live their life. A system that constantly delays and tells them they have to wait, in some cases for 14 years, is clearly not acceptable. It does not have to be this way. I believe we have the ability in this country to build a modern service fit for purpose. What we lack is urgency. We certainly need the resources and the capacity put into the system. Our message today from my perspective is clear and simple, and needs to be said in that way. I insist on reform that is rights based, properly funded, clinically safe and genuinely shaped by the lived experience of trans people.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I thank the Labour Party for tabling the motion today and for giving us the time to debate this really important issue. I stand here today in defence of trans rights, trans equality and ultimately trans liberation. This is a crucial issue and one that we need to dedicate time and effort to during this Oireachtas term. As the Minister will know, this was one of the first issues I raised with her during my priority questions because for me this is a crucial issue and one that we need to work together on to deliver for trans, non-binary and intersex people in Ireland.

The Minister needs some time and support to develop a model of care and to get this right. It is really welcome that there has been good engagement so far with clinicians, with stakeholders and with the community. I think the interim measures that have been introduced are welcome but we need to see more work.

In the minutes afforded to me, I want to talk about who we are talking about, what we are talking about, where we are talking about it, when and why. When we talk about trans people, we are talking about our friends, family and colleagues. We are talking about people who work here in Leinster House. We are talking about the postman, the nurse, the teacher, the doctor.

We are talking about everyday regular Irish citizens who are looking for recognition, for rights, for equality and just to be able to live their lives in an ordinary way like anybody else.

We are also talking about a very small minority - about 1% of population, if not less. This is a group that has existed in every society across time. It has existed in Irish society going back through history, as is being uncovered now through trans history projects. It is also a group that has been consistently demonised and attacked in the most outrageous way.

We must call out people who come into parliaments like this and demonise and attack a small minority group. It is outrageous and is a terrible place to be attacking a weak and vulnerable minority to try to look strong but actually it is just very weak.

11 o'clock

In many ways, many of the attacks are very predictable. If we look across Europe, we see what is being said in other countries and the kinds of attacks we see on the LGBT community more broadly happened in other countries first. It is a far-right movement. The same attacks and lines are rehashed here in press releases, using the same language, words and playbook. They are also using the same play book from the 1980s. They are now saying the same things they said about gay and lesbian people in the 1980s about trans people. They will not get away with it. We will stand up against it because it is utterly outrageous.

With regard to the substance of what we are talking about, we are talking about people getting access to: gender-affirming care to alleviate gender dysphoria and improve their lives, hormones, surgery and mental health supports, where they need it in a timely and, as I said, lifesaving way. At the moment, we have one clinic in the National Gender Service in Loughlinstown. It is fair to say the system is broken, not working and failing people every single day in this country. As mentioned, there are 2,000 people on the waiting list. A study by *Belong To, Being LGBTQ+ in Ireland 2024*, found that one in three people waits at least three years for their first appointment. If we had any other service across the country where people had to wait three years to get their first appointment, there would be utter outrage in this Chamber. People are waiting years upon years, sitting delayed. Some people reported waiting up to ten or 13 years. The system is absolutely broken and needs to be fixed.

This morning, before I came in here, I was on Instagram and I came across released audio of someone's clinical experience. I ask the Minister to listen to that audio because the kinds of questions that this individual was asked by a clinician are absolutely shocking. It would turn your stomach listening to the way invasive questions were asked and the way in which this person was treated by a clinician in our National Gender Service. It is absolutely outrageous and it should be setting off alarm bells. This is why we need to see urgent reform. It is why I fully support a new model of care based on informed consent and international best practice.

We need a regionalised service across the country in each of the health regions. We need it delivered in primary care and have GPs involved. GPs currently prescribe hormones to a lot of people, including older people, people with menopause symptoms and older men, who are prescribed hormone testosterone. GPs do this and they could do this for trans people as well. We need regional clinics where people can be given individualised care plans and then discharged back to the primary care services. We also need a national clinical programme for trans healthcare in partnership with the trans community. This would be a body responsible for governance, training, professional development of practitioners, policy and procedures.

We need to look at international best practice and what international guidelines are saying. We know what the World Health Organization has said in this regard. In 2009, the WHO reclassified trans healthcare as part of central health rather than mental health. WHO stated: "This reflects current knowledge that trans-related and gender diverse identities are not conditions of mental ill-health, and that classifying them as such [causes] enormous stigma." Australia, New Zealand, Iceland, Malta, Canada and parts of the US have implemented this change but Ireland has not. The new sexual health strategy published in June is almost silent on trans healthcare. At best, there are only passing references to trans people. We should integrate trans healthcare into our sexual health services. They exist across the country and they are trusted by the community. People access these services already. These services need investment and support and, as we build a model of care, delivering it alongside sexual health services is the way to go.

With regard to timelines, we need action as soon as possible. As I said at the start, the Minister needs time to get this right but that time cannot run on and on. We need action in the next year or so and we will continue to apply pressure to see that delivered. It is concerning that there was a commitment in the 2020 programme for Government that was not delivered on. I know there is another commitment in this programme for Government. We cannot have another commitment again in the next one going undelivered. We have to get this right. It has to be done in the lifetime of this Oireachtas. The Minister will have our full support in getting there and I know she will have it from colleagues as well. It is important we progress that.

Crucially, as to why we want to do this, we know that trans healthcare services are lifesaving. In 2013, TENI found that access to trans healthcare results in lower rates of self-harm, suicidality, depression and anxiety. It found that 78% of trans people considered suicide but after they accessed trans healthcare, it dropped to 4%. We will, therefore, save lives by doing this. This is why it is crucially important and those people who come in here to attack this for political gain are going to cost lives and they need to know that. This is crucially important. We absolutely need to get this right.

Beyond that, I support the calls on conversion practice and intersex rights. We need to set the goal of this to be the best place in Ireland to be LGBTQI+.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion and the opportunity to speak to this incredibly important issue. I will use three slogans to shape my contribution. The first is "Trans rights are human rights." The reason I wish to delve into this a bit more is the Minister referenced equality a lot in her contribution. As a professional in the human rights and equality sphere, I have thought a lot about how human rights and equality interact. The reality is that until everybody's healthcare needs are met, we cannot say that healthcare is a right that is realised in this country. That is what we mean when we say that equality, as the Minister said, is broad. It has to reach everyone. If we want to say that healthcare is a right, it has to be provided for every single individual group. The reality for trans people in Ireland is that outcomes are worse compared with everyone else in the cis population across a multitude of areas. For healthcare, it is absolutely crucial because for so many trans people, healthcare provides the actual self-realisation of their identity. We are ten years on now from the Gender Recognition Act. When I was working in the human rights space, we were heralded as so progressive to do that but, unfortunately, all of the other areas that helped to realise the rights of trans people have not been met.

The second slogan I wish to talk about is “nothing about us without us”. There are five words I want to imprint on the Minister’s brain, namely, patient-led, informed consent model. That is what the community and trans people are looking for to allow them to access their healthcare in a dignified way that does not push them into the grey market because of the difficulty of getting drugs or cause that indignity of the questions that are asked of people in those sessions. We need to make that shift mentally as a society, as we did with abortion. When abortion was seen as a part of healthcare, it meant that it was no longer weaponised on a moral battleground. Similarly, for trans healthcare, we need to do the same thing because that is what it is; it is healthcare. It is ridiculous, for example, that, as a menopausal woman, I can access the hormones I need but the very same product is not provided to a trans woman because she is a trans woman.

The final slogan I wish to mention is simply “trans pride”, because so often in these debates – debate is the wrong word when we are talking about rights, as others have said – but trans pride says to me is that we need to celebrate our trans community. I hosted a public meeting recently in my constituency, which I framed as a trans appreciation and information evening. I did that for two reasons: first, to celebrate diversity and inclusion in our society and, second, because it cannot be weaponised. If someone were to come out and say that trans appreciation is wrong, just like we hear people say trans healthcare and trans people’s participation in sports are wrong, then that person is simply transphobic and I will not tolerate that. We need to be political leaders. It is not an easy area. It is divisive and I appreciate and recognise that. The Minister is proving to be a Minister who is not afraid to ruffle feathers, so I urge her to be the same in this area and show the political leadership that the trans community needs.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** I thank the Labour Party for tabling this motion. I am happy to speak in support of it. I am glad the Minister is here giving her time to the debate. It is so important that we have this debate and do not shy away from addressing the issue of trans healthcare, particularly in these times of increasing hatred. Trans people are looking to politicians more than ever to see someone articulate their needs and rights. Regrettably, we know the discourse has absolutely been saturated by toxicity, lies, fallacies, misrepresentations and a focus on marginal arguments. Often, there is a focus on the circus antics of online clowns. This is all ably facilitated by social media companies. It is hard to think of another group in society right now who have been as maligned as trans people. That is a shame on all of us. When we step away from the rantings of that online mob, however, we immediately see how real people approach a minority who they see denied their basic care, that is, with empathy, respect and a desire to remove obstacles to happiness. Fundamentally, we need a reset in the debate, which centres the debate on those basics of human decency. Trans people are equal citizens in our Republic. They are our siblings, friends and neighbours. They do not receive a level of even basic medical care, medical care that is well established in other jurisdictions and provided there for the best interests of individuals. The motion calls for a model that can work, is accessible and will allow trans adults, with best interest focus and clinical guidance, to make their own decisions about their future, knowing that whatever they choose, the State will support them, their clinicians will guide them and care options will be available to them here in this country. I can see no conflict or no moral wrong that can come from enabling a tiny minority to live freely.

I have recently heard a small but growing voice that says gay men and lesbians should oppose any focus on the rights of trans people and that supporting them supposedly puts our hard-won progress in jeopardy. I say an absolute "No" to that argument. I have no time for it and I think it is predicated on a view that an equal place must be earned. It also very conveniently forgets that much of the language being used against the trans community now is the exact same language that was used in the eighties and nineties against the gay community and which, unfortunately, is seeping into the discourse today.

I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward the motion enabling this important debate on trans healthcare. I look forward to supporting it in the vote tonight.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this important motion. We in People Before Profit will, of course, support it. My thanks also for the tireless activism of many trans activists, including those in Transgress the NGS, Trans Healthcare Action and TENI, who are pushing for rights to mean something and for decent healthcare in this country for trans people. Last weekend, I saw a TD who wanted the public to pay for a €1,000 La-Z-Boy chair for him suggesting that investing in trans healthcare is a waste of resources. If investing in healthcare is not a good use of resources, I do not know what is. Perhaps we should just get La-Z-Boy chairs instead of healthcare.

It should be clear to anyone paying attention that the Government is no friend, or certainly no guaranteed friend, of trans people. We see the dog-whistling that is going on in terms of migrants, asylum seekers in particular, and any marginalised group. It may be that the formerly progressive face of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has been abandoned. That is why the activism from below pushing for rights to mean something and for decent healthcare is so important to understanding that an injury to one is an injury to all and that in fighting for trans healthcare, we are fighting for a decent national health service that provides quality public healthcare for everybody in this country, regardless of their particular needs.

The truth is Ireland is failing badly. We are the worst country in the European Union for availability and accessibility of transgender healthcare. We have one gender clinic offering transgender healthcare to adults in Ireland and that is the self-appointed national gender service based in St. Columcille's Hospital in Loughlinstown. It has wait lists over ten years long and sees fewer than 160 people a year. The NGS and its model of care were not approved by the HSE or the Department of Health. The service's name was chosen by itself. It is a clinic within the Ireland East Hospital Group, not a national clinic.

It is no surprise that there were no trans voices involved in the creation of the NGS. Those running it do trans people a disservice by lobbying against any reform of this broken system that treats trans healthcare as something to be restricted and pathologised. In this clinic, transgender people must undergo a dehumanising and humiliating assessment process. They are asked inappropriate and invasive questions that have very little to do with gender identity or medical transition. In some instances, trans people have been denied important gender-affirming healthcare if they were diagnosed with ADHD or autism or for not answering inappropriate and sexualised questions in a way deemed correct by the clinic.

Yesterday, Transgress the NGS put online an interview, the existence of which I knew of but had not seen until then. It is shocking in terms of how invasive and inappropriate the questions

being asked are. This should not be happening in a proper national gender service. These are some of the questions asked of someone seeking bottom surgery:

Can I ask you a bit about your mental illness?

When was the most serious episode of mental illness that you had?

Were you drinking at the time?

What type of drink do you like?

On Tinder, what was your profile then?

Were you experiencing a lot of erections?

What else did you experience in terms of sex drive?

Can you describe what it is about your penis and balls you notice or don't like?

Are you happy receiving as well as giving?

Are you capable of receiving an orgasm?

Would you use a strap-on or sex toys?

This is not the type of approach we should have. We should have an informed, consent-based transgender healthcare model led by GPs and nursing staff in primary care. We should look to Catalonia, which has an informed consent model in primary care that has been successfully in use since 2012, with a 36-day waiting list and 71% of adults receiving HRT on the first appointment, compared with the decade-long waiting list trans people face in Ireland.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I am glad I made it for the end of the debate. This is a critically important issue for the many people waiting 13 years, on average, for a health service. We have the worst trans healthcare in the EU. I was listening to the debate on my way here. I welcome the motion and thank the Labour Party for putting it forward.

Trans people are a minority who are being disgracefully targeted, picked on, scapegoated and used to divide people. This is being done by the far right, obviously, but mainstream politicians are leaning into it because it is a difficult issue for them to tackle with people given that the gender binary, the traditional family and all those issues are promoted in society. I urge the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health to move on this. In a previous debate, she talked about her personal experience. I ask her to act. She has personal knowledge of the difficulty this is causing.

I have a few points to make about informed consent versus clinicians. I was one of the people in here practically every week demanding change on abortion rights. I was one of very few TDs, to be frank; others then followed. Repeal was not won by doctors in this country at all. They came on board much later. They came on board when women, young people and LGBT+ people put it on the agenda with a mass popular movement. Then they came on board. It is similar with trans healthcare. I heard Sinn Féin Deputies talking in riddles a few minutes ago. I will demystify the riddle for them. The abortion pill was discovered by women in Latin America who were taking it to bring about miscarriages. It then became mainstream. It is similar with trans healthcare now. Young people are being forced to access hormones

themselves because their doctors are not helping them. We need a directive issued by the Minister instructing every doctor to help people with blood tests and things like that.

I say to the Sinn Féin Members not to wait for clinicians. It is trans people themselves who understand their needs and the Deputies to my left need to listen to that. They are not listening in the North; they need to listen in the South. The same goes for all the parties. For the minority over there, I would not waste my time. They are going to continue to pick on trans people. We must be to the forefront in defending them.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Aontú believes in a compassionate, pluralist Republic. We believe all citizens are equal and should be valued no matter their identify, religion or orientation. Everybody should be treated on the basis of their individual character. Gender dysphoria is real, it is not easy for anybody and citizens who have gender dysphoria should be treated with respect and decency.

It is also really important that, as a society, we base our approach on science and evidence. For far too long, this debate in this Chamber has been driven by ideology, and that ideology has been damaging to both children and women. Evidence and science are not optional extras. They are critical in the development of a just and fair society. A woman is a female adult. That sentence is based on logic, science and evidence. It is a sentence that comes with ease to most citizens in this country but, incredibly, very few TDs in this Chamber are able to say it.

Over the past ten years, this Government, its predecessors and campaigning groups have embarked on a significant campaign of social engineering. Incredibly, the Government has tried to delete the word "woman" from many different aspects of society. It has even tried to delete the word "woman" from maternity legislation. The HSE has used words like "chestfeeding" instead of "breastfeeding". Among the HSE literature, it has produced a document highlighting issues around cervical checks, saying that "people with a cervix" need to come to the HSE. Teachers have been told on in-service days not to use the words "mother" and "father" in class because it is not inclusive. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment has links on its websites to materials for teachers that talk about not using the words "boys" and "girls" in classes for the same reason. A former Taoiseach put pressure on Irish Rugby in the Dáil to reverse its decision to make women's rugby female only, despite significant evidence that enormous damage is done by male-born players to female players in that competition. Professor Donal O'Shea of the National Gender Service, which is deeply committed to people with gender dysphoria, stated at an Oireachtas committee that activists are brainwashing politicians-----

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** Ah, Peadar, no.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----and HSE management-----

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** Jesus.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----when it comes to proposed new gender recognition laws.

**A Deputy:** The Deputy has done so over social media.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Young gay and lesbian people are being told that they are not gay but that they are in the wrong body. A consequence of the Gender Recognition Act-----

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** This is disgusting.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----is that it has actually allowed male-born prisoners to be put in women's prisons in this State. It is an incredible situation that we have had individuals who were jailed for horrific sexual offences being located in women's prisons. Barbie Kardashian was found guilty of threatening to kill, rape and torture his mother. Kardashian was granted a gender recognition certificate by the Department of Social Protection and he was put in a women's prison, an absolute dereliction of duty by this Government.

The Government's policy on gender affirmation is ignoring the potential comorbidities that can often exist with children and lead them to question their gender. Gender affirmation puts children on a path that can lead to chemicals, puberty blockers and irreversible surgeries and it never deals with the other comorbidities they may be dealing with. They can destroy a person's fertility and cause serious health damage, in some cases leading to children de-transitioning afterwards.

Ireland remains wedded to this policy despite the fact that most other western countries are reversing from this ideological approach. The debate in Ireland is actually stuck in the past in this regard. Most of the rest of the world is moving on. The International Olympic Committee is moving to a ban on transgender athletes competing in female Olympic events because it is deeply unfair to women. The NHS in Britain has significantly changed its approach, particularly for minors, by ending gender-affirmative care models in youth in England. The US, Denmark, Sweden and Finland have all left WPATH because WPATH is not a clinical protocol. The two most experienced clinicians involved in transgender healthcare in Ireland, Professor O'Shea and Dr. Moran, have made a formal complaint to HIQA about the HSE treatment of children with gender identity issues. They say the HSE has been directing children to potentially damaging overseas affirming services. They have been given leave to carry out a judicial review into HIQA. Logic would dictate that we would listen to that judicial review so that we can understand the best way to approach healthcare in this space.

What does it say about the echo chamber of this Dáil that practically every single other party in this Dáil will swap science and healthcare for gender ideology? What does it say when every single adult in this Dáil, other than a handful, is putting the healthcare of children at risk to follow an ideological approach? We need to make sure that science is at the heart of everything we do in terms of healthcare.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I will start with my disappointment that people on that side of the House would turn around and say that people on this side of the House are far right or far left. I am a father. I have been heckled-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Give us a break. You-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Excuse me. I did not interrupt you, so have the courtesy to shut your mouth and listen to somebody.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** That is as much as it comes to.

I am going to put something on the record very clearly to you now as well, Conor Sheehan, since you talk about Limerick and put Limerick people down. I am going to talk to you as a parent.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** The Deputy has time to speak to the motion.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am going to talk to you if you may listen, but you do not listen.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** The Deputy has time to speak to the motion.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** Deputies, please.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Chair, these people-----

*(Interruptions)*

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** Deputies, respect the House.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am going to talk to these people.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** Respect the House.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Correct - respect. That is what I am asking for, and it is the one word I have written down here for you today. It is "respect".

**Deputy Jerry Buttimer:** How about yourself, Deputy?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I have been heckled in this House, saying I am anti-gay and anti-this.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** That is our-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Excuse me. Again, you cannot be quiet and listen to somebody else's opinion. It is called respect. I have been heckled in this House on more than one occasion, be that for my religion, for being over here, for being far right. I am going to put something very clear to you: I am a parent and a grandparent. I have a son who is gay. None of you ever said to me, "Gee, Richard, we did not know that." You do not know me but you

make assumptions about people. The one thing I will do for anyone, whether they are up in the Gallery or not, whether I agree with them or not, is respect and help them every bit I can.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** Great.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I will respect and help people. That is my duty of care as a politician.

People then say that one of our party members made an assumption. That is his opinion. It does not have to be mine. Allow a person to have their own opinion. All I am asking for is to be able to have my own opinion. My opinion is that there are an awful lot of people out there who are scared and lack understanding. The world is changing. Friends of mine are gay, friends of mine are lesbian and friends of mine are transgender. Friends of mine are scared because their children are coming up. My job here is to help them regardless of whether I agree with them or not. The job of doctors is to help people whether they agree with them or not. Education on this is key.

As I said at the start, I have my own religion. I respect everyone else's religion, but respect mine. I have my opinion. It does not have to be the same as yours, but respect mine. At the end of the day, I am here to help, I am here to learn, I am here to give respect to whoever I can regardless of whether I agree with them or not. That is my opinion, and that is why I started off as I did. The Deputies thought I was going down a different road, but I am not.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** What is he on about?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** This is what I am trying to say. Politicians come in here and say something sometimes for a headline. I say what I feel, being part of me. If Members do not agree with it, that is their problem.

Remember this: I went around to many houses during the election. I went to one house and a person opened the door. They were identifying as a fox. Did I respect them? Did I talk to them? Yes, I did. Did I have to agree with it? No, I did not, but I respected them and spoke to them the same as a human being.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Will the Deputy be voting for the fox-hunting Bill?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Again, I am a believer-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Sit down and shut your mouth. Gobshite.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Somebody just called me a gobshite.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Speak to the motion.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke):** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** This is the fool we are talking about. Again, a person can have an opinion.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** Deputy, we just want to hear-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** A person can have an opinion, and each side of this House will not allow opinion unless it is their opinion. As an adult, this is about-----

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** What is the Deputy's opinion? He is not speaking to the motion.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Again, if the Deputies to my right keep interrupting, it means I am saying something that is hurting them very deeply. I have my opinion and I am here to help anyone who is in whatever situation they are in, regardless of whether I agree with it or not. This is what I am talking about. Everyone in this country deserves healthcare - end of story - regardless of their circumstances or whatever else. They deserve healthcare, and that is what the motion is about. It is about caring and giving healthcare to people regardless of what it is about.

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer):** The important part we should look at is this debate is about people, first, second and third. It is not about anything else. A decade on from the passing of the Gender Recognition Act, we have a lot of road to keep going as a country. As a member of the LGBTIQ+ community, I respect everybody. Deputy O'Donoghue is right that fear is driving some of the narrative. That fear is caused by some and they have to reflect on their articulation of points.

I welcome the members in the Public Gallery and thank them for being here and for their battle in terms of trans healthcare. It is a battle they should not have to engage in. That is something we need to reflect on as a country and as a society because, as the motion before us from the Labour Party reflects, this is about stories. The sad part is some of the comments this morning will get into the paper but the real story is about the stories of the people in the Gallery here today and their quest for healthcare. I make the point to all of us, as Members of the Oireachtas, irrespective of ideology or viewpoint, to reflect on what we articulate, how we articulate it, what we say and when we say it. I get emotional when I hear some of the inflammatory language being used. Nobody wakes up today and suddenly flicks a switch from a man to a woman or a woman to a man. It does not happen. If we are to have a debate in this House, let us do so in a manner that is honest in terms of engagement on the issue of transgender healthcare.

I pay tribute to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and also to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for her own lived experience and the way she has ensured that we can have at the heart of the Government a movement toward that piece that has been missing since the Gender Recognition Act. Members of the transgender community deserve comprehensive, respectful and integrated care and the support they need to live their lives authentically so that they can flourish. When we talk about the percentage of people or the numbers and volumes, it is actually quite small. Both the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, have openly acknowledged that the current public service in Ireland does

not fully meet the needs of people seeking gender-affirming healthcare. I am glad that the Government is not opposing the Labour Party Private Members' motion today. I thank members of the Labour Party for bringing this forward.

There is a key phrase that we should focus on: gender-affirming healthcare. What Deputy Tóibín is saying is not new at all. I respect Deputy O'Donoghue. I know him to be a decent, honourable man. Let us listen to the stories as we pursue a willingness to listen to the experiences and the huge gaps in the services. Let us think about the gaps in those services. It is affecting people - an duine. People are being judged, harassed, beaten, chased, mocked, jeered and condemned by a Republic that is meant to treat all of our children equally. Leaders of Parliaments, by their words and actions, bring people. That is why this debate is important for me. We must, as a society, bring about meaningful improvements for every person who wants gender-affirming healthcare.

Deputy O'Donoghue mentioned friends of his who are transgender. They are not ogres, demons or predators. We should not have to say that. We should not have to qualify that. They are decent people. They are professionals and ordinary people trying to live their life as best they can, making a valuable contribution. I ask Members to walk in their shoes for a couple of days and see the reality of life. They are coming into your office to talk to you. They are friends of yours and they are struggling with mental health and to gain basic healthcare. For me, working with like-minded people, that diverse experience will bring about change. It will also bring about awareness.

The Deputy mentioned education. He is right. It is not education; it is raising awareness and that new clinical programme for gender healthcare. That programme must be about best practice from around the world, recognising that there has been an increase in the demand for transgender healthcare services but also reflecting a growing societal understanding of a gender diversity commitment to supporting people at every stage of their journey. That is why both the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, are steadfast in their belief that the new clinical programme will be instrumental in establishing a fair, balanced and effective system for gender-affirming healthcare in Ireland. We cannot ignore the inclusion of people with a real lived and living experience. Their viewpoint, informed by the direct personal involvement with the healthcare system is not just invaluable in shaping a model of care that is responsive, it is critical. Yes, there will be people with different viewpoints but collaboration is needed.

The process, in terms of what we are looking for, is about active engagement with healthcare professionals, advocacy organisations and other relevant stakeholders. What does it do? It brings us to a model of care that reflects the full spectrum of needs and perspectives, paving a way for a system that is both truly inclusive, effective and delivers for people who need it. Transparency is also a key principle that will underpin the programme's development. I did not hear all of the debate but I am acutely aware that information and support among gender-questioning young people and their families is one that we need to do more on. The unique challenges, navigating the complex social, emotional and medical issues in a world that is sometimes cold, where understanding and acceptance is very limited is difficult. The broader model of care must be refined to recognise the urgency of the situation. I hope the HSE will continue that.

I ask all Members to have continued collaboration based on evidence, the stories of people, their lived experience, but above all, the focus on inclusion and respect, that we can and should make a substantial and positive difference in the lives of people, particularly those we serve. The clarion call from this debate is that together, let us move forward towards a future where every member of the transgender and gender-diverse community can access the care, support and recognition they deserve, at the very least they need to continue to live their best lives. We owe them that, as members and citizens of a Republic.

**Deputy Mark Wall:** I start by thanking my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, for bringing forward this important motion on transgender healthcare. Over the last number of months, I have met with a number of transgender groups that are focused on highlighting the issues they are facing in the community regarding access to safe and effective healthcare in Ireland. I thank these groups for their input into the Labour Party motion today. This is about respect. This is about helping people. When I speak with these groups, their basic ask is for access to safe healthcare. Even something as simple as a blood test is out of reach for the trans community. I have had people contact my office over the unfair treatment they face in trying to access a blood test. This is due to a direction from the national gender service, NGS, which we are told is instructing GPs to not carry out blood tests for their trans patients. This is simply discriminatory and will put the trans community at risk.

I also want to highlight an issue with the rollout of the free HRT scheme. While this is a great initiative, inequalities have arisen in misunderstandings of the scheme. There seems to be a discrepancy in the scheme as some trans women have reported accessing menopause products while others have not been so lucky. However, those who have accessed these products are now reporting differing accounts, being given free HRT one month and being asked to pay the next. There is no consistency. I ask the Minister for Health to provide some clarity and guidance on this.

At the very core of this motion is the need to provide safe and effective healthcare services that are patient informed. Many in the trans community do not feel listened to by the Government and they certainly do not feel listened to by the NGS. We need to have a new approach to health that is patient informed, uses the patient experience and is entirely centred on that experience. We need a new model of trans healthcare that is designed not just for the community, but for the members of the trans community and their families. We must stand with the trans community today and every day, as they have stood with us on many societally defining moments in the past, like the repeal of the eighth amendment and marriage equality. We must remember that there is no LGB without the T.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** The issue we come to the Chamber to speak about today cuts to the very heart of dignity, equality and compassion. For too long, trans people in this county have been denied timely, respectful and affirming care. The word "respectful" has been used in this Chamber. When a Member of this House comments in this Chamber in an odious way against another Member, it is something we must call out and not sit idly by and listen to.

While progress has been made across Europe, Ireland continues to lag behind. It consistently ranks as the worst nation for trans healthcare among EU member states. We have so many people on waiting lists for care. Many people in the trans community have spoken of their experience of waiting over 13 or 14 years for an appointment. We can imagine the toll it takes

on their lives when they have to endure years of uncertainty and a daily struggle to access basic healthcare. The message it sends is that their identity is somehow less deserving of recognition.

This is not just a healthcare issue; it is a human rights issue. The reality in Ireland is stark. We have only one dedicated gender service, which is based in Dublin, and the capacity there is overwhelmed. While other European nations have expanded community-based services, streamlined pathways and aligned with international best practice, Ireland has stood still. Ten years after the passage of the Gender Recognition Act 2015, which was a landmark moment for equality, the promise of dignity has not been matched by the delivery of care. The Labour Party has consistently fought for the most marginalised people in Ireland and trans people are no exception. The Labour Party was instrumental in passing the 2015 Act. My colleague, Deputy Sherlock, continues to raise this issue in this Chamber, demanding reform and accountability. We introduced this motion to overhaul trans healthcare and to call for accessible, timely and affirming services. It is not symbolic; it is a demand for concrete steps towards justice.

My party's history is one of standing shoulder to shoulder with those who have been silenced or sidelined. We have advanced workers' rights, championed women's equality, fought for marriage equality and campaigned for the bodily autonomy of women. The trans community has stood shoulder to shoulder with us. The Labour Party has always sought to represent those who need a voice. Today that tradition continues with trans people, who deserve not just recognition on paper but healthcare in practice. We must remember that healthcare is not a privilege; it is a right. Trans people are not asking for special treatment; they are asking for the same dignity afforded to others. They are asking for a system that sees them, hears them and supports them. So, what must be done? First, we must expand services beyond Dublin to ensure that care is accessible across the country. Second, we must reduce waiting times by investing in staff, resources and training. Third, we must align our system with international best practice. Above all, we must change the culture. Compassion must be the cornerstone of our healthcare system. That means listening to people's experiences and recognising their health and well-being.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I am proud to stand here today as a Labour Party TD to close this motion. I commend Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, on his very thoughtful and heartfelt contribution. It really reminded me why we are here and why we do what we do, especially compared to some of the contributions we heard before it. However, I am disappointed that this debate is coming to a conclusion at 11.45 a.m. I am disappointed by the nature of some of what Deputy Cullinane said. I am disappointed that Sinn Féin has not used its full speaking slots. I am incredibly disappointed by Aontú's contribution. I am "driven by ideology" in relation to this: my ideology is compassion, inclusion and recognising people rather than pretending they do not exist. We know we have a huge problem with male violence against women in this country. The fact of the matter is that if a woman is going to be attacked or murdered, statistically the chances are that the perpetrator will be her husband or partner. That is the person who is going to do it. It is not a trans woman. Statistically, it is not a trans woman. There has been an attempt to slur and blur the debate in this respect.

I am proud to stand here because the Labour Party has always been steadfast in its commitment to the LGBTQI+ community. I welcome all our friends here to the Gallery. I am very glad we have Mammies for Trans Rights here with us this morning. That is really

important. I genuinely believe that mummies know best. Mothers know their children. They know their children's needs. They know what their children want. They know what is best for their children. All of these mothers are up in the Visitors Gallery because they want a compassionate, person-centred, informed-consent model of healthcare for their children. They want their children to be recognised. They want their children to be treated with compassion, dignity and humanity. They do not want their children to be othered. I do not like when people come into this House or other public forums and seek to other people. Regardless of whether somebody identifies as a cisgender male or a cisgender woman, or whether somebody is trans, we are all people and we have to treat people with humanity, dignity and compassion.

I am proud to stand here as a gay man, but I am very conscious of my own privilege. I am lucky to live in a society and a country that is relatively pluralist, relatively welcoming and relatively decent, albeit we obviously need to make progress. However, it is not like that for trans people. We have the worst trans healthcare in Europe and that should absolutely shame us.

The last thing I want to say here today is that the legislation around conversion therapy is on the Government's autumn priority legislation programme. We have been waiting too long. We need to get that over the line and we need to see movement on that. I urge the Minister to take that back to her colleagues in government.

Question put.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell):** In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time this evening. We will now suspend until 12 noon.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 11.51 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar mheán lae.*

*Sitting suspended at 11.51 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.*

### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Tá sé scannalach go bhfuair an Rialtas anailís óna chuid oifigigh féin a léirigh go raibh sochair fuinnimh ag teastáil go géar ach mar sin féin chuir sé deireadh leis sa bhuiséad. Bhí an chomhairle seo ina lámha. Bhí a fhios ag an Rialtas go raibh billí leictreachais ag dul suas agus suas, ach chuir sé deireadh go fóill leis an t-aon phíosa chuidithe a bhí daoine ag brath air. We said the Government's decision to cancel energy credits was a terrible call and that the removal of this vital support would leave working households under huge pressure and leave them struggling to pay their electricity bills in the face of relentless price hikes this winter. This morning, it was revealed that the Government pushed forward with the withdrawal of energy credits despite stark advice from its own officials. Documents obtained through freedom of information by Lynn Boylan MEP revealed three damning findings from the internal analysis conducted by the Department of Climate, Energy and Environment ahead of the budget. First, the case for energy credits was stronger this year than last year. The Government knew that annual bills were set to be higher in October 2025 than they were in October 2024. Second, households would have to find an extra €321 to cover

their energy bills this winter in the absence of energy credits and, third, an energy scheme for struggling households was shelved and not included in the budget.

It is clear from this analysis that energy credits were badly needed this year. The Government had this advice to hand. It knew energy bills were going up and up and yet it still cancelled the one bit of help that people really relied on to pay off these rip-off bills. This is scandalous and people are bearing the brunt of this. It is clear by the day that the Government ditched energy credits because the election is over and it feels it can break its promises without any consequences.

Working households are paying a heavy price for the Government's cynical choice. It is much colder now. People are finding it harder to light and heat their homes and more than 500,000 households cannot pay their energy bills. The Government's decision to cancel energy credits means that even more families are going to be pushed over that line. The truth is that working people were not a priority in the budget. It was a budget of €9.4 billion that left them worse off and did not even include a cost-of-living package. The CSO just reported on Monday that prices continue to rise and are rising faster now than in the past two years. People are under huge pressure in the lead-up to Christmas. They are watching every single euro and they are forced to make really tough choices.

I spoke to a mother on Monday. She and her husband are working. She talking to me about her three kids. They sat down to write their Christmas list last week. Even though they were not asking for much, she had to convince each and every one of them to drop something off the list. She had to sit them down and explain to those children that even Santa is feeling the cost-of-living crisis this year. Does the Taoiseach in any way understand the pressure that ordinary families the length and breadth of this State are under this Christmas? People see no end in sight. They see a Government that is closed off to their hardship. It cannot go on. The Government needs to act to end the rip-off, to get costs under control and to make life affordable. Its inaction does not cut it and its bluff and spin has run out of road.

This morning the question I, and I am sure many families, are asking is: why the Government cancelled energy credits despite the analysis from its own officials which showed how badly they were needed this year? Will it finally see sense and reinstate those credits to help people through these winter months?

**The Taoiseach:** Ní aontaím leis an Teachta in aon chor. Is léir gur chuireamar an-chuid áiseanna ar fáil sa cháinainéis, go háirithe do na daoine bochta agus do na daoine ar ioncam íseal. Rinneamar an-chuid infheistíochta in infreastruchtúr na tíre agus mar aon leis sin chuireamar an-chuid isteach do dhaoine le riachtanais speisialta agus do dhaoine a bhfuil ioncam íseal acu. Tackling energy and affordability is a priority of Government. People are under pressure. Up to €3.3 billion had been allocated through energy credits. That did not have any impact in terms of reducing the permanent cost of energy. Of course, the Department of Finance, the Department of public expenditure or, indeed, the Department of Social Protection would not have supported the universality of energy credits on this occasion. The Deputy talks about one group of officials in the Department of energy who had views but there is the broader Government there. We also took the view that we wanted to concentrate and prioritise our resources on those on the lowest incomes and those who would be most impacted by the energy price increases. Therefore, we increased the fuel allowance and we also increased

the number of people who would be entitled to the fuel allowance, particularly those on working family payments. Some 26% of households are now entitled to the fuel allowance and that is a help to people facing energy costs. There has been huge investment in terms of the retrofitting programme and the warmer homes scheme, which now has hundreds of thousands of people benefiting from that. There are also the microgeneration supports. About 150,000 people have benefited from the supports we have given for microgeneration.

We prioritised the issue of child poverty. We provided an additional €8 per week for children under 12, bringing that weekly payment to €58 and an additional €16 per week for children aged 12 or over, bringing that weekly child support payment to €78. These are unprecedented increases. We deliberately targeted those households to get far more additionality. Then we invested very significantly in infrastructure.

When I look at the Central Bank and how it analyses inflationary pressures and so on, the Sinn Féin budget would have added - Sinn Féin wanted billions and billions of more spending - 2.5% to the rate of inflation and to the cost of living. That is what its proposals would have done. That would have actually disadvantaged people even more. We have to get the balance right here. It is not fiscally sustainable to have a once-off package every single year for the next number of years. It is just not sustainable.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Just at election times.

**The Taoiseach:** Last week, various bodies were saying Government was spending far too much as it is. This year's budget is about €117 billion, €98 billion plus in capital and so forth, and then we have increased current expenditure over the past three years by 15%. We are spending very significant sums of money. We are targeting it in terms of infrastructure, low income families and making sure that those in the lowest deciles of income are protected, insofar as we possible can. We are then dealing with the fuel allowance and so on. Then there is the VAT, of course. We have extended the reduction on VAT to 9% out to 2030, which will save households up to about €100 per year in addition to the tax disregard for households involved in energy microgeneration and so forth.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Taoiseach's own officials warned him. They said that without Government support, customers will pay more this winter for electricity than at any time during the energy crisis. They said that before price increases, arrears had increased to record levels. We know this and the Taoiseach knew this. It is in black and white in what his officials told him. They make clear and lay out in graphs that families will have to find an extra €321 this winter compared with last winter to pay their energy bills. The Government had all this information, yet still decided to abandon workers and families by withdrawing these energy credits. It did that at a time when the Taoiseach knew and his officials told him energy company after energy company had decided to increase their prices in these months. Over 1 million families are going to see price increases. His officials warned him and he chose to ignore them and abandoned workers.

I will ask the Taoiseach again. Why did he cancel the energy credits despite the warnings from his own officials? Why did he ignore the fact that arrears had reached record levels and

that families would have to find €321 and pay higher energy prices than ever before during the energy crisis? Why did he choose to ignore all of that and abandon these workers at this time?

**The Taoiseach:** Because we believe in targeting resources as opposed to universality. Sinn Féin must be the only left-wing party in Europe and across the world-----

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** You did not believe it at election time last year.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, it is not your question.

**The Taoiseach:** -----that does not believe in targeting resources.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** You have changed your tune since the election.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** The Government bought the votes.

**The Taoiseach:** We believe in targeting resources.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** At developers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, one voice.

**The Taoiseach:** There is a €2 billion social protection package, which is about protecting pensioners, families with children and-----

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Institutional investors

**The Taoiseach:** -----particularly, people on low incomes. That is the choice we made, and also to improve our infrastructure.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** And big developers.

**The Taoiseach:** We do have to deal in a more systemic way with the high cost of energy. There are significant factors in Ireland that lead to the high cost of energy. That is well known and well documented. The bottom line is that we have had a very significant budget in terms of expenditure. Deputy Doherty wants to add another €2 billion to it for a short-term intervention which would apply to very wealthy people. Millionaires would benefit from his proposal.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** You are giving it to the speculators. Three quarters of a billion.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please. This is not musical chairs; it is Leaders' Questions. Do not try to talk over me.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Three quarters of a billion.

**The Taoiseach:** When I met with Department of Social Protection officials and the Minister-

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

**The Taoiseach:** -----they were very clear about targeted measures, particularly in terms of the most vulnerable children in the country.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Doherty just wants to ignore all of that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach, time is up. Deputy Bacik.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Child poverty has increased every year under Fianna Fáil .

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** Five thousand homeless children.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Go raibh maith agat. I want to speak about migration and the Government's one-eighty change in tone and policy on immigration. Since the Greens left government, Cabinet members have notably shifted rightward on this, pandering to some of the worst instincts in our otherwise welcoming society. The Government has allowed dangerous rhetoric to obscure its own failures on housing and infrastructure. It is introducing new immigration policies without evidence despite ample evidence of their potential harm to migrant communities in Ireland.

We all hear reports of rising levels of prejudice against immigrants, people of colour and anyone who looks different. We see this in our own communities. We have seen buildings housing asylum seekers and refugees being set alight, including an appalling arson attack in Drogheda, and a man killed last year, Josip Strok, while speaking his native Croatian on a Dublin street. Just now, during the debate on Labour's motion on transgender rights, we spoke about homophobic attacks on the streets.

These violent attacks are rightly condemned by us all but we also need to recognise that policies and rhetoric can contribute to an environment where violence can develop. Words matter when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights, as we have all just acknowledged, and when it comes to migrant rights too. What we say as TDs, and what Government Ministers say, really matters.

Last month, the Tánaiste said too many immigrants were arriving into Ireland, wrongly implying that people facing deportation make up a significant share of Ireland's inward migration. Unfortunately, he was backed by the Taoiseach and others in government. This was really disappointing because we all know what an enormously important and valuable contribution migrant workers make to our society. Our hospitality, tech, health and care sectors all rely heavily on migrant workers. We know this is a reality. Any of us who visit hospitals

or care homes will see this. We should express positive recognition of this in our words and actions.

Yesterday, President Zelenskyy addressed a joint sitting of the Oireachtas and we all rightly expressed strong solidarity with the people of Ukraine, but the Government has just stripped financial supports from Ukrainian refugees, and with the backing of some Opposition parties, unfortunately. That cut will disproportionately affect women, children and older people. It does not look like solidarity to us in Labour.

Now, the Government is introducing a mean-spirited rent payment for asylum seekers. This is not a revenue-raising measure. The Minister admits the impacts is unclear. This looks performative. It is nothing more than what we might describe as deterrence theatre, like tightening up the process on citizenship applications or introducing restrictive rules on family reunification. These measures will only make life harder for people who are already suffering hardship and have come here fleeing war and persecution.

The Labour Party calls for a positive, fact-based information campaign on migration. Rather than engaging in a race to the bottom, will the Taoiseach adopt a more positive approach to migration and recognise explicitly the huge contribution made by migrants to Irish society?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue. I have been extremely consistent in advancing the positive reality and experience of inward migration into Ireland. There are many legal ways in which people can come to Ireland to work, live and reside. That is very clear in terms of our work permit system, for example, which has worked effectively and efficiently in respect of various sectors of our economy that require additional workers.

Only last week, I was with Microsoft. It has 93 nationalities working with it in this country. It came to Ireland in 1985, when there was 17% unemployment. That is why this Government focuses on enterprise and economy a lot. I have never forgotten those days and it is a great motivating force to avoid the complacency regarding the economy that many people on the left have. They almost dismiss it as something that comes naturally. Migration has been an important part of Irish economic and societal growth.

There is free movement within the European Union. Many people from the European Union come to live and work in Ireland. They are in many of our companies, in our health service and elsewhere. I condemn any attacks or any form of racism or targeting of people because of their ethnicity.

Ireland is a very different country from what it was 30 years ago. I have met with young people whose parents came to Ireland. They clearly have an ethnic background, they said to us. They are Irish citizens but they have been subjected to intimidation and attack. I abhor that. It is wrong to say the Government's desire to have a fair, robust, legal migratory pathway is somehow incentivising those attacks or contributing to that sentiment. That is a step too far. That sentiment was there long before any changes in the procedures the Government has announced. It is important to have a fair, robust asylum system that is also timely in terms of the consideration of applications and appeals. The absence of such a system would actually create the negative climate the Deputy speaks of. It is part of the issue.

The origins of asylum are rooted in conflict, war and political suppression. I am trying to be careful but the evidence is that for quite a substantial number of those who seek asylum, the

motivation is primarily economic. I understand why, by the way, given what is happening in other countries around the world in terms of quality of life and economy, but these are the realities we have to deal with.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Taoiseach for the considered response. I agree with him on the need to promote the work permit scheme. Indeed, the Labour Party is looking for generosity on work permits and for a more expansive programme of legal pathways to Ireland for people who wish to bring their skills and expertise. That is a very important matter when we talk about inward migration.

For me, this is personal, as the granddaughter of a refugee who came here and contributed enormously to Irish society, as migrant communities do. We need to see political leadership. Of course the Taoiseach is right that there are people seeking to stoke anti-migrant sentiment - a small number of people on the far right - but we need political leadership to counter that. That is why in my constituency I have initiated Dublin 4 and Dublin 6 for All groups. People are welcoming. Across Ireland we are seeing that, but there needs to be political leadership to ensure people can express that welcome and host welcome meetings for new IPAS centres in their communities, as we are doing in Dublin Bay South. We need this at a national level and we need leadership on this from the Government, and not the sense that rhetoric and policies are hardening. Unfortunately, that has been the experience recently.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, I think we have shown political leadership in this country. Remember Brexit happened because of the migration question in the United Kingdom and it has had disastrous results for the British economy and British society as a result of that, so there has to be an intelligent, informed and balanced approach to the migration question. We have to deal with issues as they present themselves, and fears that people have, rightly or wrongly, or people who are influenced by those who want to spread aggression and hostility towards people of different ethnic backgrounds. The Government's leadership is in steering a course that is moving towards a more robust, fair and timely system for dealing with applications for asylum while also then dealing with the more legal pathways, as the Deputy has described.

Always remember that we took a lead as well-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** -----although it was a European Union-wide directive, in terms of protecting Ukrainians and so on. The evidence shows it is not rhetoric but that Ireland responded in a generous manner to that situation but I thank the Deputy for raising it.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Yesterday's historic visit by President Zelenskyy allowed us to reaffirm our solidarity with the people of Ukraine. It was also an opportunity to mark the huge efforts of people here who stood with Ukraine. Since Russia's illegal invasion nearly four years ago, 120,000 Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed here. In every corner of the country, Ukrainian men, women and children are now valued members of communities. While it was undoubtedly challenging at times to find accommodation, people rose to that challenge. More than 40,000 Ukrainian people have been accommodated by more than 22,000 hosts since the

outbreak of the war. This scale of support is something we should always recognise and always celebrate.

It is particularly important to highlight the many positive stories of migration and integration now because we are seeing the horrific consequences of rising hate across the country. This week alone, there have been reports of three separate violent attacks. A Brazilian delivery worker, André Oliveira, was set upon by ten people in Dublin and beaten on the head with pieces of wood. He had to have brain surgery and is still recovering in hospital. Three Afghan asylum seekers were also attacked by a large group of up to 14 people who followed them with motorbikes and a car. During a co-ordinated and sustained assault, the attackers screamed racist slurs as they beat the men and smashed up their car. In another incident, a food truck belonging to a Venezuelan family who moved here in 2018 was set on fire and destroyed. These are shocking violent incidents and they are now happening at an alarming frequency. I am hugely concerned about where this is going and where it might lead.

For centuries, Irish people were forced to emigrate all over the world. For that reason, we have always understood migration and have been hugely welcoming but a divisive, hateful and dangerous narrative about migrants is now taking hold. This is not helped by a Government and some in opposition who continually frame migration as a problem or migrants as a burden. While this explosion in hate is mainly directed at migrants, it is experienced by people of colour. When difference is vilified, people's skin colour makes them all a target.

The Government has spent months talking about migration and is now vocal about wanting to reduce it. The Minister for justice's plans are entirely focused on framing migration as a negative. There has been no attempt to tackle rising hate and racism.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Are there any plans for a campaign to highlight the positives of migration and what is being done to support migrants and people of colour who are now living in fear?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. At the outset, I would condemn unreservedly the attacks the Deputy has referenced in terms of the Brazilian delivery person. I have also read reports in terms of three Afghan asylum seekers reporting to the Garda that they had been viciously attacked in their car. There is, and has been a growing, atmosphere, largely fuelled by elements within society that are far removed from this House, let us be honest, who are seeking to gain electoral and popular traction in respect of their views. The responsibility of this House and all parties in it is to make sure those views do not hold sway or get a disproportionate influence. That is actually the challenge facing us.

To conflate a Government seeking to create a fair and robust asylum-seeking process or programme with elements on the far right who are peddling hate is not fair and I think it is wrong. I would not conflate the two at all. People have had concerns about migration in society. There is no point in trying pretend, or put our heads in the sand, that people did not

have concerns. They do. Our challenge is to articulate and engage with people with those concerns.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** Ireland's population has been growing significantly. That is just a fact. Saying that does not mean we are inciting anything. We are not. It has been positive. My view is that since 1845 our population was in decline, right up to the 1980s nearly. It has been a transformative story from the early 1990s to the current day. That is a positive in my view. Even at that, the island is not back to the pre-Famine population status in terms of statistics and so on. It is an interesting perspective. In the past ten to 15 years, however, there has been very significant growth and that has created pressure on a whole load of services. I think the more legal pathways we create, the better for society and for our economy and so forth.

I am concerned. In terms of a campaign, a national policy is now being developed in respect of migration to update where we have come from. As part of that, there will be a communicative programme in terms of the importance of tolerance, inclusion and diversity and, above all, of explaining the phenomenon of migration and the benefits that have accrued to Irish society as manifested in our health service, in our education system, in services more generally and in our economy.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** This Government is playing with fire and I think the Taoiseach knows it. It is choosing to frame migration in an overwhelmingly negative light.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** Multiple Ministers are now saying that net migration is too high but net migration reduced by 25% last year to fewer than 60,000 people. Of the people coming here, about 50% are Irish, UK or EU citizens. The vast majority of the rest are those who are here on work permits to keep our hospitals open, build the homes we desperately need and keep our hospitality sector afloat. Claims for international protection applications are also down significantly, by 40% this year. Why, then, is the Taoiseach and his Government choosing to frame it so negatively? The truth is we need people to come here and work. Our critical public services would grind to a halt if they did not. These workers are telling us they feel a shift, that racism is on the rise and they are reconsidering staying in Ireland and that is the real migration crisis.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** What is the Taoiseach going to do to address it? The campaign he is talking about is the EU migration pact one. Is there going to be a Government campaign to create awareness about this issue?

**The Taoiseach:** First, I disagree fundamentally. The Deputy is conflating the unacceptable behaviour of certain people in society with Government policy. That is wrong. The Deputy should not do that. She has been trying to do that now for a couple of weeks in the Dáil.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The Government is saying that the numbers are too high.

**The Taoiseach:** I think that is wrong. That is the first point.

*(Interruptions)*

**The Taoiseach:** No, that is wrong. I really resent that and I think it is not fair to do it.

**A Deputy:** It is your politics.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The Tánaiste was outside answering migration questions-----

*(Interruptions)*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy put the question.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not interrupt Deputy Cairns when she spoke, so I would appreciate the same facility and tolerance from the other side of the House in respect of this. There are legal pathways to work in Ireland. There always have been and we have a generous work permit system. There have also been visa-free arrangements with certain countries. Every country has a sovereign duty and obligation in respect of who comes into the country and who leaves it, or certainly whoever comes into the country. Every country has that. There are always limits and there always have been limits. The Deputy is suggesting there should not be any, it seems to me.

*(Interruptions)*

**The Taoiseach:** That is what I have picked up. Therefore, all that is happening right now is that fair, robust and timely procedures are being put in place. The best way to do things is through legal pathways. That gives sustainability for the individual as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up. We now move to-----

**The Taoiseach:** At all times, by the way, irrespective of what avenue people come in, dignity is important-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** -----Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and the treatment of every individual with respect. Our education system has shown that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, time is up. I call Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

**The Taoiseach:** Government policy through education has been very inclusive and we have very supportive of every child who comes into this country who needs to access education.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I wish the Taoiseach well with the new legislation he is bringing forward in relation to infrastructure. If it is not emergency legislation, we will be caught again down the road with regard to housing, motorways, roads, waterways and sewerage.

How would the Taoiseach like to get this message? I welcome the new legislation but this is another part. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, was set up by the State.

**The Taoiseach:** Who?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The EPA. An Bord Pleanála was set up by the State. I got a message the other day from a guy I know in the west who employs 200 people.

Howya Fitz? Eighteen months now and we are still waiting for planning. €3 million spent before that. €3 million to spend. Someone else called last week from An Bord Pleanála to have another walk around. Business doesn't wait, Fitz. We have worked in specialised manufacturing, in pharmaceuticals and in microchips. We are now in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. 200 people employed, 40 more jobs to be created. I am fed up of State agencies. Denmark want us to move production with a building straight away, no objections. They appreciate business. Sad to say, but we have always tried to make sure we create jobs in Ireland. It's a sad thing to say, Fitz, that we may have to move.

"The system," he said, is "f" and it ended with "d". I would use the word "broken". That is the word of a person who is creating jobs in this country. That is An Bord Pleanála, ABP. The State is also responsible for the EPA. A few months ago, I saw George Lee talking about peat being extracted illegally. A person went through one county and we will have a report next week to show that with regard to everything on one county, misinformation was given out. At the moment the EPA is talking about farmers. At the moment, outside every water treatment plant, where the water is exiting, there are enough videos done by ordinary people right around this country to show what is coming out at the exit. Why are there not analytics or basic information they can put there to know the flow and the type of stuff coming out?

These are two agencies set up by different Governments - not the current Government but different Governments. These are two agencies that are failing people in this country.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, Deputy. Put the question.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The Taoiseach's new legislation - and I wish him well on it - has nothing to do with this. How are we going to get these people to do their jobs efficiently, properly and fairly for the people of this country?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy very much. That is why, this morning, the Government launched the accelerated infrastructure report. The Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, has led the charge since this Government was established nearly a year ago with regard to an infrastructure division within the Department of public expenditure. He appointed an external task force led by Mr. Sean O'Driscoll and a number of people from the private sector or involved in State agencies who have first-hand knowledge of the challenges and barriers to development in this country. Its report is comprehensive and it is not any one measure that will change this but the sum of all the measures.

We are going to pass legislation to establish a critical infrastructure Bill. We will also develop legislation around emergency powers being given to Government. There is also a need for concurrent decisions by various State agencies, not sequential ones. In other words, when the planning is going on, the procurement should be going on and the other permits should be sought as well, not one after the other. There is much more in respect of that.

We are also bringing in legislation. Yesterday, the Minister for climate and energy announced, for example, that there is a six-week consultation in respect of capping the fees for judicial reviews and how much the taxpayer ordinarily pays now compared to what should be the case into the future. There are a lot of measures; the issue for us is to implement them over the next 12 months and we are determined to do that. There will be timelines and there will be no hiding place for agencies either. There will be clear instructions given to agencies to do their work. If they do not, a light will be shone upon them for not doing their work.

We always have to keep in mind that the Environmental Protection Agency was established at the time for good reason. I remember it; I think it was back in 1989, 1990 or that period, if I am not mistaken. Why? There was a major incident in a pharmaceutical plant, if I recall. There would have perhaps been plans coming in relation to that but there was always a good rationale as to why agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency were established. We need a planning authority. That is required. The EPA was established in 1992 and I think there was an incident in Ringaskiddy, if I recollect. People cried out for protection. The public wants protection.

With regard to measurement, the Deputy is correct. I was on farms a year and a bit ago where the whole flow is measured right to the estuary by Teagasc and the farmers. In fairness, it is measured every ten minutes. The only thing is that the estuary is still polluted. They are not totally disconnected so we have to be aware of that. In fairness, a lot of metrics from farmers on the ground are quite impressive with regard to what is happening on the farm and things are very more advanced in that regard. Agencies have to work more effectively; there is no question about that.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** As I said earlier, I welcome the legislation he is proposing but it talks about ABP judicial reviews - I agree that there are too many of them - and how it will be more difficult, to put it simply. There are different tweaks like that and the Taoiseach is talking about emergency legislation but I am talking about an ordinary person who is creating jobs in rural Ireland. In the west, 200 jobs to us are the same as 4,000 in Intel. That is the reality. The problem is that before we go to judicial review or keep going on all the other parts the Government is bringing in - as I said, I welcome that - the State agency, ABP, has held these people up.

The board of directors of this company is meeting next to decide whether they will pull plant in Ireland and go to Denmark. That is a sad reflection from people who set up a business in Ireland, employ Irish people and would die for this country. We need to make sure there is accountability. I am not talking about the judicial reviews. All of that stuff is further on.

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

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome what the Taoiseach is doing and I am not going against that but what I am saying is that the State agencies are not doing their jobs to help facilitate these businesses.

**The Taoiseach:** If the Deputy could put us in contact with that company, the Ministers, Deputies Peter Burke or Jack Chambers, would be interested in meeting. The first Minister, as Minister for enterprise, would maybe see if he could do anything to help it in its situation. Then, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, could do well to listen to that company in terms of the barriers it has faced.

The Deputy said An Bord Pleanála is the problem. We have established a new planning commission, which has been substantially resourced, much more so than its predecessor. Certain systems have changed there because there was an inherited situation with An Bord Pleanála that was not good. The planning Act allows for timely decisions. There has to be statutory delivery. This business of looking for more information is driving people nuts and decisions have to be taken on time in respect of the core economy. I fully accept that 200 jobs in rural Ireland is huge, particularly in that sector. They are good, high-value jobs and I fully accept that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There is a special gathering in the Public Gallery today with Deputy Peter "Chap" Cleere. I do not think I have ever heard him mention Boolyglass but he has mentioned every other part of the constituency. I wish a happy 70th birthday to Tom Dalton from Boolyglass, County Kilkenny. Enjoy your day.

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

**Deputy John Paul O'Shea:** I want to raise the issue of home support with the Taoiseach today. Home support, often known as home help, is one of the most essential person-centred supports provided by our health and social care system. It is a service that allows older people and those with additional needs to continue living safely, comfortably and independently in their own homes and communities. For many families across Cork and throughout the country, home support is not just a convenience but a lifeline. Every single day, home support workers carry out dignified and compassionate work that enables people to remain connected to their neighbours, communities and the place they call home. This sense of place, familiarity and independence has been proven to have a profound impact on a person's physical and mental well-being. It gives reassurance to families, reduces isolation and promotes independence, values that must remain at the heart of our health service.

We cannot ignore the critical role the home support service plays in easing pressure on our hospitals. When adequate support is available in the home, unnecessary hospital admissions can be prevented and hospital discharges can happen more smoothly. For older people in particular, remaining at home with proper assistance is often far safer and healthier than spending extended periods in acute settings. Home support services are a vital part of the wider solution to overcrowding, delayed discharges and pressures on our emergency departments. However, to fully realise the benefits of home support, the service must be resourced, properly staffed and delivered in a timely and consistent manner. Too many people are waiting for far too long for essential hours to begin. Too many families are left in distress trying to bridge that gap. This is not acceptable. A service that is so fundamentally important cannot be allowed to operate under strain, uncertainty or chronic staff shortages.

I received a response to a parliamentary question in the past number of days. There are 5,377 people waiting for a service for home support across the country at present. In Cork city and county, 890 clients have been waitlisted for home support, of whom 543 are waiting for a new service with 347 existing clients waiting for the allocation of additional hours.

To give a few local examples from my own area, a man in his eighties, a farmer all his life who paid taxes for over 65 years got a diagnosis and died nine weeks later in his home. He passed away without getting one hour of home support, despite being approved. Another lady in my constituency spent five weeks in hospital following being approved for discharge, waiting for a home care package to be approved. This should not be happening. We need the HSE to respond with a clear plan on how to identify and address this issue. Carrying on like it has been for the past 12 months or more is no longer acceptable. We need an immediate plan for the home care sector. I hope the Taoiseach can use his offices to ensure we can make significant progress over the coming weeks and months.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue which has been at the heart of Government for the past four to five years and has seen dramatic expansion of supports for home care. There is no question about that. That is part of the challenge. The broader perspective is that population growth and particularly the ageing of the population is a significant backdrop to what we are currently experiencing. I think the population of over-65s has increased by about 37% in the past decade, whereas the overall population has increased by 15% in the past decade. We have a challenge. That is why we set up the Future Ireland Fund, that is, to try to provide guarantees and security for the medium and longer term in respect of a population that will age dramatically over the next two decades. That is the backdrop to it.

In terms of overall allocation, the 2026 investment in older persons' services now will exceed €3 billion compared to under €2 billion five years ago. That is a €1 billion increase. The home support is a priority, which I fully accept, with about €840 million provided for in 2025. That was an increase of €120 million on 2024 and a 70% increase compared to 2020. The resources are going in and 2026 will have a further €82 million, an 11% increase. It is more home support than has ever been delivered before. There is 43% more home support delivered now compared to 2020.

The issue, however, is fundamentally in terms of the workforce and enabling us to recruit a sufficiency of people qualified to provide such home support. About 18.8 million hours have

been provided this year to date, which is about 5% more than target and 7.5% more than the same period last year. The Minister is, in the first instance, delivering on the recommendations of the strategic workforce advisory group on home carers and nursing home healthcare assistants. The enhanced HSE home support authorisation scheme has been in place since August 2023 for payments to approved private and voluntary providers to deliver home support on behalf of the HSE. This delivers on commitments for sectoral reform, such as payment for travel time, for example, for home support providers, paying carers the national living wage at a minimum and bringing legacy rates in line with the new revised rates of funding.

The ESRI's capacity review has now been published. That report projects future demand for older people's services in terms of long-term residential care and home support to 2040. That will inform policy developments. The key issue is around recruitment and getting qualified people in place to meet the undoubted needs. As the Deputy said, there are about 5,000 plus on the waiting list. That includes about 2,200 new applicants and about 3,100 who are already receiving some supports but who require additional hours.

**Deputy John Paul O'Shea:** I thank the Taoiseach. I agree with him that the resources are there; the problem is in recruitment and ensuring we get enough staff in place to continue. Our population is ageing and needs are increasing. The State must respond proactively, not reactively. The principle here is simple. People should be supported to live at home for as long as possible. The State must ensure the supports required are available when needed, not months later. Home support is one of the most empowering, cost effective and socially valuable services we provide. Strengthening it must be a priority for the Government, the HSE and for us all. I will continue to work with families and their carers to ensure that every individual who needs assistance can receive it promptly and reliably. A strong home support system is central to a compassionate and functioning healthcare system. We owe it to our older citizens and those who rely on those services to ensure it is properly delivered, fully staffed and adequately funded. The HSE must act with urgency here. Sadly, the recruitment I have seen in Cork is nowhere near the urgency that is required in this situation. We need immediate and targeted measures to recruit and retain home support workers across the country and in our own county of Cork.

**The Taoiseach:** I fully agree that we have to continue. There is urgency there, certainly at Government level in respect of this issue. The expansion has been quite dramatic and significant but so has been the growth in the population, the need and the demand. The Deputy is correct in saying that we have to concentrate and focus our resources on the home and keeping people living at home for as long as we possibly can. That is in the interests of the individual, of course, the family and broader society. We also have to recruit qualified people. There has to be a degree of vetting involved here as well in terms of safeguarding and protection of people who need care. There is potential, which we discussed earlier, in terms of overseas recruitment and bringing more carers in who can provide the service that is required. The issue now is recruitment of suitable people to staff the requirement. The resources have been increasing.

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

**An Ceann Comhairle:** If Deputies cannot make their point in one minute, they should not apply for Questions on Policy or Legislation.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunleavy Greene and Maurice Patton O'Connell endured 50 days on hunger strike to demand action from the Government for the survivors of industrial and reformatory schools. They ended their protest after securing from the Taoiseach specific commitments, including a Government apology and a number of measures to improve the lives and well-being of survivors. However, they have been in contact to raise serious concerns that the appointed mediator will not meet them again until January. They fear that without clear timelines, the commitment outlined in the Taoiseach's letter to them will stall and fall into delay. The risk now is that the protesters feel compelled to resume their hunger strike, potentially in the run-up to Christmas. We all know these folk have endured enough suffering. I ask the Taoiseach to give firm assurances that the commitments he made will be progressed without delay and to intervene to make sure the mediator meets with the survivors before Christmas.

**The Taoiseach:** I spoke to my officials yesterday again on this. I want to thank the survivors for the engagement I have had with them. There is absolutely no need to even contemplate going back on hunger strike. I will fulfil the commitments that I have made along with the then Minister for education. I wrote to the survivors, and I will fulfil those commitments as soon as we possibly can. We are putting together the detail and fleshing out the commitments I made in correspondence with them on these. I want to give the Deputy that commitment.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** In view of yesterday's historic visit to Dáil and Seanad Éireann by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, we must continue show solidarity with the Ukrainian people as they endure the ongoing brutality from Putin's Russian regime. In recent weeks, we have seen a drone attack on a kindergarten in Kharkiv, the deliberate murder of two unarmed Ukrainian civilians and their dog as they were holding a white flag and the targeting of a UN convoy delivering aid in Kherson. These horrific crimes must be investigated and the perpetrators punished.

I welcome the Government's support for the Council of Europe-backed Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine. Can the Taoiseach update the House on progress made by the special tribunal since its establishment in May and on what long-term support Ireland will provide to the special tribunal?

**The Taoiseach:** Ireland has been a strong supporter of the establishment of the tribunal and will provide financial supports, as we have generally in the area of international jurisprudence and, indeed, the various international courts, such as the International Criminal Court, ICC, the International Court of Justice, ICJ, or any of them have been very strong supporters of those. I share with the Deputy the condemnation of these appalling attacks. In my discussions with President Zelenskyy yesterday, I was very clear on the enormous toll on young people in this war. Thousands and thousands of Ukrainians and, indeed, thousands and thousands of Russians have been dying on the battlefield. There is no need for it. It is an appalling denial of humanity and the importance of life itself. I am shocked at how any leader and how President Putin can preside over such an appalling loss of life at a scale that is unimaginable to any human being.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I want to speak to the Taoiseach today about the four people who were on hunger strike for 50 days until 10 November. He met with them, and an agreement was reached. He signed the letter outlining the promises that the Government has made to these survivors who were wronged in childhood and are continually wronged in adulthood. Three and a half weeks have passed. There is a new Minister for Education and Youth, and the survivors have written to the Minister asking for a meeting and for the supports to start, but nothing has progressed. The Minister told them that she is not available to meet them until January. I have been notified, as has the Department of Education and Youth, that these people will resume their hunger strike. They are still recovering from the previous strike, and they are still not able to eat properly. Will the Taoiseach and Minister for Education and Youth commit today to meeting with the survivors immediately - not before Christmas but immediately - and ensure that these promises in the letter he signed will be delivered with haste and without further delay?

**The Taoiseach:** I ask Members of the House maybe to consult with me and we will engage with the survivors. I understand the Deputy is asking in good faith, but there is no need to go back or even contemplate it. Work is being done on this to flesh out what I committed to. The guarantee stands. The commitments stand. For anyone to have to go back on something like that would be very damaging to their health, so I would be very concerned about that. People's lives and quality of life into the future are at stake here because not taking food and so on can impact someone long after the protest is over. I will come back to the Deputies in respect of this.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Will the Taoiseach withdraw the very cruel cut that has been imposed on Defence Forces reservists? Up until September, they were not paid a large amount; it was €92 per day for the vast majority of working operations in which they were involved. However, from September of this year, this was withdrawn. It makes no sense. It comes in a context whereby there is a target of increasing the number of reservists to about 4,000, given there are less than 2,000 currently. Like I said, it is only €92. This is not a huge amount but it has rightly been seen by the reservists as a very mean cut whereby they are not getting paid for what they were previously getting paid for. They are currently getting paid for a much more narrow range of activities. I tabled a written parliamentary question to the Minister for Defence who replied that a business case is being prepared. However, is this not a simple decision that the cut should be reversed?

**The Taoiseach:** I am not aware of that particular cut, but I will talk to the new Minister for Defence in respect of that. I did set up the office of the Reserve Defence Force. We really have beefed up the capacity behind it, all with a view to increasing the number of reservists because it is a very important dimension to our Defence Forces. My view is that we should be doing everything to incentivise the recruitment of reservists, not disincentivising it.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Last week, Independent Ireland tabled a Private Members' motion relating to the protection of whistleblowers. Part of our motion was to remove the protection for civil servants who are knowingly acting outside of their remit whereby they would not get protected by the State if they are knowingly acting outside the remit of their work. I asked at the time for an open vote from Government on the motion and it did not allow

it. Why are we protecting people who are knowingly breaking the law within the Civil Service? This motion would have actually enacted that and protected people who are doing right, and people who are doing wrong within the service would be held personally accountable. I asked for an open vote and the Government did not allow it. Can the Taoiseach please tell me why?

**The Taoiseach:** We have a party Whip system, and we do not have open votes on every single Private Members' Bill that comes before the House-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** What about this question?

**The Taoiseach:** -----but in terms of protection of whistleblowers, there is very comprehensive legislation to protect whistleblowers. That is there and there are good systems in place and avenues by which disclosures can be made, dealt with and responded to in a systemic way. I am not clear in terms of the Deputy's comment on civil servants knowingly breaching the law. The law is there to be enforced. If the Deputy knows people have broken the law, he should report it to the Garda, which can follow it up. We need to be careful, however. The vast majority of public servants work in the best interests of this country-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Agreed.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and for the people of this country. Every now and again, we need to affirm people in their work-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** It is the minority I am talking about.

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, I know, but we tend to give everyone a bad name.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** No, it is the minority. I praise the ones who are doing the good work. It is the minority who are doing bad work.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** My constituent Mr. Maurice Brady, who is highly regarded for his knowledge of the agrifood sector and who was recently elected regional vice president of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, has brought to my attention the detailed report from a recent fact-finding mission to Brazil by the IFA and *Irish Farmers Journal*, which has to be a further cause for real concern for the European Union in relation to the Mercosur trade deal. The Government must ensure that the best interests of the Irish agrifood sector are fully protected in these trade negotiations.

As the Taoiseach knows, this State has for many decades invested very heavily, along with the farming community, in building up a world-class agrifood industry. Our industry operates to very high standards from primary production with high welfare and biosecurity standards, exceptional traceability and sustainable processing systems. Europe must not be subject to imports of products, particularly beef and poultry from systems that have much lower standards of production and monitoring. The proposed safeguarding regulation must be strengthened or

there is the potential to do untold damage to not just the agrifood sector but to our overall national economy and employment.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this question. I want to acknowledge his absolute consistent support and adherence to a high-quality food production system in this country and agriculture. At the moment, the European Union currently imports around 200,000 tonnes of beef from Mercosur countries annually. What is being proposed now is that the Mercosur countries will be granted a beef quota of 99,000 tonnes subdivided into 55,000 fresh and 45,000 frozen, with an in-quota tariff of 7.5% to be phased in over six equal stages. The Government has been actively engaged with like-minded European Union countries to voice Ireland's concerns in relation to the EU-Mercosur agreement. The Deputy is correct that the EU has very stringent standards, which are known as sanitary and phytosanitary standards, SPS, to protect human, animal and plant life.

1 o'clock

These standards are among the highest in the world and are non-negotiable. I cannot give a longer answer but the European Union, in the context of the latest agreement, has committed to increasing the number of audits and checks in third countries and to strengthening the SPS controls undergone. The reports identified by the Deputy have raised concerns.

**Deputy David Maxwell:** I want to ask about VAT registration for poultry farmers. As we know, since 1 September broiler chicken services in Ireland are no longer eligible for the flat-rate addition scheme and must charge VAT for services such as rearing and fattening. Farmers who supply broiler chicken services now need to register for VAT if their taxable supplies are over the threshold. This is a serious issue. While straightforward broiler farms will be able to register for VAT with relative ease, it is an issue for many farmers who have dairy or beef operations, or both, who diversified into broiler production for an extra income stream or to give a son or daughter an income until that farmer can retire. A farmer who is supplying broiler chickens must now register this part of the farm for VAT purposes, even though the farm is operating as a dairy, beef and broiler operation. Farmers are looking at forming a company for the chicken part of the farm, with agriculture advisers, bookkeeping, VAT returns, registration for PAYE and corporation tax, and new loan agreements for the parts of the land that are in broiler production. I ask that this be looked at again.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. My understanding, if it is the same issue, is that it arose prior to the budget and the then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, advised that, as we say in Irish, níl aon dul as. There was no way to deal with it other than to bring in new measures because of European Union monitoring and what it had assessed in terms of the existing scheme. I accept it is challenging for the broiler farmers but I am not clear there is an alternative pathway. I will bring the matter to the attention of the Minister for Finance. Sometimes in the implementation of new measures there can be space to see if anything can be done. I will talk to the Minister for Finance in respect of the issue.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** This week Brazilian beef on sale in the EU and the North of Ireland has been recalled due to the presence of banned cancer-linked hormones. The Mercosur trade deal will not only impact the health of farmers and their livelihoods; it will also

impact the health of the general public. It is about what the Government is willing to let the public consume. The thoughts that children in Ireland could be eating beef containing these banned cancer-linked hormones should be setting off alarm bells. It is the Taoiseach not worried? I can tell him that as a mother I am worried. I am worried about the risk it poses to my family. This should be black and white. Our health and the health of our families should not be put at risk for the benefit of a trade deal. What levels of testing have been carried out on Mercosur beef coming into Ireland? Will the Taoiseach stand by and let the Commission push this deal on us even if it affects our public health?

**The Taoiseach:** As I said earlier, I am very concerned about these reports. The European Union currently imports approximately 200,000 tons of beef from Mercosur countries annually. There was an assessment done some years ago on the proposed EU-Mercosur agreement that it would result in an additional 50,000 tonnes once it was fully phased in, but approximately 99,000 tonnes would benefit from an in-quota tariff of 7.5%. The fact is that Mercosur beef is coming into the country and it has been, and it is very worrying that carcinogenic hormones have been detected.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** I know but all the tests-----

**The Taoiseach:** The EU has very stringent SPS standards and they have to be implemented and enforced.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** They are not-----

**The Taoiseach:** Our standards are among the highest in the world. It is interesting that in other trade deals some of the countries did not manage to export too much into Europe because of the SPS standards, which are often described as non-tariff barriers.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** Today I welcome our new infrastructure plan, which will shape the future of Ireland. Our many goals include fast-tracking planning for critical projects and reforming judicial reviews to stop endless delays. I want to highlight one project that has not been subject to a judicial review but seems to have come off the rails and has been delayed now for four years. The DART+ South West project seems to have been put out until 2030. Today we heard that the M50 is officially full and this would have taken the pressure off. This project will be a game changer for the areas of north Kildare and west Dublin. Considering the growth of population and the proposed growth of these areas, we need to ensure this rail project gets back on track. Areas such as west Dublin and north Kildare have not been found wanting in housing development but we need the critical infrastructure to go with this. I ask the Taoiseach to raise this issue with the Minister for Transport and ensure the timetable for 2030 is brought back to 2026, as it was before.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy. I am very conscious of this issue. He has been advocating, as has Deputy Shane Moynihan who has been hotfoot onto me in respect of the timelines for this. DART+ South West is part of the broader DART programme. I will speak to the Minister. Permission was granted in November of last year. All of the benefits are there

in terms of increasing capacity. We will work with the Minister to see whether there is flexibility in terms of how projects are delivered. There is huge investment in public transport as a result of the national development plan and the sectoral plan published by the Minister. The issue is whether we can get it all delivered as quickly as we possibly can. I understand and accept Deputy Neville's concerns in respect of this.

**Deputy John Connolly:** In October 2022 I received, as a member of Galway City Council, a presentation from the NTA Galway park and ride office. Even though it is called the Galway park and ride office, it is based in Dublin. As a general point, there was limited comment in last week's sectoral transport plan regarding park and ride. On that occasion the office advised us it was pursuing three sites for the development of park and ride facilities in Galway. It told us it was in discussions with landowners on agreements and that submissions for planning applications would be targeted for mid-2023. Very disappointingly, none of this has happened. There is some land in the ownership of Galway City Council that will be pursued for a park and ride facility but there is no update on the ownership of the sites on the N6 and the N83. Earlier this year I received an email from the NTA advising me that discussions were ongoing. This was three years later. I am very doubtful about the NTA's seriousness about addressing Galway's transport issues. The bodies operate in silos. Public transport and transport bodies seem to act differently and I am concerned.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Connolly. That is too long a time. We should know what is happening with particular sites. I would have thought that if the NTA or Galway City Council has possession, it should engage with the other council and make the site available. I do not know the full details but there are always ways of getting things done. Park and ride facilities do matter and they can be of significant value to a city in freeing up inner-city congestion. I will ask the Minister to engage with the National Transport Authority in respect of this and get clarity for Deputy Connolly and the people of Galway.

**Deputy John Brady:** Last week figures provided to me confirmed that more than €400,000 of taxpayers' money was wasted on the failed IPAS accommodation site at River Lodge in Newtownmountkennedy, County Wicklow. This is a shocking example of mismanagement from start to finish. From day one I and the local community warned the then Minister that the site was completely unsuitable but the Government pressed ahead anyway, recklessly and over the heads of those affected and impacted. Tented accommodation was installed on a site that could never have worked. By December 2024, less than ten months later, the whole thing collapsed when bad weather made the tents unusable and residents had to be moved out. Now the site sits empty, and one year later the Government is still paying for private security on this particular site. More money is being thrown away. River Lodge has to be handed back to the community for community use to serve the people and not be a further drain on taxpayers. Will the Government commit to ending the waste of taxpayers' money at this site and return the site for community use?

**The Taoiseach:** Obviously the identification of centres has been very problematic and challenging for communities and for the Government. I am not sure the appellation of "waste" can be applied to it in this context. The context is much different in terms of ordinarily

procuring or acquiring buildings. I will talk to the Minister in respect of the site and seek an update in respect of it.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** When St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir was closed, the people of Carrick-on-Suir were shocked. They were also promised that a primary care centre would become a hub for chronic disease management. A centre of excellence was promised. Instead, we are now seeing the removal of vital services like the diabetic clinic and the cardiology care from the primary care centre, all because of reports of a lack of space. At the time, the Taoiseach met the former Deputy, Jackie Cahill, and Councillor Kieran Bourke, and promised the hospital would be reopened as a community hospital. That did not happen. The people of Carrick-on-Suir have lost their beloved hospital and have been left with more and more broken promises. It appears the HSE can do what it wants, there is no accountability and its word means nothing. I ask the Taoiseach for immediate clarity on what steps will be taken to restore these vital services locally. Will an additional modular space be provided if there is not space, although I believe there is? Can we have a full audit into the use of St. Brigid's Hospital and the primary care centre to make sure it is not being used by officials rather than services?

**The Taoiseach:** I will engage with the HSE to bring the clarity the Deputy requires in respect of St. Brigid's Hospital and the centre there. Facilities should be used in terms of primary care. Again, I will have to engage with the HSE in respect of this to bring further clarity to it and get an updated position.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** In January 2024, the Taoiseach's Government committed to a public information campaign on the benefits of immigration. Why has this not happened? Has that plan now been abandoned? I heard the Taoiseach's comments earlier. The reality is that some migrants are more welcome than others, judging by the changes to the family reunification system last week. Migrants are the backbone of many sectors in our economy and yet we are seeing mixed messages that are a gross failure of leadership by the Taoiseach's Government. To my mind, these mixed messages are fuelling racism and we are seeing far too many attacks on migrant workers across our communities. Is the Taoiseach going to commit to a positive public information campaign on the benefits of immigration to this country?

**The Taoiseach:** As I said earlier, a national policy and strategy in respect of migration is being developed. I object to the conflation of racism and attacks on people because of their ethnic background and the Government's position. That is wrong.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** There is a link.

**The Taoiseach:** It is wrong to do it. These attacks occurred long before anything was announced this week or this month. It is not good enough that the Deputy would make those assertions. There is nothing wrong with a proper legal system of entering into the country.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** Yes, but you promised-----

**The Taoiseach:** Sorry, it is not about mixed messages. It has always been the case that asylum is treated through the asylum system. People have never been allowed to work immediately when they are seeking asylum. It is not as if there is an open door; there is not and there never has been. Even though we were criticised by the far right for having an open door, there never was an open-door system in terms of asylum.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Hearne.

**The Taoiseach:** There have been work permits and freedom of movement within the European Union, which are all very positive.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach's time is up.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I raise the issue of bus services and Bus Connects in Dublin North-West. For the public in Finglas and Glasnevin, it feels like BusConnects is more like bus disconnects. It has disconnected them from their schools, access to the city centre and work. I had a public meeting last week that was packed out. People are furious. Their lives have been turned upside down. They are completely reliant on public buses. Our bus stops have been removed from Beneavin Road. People are left waiting for buses that never come. The National Transport Authority, NTA, is not listening to communities. The residents are so furious that they are going to have a protest in Finglas on Monday. They will be protesting outside the Dáil the week after. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Transport to get the NTA to listen to the communities and make the changes they need? These are elderly people, disabled people and students whose lives have been turned upside down.

**The Taoiseach:** Again, there has been extensive consultation with the NTA on BusConnects across the country in Dublin, in Cork and everywhere. We have been strongly making the case to the NTA to engage with and listen to the public and society more generally. This new scheme has been in operation for four weeks. I understand there is a meeting tomorrow with the NTA and the local public representatives, is there not?

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** There is a meeting tomorrow.

**The Taoiseach:** Okay. We can deal with it then. The Deputy should engage with the NTA tomorrow.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** We have engaged with the NTA.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is the wrong forum.

**The Taoiseach:** I am not disagreeing with the Deputy; I just think that tomorrow is a good opportunity to bring the views of the people to the NTA.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** We hope they will listen.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** Currently, approximately 600 dentists are providing care dental care for medical card patients. The number was over 1,200 when dentists were operating more privately. I have found out that Cork university dental hospital cannot take in medical card patients. It can do so if they are referred in by accident and emergency or by another dental practice, but it cannot take them in directly because the hospital does not have a GMS panel number. The hospital would be quite prepared to take on medical card patients if it had that number. In view of the substantial drop in the number of dentists operating privately who are prepared to take on medical card patients and the huge influx of people from the Kerry area, for instance, coming in and looking for dentists in the Cork area, I ask that this issue be looked at.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is correct when he says that this is a very serious issue. Access to the GMS in dental capacities is very restrictive. I will talk to the Minister for Health in respect of this. My understanding is that Cork university dental hospital used to take public patients in the past. That was always the tradition. I will certainly pursue that specific issue with the Minister to see if we can unblock that. It would facilitate additional capacity in a situation where there are huge pressures.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** St. Brendan's Community School in Birr is facing ongoing uncertainty around long-promised works, including an ASD wing and a major school extension. This project was first approved in 2018. Since then, the school has moved through various stages but the works have not begun. Most recently, the school was told the project could not proceed until the national development plan implementation programme was published. For a school that has already waited seven years, this is yet another frustrating delay. Parents, children and the people of Birr and the surrounding areas have waited long enough. They deserve more than repeated hold-ups and changing times. Can the Taoiseach explain why an already approved project is now subject to further delay? How does he believe the new infrastructure reform plan will help to expedite this project? I ask him for his support in getting this project started.

**The Taoiseach:** Certainly, Deputy. I will have to discuss this with the Ministers for education and public expenditure to see what the issue is and whether it is ready to go. It is an ASD wing. We have put a lot of capital into special education in the past year or two to get more special classes built and so on. I will check with the Minister what is holding it up. The Deputy will have my support in trying to progress this project.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Dublin West is one of the fastest growing areas in Dublin. It has a population of over 130,000 people and one of the busiest garda stations in the K district. A few weeks ago, another group of gardaí were attested in Templemore training centre. Despite the expectation that a significant number of these gardaí would be sent to Dublin West, only five were assigned. To make matters worse, my understanding is four experienced members were assigned or promoted, which means we have a net gain of only one garda in the entire area. While I understand it is not the Minister's role to assign gardaí, does the Taoiseach not agree that this will impact on community safety? Garda recruitment to areas like Dublin West is at a virtual standstill. The Taoiseach and the Minister have a role in ensuring communities feel safe. Sinn Féin has produced a garda recruitment and retention policy document. Will the

Taoiseach ensure the Minister will address the huge shortage of gardaí in Dublin West? It is affecting our community.

**The Taoiseach:** More generally, Dublin has benefited significantly in the past year or two in terms of an increase in garda numbers. There may be specific geographic areas-----

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Dublin West.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy is focused on Dublin West. There is no question that the city centre has benefited hugely. That has had an impact. The good news is that numbers are increasing. The last intake into Templemore - 220 - was the highest ever. I was with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, in Templemore recently when approximately 190 gardaí came out and passed through. In various parts of the country, including the Deputy's area, they are coming in now. The way the commission is doing it, with significant numbers for significant areas at a time, is probably more impactful, rather than dribs and drabs of numbers across the whole place. Over time, we will get there. I appreciate the Deputy's impatience and his advocacy for his community. I will articulate that to the Minister also.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Today a poll was released by Ireland Thinks on the issue of foxhunting. It reaffirms overwhelming opposition to foxhunting across all demographics, regions, ages and gender. Some 72% are opposed. If "don't knows" are removed, 81% of people are opposed to foxhunting. Only 2% of people have ever taken part in it. Given these huge figures, is it not a problem for democracy if three big parties in the Dáil whip their TDs to maintain foxhunting and do not allow the popular will to even be expressed in this Chamber? Is that not an actual problem? I ask the Taoiseach to give a lead by allowing his TDs to have a free vote on this issue. I am making the same call to all political parties. It is the only way we can reflect the popular will to ban this cruel practice.

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, I do not accept the premise upon which the Deputy is basing her question. We do not govern via opinion polls, nor could we do so. We should not-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Is the Taoiseach saying it is wrong?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please allow the answer.

**The Taoiseach:** I am making a fundamental point here. Is the Deputy is seriously suggesting that the Government should react to every opinion poll on every specific issue in the country? Sure we would have chaos.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Consistent polls have shown-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please. This is the wrong forum for that interaction.

**The Taoiseach:** On the issue itself, I think the Deputy has brought legislation forward. We will examine that. All the parties will examine that legislation, as I have said. I think we have submitted a timed amendment on it. That is the approach that the political parties are taking.

## **Ceisteanna - Questions**

### **Official Engagements**

1. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [49999/25]

2. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the UK Prime Minister. [50002/25]

3. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [63183/25]

4. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [63259/25]

5. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [63268/25]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the UK Prime Minister. [65778/25]

7. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [65833/25]

8. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [67526/25]

9. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [67573/25]

10. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [67607/25]

11. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent meeting with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. [67792/25]

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent meeting with the British Prime Minister. [67808/25]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 12 together.

The UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer and I both attended the recent G20 Summit in South Africa. We had a number of conversations in the margins of meetings there, including on the situation in Ukraine, on which an informal meeting of the coalition of the willing took place. Previously, I met with Prime Minister Starmer at Chequers on 12 September. We discussed a broad range of matters, including the positive state of bilateral relations between Ireland and the UK. We also discussed the legacy framework - this was one of the reasons I went to Chequers - which was published subsequently on 19 September. The Prime Minister and I took note of progress on the UK-Ireland 2030 programme of strategic co-operation since the summit on 6 March on implementation across each of the programme's four pillars of security, justice and global issues; climate, energy and innovation; growth, trade and investment; and culture, education and people-to-people links. We looked ahead to the second UK-Ireland summit, which Ireland will host in the spring of 2026. This work complements that undertaken under the British-Irish Council, which will meet in Wales later this week, and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which took place in Dublin on 17 November.

The Prime Minister and I also discussed a range of international issues, including the catastrophic situation in Gaza. We agreed in particular on the then urgent need for a ceasefire, the release of hostages and the delivery of humanitarian aid at scale, as well as finding a pathway to a two-state solution for a lasting peace. We committed to continue to work together with the coalition of the willing to strengthen support for Ukraine and increase pressure on Russia to stop its war of aggression on the people of Ukraine.

Deputies may wish to be aware that the First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, was in Ireland last week to mark the agreement of a new bilateral co-operation framework between Ireland and Scotland. The new framework includes six broad areas for future co-operation, including in the context of a strengthened Ireland-UK relationship. I also met with First Minister Swinney in Government Buildings during his visit.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I have had numerous opportunities in this House to welcome in general terms the legacy framework that was agreed between the British and Irish Governments and published in early September. There is an urgent need to enact legislation to give effect to the provisions outlined in the framework. Did the Taoiseach detect an urgency or a very strong commitment from the UK Prime Minister on the need to get this issue dealt with? Many families have waited for justice for decades and decades. We have to move on and get progress on the rights, the concerns and the grief that engulfs so many families of victims for many decades now. At the end of this month, we will mark the 53rd anniversary of the Belturbet bombing, which cost the lives of two young teenagers. We also have had significant dates in relation to commemorations, for example marking the terrible atrocities in Monaghan and Dublin in May 1974. There are so many atrocities for which nobody has been brought to justice. We cannot ever attach enough urgency to trying to deal, once and for all, with legacy issues.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The right to protest against the genocide in Palestine is being severely undermined the UK and this is being carried through to the North as well. I want to raise a case with the Taoiseach that he could raise with the Prime Minister. This is the case of Saoirse Wagner, a student at Queen's University in Belfast, who is being threatened with

expulsion for taking part in a peaceful, calm and non-threatening protest on the issue of Palestine. The Palestine assembly in the college protested at the careers fair to highlight companies that are participating in the genocide. I think the Taoiseach will agree with me that taking part in student protest is a fundamental right and so important in our democracy. To threaten a student with their whole third level education being completely taken away for participating in a peaceful protest is something we should take a stand against. I ask the Taoiseach to make representations to the college. Saoirse is known to me. I know that she would not participate in anything violent. I ask the Taoiseach to take this case on board.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We are coming up to the 50th anniversary of the Dundalk bombing, which happened on 19 December 1975. Dundalk lost Hugh Watters, who was a local tailor and a well-respected man, and Jack Rooney, a fireman and a man who worked for the council. Obviously, this was devastating for their families. A memorial event has been organised by the families. It is going to happen near the courthouse, where there is a plaque, at 6.15 p.m. on Friday, 19 December. I think it is very important that we commemorate this 50th anniversary. It was the same night as the attack on Donnelly's Bar in Silverbridge where three people were killed. This was carried out by the Glenanne gang. We know this was a UVF gang which had members of the UDR and the RUC within it and obviously, the British state was up to its neck in relation to it. I would ask about the engagement around producing a framework that will actually deliver for families like these that have been failed and that Britain does not walk away from its role and its dirty war that it fought in Ireland.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taoiseach said he discussed Gaza and Palestine with Keir Starmer. A standard tactic of the Israeli state has been to say that anybody who criticises Israel for genocide, apartheid, ethnic cleansing or the persecution of Palestinians, is somehow antisemitic. Keir Starmer, of course, has a record of going along with that nonsense and attacking people like Jeremy Corbyn, who is one of the most long-standing anti-racists and an absolute opponent of antisemitism. It is an outrageous accusation. We have now seen an instance of our own ambassador being dressed down by an Israeli minister, who accused the Irish people and the Irish Government of antisemitism. I would like to know what the Taoiseach thinks about that. Is he capitulating to that bullying by the Israeli state by intervening on the proposal to rename Herzog Park? This is an entirely justified proposal, given Chaim Herzog's history of involvement in ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** A series health crisis is arising in the North of Ireland at the moment. Sinn Féin, the DUP, the UUP and the Alliance Party are closing down key hospital services in Daisy Hill Hospital, Enniskillen and Causeway Hospital in Derry. These closures are having a significant effect on services. Patients in Craigavon hospital are waiting for 19 hours to see their emergency doctor. The waiting time at the emergency department in the Royal Victoria Hospital is nine hours. One day, there were 40 ambulances stuck at hospitals trying to deliver their patients. The longest waiting time was 13 hours. I pay tribute to the SOS Causeway Hospital campaign and Gemma Brolly, who is involved in that.

The boss of the British Medical Association in the North stated that an all-Ireland GP service would be a way to help resolve these crises. Daisy Hill, Enniskillen and Causeway all have hinterlands that feed into the South of Ireland in areas where there is great need for hospital

services too. Is the Taoiseach speaking to the British Prime Minister about developing an all-Ireland health service?

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** When I asked the Taoiseach about flood relief for east Cork villages last week, he accused me of being sly in how I had raised the question. That adjective could be more fairly levelled at his British counterpart, Keir Starmer, who built his political career on the basis of being a human rights lawyer and unifier of the left. In power, he has enthusiastically supported the imprisonment of people for years who protest against climate inaction, along with the designation of protesters of genocide as terrorists. I fully appreciate that the UK makes its own political decisions and that we have to maintain good relations with political leaders with whom we often might have major disagreements, but it is also true that Irish citizens are affected by Starmer's authoritarian crackdown on peaceful protests. Acclaimed novelist Sally Rooney has been prevented from collecting a prestigious Sky Arts award in person due to fears of arrest for her support of Palestine Action. Great-grandmother Máire Ní Mhurchú, originally from Douglas in Cork, was arrested in London in September, along with her sisters Gráinne and Olga, for a peaceful protest against genocide. When the Taoiseach met Keir Starmer, did he raise with him his government's aggressive and authoritarian approach to peaceful protest and its impact on Irish as well as British citizens?

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** With reference to the Taoiseach's meeting with British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, I note the progress made by the UK Government with regard to dealing with legacy, and I compliment Deputy Smith on his work in this area in particular.

I note the publication this week by the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee around legacy. One of the more interesting recommendations was that Ireland needs to do more with regard to legacy. I would love to hear the Taoiseach's thoughts on that given that all of the legacy investigations of this country have been ECHR compliant, which is not necessarily something that can be said in the case of the UK.

I call for increased and accelerated action on, in particular, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. That has been raised many times in this House and it needs to fall under the ambit of the legacy issues as well.

What engagement has the Taoiseach had with the Prime Minister on the ongoing humanitarian disaster of a crisis in Sudan, somewhere the international community needs to step up and pay attention? I wish to hear his thoughts on their engagement on that matter.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** There can be no watering-down of the commitments made in the British and Irish Governments' joined legacy framework. There are parts of that framework I question but it is very important. I welcome the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee report on this legacy legislation. The primary legislation underpinning the political framework is moving through Westminster. The bottom line is that the legislation must command the confidence of the families and be human rights compliant in order for it to properly deal with the legacy of the past. Reports that the legislation, which is already weak in parts, could be watered down are extremely concerning and will not be accepted. It is deeply concerning that any legislation would provide the British Secretary of State with the power to veto disclosure on national security grounds for family reports from the information retrieval body, the ICIR

and the new legacy commission. All families and survivors have the right to have an Article 2-compliant investigation into the deaths of their loved ones.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** A new defence co-operation agreement with Britain is to be signed soon. Members of the House of Lords are saying it will mean a stronger defence relationship between Ireland and the UK. The Taoiseach himself has said there must be very close co-operation with the British when it comes to security. Does he really think that is what Irish people want? Has he forgotten that our neutrality originates from an anti-imperialist struggle against Britain, a struggle Fianna Fáil once fought for? Can he tell us what will be in this new military agreement? Britain is increasing its military expenditure by £67.7 billion. It is an active participant in the genocide in Gaza. Are we going to be expected to massively increase our military expenditure, too, as part of this new agreement?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank all of the Deputies for raising a range of issues. Deputy Smith was the first to raise the issue of legacy. I believe there is a sincere commitment on behalf of the British Government as to the implementation of the legacy framework. That is shared by Prime Minister Starmer and, indeed, Secretary of State Hilary Benn, who has acted honourably in all of the negotiations and discussions in respect of the legacy framework. I visited Chequers last September specifically on legacy, along with other issues. It was important to meet with Keir Starmer on that. He has experience of the North from a former role there.

I know the Deputy has been a strong advocate on Belturbet and Monaghan and Dublin. From our perspective, it is important that the Denton report may shed some light on the Monaghan bombing and related issues Deputy Ó Murchú raised. This is relevant also to the activities of the Glennane gang and we eagerly await its publication. Operation Kenova was quite good, in my view, particularly in terms of the victims, who were very impressed with Jon Boutcher when he was in charge of Kenova. They articulated to me that he was one of the first people they met who understood where the families of the victims are coming from.

Deputy Moynihan also raised legacy. We have responsibilities in our jurisdiction. If assertions are made about us, we need to robustly deal with them, but the most effective way to do it is to make sure we respond properly to legacy. As part of the framework agreement, the British Government has, with speed, produced its legislation. That demonstrates the seriousness with which it is approaching this essential work. We are also producing legislation once the UK legislation is enacted. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has said he is hopeful the general scheme of the Bill will be published in April or May of next year. Enabling reciprocal co-operation between the two jurisdictions is at the heart of the agreed joint framework on legacy.

Additionally, as part of the joint framework agreement, the Garda Commissioner has agreed to the establishment by the end of this year of a dedicated unit as a central point of contact in relation to Troubles-related investigations undertaken by An Garda Síochána. That is an important step forward. Unionist communities in the North have always had a view. We did the Smithwick tribunal and we dealt with it quickly as part of the commitment of earlier agreements, but we do also have to be upfront in terms of the legacy framework and respond properly and comprehensively in relation to that.

I say to Deputy Ó Murchú and all those concerned about legacy that it is not about British state violence alone. It is about that, but it is also about the role of the paramilitaries, such as the Provisional IRA. I have met families of victims who have had no closure at all in terms of atrocities committed by the Provisional IRA or the Ulster loyalist groups. The focus has to be broad-based. There is an opportunity in this legacy framework to give closure to families once and for all, after decades of a lack of closure.

Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of Saoirse Wagner and asked me to talk to the Queen's University authorities. The right to protest is sacrosanct. A number of Deputies have raised this issue. Sometimes protests impede other people from doing their normal work, which is a problem. People are entitled to protest. When the war in Gaza started, I was addressing a group of 100 law students, but the objective of a protest was to stop me and to interfere with the exercise and engagement with about 100 law students. People were shouting internally, security asked them to leave and eventually they did. I was in no doubt that the whole purpose was that I would not have that engagement. Where is the balance of rights there in terms of my freedom to speak as a public representative or the freedom of people in the community to hear me? A lot of protests have crossed the line, in my opinion, with a view to stopping things happening. During a consultative forum on security challenges that I hosted as Minister for foreign affairs two years ago, the protests at that were not about protests. They were deliberately calculated to disrupt the event.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The forum was not about consultation either, was it?

**The Taoiseach:** It was a legitimate consultation. If the Deputy believes in freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, what he and like-minded people were about was stopping that from even happening. They never complain about that. It is fair play for them to do that. There is balance here.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I do not know about the protest.

**The Taoiseach:** Of course the Deputy knows about the protests. She knows all about them.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I have no idea what the Taoiseach is on about.

**The Taoiseach:** They were on the public television, for God's sake.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I do not organise every protest in Ireland.

**The Taoiseach:** They were on the public television, in the media and everywhere. In this House-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That does not make it terrorism.

**The Taoiseach:** -----assertions were made. I am not calling it that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputies are only delaying the next question.

**The Taoiseach:** The point I am illustrating is that there are different forms of protest on the continuum and some of those forms are unacceptable-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** We did not organise-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, stop engaging, please.

**The Taoiseach:** -----as an infringement of the rights of people generally. That is the point I am making.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The time has elapsed.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I am just correcting a mistruth there.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not a one-way street-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It does not matter.

**The Taoiseach:** -----all of the time. That is the point I am making. Ramming gates at Shannon Airport is not a legitimate form of protest. Stopping trade through Dublin Port is not a legitimate form of protest-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** We are not.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because people's livelihood depends on it. Eighty per cent of trade in this country goes through Dublin Port. Having a problem with a company is not a justification, in my view, for disrupting the entire port. I have no problem having a debate. I participated in protests as a student. I think student protests are important.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Did you?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is not a debate.

**The Taoiseach:** I did, actually

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Okay, I will look that one up.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy can do that. Joe Duffy was put in prison as a result of that protest. It was to do with medical cards. There you are now. Students in this country automatically had medical cards at one time. That was taken away in the eighties. The point is that legitimate protests-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Which party was that?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Ah please, Deputy, we have to get through this.

**The Taoiseach:** I think it was the Deputy's former colleagues in the Labour Party.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, are we moving on?

**The Taoiseach:** That is history. Protests happen, and I have no issue with that, but there is a continuum. I will take the Ceann Comhairle's advice.

To Deputy Ó Murchú, I have dealt with some of the legacy issues, which Deputy Conway-Walsh also raised. I will talk to Queen's University on that point. In terms of the Dundalk bombing and the Glennane gang, I hope Operation Denton will shed light on that.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** What about the health services?

**The Taoiseach:** I will come to that. On Deputy Boyd Barrett's question, there is no relationship between the strategy and policy of the Israeli Government and my views on the renaming of Herzog Park. I have a very basic view. Throughout the history of the State, there have been namings and renamings. I am, and have been, a student of history and I taught students. I always showed them that the names of parks could be the remnants of empire or anything, but they are windows to explain the history of a given subject or personality. If we keep shutting down everything that is named after somebody, there will be no history left.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** When was it named Herzog Park?

**The Taoiseach:** There will not be a history left.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** When was it named Herzog Park? It was ten or 20 years ago.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please move on, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** That is not the point.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is not history.

**The Taoiseach:** It is, actually, if you go back through his father and before that and examine how Jewish communities came to Ireland in the first instance. There is huge history there, for God's sake.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** But not the park.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is still history if you change the name of the park.

**The Taoiseach:** As a historian and someone who is interested in history, I would be very careful.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** -----you are verging on disruptive.

**The Taoiseach:** Breandán Ó hEithir wrote in *Lig Sinn i gCathú* about the thirties when places were being shut down left, right and centre.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seven more Deputies, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** There is a lot more to it than that, but it has nothing to do with this. I can put Deputy Boyd Barrett at ease in that regard.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There are seven more Deputies to answer, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** By the way, I object, like the Deputy does, to Israel's consistent messaging that if you are not onside, you are offside or antisemitic. That is wrong. You are entitled to be against Israeli Government policy and criticise it and not be labelled antisemitic. That is absolutely correct and I support it.

Deputy Tóibín should talk to his former colleagues in Sinn Féin in earnest and engage with them on the health services in Northern Ireland. That is one issue. There are broader problems with the National Health Service generally, but there are real issues in Northern Ireland. There is no question about the pressures on the health service there.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There are benefits to an all-Ireland health service.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, this is not a continuous back-and-forth. I am not allowing that. This is Taoiseach's Questions. The Deputy has asked a question and is getting an answer.

**The Taoiseach:** Under the shared island initiative, we are trying to do specific projects and programmes, for example in paediatric and cardiovascular health, cardiac surgery and the cancer centre at Altnagelvin hospital. Those are good programmes that have worked very well.

Deputy Quaide referred to Prime Minister Starmer. I do not see him as an authoritarian person when I meet him. I spoke about the continuum of protest. I am not *au fait* with British security services or why they came to do what they did in respect of Palestine Action. We have proceeded differently in this country. When I meet Prime Minister Starmer, I will have an opportunity to deal fundamentally with a range of issues although we cannot deal with every single issue. The UK has had challenges on both sides of the political spectrum in respect of protests and the nature of those protests.

I dealt with the points raised by Deputy Shane Moynihan about Operation Denton. The Sudan issue is one I have raised consistently with leaders, including publicly, at the G20 summit

and at the Africa-European Union summit. It is catastrophic. It rarely gets mentioned in this House, but 12 million people have been displaced. Genocide against the civilian population is happening there. Some of the rebel forces are being supported by neighbouring countries with arms and so forth.

To respond to Deputy Conway-Walsh, the framework is Article 2 compliant. It is far stronger than its predecessor as a legacy Bill.

Deputy Murphy raised the new co-operation agreement. It absolutely makes sense that we co-operate very closely with the United Kingdom on the gas connectors, for example. Those are a huge security vulnerability for both the UK and Ireland, but particularly for Ireland. Within a week, our economy would come to a standstill if anything untoward were to happen to those interconnectors. I hope the Deputy would agree that we should have close defence co-operation for our economic security, in particular, and for our subsea cables. That will mean a lot of technological co-operation. When a Russian shadow fleet crosses over those pipes or subsea cables, very often divers have to go down and check that the pipes are okay. That is co-operation. Letting people know that somebody who might be up to no good is in your terrain is co-operation. Intelligence services sharing information about terrorists or potential attacks is co-operation. There should be no big deal about co-operation.

By the way, on the origin of our neutrality, it was not an anti-imperialist origin. In fact, at the consultative forum, there was a very good seminar on our neutrality and its origins. Obviously, the Second World War was at the core. We were neutral in not having issues with Britain and the occupation of Northern Ireland and so on, but the more fundamental issue was that it was a neutrality of survival. No one was in a position to defend Ireland in 1939, 1940 or 1941. There were good presentations made at that consultative forum but Deputy Murphy boycotted it because he felt it was not worthwhile. It would have been informative had he gone. It would have provided a more nuanced view-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is a shame the Taoiseach scrapped the idea of a citizens' assembly.

**The Taoiseach:** -----of the origins of our neutrality.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Taoiseach and ask him to move to the next question.

**The Taoiseach:** I apologise. I thank the Ceann Comhairle for her tolerance.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is not my tolerance. I get complaints at the Business Committee that this forum is not working. We are going to take it to the Dáil reform committee for change.

### **Regulatory Reform**

13. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [50582/25]

14. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [58232/25]

15. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [63260/25]

16. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [63269/25]

17. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [63479/25]

18. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [63906/25]

19. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [65261/25]

20. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [65601/25]

21. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach about his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [65781/25]

22. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for an update on his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [67527/25]

23. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach his Department's plans to co-ordinate a range of actions aimed at regulatory reform. [67793/25]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 13 to 23, inclusive, together.

Regulation, and the extent of any regulatory or administrative burden, has recently become a greater focus at European Union level and nationally as a means to further enhance competitiveness. At a European level, both simplification and implementation are important Commission priorities. The Commission is striving to simplify and lighten the administrative burden of European Union regulations to ensure they are proportionate, stable, coherent and technologically neutral.

Likewise, our national regulatory framework is a central focus for the Government as we strive to support competitiveness at a time of international economic uncertainty. In line with the programme for Government, we published an action plan on competitiveness and productivity on 10 September this year. The action plan includes actions across government to ensure the development of a more effective regulatory system which will support economic growth.

These actions reflect priority areas where targeted public policy intervention can have the greatest impact. These include a red-tape challenge to reduce regulation for SMEs; the application of the SME test by Government Departments to all measures, in particular policy

initiatives where it is proposed to increase costs on small businesses; expediting the Environmental (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill; commencing reforms, as we have done, under the Planning and Development Act 2024 to enhance delivery of infrastructure; and implementing the outstanding recommendations from the review of the administration of civil justice review group report.

Increased regulatory burden has also been identified as a barrier to infrastructure development and delivery. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, supported by the work of the accelerating infrastructure task force, this morning, with Government colleagues including me, the Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, published a plan which will include extensive regulatory reforms aimed at accelerating the delivery of critical infrastructure. Today's plan provides the blueprint to reduce complexity and blockages in the system and deliver infrastructure with urgency. The changes we are initiating today are vital if we are to maintain our competitive position in an ever uncertain world. They are also necessary to support our citizens with top class public services, job security, access to housing and all other facilities necessary to enjoy the stability and good quality of life we are all entitled to expect.

The actions are ambitious but achievable, and delivering them will require commitment and co-operation across a broad and diverse range of stakeholders, from political, legal and public sectors, industry and society as a whole. We have established a cost-of-business advisory forum where business owners and representative bodies can speak directly to decision-makers about the real-world impact of regulations, fees and operational challenges. The work of that forum is under way. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is working on the simplification omnibus packages put forward by the European Commission in a range of policy areas, most recently the Commission's digital simplification omnibus package, which was published last month.

My Department will play a co-ordinating role across these different regulatory reform initiatives, as outlined in the action plan on competitiveness and productivity, including the establishment of a central economic regulators' forum, and we will work with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and other Government colleagues on that agenda.

**Deputy Tony McCormack:** I thank the Taoiseach for his response. I acknowledge the significant work he, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and their two Departments are doing on infrastructure reform, particularly the steps being taken to modernise planning, reduce delays and ensure major projects move forward. Infrastructure reform is vital, but businesses and especially SMEs are also calling for a more streamlined regulatory environment. These firms consistently cite overlapping rules, slow approvals and heavy administrative demands as major obstacles to growth. Building on the work already happening on infrastructure, will the Taoiseach update the House on what specific measures his Department is pursuing to simplify compliance for SMEs, reduce unnecessary paperwork and make it easier for businesses to operate and expand? How will these reforms help to lower costs for employers and the taxpayer by making the system more efficient overall?

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** It is vital that when we speak about regulatory reform, we talk about the administrative operations of existing systems in the function of the State. I will specifically reflect on the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and the roll-out of grants. We are about to have a debate in this Chamber on energy costs. One thing that is vital is that the best way the Government can help to reduce energy costs in homes is to retrofit them for the

future so that they simply do not need as much energy. That is the number one way to reduce the cost and it facilitates homes to be more efficient and takes pressure off the grid. The Government needs to do something to accelerate the rate at which homes can be retrofitted by the SEAI. For many constituents in my constituency, it is taking too long to get through the process of approval of the grant to construction.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We all accept there are huge issues with bureaucracy and red tape in planning. We should have seen simplification and streamlining. Conversations about this are occurring across Europe, but we know about the home-grown issues. It is an issue I have brought up previously, even within the planning systems involving State authorities. For example, Louth County Council is involved in the Ardee Education Together National School build and a particular issue has arisen. We do not have enough agility in the system. Multiple requests have gone in stating that there are not enough parking spaces. There are 21 spaces, including three disability spaces. There are only two set-down spaces for minibuses and there is a need for five as there are five autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes and there is not even room for a full-size 52-seater bus to turn. There are 21 spaces for staff and there is a need for something closer to 40.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It is possible to get this work done at this time, but if the works continue as planned, the problem will still need to be fixed but it could take more than €100,000, so we need something to be done.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I raise the regulation of social media companies in the online space, particularly as it relates to children. The criticism that has been levelled at Coimisiún na Meán's online safety code is that an earlier draft had a recommendation that social media companies turn off recommender systems and it has been removed. Recommender systems profile people who are using apps and then drive them down often hateful and dangerous rabbit holes. It is not healthy for them or society. Will this be looked at?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** I raise regulatory reform of immigration and particularly family reunification. It is now being made much harder for many essential workers to be unified with their families, in particular migrant healthcare assistants who were brought over here on a visa programme and are working in private nursing homes. Last week on RTÉ radio, the Minister for justice was asked by the presenter whether these people are not entitled to a normal family life. They are caring for our older people and we have to show we care for them. The Minister's reply was that no one is forcing them to come here. That is absolutely heartless, shows zero empathy and is also completely counterproductive because many of them are nurses. They could go to other countries, but they have come to Ireland and are working below their grades or qualifications, giving huge added value to the nursing homes. I urge the Taoiseach to have a heart. We had a briefing here a few years ago, which Deputy Michael Healy-Rae attended because he knew the value of those healthcare assistants in nursing homes. These are essential workers and they will go elsewhere.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Please entitle them to have a normal family life. These mothers should not be separated from their kids.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The programme for Government says the Government will move responsibility for the Multi-Unit Developments, MUD, Acts to the Department of housing from the Department of justice and establish a unit in the Housing Agency to regulate owners' management companies, OMCs, to ensure effective governance. That is important work that needs to happen. The problem is that it is not happening currently, but it has been agreed. Effectively what is holding it up is that, as a result of the Mulcreavy judgment, the primary legislation needs to be changed. At the moment, the MUD Act refers to the Minister for justice and not the Minister for housing. A simple amendment is needed to change the reference to the Minister for housing. Until that happens, all this work of regulatory oversight of OMCs and so on is simply not taking place. There was a meeting of the housing committee to discuss these issues. It invited various officials from the Department of housing and was told they could not come yet because their line Minister is not yet responsible for this.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Housing Agency has not been allocated funding for doing any regulatory work as a result. This needs urgent action.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** There was a health committee session last week on the regulation of counselling and psychotherapy. In standards it has published, CORU has adopted a position that is entirely at odds with the main representative groups of those disciplines, which will reduce supervision requirements and remove mandatory personal therapy for trainees. These changes, if implemented, will degrade professional standards and undermine patient safety. CORU is showing a remarkable level of intransigence on these fundamentals of safe practice. Practitioners and representative bodies have warned that the proposals could also jeopardise recognition and mobility across the EU for counsellors and psychotherapists. We must protect high-quality training, preserve public confidence and ensure regulation strengthens, not weakens, these services.

I am not expressing some fringe opinion. The health committee was unanimous in supporting the counselling and psychotherapy representative groups and the session included some strong and insightful contributions from the Taoiseach's party colleagues, including Senator Costello. Will the Government immediately pause the CORU process, bring representative bodies and practitioners into full consultation and commit to reforms that prioritise client safety and high professional standards?

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I will talk about the regulation of quarries. The Taoiseach knows the price we have paid in this country and the price that families affected by the defective concrete blocks scandal have paid due to a lack of regulation.

2 o'clock

Many of the homeowners I have spoken to in Mayo are not satisfied with the current regulations of quarries and in particular, that geologists are not examining the aggregate within the quarries that are being used to build homes now. I ask the Taoiseach to have a look at this area to see what can be done in that regard. It can be easily fixed by engaging and employing geologists to do the job and to make sure that people have confidence in the materials that are coming out of quarries.

**Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett:** The Taxi Regulation Act 2013 clearly gives the Minister the power to impose regulations around the activities of dispatch companies. Today, for the third time in two weeks, taxi drivers in Dublin are protesting. There is a widespread protest against this across the country by taxi drivers over the behaviour of Uber, a multimillion euro company, that is trying to undermine the livelihood of nearly 20,000 taxi drivers by introducing a fixed fare system. This will undermine the regulated fare structure and therefore the livelihoods of taxi drivers and ultimately the industry itself. In the long run, as is clear from Uber's behaviour elsewhere in the world, it will not benefit the customer. Once the company gets hold of a market, fares and charges go up and the livelihoods of taxi drivers get smashed. Will the Taoiseach ask the Minister for Transport to impose such regulations to prevent Uber destroying the industry and livelihoods of taxi drivers around this fixed fare system and enforce the taxi regulation and meter stuff?

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy McCormack raised infrastructure reform, particularly for small to medium-sized businesses. Some of the measures we have taken in respect of deferring the alignment of the minimum wage with the national living wage will help to avoid the escalation of costs because the SME sector has borne the brunt of a lot of additional costs over the past five years. There is no doubt the reduction in VAT on hospitality will help a lot of SMEs in the hospitality sector and hairdressing as well. The number of sick days leave is going to be quickly expanded. We have expanded it to three days. The cumulative cost of everything has been fairly excessive. The Small Business Forum is there to try to balance imposition on small business as well as the cost.

The other issue is the sequential approach to planning and regulations as opposed to a concurrent approach whereby instead of waiting for the planning to be done, agencies do the procurement. Instead of waiting for environmental assessments, doing them all in parallel would speed up a lot of activity. In many instances, we are constantly looking at the avoidance of increased cost for SMEs and trying to slow down the increased costs that have come their way. It is interesting the rate of youth employment has crept up in the past six to nine months. I believe that is related to costs on SMEs.

Deputy Dolan is correct that retrofitting is the most effective way to reduce costs. Between 2019 and September 2025, the Government provided over €1.5 billion in support to homeowners for over 228,000 upgrades, including 30,000 fully funded retrofits under the warmer homes scheme. It is estimated that if a deep retrofit is done, it can save a household up to €1,100 per year in energy costs. I get the Deputy's point that the administration of it needs to be faster. There is also resource demand in respect of it as well with some people not being able to afford to do retrofits because of the cost.

On Deputy Ó Murchú's issue, I do not have the specifics on Ardee Educate Together National School. I do not know what the interaction with the county council is, but in any event-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** The refusal to change-----

**The Taoiseach:** They should sort it out. A school is an important facility. The county council should be facilitative in the building of a school.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It is not just the council.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy O'Rourke raised regulation online. We have now established the regulatory framework governing online. There is ongoing review in respect of it. Children must be protected. That has to be the optimal.

Deputy Coppinger raised healthcare assistants and family reunification. We have significant reunification in Ireland under our migration system, in particular when people leave direct provision who have residency. The Minister will bring forward legislation in respect of this and these are issues we can discuss in greater detail at that stage.

On Deputy Murphy's point, I will talk to the Ministers responsible. There has to be proper regulation of management companies. There are fundamental rights involved in terms of those complexes. I will pursue that with the Minister and see where we are in terms of amendment to primary legislation.

Deputy Quaide raised the issue of counselling and psychotherapy. On qualification frameworks and regulators generally, we want more therapists, but they have to be highly qualified. Public health is number one and the protection of the consumer. In some instances, they can be quite protectionist as well. The judgment called for regulators and I would like CORU to get the judgment right in terms of not having the bar so high that there are only highly qualified, and others are not. That is not just in terms of therapy and counselling; that is in terms of teaching and a range of other issues.

Deputy Conway-Walsh raised the regulation of quarries. I will talk to the Minister involved in that. We can overregulate too but I take the Deputy's point about the quality of aggregate and quality of the product. There are existing systems to deal with that. The SEAI is there. There are various regulatory bodies to deal with the quality of materials, but I will talk to the Minister in respect of that. New bodies were set up after the defective blocks scheme.

Deputy Boyd Barrett raised taxi regulation. I will talk to the Minister about the issues that the Deputy raised. There is a balance between consumers, those availing of taxis and the regulation of same. We had regulation a long time ago; it did not work. There was always an imbalance between supply and demand. I will look at this and will talk to the Minister for Transport in respect of it. He is fully aware of it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have a delegation of students visiting from Ukraine as our part of our EPAS programme hosted by Maynooth Post Primary School. They are most welcome. We had their president here yesterday, which we enjoyed immensely.

## **Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Seanad Éireann has passed the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 without amendment.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Transport has completed its consideration on the following Supplementary Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 31 - Transport

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.08 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 2.08 p.m. and resumed at 3.08 p.m.*

### **Energy Costs: Statements**

**Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** For the information of the House, Committee Stage of the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 is starting at 3.30 p.m. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, will come in after I have spoken. Officials will take note of matters raised by all Deputies here and we will respond. It is outside my control as the committee meeting was scheduled by the committee.

Since 2022, we have seen significant increases in the prices that households and businesses pay for energy. This has come alongside general inflation at levels not experienced in recent times. Domestic energy prices and cost-of-living pressures remain matters of serious concern. The Government is acutely aware of the challenges that households continue to face in meeting the costs and remains fully committed to supporting those most at risk.

The Government takes this matter very seriously and has made a number of important commitments in respect of addressing the continued high cost of energy and, indeed, we have implemented some measures already. This is evident in the programme for Government which acknowledges the increased energy cost pressures on households and businesses and commits to bringing forward measures to help contain energy costs.

Today, I will outline some of the key drivers of energy prices as well as the steps that the Government has taken to support households to meet these costs. I will also set out the actions being taken to protect Irish consumers over the longer-term, by making critical investments in renewable energy, in our electricity grid and, importantly, in energy efficiency.

The pressures we face are not unique to Ireland. Rising energy costs have been seen across Europe since the economic recovery from the pandemic and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The invasion introduced huge volatility into the wholesale gas market, which directly led to higher prices paid by households and businesses across Europe for electricity. There remains a strong correlation between wholesale gas and wholesale electricity prices, as gas remains an important source of fuel in the electricity generation mix. Wholesale prices have stabilised and fallen since then but remain elevated compared to the pre-pandemic averages. In line with rising wholesale prices since the post-pandemic recovery, accelerated

by the war in Ukraine, household electricity and gas bills rose significantly in 2022 and have remained elevated since.

The electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas prices are commercial and liberalised. The position of successive Governments has been that competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses in terms of suppliers, products and prices. CRU ended its regulation of retail prices in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014. Price setting by electricity suppliers, including standing charges, is therefore a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned.

Each such company has its own approach to pricing decisions over time, in accordance with factors such as their overall company strategic direction and developments in their cost base. The latest data from Eurostat shows that, in nominal terms, Ireland ranked fifth for electricity prices and eighth for household gas prices among European countries in the first half of 2025. When adjusting for purchasing power parity Ireland is mid-table in terms of energy affordability with the 12th highest electricity prices among the EU 27. Retail prices are influenced by several factors which must be borne in mind, including wholesale energy prices, system operation costs and supplier hedging. In Ireland, our reliance on imported fossil fuels, specifically gas, for electricity generation, has been a long-standing driver of higher energy costs. Furthermore, our location as an island on the periphery of Europe and our low-density and widely dispersed population also influence prices.

Regarding hedging, suppliers in Ireland were shown to have taken a prudent approach to hedging which had the benefit of protecting final customers from the very worst effects of the wholesale price crisis. Conversely, hedging limits the ability of suppliers to reduce prices immediately in line with wholesale price shifts. The International Energy Agency has observed that retail prices in Ireland have not adjusted at a comparable pace to the decline in wholesale prices, with the energy component of retail prices remaining up to three times that of wholesale prices. That is the margin to which I referred.

While the CRU has carried out extensive monitoring of the Irish retail energy market before, during and in the aftermath of the energy crisis and found no evidence of market failure, the findings of the IEA renewables report underline the importance of progressing the programme for Government commitment to "commission an independent review into the speed and level of passthrough from wholesale prices to retail prices, with an additional assessment of the overall price dynamics and an overall focus on the competitiveness of the Irish economy".

It is in this context that I have requested that the CRU lead the independent review of the relationship between wholesale and retail energy prices. This review will build on the work of previous CRU reports and investigations from 2017, 2023 and 2024 by reviewing the competitiveness of Irish retail energy markets, examining supplier costs, including hedging and pricing practices, and providing comparative price analysis with other EU member states. It will also identify any issues affecting the speed or scale of passthrough from wholesale to retail costs, assess whether any further measures are warranted to enhance market responsiveness to wholesale price changes and make recommendations to ensure that the benefits of lower wholesale prices are felt by both households and businesses.

As Minister, I have engaged with individual suppliers to gain a detailed understanding of measures they will introduce to support households this winter. This included a round of meetings with the largest energy suppliers on this topic. Each of those suppliers committed to ensuring that hardship funds and focused measures are in place for any customers who may find themselves in difficulty over the winter months.

A suite of measures was introduced in recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy. This included €1,500 in electricity credits to all households through the electricity costs emergency benefit scheme and that cost €3.3 billion. This universal measure provided valuable on-bill support to nearly 2.3 million households, taking many out of arrears completely and preventing others from becoming more indebted. Further financial support was provided through the reduction in VAT on electricity from 13.5% to 9%.

This is in addition to one-off increases to certain social welfare recipients such as those in receipt of the fuel allowance, pensioners, working families, carers, those living with disabilities and those in receipt of child benefit. The SEAI has invested significant resources into enhancing existing support schemes which businesses can avail of. These include longer-standing schemes such as excellence in energy efficient design and the support scheme for energy audits, introduced in 2021, as well as the new SME scheme, the business energy upgrades scheme, introduced November 2024. The accelerated capital allowances scheme is a tax incentive that encourages businesses to purchase equipment that are highly energy efficient and thus make significant savings on energy costs and reduce carbon emissions. The accelerated capital allowances scheme for energy-efficient equipment is extended until 31 December 2030, encouraging investment in low-emission technology among businesses.

As part of budget 2026, the Government has also provided significant targeted support to those people who most require help with their energy costs. From January, the fuel allowance will be increased by €5 per week to €38 per week, supporting over 450,000 households who most require Government assistance to meet their energy costs. To directly support working families, the fuel allowance is now being extended to recipients of the working family payment. This will benefit over 43,000 families and will be a significant measure in protecting children, in particular, who are experiencing energy poverty. This measure will be paid from March next year, and backdated to January.

In addition, from September 2026, those who move from disability allowance or blind pension to employment will be able to retain their fuel allowance for five years. Additional needs payments are available for people who have essential expenses, which they cannot meet from their own resources, including people who face difficulties in meeting fuel bills. Also, a heating supplement may be paid to people who have exceptional heating costs due to ill health, infirmity or a medical condition and are unable to meet those costs out of household income. Heating supplement is not restricted to the fuel season and can be paid throughout the full year. As Deputies will know, the reduced VAT rate of 9% currently applied to gas and electricity has also been extended for the lifetime of this Government. This will reduce household energy costs by up to €100 per annum at a cost of €254 million per annum.

The programme for Government has committed to continuing to allocate revenue raised by the carbon tax towards the funding of social welfare measures, agri-environmental schemes and retrofitting. This is an important commitment to ensure we protect the most vulnerable throughout the clean energy transition. As of budget 2026, the Government has allocated over

€4.2 billion in carbon tax revenue for this purpose since 2020. ESRI analysis consistently shows that lower income deciles are better off as a result of the social protection measures funded by the increased carbon tax. Each year, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities carries out a review on the effectiveness of customer protection measures over the past winter, as well as deciding the measures to be retained for the forthcoming winter. The additional protection measures originally identified by the CRU in 2022 have been monitored with data and feedback sought by the regulator from customer representative groups, network operators and suppliers, to fully understand the impact for all customer groups, and really importantly, for those vulnerable customers.

For this winter period, 2025-26, some of the key measures that will remain in place are as follows: the debt repayment level on pay-as-you-go meters will remain at a maximum level of 15%. Suppliers will be required to continue to automatically place customers with a financial hardship meter on the most economic tariff available. Energy suppliers will be required to actively promote the vulnerable customer register and the protections it offers, promote how customers can have a nominated representative to manage their account, and how customers can sign up for level payment plans. Additional requirements have been outlined for suppliers when engaging with indebted customers who may benefit from entering a repayment plan, due to increased levels of customers not being able to complete repayment plans in the previous year. The disconnection moratorium for registered vulnerable customers will remain in place from 1 of November 2025 to 31 of March 2026. The winter disconnection moratorium for all other domestic customers will be in place from 8 December 2025 to 16 January next year. The customer protections are complemented by the supplier energy engage code, which provides a further level of security for domestic electricity and gas customers. This code encourages customers, who are having difficulty in paying a bill, to engage with their supplier regarding the management of their debt. Under this code, suppliers will not disconnect customers who engage with them and must provide every opportunity to customers to avoid disconnection.

There are a number of longer-term actions we need to take as well. The energy crisis required Government to act decisively to shield households and businesses from unprecedented price hikes. The energy transition poses a different challenge to Government. The transition towards an electrified and low-carbon economy will be of huge long-term benefit to the economy, and really importantly to society, and is aimed at providing secure, sustainable and affordable energy for generations to come. The energy transition requires unprecedented levels of investment in renewable and conventional generation capacity as well as network infrastructure. This requires a shift in policy approach from crisis measures to enduring solutions, including significant investment in energy infrastructure coupled with targeted supports for the most vulnerable, which tackle the root causes of energy poverty. The Government is working at speed to roll out more renewable energy infrastructure, both onshore and offshore, wind and solar. This is already helping to bring down the cost of electricity and is the long-term solution to high energy bills.

In July this year, we approved a landmark €3.5 billion investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure to the end of the decade as part of the national development plan. This represents the largest single investment in the country's electricity network in its history. This transformative investment will strengthen Ireland's energy security, support economic growth and accelerate our transition to renewable energy. The investment will see €1.5 billion allocated to ESB Networks and €2 billion to EirGrid, enabling both companies to significantly

increase capital investment to expand our onshore and offshore electricity transmission and distribution network infrastructure. We have had that debate and that legislation has been signed into law.

The Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 2025 was progressed as a matter of priority to allow that €1.5 billion equity to which I referred, to be made to ESB Networks by the end of the year. The Act also increases the statutory borrowing limit of the ESB from €12 billion to €17 billion. This Act ensures ESB Networks is sufficiently financed to begin delivering on the ambitious onshore grid investment programme next year. The overall ESB Networks investment plan, under what is called price review 6, will see delivery of over 500 capital projects, including 181 km of new overhead lines, 319 km of new underground cables, nearly 70 new and upgraded substations right across the country and over 50,000 pole replacements. The Government equity injection into the ESB will support the strength of its balance sheet and assist in maintaining the excellent credit rating it enjoys. This will ensure the ESB can borrow at the most competitive interest rates, which ultimately lowers the impact of network charges on customer bills. Delivery of electricity grid infrastructure is a priority for this Government. My Department is currently reviewing grid delivery oversight and will ensure the equity investment is appropriately legally documented, with enhanced Government expectations of the ESB in relation to project governance, reporting and delivery. The mechanism for making the €2 billion investment in EirGrid will be agreed and legislated for separately next year in 2026. This investment will be allocated over the next five years to support EirGrid access the capital markets and fund its investment program.

We are continuing to make significant investments to improve the energy efficiency of our built environment. Since 2019, almost €1.5 billion has been invested in SEAI schemes, supporting over 220,000 home energy upgrades, including almost 74,000 B2s and over 29,500 fully funded upgrades for households under the warmer homes scheme. A record capital allocation has been made available through the budget of 2026. That is €558 million for SEAI residential and community energy upgrade schemes, including the solar PV scheme, to support the delivery of the national retrofit plan. That is an €89 million increase on Exchequer funding in the budget allocation. It means that more funding than ever will be available to homes to make them warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less expensive to heat. Analysis carried out by the Department and the SEAI indicates that a household can save between €750 and €1,120 per year by installing a deep package of efficiency measures. Government is also continuing to invest significant resources into support schemes for business, including the excellence in energy efficiency design, EXCEED, and the support scheme for energy audits, as well as the business energy upgrades schemes that were introduced in November 2024 to support SMEs to undertake energy upgrades. Supporting these schemes will be critical to the achievement of Ireland's 2030 public sector energy efficiency targets, which are mandated in the energy efficiency directive. My Department has also established the heat and built environment task force to accelerate and drive delivery in relation to retrofitting, renewable heat, district heat and decarbonisation of the building stock.

In June 2025, a cross-government national energy affordability task force, which I chair, was established to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses, while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. The task force membership includes representatives of various Departments and crucial energy sector stakeholders. The first report of the task force

was recently published and included measures for consideration to support customers in budget 2026. The report is available and has been published. Further analysis will now be carried out in order to inform the energy affordability action plan, which will include recommendations for structural reforms to benefit consumers in the medium and longer term. This will be a crucial part of Government's work to improve competitiveness and will complement the development of a whole-of-government action plan on competitiveness and productivity. This plan will also include a broad review of cost drivers in the energy sector and will address energy poverty, including work from the energy poverty steering group. Specific engagement and measures to support those most at risk of energy poverty will also be a key feature of the energy affordability action plan. The task force will soon commence a consultation to ensure the action plan is informed by public input, as well as further stakeholder engagement. The plan itself will be published next year. The work of the task force reflects a firm commitment to move towards long-term sustainable solutions to energy cost pressures, including through greater targeting of resources towards those most in need, and exploring the best way to fund necessary investments in energy infrastructure. Effective ways of defining, measuring and tracking energy poverty are absolutely essential for designing sound policy responses. Currently, the measurement of energy poverty in Ireland is based on the level of expenditure on energy by a household. Households spending above 10% of total income on their energy needs, excluding energy for transport, are counted in the current measurement of energy poverty. Using this metric, it is estimated that, in 2022, the share of households that could risk energy poverty had risen to 29.4%. However, this measure does not account for the energy efficiency of homes and does not identify households most acutely affected by rising energy costs. Neither does it capture the extent to which households may restrict their energy consumption due to cost concerns. For that reason, the Government is providing funding to examine whether existing supports are well targeted towards those who are at risk of energy poverty and the impact of those supports on the level of energy poverty. Amongst other things, this research will propose a metric for measuring energy poverty that combines expenditure and energy efficiency and metrics to measure changes in the trend of fuel energy poverty regarding the number of households and its severity. This research programme is due for completion in 2026. The results will be considered as part of the work of the national energy affordability task force and will be part of the budget discussions for next year.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the challenges and reaffirm mine and the Government's commitment to taking action to help households and businesses across Ireland with energy costs and to building a clean energy future. I am looking forward to hearing contributions from Deputies across the House.

The critical area for us in relation to grid is delivery on the capital programme. This will be the largest investment the State has ever made in electricity infrastructure. It is badly needed so we can ensure more clean, green, renewable energy that we have control over, as well as more storage capacity, more distribution capacity and more generation capacity, is brought onstream.

Last year over 40% of our electricity was generated through renewables. That is a good thing. We are projecting well into the high 60% or early 70% by the end of the decade. We need an energy grid that supports businesses and households. We need to be acutely aware of those struggling to pay their energy bills. It is absolutely correct and prudent to target measures at those households and individuals. I have already mentioned what we have expanded there.

The permanent change, effectively, in the VAT rate is also significant but we need to deliver projects like the North-South interconnector. That project alone will reduce household bills by an average of €100 per annum. It is badly needed from an all-island, all-Ireland electricity network perspective. It is one of the critical capital schemes we need to deliver over the period of 2026 to 2030. The changes we have made and are making with regard to planning will underpin the critical infrastructure we need. Deputies can be assured the work will continue with regard to the national energy affordability task force, looking at structural measures within our energy system.

The challenges we face are not unique to Ireland. They are challenges right across Europe and the developed world. I have put the issue of energy affordability front and centre at Energy Council meetings at EU level and as recently as the COP conference in Belém, Brazil.

As I mentioned and as Deputy Daly will know, the Environmental (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is on Committee Stage, which I will have to attend around 3.30 p.m. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, will come in shortly and take the rest of the debate. We will note each contribution Members make. The scheduling of the committee meeting and of this debate was outside of my control and I cannot be in two places at once, unfortunately.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank him for explaining his departure at around 3.30 p.m. We understand the committee is on as well. Bogaimid ar aghaidh le Sinn Féin anois.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Beidh mé ag roinnt mo chuid ama leis na Teachtaí O'Hara, Ní Fhearghail, O'Rourke agus Newsome Drennan. I have come from the committee the Minister mentioned and apologise for being a couple of minutes late.

Workers and families across the country are being hammered by soaring energy costs and it is happening on this Government's watch. Despite all the promises made before the election to protect workers and families from further increases in energy bills that were already eye-watering, the opposite is being done. For the first time in five years, there are no energy credits. At precisely the moment energy companies announced a fresh round of price hikes, the energy credits were withdrawn. Energia, Bord Gais, SSE, Airtricity and Pinergy all piled on, adding hundreds of euro to household bills. Then the supports were ripped away, contrary, as we now know, to advice given by Government advisors that they were very much needed. As if people were not frustrated enough, the fact this was done despite the warnings of how badly it could go is a total slap in the face to hard-pressed energy-bill payers. Does the Minister seriously think ordinary workers and families can afford the extra €321 on their bills when they already pay some of the highest prices in the EU? The officials warned bills would skyrocket and the number of households in arrears would further spike, and this has happened. The one lifeline people had to help them keep the lights on and stay warm this winter was ripped away.

Already we have a record-breaking figure of over 300,000 households in arrears. Disconnections are up 50% on last year. Those are not just statistics; they are real people and families terrified of what is about to come. Rolling out the tired excuse or explanation that the Government's hands are tied will not cut it. The extortionate cost of energy here is not inevitable; it is a result of political choices made. Promises were made last year but it seems to ordinary people they were just an attempt to buy the election. This is the result of inaction

since then. The report we received today could not have made that any clearer. The Government was warned of the fallout but chose to proceed in any event. It was also made clear by the Government's complete failure to end the price gouging by the energy companies. It continues to prioritise the corporate bottom line over the needs of workers and families. More and more households cannot afford to pay skyrocketing bills while energy companies ride off into the sunset with massive profits.

Let us look at the facts. Wholesale energy prices have fallen 75% since their peak in 2022 but retail prices remain sky high at between 50% and 70% above 2021 levels. Average household electricity bills have basically doubled in the past five years from €976 to an expected €1,877 this winter. Who in their right minds thinks this is okay? It is a total rip-off and the Minister knows it.

Energy companies are riding roughshod over consumers and being let away with it. The energy regulator has no effective powers to regulate hedging practices or standing charges despite legislation Sinn Féin introduced to fix that and mandate the regulator to prioritise energy affordability. Unsurprisingly, those pieces of legislation were blocked by the Government.

The Government betrayed households once again with carbon tax hikes on home heating oil. The cost of a tank of home heating oil has already risen by €220 and last week we learned the Government - Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Regional Independents and the Healy-Rae brothers - plans to increase this by a further €150 over the next few years. Last week there was a motion here and a chance to vote against these carbon tax increases and to support our Bill but once again the Government failed to do so. Nearly 1 million households rely on oil to heat their homes, especially in rural Ireland. Ministers cannot continue to shrug their shoulders. Enough is enough.

We are calling for immediate action to reintroduce the energy credits of three payments of €150; reverse the carbon tax increase and scrap further hikes; give the energy regulator real powers to hold the companies to account and stop profiteering; and make data centres pay their fair share. Treat energy as a public good, not a commodity for profit. Translate our national resources into national wealth for all.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** Ireland's energy bills are among the highest in Europe. Households across the State see their bills continue to rise and have to balance paying their bills, keeping a roof over their heads and putting food on the table. Sometimes this balancing act is simply not possible. I meet people across my constituency forced to make the most difficult of decisions. Families are forced to choose which essentials they must do without to stay on top of bills. We are seeing record levels of energy arrears. There are now over 300,000 households in arrears on their energy bills.

Despite this trend of rising energy costs, rising energy arrears and rising energy poverty, Government refused to include energy credits or a broader cost-of-living package in this year's budget. This decision flies in the face of the Government's national energy affordability task force. Its interim report detailed the critical impact that energy credits played in supporting households. Today, our colleague, Lynn Boylan, MEP, has uncovered that the decision to remove energy credits was also made despite evidence from the Minister's own officials, who noted that the case for energy credits was stronger this year than last, that households would

have to find an extra €321 to cover energy costs and that an energy scheme for struggling households was shelved. How can this be justified? This decision not to support families and households was a political choice. Realistically, the only difference between this year and last is that last year we had a general election on the horizon.

As well as having their energy credits pulled, households are hit. Once again, Energia, SSE Airtricity, Pinergy, Bord Gáis Energy and Flogas are all imposing fresh price hikes, with energy companies refusing to pass on the full reductions in wholesale costs. The Minister refuses to take on the energy companies, to empower the regulator or to reform hedging prices, the pricing system, the PSO or network charges. It is time for the Minister to act and intervene on behalf of customers who are being ripped off.

In recent weeks, we have heard of the cost of home heating oil shooting up by €80. We know the cost of driving continues to be very high, which is an absolute necessity for people in rural Ireland. Yet the Government continues to proceed with carbon tax increases that will continue to push these costs up in the months and years ahead. Whether the Minister wishes to acknowledge it or not, a cost-of-living crisis is happening. He needs to wake up to this reality, provide supports in the here and now, help people to get through this winter and tackle companies that are ripping people off.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Last month, a report by the International Energy Agency found that energy companies are buying electricity at a third of the price they are selling it at. We have hard-pressed working people and families being absolutely fleeced by big energy companies. The report confirms that sky-high energy prices are not the result of unpredictable global market shocks. Quite simply, they are being set by price-gouging energy companies lining the pockets of their shareholders at the expense of ordinary people.

We need to give people a break and the Minister could give people a break. He could end the rip-off, stand up to these energy companies and deliver affordable energy. What we have instead is a Government that has chosen to make it worse. This Government has actually gone out of its way to make life more difficult and to hike the cost of energy and transport by increasing the carbon tax. This is having a massive impact on people in the west of Ireland, many of whom are already struggling to make ends meet. In my clinics, people come into me really concerned about being able to heat their homes. They are just saying they can no longer afford the bills they have to pay. A lot of people in the west of Ireland, as the Minister knows, rely on oil for heating. They are now going to have to fork out €1,000 to fill up a tank of oil. Some €220 of that is carbon tax. These people are being punished for something that is completely and utterly out of their hands. Thousands of rural households have no other choice but to use oil to heat their homes. They are being forced to live in freezing cold homes this winter because of this Government.

Climate action cannot come at the cost of pushing working people into poverty. It needs to be a just transition. The Minister's Government's carbon taxes are an unjust, failed and technocratic approach to environmental policy that is deepening social and economic inequality. It needs to be scrapped. Working people and families are in desperate need of support to pay their energy bills. They need the Minister to reverse his cruel decision to scrap energy credits. They need him to scrap the carbon tax and end the energy rip-off by standing up to the big energy companies. Tá an oiread sin daoine in iarthar na hÉireann nach bhfuil in

ann íoc as a gcuid billí ná an ola atá acu agus tá an cáin charbóin ag cur leis an mbrú atá orthu. Is cinneadh é sin atá déanta ag an Rialtas. Is mór an náire é.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Ireland has some of the highest electricity prices in Europe, way above the EU average. The typical Irish household is paying hundreds of euro more per year than its European counterparts. This is a scandal and a direct result of Government failure. When energy companies were making record profits after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this Government refused to apply a strong and effective windfall tax. Instead, it allowed profiteering to continue unchecked. It continues to do that. Decades of Governments led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have left us over-reliant on dirty, expensive fossil fuel imports. They failed to invest in renewables, leaving Ireland energy insecure and exposed to volatile international markets. Now, they want to lecture people about the environment.

The truth is simple. Government inaction is at the heart of Ireland's rip-off prices. Profit maximisation has been prioritised over affordable energy for ordinary families, and this must change. Sinn Féin has long set out a suite of fundamental regulatory and structural reforms that are clear and deliverable and that would significantly reduce energy costs to businesses and households. We are calling for an overhaul of the electricity markets regulatory regime. The energy regulator needs to be given new powers to monitor standing charges, hedging practices and anti-competitive behaviour, alongside stronger transparency and accountability. We want a reformed CRU mandate that prioritises affordability. We will break the link between wholesale gas and electricity prices.

Sinn Féin would make the transition fairer by restructuring network charges, expanding community and domestic ownership of renewables and introducing a fairer retrofit plan, with increased funding and accessible, area-based schemes targeting those most in need. We will end the punitive carbon tax approach that locks families out of benefits. We will commit to no further hikes. We will significantly increase investment in renewables to transform Ireland's vast natural resources into national wealth. This is about fairness, affordability and energy security for all. Families cannot afford the Government's dithering incompetence any longer. Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** Numbers speak of a harsh reality facing so many Irish households. Ireland has the third most expensive electricity prices in the entire EU. This has been no gentle increase. It has been a shock to the system. In just five years, the average price has rocketed from €37/MWh to a staggering €114/MWh. This statistic is not abstract; it is the grim reality for tens of thousands of households struggling to pay their bills and for the 300,000 households currently in arrears. What was the Government's response? It was to scrap energy credits despite official advice. This was a cruel and harsh decision. Time and again, this Government turns its back, but to ignore official expert advice in doing so is utter neglect.

This Government has not only failed to bring prices down but has actively created the conditions that keep them high. Under its watch, our national grid has been dangerously neglected. We have not invested adequately in the capacity to harness the increase in renewable energy. Wind turbines are going up at such a rate that the grid cannot cope. Why? It is because the sole focus seems to be on hitting 2030 targets, with little to no regard for the real cost. The result of this failure is a scandal in plain sight. Since 2017, over €2.5 billion has been paid in curtailment payments. This is money handed to profit-driven projects to stop them producing

energy. Who foots the bill? It is the public. The cost is added euro by euro onto every household's energy bill. What we are seeing is that the roll-out of solar and wind farms has begun to move beyond the green strategy. It has been designed to ensure high profits for profit investors and not for the benefit of customers or the public good.

While they cash in, this comes so very often at the expense of our rural communities, like my own in Carlow-Kilkenny. For almost 20 years, people there have waited for the updated planning guidelines for wind turbines. Successive Governments have kicked that can down the road. This delay has given developers free rein, while communities are left alone to navigate these massive landscape-altering developments that impact them for generations. It is time for the neglect to end. We need a national grid that does not waste renewable energy, policies that put people before profit and guidelines that protect our communities. Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** For the past number of years under Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments we have seen what feels like a permanent cost-of-living crisis. People are being squeezed from every angle, be it grocery price inflation, the cost of renting or buying a home or childcare costs, something the Government has been conspicuously silent on since the promise of it costing €200 a month. We know student fees are going to be increasing. Compounding it all, we have the matter at hand, which is energy bills.

The Barnardos report during the summer was really eye-opening in terms of just how stark the picture really is for families, especially vulnerable ones. Some 40% of parents have been forced into borrowing money to help pay for essentials for their children, while lone parents were disproportionately more likely to cut back on those essentials. We are seeing parents going hungry so that their children are fed and others are going without heating in their homes, or taking on debt to keep the lights on.

The Government had the chance to alleviate some of that burden in the recent budget but against the advice of officials chose not to – a conscious choice. It was a conscious choice not to support some of the most vulnerable households with targeted energy credits that I and the Labour Party had been calling for. There was a conscious choice to instead give a needless tax cut to the likes of McDonald's and big property developers. The cost-of-living crisis has perhaps never been so acute but now that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have bought the votes they needed to get back into Government, we now cannot afford to give people the little bit of support they need to get through. We can, though, hand over more than €630 million in VAT cuts to the hospitality sector. It is ridiculous and offensive. We should have seen targeted energy credits in the budget, not the pre-election sweeteners that were given out to everyone by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in the previous couple of budgets, but actual supports given to those who need it most. There are 300,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills and 185,000 are in arrears on their gas bills. They are the people who should have been supported with meaningful and targeted measures in the budget but they were let down by this Government.

It is three years since the first universal energy credits were paid out. This Government is, with a few exceptions, broadly the same as the previous one. Three years should have provided more than enough time to have devised a way to target the credits more effectively. Either the Government could not do it or it would not. As I have said before in this House, if we are

talking about energy costs we need to talk about the energy companies themselves as well, and the profiteering and the outright greed that has been on display over the last few months. I will give a few examples. Flogas has hiked its prices by 7% after its parent company, DCC, recorded operating profits of €820 million in its most recent accounts. Bord Gáis Energy, after a year in which it made €75 million in profits, raised its prices by 13.5%, adding €218 a year to the average bill. Pinergy went up almost 10% after having increased its revenues by nearly 40% in 2024. Energia increased electricity prices by more than 12% after making a very healthy €154 million in profits last year. SSE Airtricity had a 9.5% increase in electricity prices, its second hike this year after a 10.5% increase in electricity in April, alongside an 8.4% rise in gas prices. SSE Airtricity's most recent accounts show a €111 million operating profit.

It is hard to see this as anything other than blatant greed and ordinary families, many of whom are already struggling, are paying for it. How are they supposed to cope? The energy credits, as imperfect as they were, were a lifeline for so many people but the bigger picture is that these energy companies need to be reined in. The gross profiteering in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, which is almost capitalising on the cost-of-living crisis, needs to be called out. The energy market is supposed to be competitive but these companies are carrying on more like cartels, like an oligarchy. As I have called for again in this House, the Minister needs to start looking-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Gabh mo leithscéal, Deputy. Just be careful with naming specific companies.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** Okay.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** They are not here to defend themselves.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** Understood. I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. However, this needs to be called out and I have asked the Minister before to start looking seriously at ways we can reintroduce some level of regulation of energy prices beyond network tariffs. I am not suggesting that is easy but there are carve-outs in EU competition law that allow for price regulation in order to protect customers. We should be exploring these options and I will provide some context for this request.

Under EU energy market rules, our electricity and gas markets have been fully liberalised. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, judged competition to be effective in the electricity market in 2011 and in the gas market in 2014. The ESB, via Electric Ireland, still holds a large market share by virtue of its once-monopolised position but some time ago the CRU deemed that competition had developed to an extent that it judged that it was effective enough to protect consumers and keep prices down. Once that happened, EU rules meant it could no longer justify blanket price regulation and so regulations were lifted. If we look to the North, however, Power NI is a former monopoly provider, similar to how the ESB was here in the South. As Power NI still holds a very large share of the domestic market, its tariffs are regulated by the Utility Regulator to ensure that customers are protected and that prices remain fair. That was true even prior to Brexit, when EU competition law applied in the North, because

the European Commission accepted the case that there were less competitive dynamics in the North and regulation of Power NI's tariffs were continued as a public service measure.

This poses a question for us. Have the competitive dynamics that enabled the liberalisation of our energy markets back in the 2010s been a success? Have they delivered better prices and a better service for households? I would find it hard to argue that they have. Competition has not delivered better and fair prices for consumers. Instead, it seems that energy companies have given up on the idea of competing with each other, and a price hike by one gives an excuse for a price hike to the rest. All of these matters I am raising are on the public record. The profits of these energy companies are on the public record. There is nothing wrong with calling them out here. As I have said, it appears to be much more than a coincidence that they are all raising their prices at the same time, or one after another. They are almost using it as an excuse. When one raises their prices, another uses that as an excuse to also raise their prices. This is hardly the sign of a well-functioning and competitive market.

Under EU electricity and gas directives, price regulation is allowed in exceptional circumstances, such as when competition is not working, or indeed, in order to protect vulnerable customers. We are very much approaching the point where we can claim on the basis of the evidence we are seeing at the moment that competition in the Irish energy markets has failed. The Minister should be looking to exploit those exceptional circumstances provisions in the EU rules in order to rein in energy companies and making the case for this to the European Commission.

I would also like to briefly raise the CRU's draft price review six. It is pretty outrageous that it is proposing that we increase costs on households while giving a discount on energy prices to data centres, the same data centres putting our energy system under enormous pressure – a 412% increase in electricity usage in the past ten years – leading to increases in costs for ordinary households. The Government knows this. The Secretary General in the Department of public expenditure has said that soaring electricity demand is largely attributable to data centres. We know that demand is expected to grow to 30% of our national energy use by 2030. This follows the Secretary General in the Minister's own Department of energy saying that the Government must choose between the power demands of data centres and building homes.

Ordinary, working families are paying for this and, quite simply, it is wrong. The billions of euro now thankfully being poured into updating and upgrading our grid are being used to accommodate these large energy users like data centres. It is being paid for by households. I introduced a Bill last week, the Electricity Regulations (Climate Action and Connection to Distribution and Transmission Systems) Bill 2025, which attempts to deal with part of this issue. It would give the CRU the power to ensure that data centres generate their own on-site renewable energy, which would compliment draft proposals on regulation published by the CRU earlier in the year. Essentially, this will mean that for every megawatt that data centres take from the grid, they have to give back a megawatt of clean, renewable energy that they have generated themselves - in effect, neutralising their energy demands.

Of course, there is also the climate element and the impact data centres have on our emissions. The massive energy demands of these data centres means that they guzzle through fossil fuels and they are taking basically all of the relatively small amount of renewable energy we are currently producing. That is renewable energy that could be used to decarbonise our homes, reduce bills or electrify our public transport. My Bill would ensure that ends, and that data

centres cannot build any new fossil-fuel infrastructure, but rather provide their own renewable energy and contribute towards our efforts to decarbonise our economy and our public services.

I will conclude by reiterating that this issue – alleviating the struggle that people are facing with soaring energy costs and the cost-of-living crisis more generally – is about political choices. It was a political choice to give a massive VAT cut to burger barons and big developers while denying vulnerable households supports like the energy credits they have desperately relied on over the past couple of years. It is a political choice to allow energy companies to run riot and I ask the Minister to seriously consider my proposal today.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** Deputy Ahern and Members of this House are absolutely correct to call out the energy companies and we should call them out every single day where we believe it is necessary. There is no doubt that they are having a very negative effect on people in their own homes and indeed small businesses. Every small business I go to to discuss their circumstances in Carlow and Kilkenny will, first, highlight the cost of energy to them. I looked at a man's budget, Mr. Paudie O'Neill in Thomastown, County Kilkenny, regarding the running of his business.

4 o'clock

Because I was involved with that kind of business previously, I was absolutely astounded by the level of cost of energy. He had solar panels as well. He was making every effort to meet every cost that he could, but he could not deal with the energy companies. It is absolutely impossible for people in their senior years to deal with energy providers or service providers. They cannot get through on the phone. They are left waiting. The companies will not correspond by email and they take a very hard-nosed approach to collecting their money. They refuse to deal with the queries people have. If only they would do that, they might resolve some of the issues and fewer people might owe the amount of money they owe or be indebted to these companies.

I listened carefully to the Minister of State set aside everything that was done in the past including the relief for businesses and householders. I listened to what he said about the future. The past is the past; what people are worried about is the here and now. The stories I am hearing about the cost of energy would frighten you, such as older people trying to heat their homes or people who are trying to do the best they can with the money they have but who simply cannot cope. The price of a bag of coal has increased significantly, as has the price of a bottle of gas. Older people, the people I am making a case for, are reaching out for the help they need just to survive. I ask the Minister of State to deal with today, the immediate future, the immediate problems people have, and do something to stop the price gouging that is going on by every single company in the State.

We should be looking at nuclear power. We should not be afraid to debate that. There are huge problems with the legislation regarding wind farms.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome today's statements. Households and businesses have been through a brutal energy shock. Russia's invasion of Ukraine weaponised gas, drove up wholesale prices and exposed how dependent Europe had become on imported fossil fuels. Prices have come down from the 2022 peak but nobody at home feels as if the crisis is over.

Prices are still too high and people are anxious opening their emails or the envelope with the latest bill. To be fair, the Government did not stand idly by and this must be acknowledged. It put in place four rounds of electricity credits, worth €3.3 billion, cut VAT on energy and gas to 9%, expanded and increased the fuel allowance and targeted extra protections for vulnerable customers, including the disconnection moratorium over winter months. It is now putting significant resources behind long-term solutions, such as record funding for retrofitting, a major expansion of the warmer homes scheme and billions in planned investment in the grid and offshore renewables.

We have to be honest about the structural problems. For far too long, we relied on cheap imported gas and assumed the market would always deliver. At European level, the marginal pricing system meant that when gas prices went crazy, everything did. Here at home, political choices in recent years, especially by the last Minister, did not give security of supply the priority it deserved. There was a failure to deliver properly on storage, on flexible backup and on planning the grid we actually need. The breathing space brought by the rounds of energy credits was not used effectively, in my opinion, to deliver the necessary structural change. However, the opportunity now is to move from a politics of scarcity to the politics of abundance. As a nation, we must embrace this change. Off the west coast, for example, we have the potential for almost limitless clean power if we can get the planning, the grid and investment prices right. Cheap, abundant renewable energy is the single best industrial policy, climate policy and cost-of-living policy we can pursue as a country. That means acting in the common good. Communities that host wind farms or live beside data centres, especially large ones, must see tangible benefits, from district heating schemes to local amenities and community dividends. In return, though, the State must be willing to defend the common good against the narrow and vested interests that try to block every project. If every project is blocked, nothing changes. Like some other unnecessary interventions I have highlighted in this House before, this ultimately undermines public support for the transition away from fossil fuels and is deeply counterproductive. If we get this right, Ireland can move from being a price-taker at the end of a gas pipeline to being a clean energy powerhouse, cutting bills and emissions and strengthening our energy sovereignty.

I thank the Minister of State and acknowledge his work since taking office. I encourage him and his colleagues to accelerate efforts to take the necessary action in the common good to deliver clean, abundant and cheap energy for Irish consumers and businesses.

**Deputy Paula Butterly:** The Celtic interconnector will connect the Irish electricity grid from France. The cable will have enough capacity to power up to 500,000 homes. Within the next three years, we will be importing from France and Britain. Indeed, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, said this year that the interconnector is a major strategic infrastructure project that will play an important role in Ireland's energy security, which is expected to be operational by 2028. This is absolutely great news, but is it not time that the grown ups had a conversation about developing our own nuclear capacity? Nuclear fusion energy is still in the early stages, but it could be an energy source of the future. It is important that Ireland be prepared to incorporate nuclear energy early so that it can potentially transition to fusion reactors in the future.

For a moment, let us acknowledge, perhaps, the negative aspects of nuclear energy. I believe that is essentially fear of what people thought about nuclear energy in the past. Let me also

point out the reasons for nuclear energy. The fluctuations of energy production are a key issue for renewables. In order to keep a steady power flow, grid operators currently have to turn to other sources such as fossil fuels when demand exceeds the supply generated by renewables. Small modular reactors could indeed be our future. The average SMR is designed to operate for 60 years, with minimal maintenance, which means fewer disruptions and a stable energy output. The Irish Academy of Engineers has called for nuclear energy through SMRs in the future to ensure we can cope with our growing energy dependence and our goals of reducing to net zero carbon emissions.

The programme for Government commits to exploring funding models for the renewable electricity support scheme and the public service obligation levy, which would help reduce electricity bills for households and businesses. There are opportunities we cannot ignore. Therefore, we must explore nuclear energy as our future.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** In County Louth?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Sinn Féin is next.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** When we are dealing with energy costs, we can start at a fairly obvious place. There are 180,000 in arrears on their gas bills and 300,000 homes in arrears on their electricity bills. That is 13% of households who cannot afford electricity and 26% who cannot afford gas. That is the reality. It would not be difficult for anyone to find out that people are facing severe issues related to this. It is not really shocking that the Government had information indicating people were facing into even greater costs than they were last year. We have all heard the figure of €321. That is a hell of a lot of money per year if you do not have it. We know where the State has absolutely failed. Energy credits were used and people understand how they work. The argument for them was much stronger on the basis of the information the Government had, which was received through freedom of information by Lynn Boylan MEP. We would all prefer if this was not the way we had to get information. I would like to get a bit more information about the targeted energy scheme plan the Government was looking at, but there is no sign of it. I believe the terminology that has been used is that it would not be in the public interest to share this information. The people who cannot afford to pay their bills and those who are suffering even more as it gets colder are not going to be too impressed with that. We have to deal with the reality. In fairness, many have spoken about some of the issues that could be dealt with around why we have such huge energy costs. We have a Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, that does not have the powers it should have. We need to make sure we get all the information in relation to energy companies and that we do not just hear about hedging in a very generalised way. We need to get greater detail. The powers need to be provided. We need to deal with the issues of standing costs and network costs, and we really need to put pressure on energy companies that have absolutely gouged. This should not be a shock, however. As Deputy O'Rourke said, we absolutely failed to bring in windfall taxes when we had the crisis three years ago. It should have happened there and then.

We are going to talk about new energy sources. I have no problem in relation to having conversations on whatever technology. I would find it very difficult to talk about nuclear power without dealing with the issues of nuclear waste and talking about Chernobyl and Sellafield.

However, we should be a wind power superpower at this stage rather than just using the term in this building. That has not happened and the reason it has not happened is that we have not got to grips with infrastructure, and the proposals today are just proposals. We will see how long it takes in relation to legislation but we need to see huge moves. People are suffering and we need to see delivery rather than just conversation.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** It is freezing outside and, as we sit in this Chamber, there will be people sitting at home - elderly people and people experiencing energy poverty - who will be afraid to turn on their heating because they know they simply cannot afford to. They will leave it as long as possible before they can make themselves comfortable, and that is not right in a wealthy country like Ireland.

We are at a situation now where prices for electricity have almost doubled in the past five years. It has gone from €976 for an average bill to €1,817. The pressures being put on individuals and businesses are astronomical. Many retailers have increased their prices by 10% to 12%, adding an extra €150 or €200 on to a Bill. That is while their own costs are going down. They are hiking up their prices and they are paying less for the wholesale energy they are purchasing.

There are 300,000 homes in electricity arrears at the moment, and 180,000 in gas arrears. The average electricity arrear per household is €436. That is a lot of money to have sitting as a bill a person is not able to pay. For gas, the average is €186. There are 187,000 customers who are in long-term arrears for electricity. That shows the Minister of State the extent of the problem. That is a red flag. If 190,000 electricity customers have not been able to pay their bills for over 90 days, that is a warning signal to which the Government needs to listen.

We heard earlier from both sides of the House that it is now time to call out the energy companies. What I would say to that is that it is way past time that energy companies were called out. Now it is time to call out the Government for its inaction on this issue. Energy companies are in the business to make money and make profit. That is their financial and legal responsibility. It is the Government's responsibility to regulate them and ensure vulnerable people, families and businesses across this country can actually pay their electricity bills and that there is not gouging happening. We all know in this Chamber, and even the Taoiseach mentioned it, that there is gouging happening with electricity prices. However, rather than the Government actually sitting down and going through the analysis and examining exactly, bit by bit, where that gouging is happening and who is gouging, it is not taking that action. It is just calling them out.

The Minister met with the energy companies a month ago and sat down with them and had a chat. He came back in here and said that it was great, and that the energy companies are going to put in hardship funds. Hardship funds will do nothing to drive the price of electricity or gas down. They will do absolutely nothing to address those systemic problems that we have in our market at the moment. What I would also say to the Minister of State is to go on to any of those retailers' websites, because we did it this afternoon, and search for "hardship fund" and come back and tell me how many of those websites are making it easy to find if someone is in trouble. We could not find any information about how much is available, how to access it or what is there. If we could not find it via all these retailers' websites, I do not think he could say

it is clearly available for anyone who is actually struggling to pay their bills at the moment. The Minister was really sold a pup with those hardship funds.

We have also heard an awful lot over the past number of weeks since the budget about why we should have energy credits. The Social Democrats will maintain our position on this. It is the same position we had last year and the year before when it comes to energy credits. Energy credits should be targeted. We are not calling for energy credits for holiday homes. We are not calling for energy credits for wealthy people who can afford to pay their bills. We are calling for energy credits to be targeted at those people who cannot pay their bills and who are really struggling. That is where the money, support and assistance should go. We do not want to see €100 million wasted on holiday home electricity meters because that is what happened previously. It was a huge waste of money by this Government. We want that money in the pockets of the people who actually need it.

We heard the Minister mention a disconnection moratorium for registered vulnerable customers between 1 November and 31 March and that there is a winter disconnection moratorium for all other customers between 8 December and 16 January. That is a measly four weeks. When we talk about vulnerable customers, that means medically vulnerable customers. That does not mean financially vulnerable customers. I brought a Bill forward in the previous term to address that and include financially vulnerable customers in that moratorium and in that definition. The Government did nothing on it and has continued to ignore it.

One of the recommendations of the energy affordability task force was that an analysis of the price differentials should be done to see whether there is gouging happening. That action has to take place immediately. The task force was set up in June. The interim report was reported last month, and it is now going to be next year before we get any actual tangible measures. That is not acceptable when we are in the teeth of an energy crisis and a cost-of-living crisis. The number of people who are going to fall through those gaps over the winter is enormous. I ask the Minister of State to move on whatever measures he can to ensure that those people who are struggling are assisted and do not fall further into debt because that is exactly what is going to happen.

Next year, when we have this disconnection on arrears data, there is going to be a huge increase in the number of people who cannot afford to pay their bills. What I would say to the Minister of State is to please, as a Government, be proactive. It should help those people now. Do not let them go through a winter where they are cold, stressed and worried about turning their heating on and feeding their children. The Government should support them now with the targeted energy credits the Social Democrats have been calling for because this problem is not going to go away. It will get worse. The Government should please deal with it now before that happens.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I really like numbers. I look at numbers all the time. There are approximately 750,000 people who are about to go on auto-enrolment in January, approximately 1.5 million recipients of social protection payments and zero offshore wind farms in this country that are operational. A magic number I just discovered is minus €250. The reason I really like numbers is that they often bring clarity. Politics is too often the opposite of mathematics. It is often too much about obscurity and opaqueness; telling people we are doing one thing and then the Government doing the other. Therefore, I thought I would run

some numbers and seek some clarity. In the most recent budget, there were no energy credits like there were last year but there were increases to the fuel allowance, which I welcome. Yet, at the same time, the energy companies have put up their prices to €1,877 per year on average, according to the figures released from the Minister of State's Department that were covered in the *Irish Independent*. I want to know where this leaves a typical pensioner, a typical person on disability allowance and a typical carer, who are all reliant on this fuel allowance increase. To be clear, more than 400,000 households are in receipt of the fuel allowance. This is approximately 25% of all households in this country. This is not a niche issue. It turns out that despite all the hot air from the Government and the weak efforts on fuel allowance, each of these people will be €250 worse off in the next 12 months than they were in the past 12 months. This means they will need to shut off their energy supply for a month next year or make ends meet and cut their budgets somewhere else. If they dip into the social welfare payments that were announced in the budget, it will mean they will spend nearly 50% of these budget increases on energy over the next year. This is despite the supposed increase in fuel allowance, which it turns out does not make a dent in these massive increased bills. They will still be €250 worse off.

What is the Government's recommendation to this quarter of all households, to the grandmother, the disabled person or the carer in Kanturk? Should they shut off the heating for two months or spend less on Christmas presents this year? Should they go cold or should they go hungry? Should they believe the Government's spin or should they check their bank accounts? They will be €250 worse off. It is just maths and the Government is failing at it. Its numbers do not add up.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I like numbers too but I like when they are used in an appropriate way. To take the average amount spent on electricity according to figures in the *Irish Independent*, which came from the Department, and then apply them to a pensioner who is not necessarily paying the average amount is a little bit disingenuous and it does not reflect the reality of the situation.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** Households.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** Households are not unitary things. They do not all look the same and they do not all pay the same for electricity. If we take the average, it will be above what the average pensioner is paying because the average pensioner is in a household that is smaller and, therefore, has fewer energy demands. It is comparing apples and oranges, which is not to say I am happy with the cost of electricity because I am not. Everyone of us in the House acknowledges that electricity and energy costs in this country are way too high. They are inexplicably high. This is something I have raised in the Chamber previously.

We have put in place a regulator to ensure the cost of energy in this country is managed yet we have seen huge spikes in the cost of electricity in circumstances where 40% of our electricity is generated from renewables. How can this be? They are not affected by the increase in the wholesale price of oil and gas.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** They are tied to it.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I understand in the context of the Ukraine war why this happened. I also understand why we put in place measures to protect people with the exceptional measures put in place in the previous two budgets. However, prices have remained high and there is no justification for it. Nobody can give me a reason I am satisfied with as to why they remain so stubbornly high. It is grossly unfair on the people of this country that we pay among the highest rates for energy in the European Union and without any good reason for it. Let us address this.

One of the ways we can address this, and reference has also been made to the renewables issue, is by bringing onstream renewable energy in this country. Offshore wind farms are an absolute obvious ask. It is shocking that we are not taking more energy from the wind and the waves that crash against the shores of this country. It is a crime we are not doing it. I welcome the infrastructure measures the Government announced today, which will reduce the opportunity for people to object to such plans. This is the right way to go about it. It should not be the case that someone can live in County Donegal and object to a wind farm off the coast of County Waterford when they have no *locus standi* and no basis to object to it. It is right that we change this. We need to do it even faster than what is proposed.

We need to have a situation where we are bringing onstream all of the renewables that are available to us and we need to speed up the work being done on the Celtic interconnector with Franc, so we can plug into a European energy market that will finally bring a little bit of competition to those people in this country who are running utility companies and who are, at the moment, as far as I can see, fleecing the ordinary consumer in Ireland. It is not acceptable and we need to change it. Yes, we need to put in place the infrastructure but the CRU needs to take responsibility for doing what it can in the short term and not hang around until the prices go up again, without any explanation or justification as to why that is.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the cost of energy, an issue that continues to weigh heavily on households and businesses throughout the country. While the worst of the crisis has passed, the reality is that energy prices remain stubbornly above pre-pandemic levels. I firmly believe responsibility now falls on us to take the next steps not only to protect people this winter but to reshape the system so energy in Ireland becomes predictably affordable for the long term. Yes, the Government acted decisively during the crisis, with €3.3 billion in energy credits, the VAT cut to 9% and hardship supports that kept families afloat but if we are serious about long-term affordability, the response must shift from crisis management to structural reform.

We must ensure general transparency in the price setting system. Price decisions may technically be commercial matters but when households continue to feel squeezed while wholesale prices fall, we need quicker and more honest path through. The programme for Government commits to an independent review of this and this review not only must happen but also has to be acted on. Consumers deserve clarity and not lag times, leaving them paying more than they should.

We must push forward aggressively on grid investment. The €3.5 billion earmarked for 2026 to 2030 is welcome but grid delays are driving up costs, slowing renewable projects and undermining energy security. This investment should be front-loaded where possible because every year of delay keeps Ireland dependent on volatile global energy markets.

We need to accelerate retrofitting at scale. I raised this with the Taoiseach earlier. The speed at which the SEAI is reviewing people's homes and then ultimately giving them grants is far too slow. I have many constituents in Galway East who are trying to retrofit their homes because it is the most effective way to reduce energy costs for their homes but they are being left on the long finger with the SEAI and they are not seeing any progress in their applications. Even getting a BER review takes months. This is something we should allow constituents to do themselves and we would fund it on approval.

We need to strengthen protections for vulnerable customers. The increased fuel allowance, expanded eligibility and a moratorium for vulnerable customers are positive steps but too many families just above the thresholds continue to struggle. We need more flexible criteria that reflect the real cost of living and not rigid income cut-offs that ignore mortgages, childcare and disability-related costs.

The new national energy affordability task force is an opportunity but only if we use it ambitiously. It must not be another report that sits on a shelf. The task force should deliver a clear actionable plan in 2026 to structurally lower energy prices, speed up renewable integration, reduce dependence on gas and ensure fairness for every household and business. Affordability must be the test of our energy policy; not headlines or targets but the ability of a family to heat their home without fear of the next bill. We have acted strongly during the crisis and now we must act strategically for the next decade. This is what the public expects and what we must deliver.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** It is important that we discuss this and that we do so thoroughly. At this time of the year we are more conscious than ever of this issue. Many of us are homeowners and we live in our homes. A lot of us here also rent. We have bills during the summer but as we face the winter a different set of costs often come onstream from a gas perspective, and this puts it back on homeowners. In recent years we have had the energy credits and they have made it easier for a number of people as prices reach their highest levels in the history of the State due to what happened in Ukraine. The previous Government looked to provide support but the theme of the budget was that we needed to move away from one-off payments and to invest in our future. Each week we see plans announced to invest in the coming years and energy is no different.

I am a member of the infrastructure committee and we have had various groups in. We had Gas Networks Ireland and ESB Networks before us last week, and today we had the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. All of these bodies are there to be pushed and we have to ask them whether they are delivering on behalf of the State. The utilities tell us they have the money, the funding and the ability to deliver on behalf of the people. I have come from a committee meeting where I pushed the CRU on whether it was delivering on behalf of the people. We know it has increased its staff numbers from 113 to 180 in the past year or two. This has been done so it can put pressure on the utilities to ensure we can get the prices down.

We have not spoken enough about investment in individual houses and this is something we need to discuss. The one sure fire way for people to reduce energy costs is by looking at their own houses, whether through the landlord or homeowner. That is key.

In my previous role, I was CFO for a solar company that grew, developed and built. You could see the importance of solar energy in the houses and the pay off. If you invested, you

would have it paid off in six or seven years and after that, you would benefit into the future. We saw the effectiveness of TAMS on farms and the benefits for commercial companies. We need to keep pushing forward on that.

Previous speakers spoke about the need for infrastructure improvements and that is a key focus. The demand is there but roofs are still not covered in the way they need to be. We need to place a strong emphasis on that and continue to push that in the years ahead. Ultimately, energy is going to be the key demand for the rest of this century and into the future. The demands on energy will not come down and there will be key demands from a commercial energy perspective.

I asked the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, why prices were as they were. It said 30% of the prices are set but the other 70% are set by the wholesale. The excuse for this was that we are in the position of last supply. We have to take the price from the UK or wherever else we get it. Ultimately, that is not good enough. We need to deliver our own energy and invest in our own infrastructure, whether wind farms or solar, but we need to do it quickly.

**Deputy Réada Cronin:** We are seriously reaching a crisis point with the cost of electricity and energy. Sinn Féin asked in September in the lead up to the budget to extend the energy credits introduced in 2022 at a time when the cost-of-living crisis was at its worst with fuel and food costs, with electricity companies announcing price hikes to customer bills and with more than 300,000 people - and growing - already in arrears with their electricity bills. We warned the Government this was going to be a particularly difficult winter for people. The energy credits are needed now more than ever to get people through a dark and very cold winter.

However, the Government did not listen to us. It did not listen to its own officials in the Department of energy either who warned Government electricity and gas prices were rising for the first time in years. According to information found by my party colleague, Lynn Boylan MEP, officials claimed that without government supports, average households would be hit by an extra €321 in electricity costs but it ignored them. The pre-election giveaway budget of the past year is firmly in the rear view mirror of this Government and it has now resorted to austerity when people are at their most vulnerable.

Not only has Government cut those vital lifelines for people this winter, it has refused to do anything substantial to stop electricity companies from price gouging. Price review 6 is ultimately going to see another increase in electricity charges for ordinary people, with a 21% hike for households with the annual cost rising by almost €500. Large energy users, on the other hand, such as data centres will see their bills fall by 3% to 18% under Price review 6. We know data centres are already consuming about 22% of all our electricity in 2024. This is set to rise to 30% in 2030, the equivalent of 2 million Irish homes, which we are not going to get under this Government. What is worse is new data centres are in direct competition for electricity connections with new homes. The first-come first-served policy does not and cannot work. We saw it in Grange Castle in west Dublin, where the houses meant to be connected to the grid did not get it because the data centre did. Why are data centre energy costs going down while ordinary people's energy prices are going up?

We have to invest in the grid in the coming years but these charges need to be distributed fairly. People cannot afford to pay the bills they are getting while they see data centres and

other large energy users getting a reduction. We need immediate and tangible action from this Government to ensure people can keep the lights on this winter and ensure data centres are not allowed free reign over our grid capacity in the future.

Government really has to get to grips with the energy costs. We are going to see it in all our constituencies. The cafes, hairdressers and restaurants will have to pay increased electricity costs. The worst thing is customers are also seeing less money in their spendable pay and will not be able sustain these small ordinary companies because this Government give favourable treatment to data centres. It is not fair.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** In the limited time I have, I will make one short point. So much of the debate on the cost of energy is focused only on today and what can the Government do today to alleviate increased cost on households. That is, of course, essential but what is the point if we are not also talking about how we get away from our dependency on expensive, shock-sensitive fossil fuels? Even though more should be done, there is a limit to what a Government can do in an emergency mitigation situation. It is expensive and is never going to cover everything that is needed.

That dual-track approach on energy of "helping today, saving tomorrow" is one the Green Party devoted much of its time to in the previous Government when external shocks, like the invasion of Ukraine hit. It was former Minister, Eamon Ryan, who led on developing energy credits to ease the massive burden on households. However, imagine the cost to the economy if we had not spent the two previous decades building our renewable energy capacity. Should we not be concerned with asking ourselves how the Irish people can afford another shock like that?

I hope the Minister of State agrees with what I am saying and that Government policy is focused on that but it does turn out to be a question of priorities. When the climate and nature fund, a large portion of which was set aside for the future focus piece on energy, especially offshore but also retrofit, is wiped out in one go, we are shown what the Government's priorities are.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** During the last budget, the then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, claimed there was no need for cost-of-living payments in the budget because, "inflation has now returned to normal rates." He said inflation would be around 2% this year. What a load of rubbish, gaslighting people that the cost of living was actually becoming more affordable, when the dogs on the street know that it is not. He has now swanned off to Washington to be on €600,000 per year and is not bothered but ordinary people are left with the highest inflation in two years, with over 4% in food price inflation and 3.3% energy price inflation. It will be a cold, hard Christmas for many people.

Economists are saying this will last for six months. The cost of 1,000 litres of home heating oil has shot up by €80 in the past month alone, affecting nearly a million households. Last week, the Government voted down our People Before Profit Bill to retrofit private rented properties, condemning hundreds of thousands of households to drafty homes, high energy costs and high carbon emissions long into the future with the headline that inflation figures do not even account for housing costs. They are going up too, dramatically in some cases. If you are a Dublin City Council tenant or a HAP tenant, you are facing rent increases of up to 50%

from April and the plan is to roll this out across the country. The Government knows that too but it does not care. After housing costs, 57% of HAP tenants and 43% of local authority tenants are already living below the poverty line, as are a third of private renters. Tenants are already protesting the rent hikes and they will show the political establishment what they think of it in next year's by-elections.

Disabled people and carers are also fighting back. The budget took upwards of €1,000 out of their pockets in nominal terms - worse in real terms - and they simply cannot afford it. They are calling for an emergency cost-of-living payment before Christmas so they can put food on the table and keep the heating and lights on. They will be protesting outside the Dáil next Tuesday to demand their rights.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The cost of energy is putting huge pressure on households, with 300,000 households now in arrears with electricity bills. I was listening to Deputy Barry Ward complaining about the energy companies putting up the wholesale price - of course, they are doing it - and he wondered why electricity is getting so dear. Well, 25 years ago, it was 96% publicly owned. We had one of the cheapest electricity supplies in the European Union. Now, it is 25% publicly owned and 75% private. That is because of all the renewables owned by private companies, except the Bord na Móna ones which I have no problem with. We have the third to fourth most expensive electricity in Europe. That is the first thing Government TDs need to take on board, instead of coming in here and complaining about private companies. Of course, they are going to do what they do; they are set up to make profit. They are going to get as much as they can out of it.

Government is increasing carbon taxes not once but twice a year and these hikes are having a huge impact on householders, small businesses and motorists, adding to the cost of living by putting up fuel prices. Of course, if fuel prices go up, everything else goes up.

It has turned out that the carbon tax is benefitting those who can afford to buy a new electric car and get the grant, or those who can do a major retrofit in their home. However, low income households, often rural dwellers, are not getting the benefits from the carbon tax that is being collected. I want the Minister of State to take that on board.

We need energy credits, which was recommended by Department officials. There has been a sharp increase in prices but it should only be done in a targeted way. Do not give energy credits to millionaires as was done last year. That was okay. The Government did that before the election and I know why it did so, and members of the Government know as well. Do not do it this year. Do it in a targeted way for low- and middle-income households who are facing another long cold winter.

I want the Minister of State to address the fact the housing aid for older people grant cannot be given to people to replace a gas boiler. I am not sure if it was the Department officials or one of the Ministers who decided this. I have a case of a woman who I will call Sheila. She is 67 years old and a cancer patient. She is living alone and is on non-contributory pension. She has a 20 year-old house. Her gas boiler has stopped working. She cannot get the €3,000 grant from the council to replace it. She cannot get it from the community welfare officer because he says it is the job of the council and she cannot get it from the SEAI because there is a 25-month wait. The rule from the Department says that it cannot be replaced with gas because it is fossil fuel.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You should conclude, Deputy.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** That needs to change and I would ask the Minister of State to bring that back to the senior Minister.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** In the short time available to me, I want to call for the payments of an emergency winter energy credit of at least €500. Households, especially those with children, are under huge pressure from the cost-of-living crisis, which is pushing more and more families into poverty. There are already 630,000 people living below the poverty line and 190,000 of those are children. We have almost 17,000 homeless, with almost 5,500 of these being children. Yesterday, figures showed that the inflation rate here is now at 3.2% as against 2.1% in the eurozone, so we are 50% higher than the eurozone. This inflation is driven by higher energy prices and higher food prices. Food prices are up by 6% and food prices for family over the year are now costing over €3,000 more than they did a few years ago.

Our energy costs are among the highest in Europe. On top of that, the energy companies have announced increases recently: SSE Airtricity, a 9.5% increase, an extra €150; Bord Gáis Energy, a 13.5% increase, an extra €218; Pinergy, an increase of 9.8%, an extra €199; Energia, an increase of 12.1%, up €200; and Flogas Electricity up 7%, an increase of €126. We have over 300,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills, which is an increase of over 85,000 on the same period last year, and 176,000 households are in arrears on their gas bills, which is also an increase on last year.

People with disabilities are particularly badly hit by this cost-of-living crisis, having lost out on about €1,400 in the recent budget. The measure of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable. Thousands of families will face the coming Christmas with difficulty and it is very worrisome. The least we can do is ease that worry by at least the payment of an emergency bonus this Christmas.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** Energy is not just a commodity; it is the lifeblood of every home and business in Ireland. While the worst of the global energy shock may have passed, its legacy remains deeply felt in Irish households. Rising bills have eroded disposable income, pushed more families into arrears and amplified the sense of insecurity that began during the pandemic and worsened with the war in Ukraine. It is not an abstract problem. When parents are rationing heating or skipping meals to keep the lights on, we are failing in our duty to protect the most basic standard of living. That is why we must look at the figures with honesty, acknowledge what has been done and commit to more work that needs to be done. The current situation is grim for some. Despite some stabilisation, Ireland still ranks among the most expensive countries in Europe for electricity. The average household now pays 36.34 cent per kilowatt hour, compared to EU average closer to 28 cent. This translates into an annual bill of €1,817, roughly €350 more than European norm.

Energy inflation has slowed but it has not disappeared. Prices have risen again by 3.3% this year, keeping pressure on household budgets. Behind these percentages are real people. Some 176,000 households are now over 90 days in arrears, with an average debt of €500 per account. That means thousands of families are living under the constant threat of disconnection. It is not just about electricity. Gas prices remain volatile, and network charges account for nearly

one third of every bill, at over €500 annually to costs. These structural factors make Ireland uniquely vulnerable and unless addressed they will keep energy poverty entrenched.

The Government has done some good work and made some positive steps, including the electricity credits. We had two credits of €125, totalling €250, which were applied to domestic electricity accounts last winter, benefitting over 2 million households. Since 2022 with the energy action poverty plan, emergency schemes have delivered €1,450 worth of credits to households at a cost of €3.3 billion. Regarding home energy upgrades, there has been record funding of €469 million for retrofitting and solar PV in budget 2025, including €240 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides free upgrades to low-budget households. The fuel allowance will be increased to €38 per week from January. I also note the VAT reduction to 9% on heat pumps, which will help to make efficient heating more affordable. These measures have helped but they are short term relief.

The structural problems remain. These include Ireland's dispersed housing, high network costs and reliance on imported energy, which keeps bills stubbornly high. We can and need to do more. We need to accelerate energy efficiency, expand the retrofitting schemes and simplify application processes. We need to reform market structures, review the network charges and capacity payments to ensure fairness. We need to target support for vulnerable households, move beyond universal credits to income-based supports and flexible payment plans.

Finally, we must future-proof affordability by investing in renewables and storage to break the link with volatile global gas prices. The Government's commitment to 80% of electricity from renewable sources by 2030 is welcome but delivery must accelerate.

**Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere:** I welcome these statements on this very important topic. Addressing energy affordability is a priority. It is time to focus on long-term affordability and ensure that every household across the country can access secure affordable and clean energy. I want to talk in particular about retrofitting. A deep retrofit can save a household approximately €1,100 per year in energy costs, which is a significant saving. In 2025, €280 million was allocated to the warmer homes scheme, which provides free retrofits to households in energy poverty. In 2024, this scheme facilitated nearly 8,000 energy upgrades in low-income households. Some 257 of these were in Carlow and 304 in Kilkenny but it is too slow. The average waiting time is 20 months, which is ridiculous. It has to be speeded up to give long-needed solace to these vulnerable families around Carlow and Kilkenny.

I acknowledge that the average cost of an upgrade in 2015 was €2,600 and that the average cost has increased significantly. This year the average cost of a deep retrofit upgrade is €29,000. Huge work has been done on the funding side of things but the speed is an issue that has to be addressed as soon as possible. Record funding of €558 million is allocated for SEAI, residential and community energy upgrade schemes next year. This is an increase of €89 million on the budget 2025 allocation, which is to be welcomed. The funding is expected to be supplemented by additional funding, such as an allocation from the ERDF, which will provide for an increase in the allocation for the warmer homes scheme. Continued support is also provided for the home energy upgrade loan scheme, which provides low cost-retrofit loans with interest rates available from 3%.

What I can say is that the hundreds of families in Carlow and Kilkenny I have spoken to, who got their properties retrofitted, could not speak highly enough of the scheme once the work was

completed and the savings to them and their families have been fantastic. However, once again I have to really make this the biggest point here. It is too slow. The finance is there but the speed of delivery is too slow and it has to be tackled with a bit of purpose. I also acknowledge what previous speakers said in relation to the fuel allowance. The payment will increase by €5 from €33 to €38 per week from January 2026. That is to be acknowledged because that money is going to help vulnerable people right across the country and in particular in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. It is an additional €140 during the annual fuel allowance season. That has to be welcomed, along with the reduction of VAT on electricity and gas to 9%, which has been extended until 31 December 2030. This measure will help to reduce household energy costs by up to €100 per annum for the next five years. For those aged under 66, the means limit on the fuel allowance is linked to the rate of the State contributory pension plus €200. It therefore increases automatically if there is an increase in the rate of the State contributory pension.

Given that there are many vulnerable customers out there, it is important to acknowledge that extra consumer protection measures are in place for registered vulnerable customers, including priority reconnection after outages. A disconnection moratorium for reasons of non-payment of account for registered vulnerable customers will remain in place from 1 November 2025 to 31 March 2026.

I acknowledge the significant investment the Government is making through the warmer homes scheme and the SEAI. It is making an impact in terms of the funding being available, but I cannot harp on enough about the need for speed in getting these cases over the line. There are thousands of families waiting ten, 12, 15, 18 or 24 months in some instances and it is not good enough. The last thing they want is to face into another winter of excessive costs when they are ready to go with their retrofitting. We all know the funding is there. With the funding that is available, I implore the Minister to make it a priority to fast-track the speed with which applications are brought through the system.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Energy costs are driving people into energy poverty. What does it look like? It is less for food, clothes and bills. It is the choice between eating or heating. For working families, older people and people with disabilities, it is about hesitating to turn on the heating for fear of the bills coming through. People on low incomes are the worst affected.

The Minister's Department said that people would be €321 worse off, yet incredibly the Government chose to give developers €230 million in tax breaks for apartments they are already building rather than helping people who are struggling. The Government has chosen to allow energy companies, in the words of the Taoiseach, to gouge our citizens. When prices around Europe started to fall, energy companies in Ireland increased prices and also recorded record massive profits. I can assure Members that their executives and shareholders have no fear about sticking on the heating today.

Sinn Féin has produced a number of proposals, including legislation to strengthen the energy regulator's power to do its job properly and hold energy companies to account. Fairness and affordability should be at the heart of Ireland's energy market rather than profiteering. Until such reforms are implemented to bring down prices for people, the Government should have continued to provide electricity energy credits.

Emergency supports should not have been withdrawn precisely as Ireland's energy crisis is deepening. Taking away support when prices are sky-rocketing is not only cruel, but it proves yet again how cynical many of the commitments made by the Government parties during the election were. People are quite rightly asking why the Government chose to end energy payments if its own experts said that people would be worse off? The answer to those people is quite simple: they were facing an election and that is what you do during elections, is it not?

Winter has started and there is no doubt that it is colder than it was last year. The Government can choose to help hundreds of thousands of people who are in energy poverty and many more who are going to be facing into energy poverty in 2026. It can choose to change its mind and bring back energy supports while planning for legislation to strengthen the energy regulator and tackle energy price gouging. That is the Government's choice over the coming weeks and months. I urge it to make that choice. Too many people are really struggling.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The recent documents obtained following a freedom of information request exposed a shocking truth about the Government's priorities. Officials from the Department of climate and energy strongly advised that energy credits should be continued in budget 2026. They warned that without these credits, households would face an extra €321 per year on their bills. That is not a minor increase; it is a devastating blow for families that are already struggling. These same officials highlighted that electricity and gas prices remain sky high compared to pre-2022 levels. Gas is up 90% and electricity is up 61%. Arrears have surged to record levels with over 300,000 households now behind on their bills. That is the reality in homes across the country.

Let us remember that we are in the lead-up to Christmas, a time that should be about family, not fear. Parents are wondering how they will keep the lights on and put food on the table. As we have heard already, pensioners are choosing between heating and eating. This Government's decision makes that struggle even harder, yet despite clear and urgent advice, the Government chose to scrap energy credits. What was its excuse? It wants to move away from so-called *ad hoc* supports and focus on long-term investments. Tell that to the family freezing in its home this winter. Long-term plans do not pay the bills today.

Here is the hypocrisy: just before the last election, energy credits were handed out. Back then, the Government knew the value of helping households because it suited it politically. Now, when families need help most, it turns its back. This is not leadership; it is betrayal. The Government had the evidence and the warnings and it still chose to make life harder for ordinary families.

It is time it reversed this decision and put people first, not corporate profits. If this Government truly cared about families this Christmas, it could reinstate the energy credits. It is not rocket science; it requires Cabinet approval, a quick amendment to the existing legislation and a supplementary allocation of funds, just as was done before the last election. The ESB network and suppliers can deliver credits automatically, once instructed. The only barrier is political will. Families are facing record arrears and soaring bills. The Government has the tools, the authority and the money. What it lacks is the commitment. It should act now before Christmas becomes a crisis for thousands of households.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Christmas is approaching. When we were growing up, we were told by our parents that if we were not good for Christmas, Santy would fill our stockings with coal. How many people in this country this year will be hoping that Santy brings them a bag of coal? How many? Have we not turned full circle? It is not that long ago that we heard it. We will now see people go cold in their houses this year.

I have been trying to figure out what is wrong. The Government has run out of ideas. The Minister's Department has absolutely run out of ideas. All it can look at is how it can get in a marginal tax from inflatable costs. It cannot fix the problems. Why? It looks at energy rates. For example, the Government announced that it is giving an extra 10% for costs relating to buildings with pyrite. However, I read out a letter yesterday showing that all of the manufacturers have put up their prices by 8%. The Government is a year behind.

I am in construction. The Department is looking at the SEAI grants and retrofitting houses. It takes so long for it to process people's applications that the costs have gone up by 30%. That is what is wrong. The bureaucratic bull that people have to go through to get a grant in the first place takes so long that the inflationary costs have already caught up to it and it is not affordable any more. That is what is wrong. The Government needs to speed the process up and get the funding out to people straight away to make sure that it helps. Let us hope that every child in this country has been bold so that Santy might bring their parents and grandparents, who cannot avail of the grants previously provided by the Government, a bit of coal this Christmas to keep them warm.

5 o'clock

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Twenty-nine per cent of Irish households are now living in fuel poverty. That is the highest number on record. The percentage of domestic electricity customers in arrears is heading towards 13%. Some 300,000 electricity customers and 183,000 gas customers are in arrears. Since 2021, electricity costs have increased by 69%. The cost of gas has increased by 102% in the same period. Electricity companies are still jacking up those prices. It is incredible.

The Minister and the Government always talk about the fact that we have high wholesale prices in Ireland. The fact of the matter is that we have the biggest gap between wholesale prices and retail prices practically throughout the EU. It is not the wholesale price that is the significant problem for so many people. It is the fact the Government allows these companies to price gouge.

It is not just private companies that are doing it. The ESB is a semi-State body that is meant to be delivering Government policy. It is one of the biggest players in the market and it made a profit of €706 million last year. A profit of €706 million made by a semi-State body during a cost-of-living crisis is absolutely wrong.

We then come to the level of taxation on fuel this Government is implementing. It is quite incredible. A reply to an Aontú parliamentary question showed that the Government took in €4.1 billion of taxes on fuel last year, which is the highest total ever, in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. Last year, the Government took in €1 billion in carbon taxes, the most it has ever taken, in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. In fact, the Government has increasing carbon taxes set in law for the next five years irrespective of the economic situation of families across the

country. It has built in taxation on fuel irrespective of whether people are in fuel poverty. That is absolutely a sin. It is incredible. I do not think this Government actually cares. It has built a dysfunctional energy market, and that dysfunction is hitting customers in the pocket.

Deputy Barry Ward talked a few minutes ago about the fact the cost of renewables is lower than the price of gas, yet that is not being passed on to customers. The truth is that the Government's law has built in a link between the price of electricity and gas. Electricity is priced at the highest input costs in terms of electricity, and that is the Government's law.

The Comptroller and Auditor General has said that only 2.1% of the €190 million fund that was collected to help people in energy arrears has been paid out. It is only €3 million of €190 million that has been collected. The Government has the urgency of a half-cut snail when it comes to helping people with the difficulties with which they are dealing.

I have heard other TDs talk about advancements in renewable energy. Some of the information here is quite amazing. Does the Minister of State know how many biodigesters are linked to the gas grid at the moment? There is one. For all the talk over decades about biodigesters and the fact that they can bring in renewable gas and help farmers, only one biodigester is plugged in.

There were seven offshore wind turbines but they are being decommissioned. We now have no offshore wind turbines in the country. There have been more offshore wind conferences held by the Government than there are individual turbines in this country. The Government is worse than useless in the delivery of infrastructure that is necessary for people to survive and as a result, prices are spiking and families are being hurt.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Before I speak to this subject, I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle and the staff of Leinster House for the event yesterday. We have all seen the analysis of our distinguished guests, as has been well covered in the media, but it is important to pay tribute to the ushers, the administrative office and the office of the Ceann Comhairle. It was a special and historic day and it passed off quite well.

I am glad for the opportunity to speak on this debate. The debate takes on a whole new context in light of the front pages of today's newspapers where it is reported that there will be no energy credits this winter. Many people have emailed and phoned me throughout the day. Indeed, a few people called into my office but I am here in Dublin today. They had factored energy credits into their household budgets for the winter of 2025 and the spring of 2026 so that the shock of the bill landing in the post every eight weeks or so would not be as stinging as it was in previous years. I appreciate that energy prices peaked in 2022, largely due to the war in Ukraine, and there was a shortage of some supplies coming across continental Europe. We were trying to transition away from fossil fuels. As others have said in respect of our pathway to renewables, we are getting there but there is a long way to go. I appreciate that the peak season was in the winter of 2022, but three years on, we have gone from a period of relative stability to the energy companies raising prices again. It is the worst time for that support to be pulled.

I mentioned our distinguished guest, President Zelenskyy. It is right that Ireland shows solidarity and support, but I am being asked in emails how we can be giving €125 million to Ukraine and not be giving supports to our own people for the energy costs they will meet this

winter. I have often seen people make unfair comparisons over the years and perhaps I can now be accused of doing that, but we must be cognisant that people had credits factored into their household budgets.

In winter 2022, the Government brought in a windfall tax where excessive profits were being made by energy companies and the Government was able to take some of those profits back as a deterrent to raising prices further. Something like that must be considered again.

I welcome the €3.5 billion plan to upgrade the national grid, but in the part of the country I am in, sections of power lines have only recently been fixed after Storm Éowyn. Huge work was undertaken by the ESB. It is a cause of hurt that the power was out for so long and it took so long for it to come back. People find it hard this year to see the rising costs on their bills.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that followed, the previous Government was very agile. That was a term used often in the House. We were able to respond to the needs of households, families and businesses. I hope that this can stay under active review and that as we go through these tough winter months, this will be considered.

As all TDs do, I often make house calls in my constituency. You sometimes go into very cold houses. Sadly, they are usually the houses of older people. They do not want the heating on. They are trying to siphon off a few bob each week to leave something as a legacy to their children. That is very sad. I often visit households and tell the homeowners to, for God's sake, switch on the heating or throw a briquette on the fire to keep themselves warm. Those worries will be for another day, but on dark, cold nights such as this, everyone needs a warm house.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I add to Deputy Crowe's congratulations to the Ceann Comhairle on the manner in which she hosted the visit of President Zelenskyy and his entourage yesterday.

Rising energy costs in Ireland seem as if they are inexorable and progressive, without restraint or any hope of correction. They are punishing and unsustainable. They affect families, businesses, the economy and competitiveness. While I accept this is an international problem because of the rapid economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, reducing investment in fossil fuel production in the past decade and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we must still be cognisant that households are opening bills with a sense of dread. Our electricity costs are among the highest in Europe. People do not need another index; they need fairness.

Something is deeply off about this market. Ordinary people cannot understand why electricity retail prices are 200% to 300% higher than wholesale prices. I can understand hedging, but there is deep suspicion of profiteering. There is a moral hazard. Our energy suppliers are no less susceptible to this than anyone else. Try to explain hedging to ordinary people and families.

Ireland has vulnerabilities. We rely heavily on natural gas and an expensive grid. The drive to sustainable and clean solar and wind-generated energy takes time. Thankfully, 40% of our energy is already renewable and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has suggested we will get to 60% in the next couple of years. None of this, however, explains why the gap between wholesale and retail electricity prices is bigger here than almost anywhere else in Europe in spite of the assertions of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. People are not naive. They are asking who is watching the watchers. Right now, the State regulator cannot cap prices. It cannot directly stop unjustified price hikes or intervene when retail prices diverge

far from reality. We need a market that works, not one that hides behind complexity because complexity reeks of anti-competitive behaviour.

Here is what I believe must happen. We need real transparency around pricing, not vague statements; strong regulatory powers that ensure competition; and a rapid transition to Irish-generated renewable energy. We must continue to protect the households with the least resources.

The Government has done that with targeted supports, such as increasing the fuel allowance and the maintenance of the 9% VAT rate.

I will paraphrase a recent successful election campaign: a country we can afford; running for office to lower the cost of living for working-class people; building affordable housing; childcare for all; reducing the cost of energy; ensuring affordable groceries. That was not in Ireland; it was in New York city. It went on: life does not have to be this hard, life can be more affordable and it is a government's job to deliver it. That was the campaign of Zohran Mamdani in New York city. These issues are international but we must solve our own problems by disruption of the *status quo* and with a meaningful, determined strategic development of affordable, clean, abundant, sustainable energy.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** This week, the *Irish Examiner*, noted that the number of people switching energy providers is at a record high. In one month, 48,216 people switched providers. Would anyone blame them when they are being gouged, as the Taoiseach himself has said? Consumers are searching desperately for cheaper energy costs as the Government will not act, despite the State experiencing a cost-of-living crisis that continues to hit hard. In recent months, Bord Gáis Energy, Flogas, SSE Airtricity, Pinery and Energia have all increased their consumer prices, adding hundreds of euro to the annual energy bill of many consumers. Nearly 300,000 households are in arrears on their electricity bills and almost two thirds of them have been in energy arrears for more than 90 days. This is an absolute crisis facing us. Arrears are being accumulated because the consumer price paid for energy utilities continues to increase. These increases come despite wholesale energy prices being 74% lower than in August 2022, not long after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A lot of people will not be aware that they are not getting an energy credit this year. A lot of older people have not realised it yet. They will be shocked when their bills come in and many will not be able to afford to pay them. In Sinn Féin's pre-budget submission, we provided for a €450 energy credit and something like that needs to be done. As we stand here tonight, it is freezing outside and, as other Deputies have said, some people will be afraid to put on the heat because they will not be able to afford the bill. We are supposed to be a wealthy country and a country that looks after the most vulnerable. We are abandoning them in this when we do not need to.

The average energy bill for a three-bedroom house now stands between €1,700 and €1,800 per year. Some home heating oil costs increased by €80 in one month. In addition, people have the cost of rent and groceries, meaning many families are barely hanging on financially. Consumers desperately need assistance, yet the recent €9.4 billion budget provided nothing to workers or families. The Government has compounded the cost-of-living crisis by failing to deliver cost-of-living supports and energy credits in the recent budget. It has further compounded this crisis by failing to tackle energy companies and failing to heed our calls to

plug the regulatory gap in the energy market. Our recent legislative proposal would have allowed the CRU to oversee the hedging practices of many energy companies and would have allowed sanction to be applied to any profiteering or anti-competitive behaviour discovered.

In the short time I have left - I would go on much longer if I could - we must deal with the current reality of people struggling to pay their utility bills and particularly energy bills. People continue to struggle through this cost-of-living crisis while an inept, lethargic, out of touch and outdated Government sits on its hands, does nothing and abandons them to what will probably be the coldest winter we have experienced in years.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I congratulate the Ceann Comhairle on how yesterday was dealt with. Fair play to her. Bhí sé iontach.

We all know that families are struggling and I heard from across the House, when I was upstairs in my office listening to this debate, about the soaring energy costs and the thousands of people in arrears. I want to push something towards the Minister of State. I am on the climate and energy committee and EnergyCloud came before it. EnergyCloud will try to use the surplus or wasted renewable energy on the grid to heat up a boiler in a house for someone who is struggling. I ask the Department to look into this. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about this and the Department is looking at it, but it needs to be fast-tracked.

At the moment, every day, on average €2.7 million worth of unit cost of electricity is being wasted due to curtailment and dispatch down. I was at a solar farm recently where the owner told me he has to turn off his farm regularly due to the grid not having the capacity to take the energy being added. I do not understand why we cannot fast-track long-duration energy storage to tackle this, to add to the grid and store the energy so as to level out the efficiency when there is a lack of wind or sun. Gigawatts of wind energy could be added to this country but we do not the grid capacity right now. We have had the ESB and EirGrid in before us. I know they have a huge job ahead of them but I urge that this be done. The legislation proposed today might help them with that.

As everyone will know, private wires was a key priority for me in Government formation talks. I have heard Members of the House talking about this. It is not privatising our grid. It is not like when we changed out from telecoms. It is about removing the monopoly from the grid. It provides an alternative when grid constraints or inefficiency block renewable regeneration of energy. In the right context, they can be used to lower energy costs but it is crucial that private wires serve the public interest and eco-villages. If they are used for corporations, we must make sure they are not used as greenwashing tactics.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I was listening to the Minister when he delivered his speech earlier. I was in the Chair and I listened to him and heard what he said. The problem is that the Government has given up on ordinary families, totally and absolutely. The multinationals and oil companies are gouging the people. Every party in this House voted for carbon tax. Sinn Féin wanted more carbon tax a few years ago. The Rural Independent Group was the only group to oppose it. The Government then gives the nod to come in here.

I want to speak about part of the country this evening, Grange in Ardmore, the lovely round tower in Ardmore and Scart mountain and those areas where gigantic wind turbines are going

up now. The round tower in Ardmore is 96 ft, the Spire in Dublin is 390 ft and these gigantic 605 ft tall wind turbines with a huge axis from the radius are being put up and the locals are just cast aside. It goes straight to An Bord Pleanála. The Government has no respect for ordinary people. That is what is wrong. It is all about big business, which has the Government in its pockets.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** For many people, the energy price crisis reflects a Government paralysed by inertia that is only now slowly turning away from the madness of the Green Party era when the tail wagged the dog and energy independence in the form of LNG or oil and gas exploration was considered almost a heresy. I acknowledge that things are turning in the right direction and the storage facility will now proceed but the problem is that it will take years. We should be self-sufficient for energy. I have always said that here. Many mistakes were made and the closure of the Shannonbridge power station was one of the huge mistakes made.

On electricity prices, many people, particularly elderly people, are struggling, as are small businesses. Many small businesses have closed and I have been made aware of that happening in my constituency in Offaly. I ask that the energy companies be called out; for an end to their profiteering; and for a message to go out from the Government that they need to respect people and be fair with prices. Ireland has some of the highest prices in Europe.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Every day since Bord na Móna was closed, the cost of electricity has gone up. There is no account whatsoever of a regulator keeping any track of what is going on. No one is saying "boo" to all these electricity companies. They are competing with one another to put up the price of electricity and no one is watching.

The other thing is carbon tax. When carbon tax was brought in, the cost of fuel - petrol and diesel - was €1.15 per litre. It was to discourage people from using petrol and diesel. God help us, the price has now gone above €1.80 per litre and that is way more than the carbon tax was at the start. Will the Government cut the carbon tax now because it has outlived its usefulness? It is not relevant any more because the price of the petrol, diesel and heating oil is driving up inflation and the cost of living. Surely, the Government realises it by now. Cut out the carbon tax or as much as possible as it can.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes the debate. However, that is not the end of the debate. It has just concluded for this evening. I thank the Members and Minister of State.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has completed its consideration of the Protection of Employees (Employers' Insolvency) (Amendment) Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

### **Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 32 - Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

### **Housing Plan: Statements**

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I very much welcome this opportunity to come before the House to discuss the Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The development of this new housing plan was a commitment under the programme for Government. It reaffirms that housing is the number one priority for all arms of government, including local government, and expects that all people and organisations, whether public or private, will play their part in tackling the challenges we face in increasing housing supply and reducing homelessness. The Government is entirely focused on building 300,000 new homes. By the end of 2030, there will be 72,000 additional new build social homes built for those in our society that need them most. Our goal remains a housing system that truly serves the needs of our people. That is why we are committed to also providing 90,000 affordable housing supports. Delivering Homes, Building Communities is ambitious - of that there is no doubt - but the Government is fully committed to making it a reality.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities also builds on the achievement under Housing for All with over 137,000 new homes built, 44,000 social homes and nearly 16,900 affordable housing supports provided, with 4,500 of these being cost-rental homes, a tenure type that did not exist just five years ago. This gives the Government a strong platform to scale up housing delivery and under Delivering Homes, Building Communities, we are focused on delivery. This will not be easy and there is no one single solution that will solve the housing challenges we face. That is why Delivering Homes, Building Communities takes pragmatic action across a number of different policy areas to boost housing supply while ensuring that the new homes delivered support people who need them the most. These two key objectives provide the foundational pillars in the plan: activating supply and support people. The first pillar, activating supply, is about removing structural barriers to homebuilding and ensuring we deliver 300,000 new homes in the lifetime of this plan. This includes measures aimed at unlocking land, reforming planning, delivering infrastructure and creating the conditions needed to increase investment in housing supply.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities is enabled by the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State. A total of €275 billion will be invested over the next ten years under the national development plan, to significantly upgrade our infrastructure and make the environment for building homes much better. This cannot be overstated. This includes almost €20 billion to support the delivery of 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable home supports over the next five years. It also includes €12.2 billion for water and wastewater services and €3.5 billion in equity funding for ESB Networks and EirGrid to make sure that we have the capacity in these vital services to make housing connections as and when they are needed. The Uisce Éireann investment is particularly significant. Of the €12.2 billion funding provided, 95% of it will be used to support the delivery of a wide range of projects in cities and regions to ensure the delivery of the additional water services capacity required for new housing.

Investment in transport will also be critical to unlocking housing. Up to €3.5 billion will be invested in transport projects, which will support the delivery of tens of thousands of homes across the five cities. We have also introduced a €1 billion infrastructure investment fund, which will help to de-risk the development of sites in towns and cities across the country. This will be managed and deployed by the housing activation office.

A key change element of Delivering Homes, Building Communities is the emphasis it places on creating the environment needed for the building of more homes. One vital part of this is creating the right conditions to attract inward investment in housing development, particularly in building apartments. Delivering Homes, Building Communities details a suite of complementary measures to do just this. They will result in the development of thousands of new apartments. The measures include: the changes announced to rent pressure zones, RPZs, to attract private investment back into the rental sector; the new planning design standards for apartments; a reduction in the VAT rate to 9% from 13.5%; an enhanced corporation tax deduction; and an exemption from corporation tax for cost-rental homes. The cumulative impact of these could result in a reduction of up to €160,000 in the cost of delivery to apartments. This is a significant amount of cost savings per unit, and it has the potential to unlock thousands of apartments that were not viable just six months ago. Another such measure is the establishment of the housing activation office. The office is now up and running. The team has met with all local authorities and industry and is actively developing a programme of investment to get more homes built. The office will identify and address barriers to the delivery of public infrastructure projects needed to enable housing development, through the alignment of funding and co-ordination of infrastructure providers.

To deliver more homes at speed, the State will indeed do more, but this plan will also empower others, particularly the private sector, to play their part. We can all agree that an effective planning system remains a critical piece of the solution. Delivering Homes, Building Communities is not only tackling the barriers in the planning system, but also those in the legal system, regulation and procurement. We will free-up the private sector to provide homes at much greater scale by providing more zoned and serviced land for housing right across the country. The full implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 will be another game-changer for the wider housing system. It will provide certainty to all practitioners but particularly developers. Having set timelines for decisions allows developers to better manage projects. This, in turn, will have positive impacts on the cost of housing development.

The Government is also committed to creating the best possible conditions for the industry to build and to activate more homes. We have not waited until the publication of this plan to get on with the work. Since coming to office, the Government has delivered a revised national planning framework, NPF, enabling the zoning of significantly more land. We have introduced reform of RPZs and revised apartment standards, both of which will make apartment building more viable. Working across government, Delivering Homes, Building Communities also involves measures to boost construction capacity and skills. The scale, quality, speed, efficiency and sustainability of the construction industry must be at the highest levels to meet national housing projections. Increasing skills and enabling wider adoption of modern methods of construction, MMC, is a critical aspect to achieve this and support the delivery of high-quality housing with reduced delivery times and reduced costs. In addition, while housing need is so critical, addressing vacancy and dereliction remains a key priority of the Government under Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The plan commits to bringing homes back

into use through the vacant property refurbishment grant and the introduction of a new derelict sites tax, administered and collected by the Revenue Commissioners.

As I have outlined, the Government will lead with record investment and strong direction, but success also depends on local authorities, the Land Development Agency, LDA, approved housing bodies, AHBs, and the private sector playing their part. The LDA has been further capitalised by €2.5 billion. This will support a significantly expanded role. In addition to over 2,000 homes already delivered, the agency is working on a pipeline of a further 27,000 new homes on over 40 sites. Local authorities will be supported as well. A number of measures detailed in the plan will ensure the delivery of record levels of social homes and affordable housing supports by local authorities. A new single stage approval process for all social housing projects under €200 million will support them to increase and accelerate the delivery of new homes. The Government will also support and fully fund local authorities to establish ring-fenced new build teams that are fully focused on delivering new social and affordable homes. This will ensure there is additional dedicated housing expertise in every local authority. These teams will be solely focused on the delivery of new homes. They will be afforded the opportunity to develop own build projects, problem solving as they go while developing a strong pipeline of future social and affordable homes. They will be recognised for over-performance to incentivise delivery of the 72,000 new social homes by 2030. We will also put in place measurements and publish data to illustrate how everybody contributes.

Every part of society has a role to play. The housing crisis affects us all and solving it will need everyone to act together. Affordable housing bodies also play an invaluable role in housing delivery that complements local authority social and affordable home delivery, helping to address acute housing needs, including for many of our most vulnerable citizens. They have been responsible for approximately 50% of all social and affordable delivery over the past four years. The Government is committed to strengthening capacity and specialism in the AHB sector to increase delivery. This will include, among other things, supporting a restructuring and consolidation of the sector, addressing legacy impediments and providing greater clarity of the required social and affordable housing delivery by AHBs through local authority housing delivery action plans. The second pillar, supporting people, is aimed at supporting people to get a home. It is focused on tackling homelessness, protecting children and families, increasing social and affordable housing output and strengthening protections for those renting. It supports homeownership - giving new buyers a chance to put down roots, while revitalising villages, towns and cities.

I am acutely aware of the profound impact homelessness has on individuals, particularly children, and addressing homelessness is a key priority under Delivering Homes, Building Communities. This includes measures to prevent homelessness, support people experiencing homelessness and support people to exit homelessness.

As part of this plan I felt it was essential to reaffirm my, and the Government's, commitment to the Lisbon declaration and working towards ending homelessness by 2030. I will also continue to work with the national homeless action committee to ensure a whole-of-government approach is taken in everything we do to address homelessness. The single biggest intervention we can make as a Government is to deliver increased levels of social homes. An additional 72,000 social homes will make a big difference. We will also work with each local authority to examine how the allocations of these new social homes will best address the needs

of households experiencing homelessness and, in particular, families with children. On top of this, Delivering Homes, Building Communities includes a number of additional measures that the Government will take to address homelessness, including the provision of an extra €100 million capital funding in 2026 to support the exit of families longest in emergency accommodation. This is in addition to the €50 million already announced for 2025. We will also develop a child and family homelessness action plan and a whole-of-government homelessness prevention framework. Both will allow for a co-ordinated approach to addressing the root causes of homelessness.

I also want to detail some of the action the Government is taking to support our ageing population. Providing housing for older people is very important to this Government. We will develop an action plan to increase the delivery of housing for older people. The action plan will focus on increasing the delivery of social homes for older people, increasing delivery of more suitable homes for older people in private housing and will increase choice for those who wish to rightsize.

This plan is focused on supporting people to get a home and the Government has committed to record levels of direct funding for housing to support this. In 2026 alone, over €9 billion capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer, LDA and Housing Finance Agency. This funding is targeting never before seen levels of social homes and affordable supports. An average of 12,000 new build social homes and 15,000 affordable home supports each year to 2030. This will provide real homes and supports for individuals and families right across the country who are currently struggling to secure a home of their own. We will also continue to work with our stakeholders to revise, expand and improve the range of affordability supports in place for home ownership and cost rental. This will be done within the context of investing in our towns, villages and cities recognising the importance of community in people's daily lives.

Through the implementation of Housing for All, we have learned that there is no single solution to the challenges we face. The answer lies in a suite of complementary actions across a broad number of areas. Delivering Homes, Building Communities provides a clear roadmap for the action that now needs to be taken. The state will continue to play a critical role, investing unprecedented levels of public money in the delivery of housing. We will continue to consider every lever at our disposal to increase supply. We remain steadfast in our commitment to meet the challenges head on and ensure all those aspiring own their own home will be able to realise their aspiration.

I look forward to hearing Members' views and perspectives on these vital matters.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The definition of "madness" is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result and that is exactly what the Minister is doing with this so-called plan. It is not a new plan and anybody with a shred of honesty who has read it would say that plainly. It is the same old failed policies repackaged, rebranded and re-presented one more time but this time with far less feeling. In fact, the only changes in this document from those of the Minister's predecessors are the reintroduction of policies from a previous plan that failed back then and without doubt are going to fail now.

Let me run through some of the problems. The first and most fundamental is once again the Government is underestimating overall housing need. It is ignoring the Housing Commission's

estimation of the housing deficit, the amount of homes that are needed to meet housing demand right now, by a factor of about 20%. That is why the Department of Finance has said that even if the Government meets these targets, the housing crisis will continue for another decade and a half. Within that, the Government is chronically under-providing new social homes by a factor of about 30%. We need more than 90,000 new-build social homes over the next six years but we also need far more funding for the regeneration and improvement of existing social homes and a far more ambitious programme of social housing acquisitions. None of that is in this plan. Despite the Minister's commitment to working towards ending long-term homelessness by 2030 – I always thought the Lisbon declaration was to end long-term homelessness by 2030 – there is not a single new measure in this plan across its 100 pages to prevent homelessness or accelerate people's exits from homelessness.

Every time I hear the Minister, who normally is very cautious in his choice of language, talk about waging a war on dereliction, I am quite embarrassed for him because there is no urgency in tackling vacancy and dereliction in this plan. Transferring responsibility for the derelict sites levy to Revenue, which may collect it by 2027 is not a war; it is a snail's crawl in tackling one of the most urgent and pressing issues of our time. Crucially, for all the Minister's talk about private sector supply, new measures for the small and medium-sized builder-developer sector to build good-quality homes for working people to buy in every county are entirely absent from the plan. The only changes the Minister is proposing are the changes well announced to the private rental sector – reintroducing inferior design standards for apartments to make them smaller and darker; a €640 million tax break to apartment developers where the apartments are viable, being built and, in most cases, already have buyers; and legislation trundling its way through pre-legislative scrutiny of which the primary, if not sole purpose, is to jack up rip-off rents even higher from next March. Yesterday during pre-legislative scrutiny, the Bill was described by one stakeholder as "a jungle of confusion". I could not have found better words. It contains three new rules for rent setting and three new rules for security of tenure, and the only thing we are sure of is not increased supply, but ever greater rip-off rents and confusing and unenforceable tenure changes.

Of course the Minister knows it does not have to be this way. His party leader - sometimes I think the man who is actually in charge of housing - the Taoiseach stood in this Dáil only a week ago and complained about the Opposition and said that we had no alternative and no detailed plans. He must have missed the Government's own Housing Commission report with over 200 pages of detailed recommendations being thrown in the bin and ignored by the Minister and his predecessor. The Opposition, including ourselves with a fully costed housing plan, over and over again has set out exactly how it can be done. Unless there is greater State intervention and the right kind of private sector supply to meet the needs of buyers, we are not going to get to a situation where all of those people who have been failed by the Government's housing policies get access to secure, adequate and affordable homes. As long as that is the case, we will continue to campaign, to highlight and to critique but crucially to set out the alternatives because the only thing that is certain is this: this plan will come and go like Deputy Darragh O'Brien's, Eoghan Murphy's and Simon Coveney's before it. It will fail and the losers will be people in need of affordable housing. On that basis, we will continue to oppose the plan because it is part of the problem and not part of the solution.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Minister does not understand the damage that he does and that Governments have done when they announce a new housing plan. It takes a year to deliver but what a Minister does when he announces a new housing plan is create hope. People are so desperate for housing they would do anything. They look at their Government as they wait for its plan. It has caused devastation to ordinary people because this plan is only a rehash of what we have seen before. There is nothing in here that will solve the housing crisis. There is nothing in here that will solve the homelessness crisis. I take no glee in that. I am actually gutted that there is nothing in this plan.

In my constituency today, four houses came up in Kerry Pike. Hundreds of calls have come into my office for four houses in Kerry Pike because people are so desperate. Does the Government not understand how hard it is for ordinary people and families who are trying to get a home? They cannot find a home to buy; they cannot afford it. They cannot get somewhere to rent; they cannot afford it. They cannot get social housing. I am talking about the pensioners who have notices to quit. Where will they go? These are people who are terrified about where they are going to go in January because we have a tsunami of evictions coming and the Minister seems to have his head in the sand. Does he not know what is happening? Does he not know what people are living through? He is coming in with this plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. I would love to tell him what I think of it. I am dealing with people who are sleeping on couches or in box bedrooms, and people who are separated for Christmas. Christmas is coming. I have families who have been in emergency accommodation for three years. Imagine those poor children. They cannot put up a proper Christmas tree. They are wondering will Santa come. The parents are then distraught because they are looking. They feel like failures but they are not the failures. The Government is the failure. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are the failure because they put developers and speculators before people. They put money before people. That is what this is doing. It is an absolute disgrace. Where is the hope this Christmas? Who will be lighting a candle for all those homeless people?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** This latest housing plan is not worth the paper it is written on. Like all other failed plans from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, this will only make the housing crisis worse. It will only make people's lives harder. It will lead to more misery for anyone trying to put a roof over their head so that a small few can make bigger profits. Smaller, darker, more expensive homes; that is this Government's plan. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are serving the interests of people who are profiting from the housing crisis. In my own county of Donegal, 80 council houses are lying empty because of defective blocks. There is no plan from the Government. They are just lying empty. It is disgraceful. Fine Gael's record in government is clear. Since it came into office, the number of people under the age of 40 who own their own home has been cut in half. Fianna Fáil joining in has only made matters worse. Today, 180 landlords own 56,000 homes in this State. The Government has ripped up home ownership and ripped it away from a whole generation to drive them into the arms of corporate landlords. In the last five years, these big landlords have doubled the number of properties they own. We have seen them hoovering up homes. They have outbid people at every turn. Workers watch on as house prices are pushed out of reach.

The Government is trying to spin a yarn that there is not enough money in housing. It churns out industry nonsense for big developers, the same big developers that are making super-profits. The biggest players have 20% gross profit margins. They are talking such a big cut

that it would make the banks and the insurance industry blush. The Government looked at these obscene profits and decided to hand the developers more. It handed them massive tax breaks in this year's budget. Every worker will be worse off next year in order that developers can make more money. Shame on the Government. It wants us to believe that higher rents, higher house prices and bigger profits are going to solve the housing crisis, but that is not the case. While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael remain in government, the housing crisis is only going to get worse. More and more people become homeless. Young people emigrate. Lives are put on hold. People's hard-earned wages are handed over to landlords and banks. All of that will continue until we take back control and start building homes working people can afford to own.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Well said.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** One of the biggest failures of this Government is the whole area of affordable housing. In large numbers of local authorities across the State, there is just no plan to roll out affordable housing schemes. I can speak with authority about my home county of Donegal. Again and again, I have submitted questions to the Minister and to his predecessor, Deputy O'Brien. I have appealed to them to put in place affordable housing schemes. If a family in Donegal with two adults and one child earns over €32,250, they cannot go on the social housing list. In order to get a mortgage, they would have to earn between €70,000 and €90,000. If the Minister does not know what wages are like in Donegal, I can tell him that a huge cohort of families are stuck. This is happening all across the State but I am telling the Minister about Donegal because I can speak with authority about it. They cannot go on the social housing list. They cannot get a mortgage. The Minister has no plan for them. He has just abandoned these working families. There is public land all across the State that could be deployed for this purpose and the Government wilfully refuses to do it.

We are hearing again and again the stories of our young people who are telling us they have no other option than to go because they have no hope. There is no light at the end of the tunnel for them to be able to put a roof over their heads. This is the social contract. We told our young people to go to college, get an education and train up in a profession. That is the contract. Get up every morning, go to work and you will have a roof over your head and security for your family, which is the most basic right. That has been denied to them. I genuinely cannot believe the Government has published another plan that fails to address this huge cohort of workers. These are ordinary workers who earn a wage that reflects their reality and life. They cannot do anything. They are stuck. I am not even going to appeal. I have lost hope in the Minister's Government. It is time for a new Government. That is clearly what we will have to work for because the Government is not listening. It is not even listening to its own commission. It is outrageous.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** I thank the Minister for finally coming before the Dáil to speak to this housing plan, a plan which is a blueprint for failure. It has next to nothing to say about rural depopulation because we know it will take real action to confront that problem. Communities across the State are being slowly hollowed out - in some cases quite quickly - because the Government has failed to deliver the homes, the services and the opportunities that young people need to stay rooted in their communities and their own places. Once young people are forced out, everything else begins to erode such as the school, the post office,

community organisations and the GAA club. The failure of the Government is compounded by barriers to rural planning and the absence of basic enabling infrastructure. Wastewater capacity, water connections and transport links are missing, and without them housing simply cannot be delivered. This is the direct consequence of a Government that has turned its back on rural Ireland. This housing plan offers more gloss, more spin, nothing new and certainly no delivery.

Fágann plean tithíochta an Rialtais an Ghaeltacht ar lár. Is é seo an ceathrú plean ó 2013 agus fós tá teaghlaigh óga á bpraghsáil amach as a bpobail féin. In áit ghníomh, faighimid gealltanais ar staidéir nua agus moltaí nach bhfeicfidimid go dtí 2026, más ea. Tá an ghéarchéim ann anois. Tá sé ann le blianta. Tá teaghlaigh ag imeacht anois. Caithfear cumhacht agus acmhainní a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta chun tithe agus bonneagair riachtanach a chur ar fáil. Caithfidh an Rialtas toil pholaitiúil a léiriú agus a thaispeáint do na húdaráis áitiúla. Gan tithíocht, níl aon phobal agus gan pobal, ní mhairfidh an Ghaelainn.

The housing crisis in Waterford is now undermining the very future of towns, villages and the city. Rents are rising out of control, up 7.6% this year, which is above average. While affordable and social homes remain stuck in process and are delayed, families are left waiting. Nowhere is that failure more stark than in the village of Ardmore, where a community is facing an existential demographic crisis because an affordable housing scheme that is being spoken about has been pushed from pillar to post, from local authority to Department and from Department back to local authority, for years. It has been left in limbo. Young people have been driven out and are being driven out still. The demographic core is thinning and the village risks losing the very people who sustain its services, its school and its very identity. That same pressure stretches from Dunmore East to Lismore, and from Bunmahon to Waterford city. This neglect and indifference must end. Like my colleagues, I appeal to the Minister to change course. We hold very little hope because the plan he has published is an abomination and an admission of failure.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. After months and months, we finally have the Government's new flagship housing plan. After almost a year in office, we finally see how the Government hopes to bring an end to the housing catastrophe in this country. However, what did we get? We got very little. We got, essentially, an admission of failure and a total and complete lack of any vision or ambition. We got a plan that scrapped targets, provides no serious pathway to secure affordable homes for ordinary people and is not ambitious enough on social housing. It has nothing new on affordable ownership and it does not even give proper clarity on the role of State bodies like the LDA. This could and should have been an opportunity for Government to change course on housing. Housing for All, objectively, was not a success. In its lifetime, homelessness rose from around 8,000 in 2021 to 16,766 at the last count. Family homelessness, in some cases, has risen by 120% and the number of single adults living in homelessness has never been as high. In that time, the average price of a home has risen from €272,000 to €380,000 and the average rent has risen from €1,516 to €2,200. In the lifetime of the plan, the Government never met its targets for social and affordable housing construction. In 2024, the target was 12,930, of which it delivered 10,596. It will not meet its targets this year either. The Government claims to have delivered 7,126 affordable homes in that time but it can only get that figure by including vacant property refurbishment grants. As for private homes, I will not even go there.

There are a couple of particular issues I have with the new plan. First is the abandonment of annual targets for the private sector. This is a naked attempt to pull the wool over the eyes of the Irish people and to avoid accountability and scrutiny. It will not work because people know the previous target of 40,000 per year was a complete fiction. They know when they look at the Central Bank forecast of 32,500 homes in 2025, 36,000 in 2026 and 40,000 in 2027, that there is not a hope of reaching 300,000 by the end of the plan.

There is a section in the plan on promoting affordable ownership. This is the most pressing issue facing us as a society. We have an entire generation locked out of home ownership with all the threats that poses to the social fabric of the country. There is nothing here on reducing prices or on making home ownership a plausible reality for younger people. Instead, we have had what I can only describe as a PR rebranding exercise, repackaging existing supports as a so-called starter homes programme. Again, the Government is trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the people. The plan states that giving existing schemes a new name under one umbrella will "strengthen the focus and visibility of these initiatives". This is the bit I find most absurd. Is Government seriously suggesting the issue with the housing market is that people are not aware of the support schemes that are out there? This is a supply-led crisis and demands a radical supply-side response. We in Labour believe we need a massive ramping-up in the State's capacity to deliver homes. There is nothing in this plan that offers any hope on that front.

I am glad the Government has at least retained an annual target for delivery of social homes but the target of 12,000 units is too low. It should be around 15,000 units per annum. This is something we proposed in our manifesto and it is more in line with the recommendation of the Housing Commission that social and affordable housing stock should be 20% of all housing stock. It is currently around 10%. That has been ignored. It is important to note the Housing Commission estimated a deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes and it is clear from the targets published here that the Government has once again ignored that.

In relation to the 72,000 target, how many of these social housing units will be turnkey developments and how many will be direct-build homes? That is something we need clarity on. We also need clarity - I pursued this last week with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell - on the issue of gearing and access to finance for approved housing bodies. We know how crucial the AHB sector will be to our hopes of getting anywhere near the targets for social homes. We know many of them are approaching their borrowing capacity. I do not take much confidence from the Minister of State's reply to me last week that the Department will now move the recommendations of the strategic forum to a sectoral reform working group - yet again, more delay.

I want to talk about land speculation, which we know is making this crisis worse. I welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to implement the land value sharing residential zoned land tax to penalise land hoarding and ensure zoned land is developed. During the last Dáil, we published legislation on implementing the recommendations of the Kenny report; however, that Bill lapsed at the election. This is something we will be coming back to because the Government must be committed to dealing with the issue of excessive profits being made following the zoning of land.

It is nothing short of shameful that 17,000 people will spend this Christmas in homeless accommodation. This is a wealthy country. The focus on family homelessness in the plan is

welcome but the Minister will be judged on it. The plan will be judged on its delivery of outcomes. I am slightly concerned by the lack of specific measures for single adults in homelessness. We need a stand-alone strategy for dealing with this group because it is the biggest group of what I would describe as non-movers. The plan recognises this because it states single adults account for around two thirds of households on social housing waiting lists, but there is no real, tangible detail on dealing with the issue. We need to increase the stock of one-bed housing units. That is an important first step but we also need a specific plan for dealing with single people in homelessness.

On the rental market, the plan refers to stability but what is proposed in terms of the RTB (amendment) Bill is nothing short of a horlicks. It is unenforceable, confusing, incoherent and seeking to satiate two competing interests at the same time. Rents will, unfortunately, continue to rise and so will the rate of terminations. I am more concerned by the lack of an updated definition of "rent" or of a long-term coherent vision for renting in Ireland. We need real protections for renters, protections that keep people in their homes. People deserve stable leases, predictable rents and clear, coherent procedures that can be easily understood and enforced. In relation to the RTB (amendment) Bill, I am concerned we will be back again in two, three or four years' time when rents continue to rise and whatever government is in power at the time comes under undue political pressure. While the intention here is good, I do not think this plan will deliver the radical reset in housing policy we need.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** I welcome the publication of the action plan on housing and the target to deliver 300,000 homes through a whole-of-government approach. It is ambitious but appropriate. We need ambition.

Housing affects everyone in society, whether someone waiting on a local authority housing list, a young person hoping to buy or older people looking for more suitable housing. This issue is urgent. In my area of Carlow-Kilkenny, I meet constituents every week. Single people are finding it very hard to get one-bed houses or one-bed apartments. I know that is a priority for the Minister.

6 o'clock

It is urgent across all of society that we build as many homes as possible and have as much supply of housing as we can. It is also very important that we work with our local authorities in improving housing delivery. I particularly welcome the commitment in the plan to deliver 12,000 new social homes every year. This is critical. We have to focus on starter homes and affordable housing. I know these are a priority for the Minister and that he is very much committed to delivering them. I welcome that. Like other TDs, though, I have received lots of contact from people who are working and do not qualify for either the local authority housing list or a mortgage. These people are caught in the middle. It is an area I know the Minister is addressing and I welcome it.

The other issue is the lack of supply of rental properties. It is very challenging, but I do welcome the increased protections for renters. It is really important alongside the increased supply the Minister is committed to. Serviced sites across the country, including in my own area of Carlow-Kilkenny, need to be developed as soon as possible by local authorities for a mixture of homes. Sites should deliver homes for those on the social housing list and those looking for starter homes, as well as our older people and those with disabilities who need

different housing options. I welcome the Minister's opening statement when he spoke about this issue and his commitment to it. This is really welcome. This does show the Government's commitment to housing and working to find and get everyone a home. This is so important.

We also need to look at the waiting list for grants. I just wanted to bring this matter up in respect of the housing adaptation grants. I have spoken to the Minister about it. I know the Government has increased the funding. I welcome that and I know it has done that. I wonder, though, if it could look again at the hike in the price of materials, because this means people are finding it difficult between quotes and the grant value. Maybe this is another issue the Minister might come back to me on again.

Our local authorities need resources to deliver on all this. I know the Government has funded extra staff in local authorities. I thank the Minister for it. I also know this is something he has worked on and I ask that this continue. I again have to mention my own area. This is why I felt it was important to come in today and ask the Minister about this issue. I want to talk again about dereliction in housing. I know a lot of work has been done over the last year. I can see it as well. The only issue I have is that maybe we need to look at our local authorities on the timeframes for empty houses in our towns and villages and in our stock.

Carlow is now a university town and county. Like other university towns, we know the value colleges and students bring to the local communities and our economy. I ask that student-specific accommodation would be a priority. I know student accommodation is a topic the Minister has spoken about many times, but we feel in my home town of Carlow that too many students face long commutes that impact their studies and social life, as well as taking away from the towns and cities where they are studying. Again, I know this is something the Minister is addressing and I welcome it.

The programme for Government commits to re-establishing town councils on a phased basis. I was a county councillor for many years, so I really do appreciate this. I see the work they do. I ask that this be done as soon as possible. The Minister knows himself that local authorities and local representatives play a huge role in towns and counties and can be so effective as leaders. They are leaders in community engagement and championing local authorities.

Within my own remit, I will mention that in my own area, the Department of Health, I have also secured some funding in the budget for healthcare initiatives for people in emergency accommodation, having worked with the Minister on this issue. We also need to look at services for the vulnerable. This is within my area. I know the Minister has been very supportive of me doing this. The really good news today came when I read about Rosslare-Europort. I see CIÉ will soon be seeking planning permission to expand the port and develop a landmark facility for offshore wind energy. This will be a huge investment in the south east. Again, this is really important. I believe too that offshore wind energy is the way to go in increasing our energy capabilities. All this is backed by the unprecedented investment in infrastructure under our national development plan and the infrastructure report. These are just excellent. I know we have a lot to do and we need to build a lot, but I do believe the Government is going to make those changes in line with the commitment they have given.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Government's housing plan, delivering homes, building communities. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

As has been said, this is a very ambitious plan. We know the overall target is 300,000 houses between now and 2030, with 12,000 social homes and 15,000 starter homes. These are critically important. This is a plan of substance and actions. There are up to 80 actions in this plan. No single action will deliver what we want, but if we combine them all together, it will result in significant action in my opinion. It is building on the announcements already made by this Minister and this Government in recent months, such as extending planning permissions that were about to expire, resourcing the planning system so we get faster and more efficient planning decisions, resourcing the Land Development Agency, and we know there is an additional €2.5 billion, which is significant funding, simplifying the approval processes in the Department so we have faster decisions in terms of housing approvals and, of course, the Housing Activation Office working actively with the 31 local authorities in helping to deliver homes. These are critical measures and this plan will build on that.

It provides record funding through the revised national development plan, with €102 billion between now and 2030. This will provide critical investment in water, wastewater, energy, key infrastructural requirements and, of course, housing itself. As we have seen today and this week in relation to the accelerating infrastructure task force and the recommendations within that in terms of trying to speed up the delivery of key infrastructural projects, I think that will work in tandem with this plan so we can have a very solid foundation for home building in future.

The €9 billion of Exchequer funding being provided in 2026 for homes in this country through the Land Development Agency and the Housing Finance Agency is very significant. As I said, the planning reforms are very important so that we have faster decisions and consistency across the country in terms of decisions. The reforms of the city and county development plans are also very important so we will have additional zoned land and sufficient headroom in this regard. As we know, not all zoned land is developed, so we need sufficient headroom there. The new, updated development plans will allow for that.

We must, of course, ensure we have compact growth in our urban areas so we maximise the services we have available. Tackling vacancy and dereliction is also a very significant part of this and there are key measures in it to provide additional incentives. Equally, if actions are not being taken, a property tax will be established through the Revenue, which is also very important. The real test of this plan will be reducing homelessness in this country, which we know is very significant. There are specific actions in this plan to try to address this issue of homelessness. Critically, for me, this is about ensuring we have a proper housing supply, that the 15,000 starter homes are delivered through this plan, which is critically important so people have the option of securing home ownership, and that the schemes are there to assist them.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome these statements on the Government's updated housing plan, which rightly sets a minimum target of 300,000 homes, including 72,000 social and 90,000 affordable homes. The plan is backed by €9 billion in housing capital for next year alone. It focuses on activating land, clearing blockages and expanding housing first and family homelessness measures. This is essential if we are serious about meeting needs rather than chasing yearly targets.

In my area of Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown, we can clearly see what works when the State, the county council, the LDA and approved housing bodies pull in the same direction. Shanganagh

Castle in Shankill is the largest social and affordable housing scheme in the country, with 597 new homes, including hundreds of social, cost-rental and affordable purchase homes in one integrated community. That is how we should be doing public housing everywhere, at scale, where mixed tenure and long-term affordability is built in. Alongside that, Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown has sharply increased allocations from its own stock and AHB homes in recent years, and has used voids funding to bring long-time vacant units back into use.

Those are the quiet but important wins for families on waiting lists and for people exiting emergency accommodation. However, nobody in Dún Laoghaire believes the job is done. Rents are still some of the highest in the State, and we see the human reality of homelessness every week. This plan will be judged on whether it speeds up approvals, gets more Shanganagh-type schemes on the ground, turns vacant properties into homes and gives local authorities the staffing and flexibility to deliver. If we do that, then this plan will not just deliver units on a spreadsheet, it will build new communities in Dún Laoghaire and across the State.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I have listened to the speeches over the last little while and I find it incredible. Fine Gael has had 15 years and it is talking about another new plan on the abandoned plan on top of the other abandoned plan it had prior to that, which created nothing. It is absolutely scandalous to listen to the Government because it is not a new plan. It is reheated, repackaged and has already failed three times to deliver genuinely affordable and social homes. What is shocking is that the Government is now actually underestimating the number of homes required by 20%. There has been no increase in social housing funding or targets and this means homelessness will rise and council lists will continue to get worse.

My office and our council have seen a dramatic rise in the number of those receiving notices to quit, meaning more and more children are going into homelessness. If the Minister does not believe me, just have a look at the statistics. Every single month, month on month, it is increasing.

The gouging of the funding for the tenant in situ scheme, where the council would buy the homes of those facing evictions, is an absolute disgrace. The scheme is one of the things that actually was working and preventing children and families going into homelessness. This week, I was contacted by a mother with two adult children in a two-bedroom apartment. She is a professional who worked hard and did the right things. You know when the Government said, "Do the right thing. Stay in school, go to college, get the degree and the master's, get the job, buy a home and maybe have a family if you want"? Those dreams have turned into a nightmare for a generation of people.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** In one single school in Dubai, there are 50 Irish teachers. I have spoken to some of them and they talk about coming home. They wonder how they are going to find somewhere to live and how they are going to survive in a cost-of-living crisis when they come home - if they come home. A teacher contacted me just today. Schools in Dublin West have had to cancel subjects, with children unable to take their favourite subjects, because there are not enough teachers and they cannot afford to live in Dublin West.

I mentioned gardaí today. We had a net increase of one garda in the K district. Why would a garda stay in Dublin when rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Dublin West is €1,400 to €1,600 and a house is €2,200 to €2,500? So-called affordable housing in Dublin West costs over €400,000. That is if they even get on the list. Three hundred people applied for around 60 houses. Despite the cost, they are all massively oversubscribed.

Despite this bad news for those in housing need, Sinn Féin will continue to campaign for and champion the needs of all those without a home of their own. The Government's developer-led policy, which hands hundreds of millions of euro to profitable developers, is sickening in a cost-of-living crisis. Sinn Féin will work with builders to build public houses on public land with public money. That is where the solution lies, not in another failed Government strategy.

**Deputy Rory Hearn:** The housing disaster, as the Minister is well aware, is worsening by the day. Unfortunately, the housing plan he and his Government have developed offers very little hope that they are willing to accept the utter failure of this and successive Governments. This housing plan is no radical reset. It is no radical transformation and, in particular, it offers nothing but words to the thousands who are stuck in homelessness, the 500,000 adults stuck infantilised in their childhood box rooms, the hundreds of thousands of renters, our young people who have emigrated already and the tens of thousands who will emigrate in the coming years, as they see no future here because they cannot afford the crazy rents or house prices.

The Minister is about to deliver a double blow to renters this coming March. What is going to happen is his rental changes will squeeze renters who are already struggling to get by. I would argue that he has been deeply misleading in his claims on the new rental measures. He said here in the Dáil last month:

We are severely restricting how tenancies can be ended by landlords. That is to ensure there is that security of tenure. I believe that you will see far less frequent notices to quit as a result of this security of tenure being brought in for tenants.

This is untrue, is it not? The truth is that the hundreds of thousands of renters who are currently in leases will get no extra security of tenure after March. They will still be as vulnerable to being evicted on a no-fault basis if their landlord decides to sell as they are today. The current renters, the hundreds of thousands of renters, get no extra protection. If they do nothing wrong, they will still be at risk of those evictions. There is nothing to stop landlords continuing to evict most of these renters on current leases into homelessness after March. The Minister has misled the Dáil and the public on what is happening. Second, he has said that by extending the rent pressure zones across the country, he is giving renters certainty in rent, but what he is actually doing from 1 March is that in the case of any new lease signed by a renter, he is effectively removing all the rent controls that are in place. He is removing the intertenancy 2% cap on rent so that when a new tenancy is set after March, it can be set at a market rent in most cases. We have also know that every six years, the rent can be reset to the market rent.

Last night, at the housing committee, a number of experts said very clearly that this is effectively deregulating rents and removing rent controls for new tenancies. What the Minister is actually doing in March is leaving existing tenants exposed to the ongoing risk of no-fault evictions and giving them no security of tenure, and he is exposing all new renters to what are effectively uncontrolled market rents every six years on a skyrocketing level.

This housing plan is a slush fund for investors and developers and the Minister's new rental measures are a landlord's ticket to continue to exploit renters into the future. In fact, he set it out very clearly in his speech when he said the big changes are "changes... to rent pressure zones to attract private investment back into the... rental sector"; "new planning design standards", and we know what they are, reducing standards; a reduction in VAT, which is a giveaway to developers; and an enhanced corporation tax reduction. The cumulative impact the Minister set out is a potential reduction of up to €160,000 per apartment. That €160,000 per apartment is the gift he is giving to developers and investors per home. Billions of euro in public money are about to be given to investors and what will young people in this country get? Very little, most of them.

On the eviction ban, which is much needed, there is a tsunami of evictions going on. Fifteen thousand notices of termination have been issued to renters so far. I have gone through it by area. The Minister can look at it. There were 1,706 notices to quit issued in Cork alone, with 940 in Galway and 412 in Meath. In the Minister's own constituency, 356 notices to quit have been issued to renters so far this year. Where are these people to go? There are not homes for them to go to. All of these renters are individuals and families with their own stories. It is a trauma, as the Minister very well knows, to be evicted from your home. He and previous Ministers and taoisigh have claimed that these are not evictions but notices to quit. They are evictions just as much as the battering rams that battered our homes and battered people and tenant farmers out of their homes in this country during the Famine times. They are as much an eviction as they were and I am shocked that we are not seeing this as a tsunami of human misery, which is what it is.

This country has not seen this level of evictions since the Famine times and the Minister is standing over it. In fact, his measures are helping it, as he knows. Why is he not implementing an eviction ban like the one we saw during the Covid years? It was done during Covid as an emergency. How is this not an emergency? Thousands of people are being evicted from their homes, including children. How can they look forward to Christmas now? Where is Santa Claus going to come to? What are their parents telling them? "We do not know where we are going to be." The Minister knows the impact of that on a child's life. He is destroying these children's childhoods and I am not saying that, as the Minister described it last week, as hyperbole. I am saying it because it is true and the Minister knows it is true, too. I cannot get my head around how an Irish Government is willing to stand over tens of thousands of people being evicted into homelessness. It is utterly wrong.

On the issue of starter homes, again, it is completely misleading for the Government to say it is going to deliver 15,000 starter homes. First of all, what is a starter home? These are grants. They are not actually affordable homes delivered. Where is the target for directly delivering genuinely affordable homes? There is also nothing in the plan to deal with what the Instagram account Crazy House Prices highlighted, namely, the massive issue of gazumping, bidding wars and the lack of transparency in the house purchasing process. Why will the Minister not make real moves to reduce house prices? Is he unwilling to step up to the vested interests who profit from higher and higher house prices? There is nothing in this plan to tackle that issue.

On housing in the Gaeltacht and the Irish language, níl aon tithíocht ina chmhainne ar fáil in aon áit ar bith sa tír seo. Tá an cíós ró-ard agus tá na praghsanna tithé ró-ard leis. Tá pleananna agus beartais an Rialtais ag déanamh rudaí níos measa. Is ceart daonna í an tithíocht do gach

duine sa tír ach tá na daoine óga ag dul ar imirce. Bíonn ar dhaoine óga bogadh ar ais go dtí tithe a dtuismitheoirí. Tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht ag cur ár dteanga i mbaol. Is cúis mhór díomá é seo do na pobail Ghaeltachta, a dúirt Conradh na Gaeilge agus BĀNŪ agus iad ag iarraidh réiteach a fháil ar an bhfadhb tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht. Níl aon rud sa phlean náisiúnta tithíochta a thabharfaidh dóchas do na cainteoirí Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht. Caithfidh an Rialtas na cumhachtaí a thabhairt d'Údarás na Gaeltachta chun tithíocht a fhorbairt do phobal labhartha na Gaeilge. There is nothing in the plan that gives hope to the young people who are growing up in the Gaeltacht, who are there, who cannot get a home. Why is the Minister not willing to give Údarás na Gaeltachta the powers and funding to build affordable homes, which is what it could do? The future of our language is in jeopardy because young people cannot find a home in the Gaeltacht. The Minister has the power to do something on this.

We in the Social Democrats have put forward many solutions, including the homes for Ireland savings scheme, which could provide billions in additional funding. The Government has ignored it in this plan. We have put forward clear policy alternatives. Instead, the Government is clearly captured by the former Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael lobbyists who are working for the investor funds and the banks. It is doing the bidding of those who want ever higher rents and house prices while our young people are locked out of the basic need of a home, which is a fundamental human right. It is not mentioned once in the housing plan that housing is a human right. Where is the Housing Commission recommendation for a referendum to put a right to housing in the Constitution? It is at the heart of why we are in this mess.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** In the short time I have, I would like to raise a number of issues that have been raised here before, but I would like to see them addressed. In Kilkenny city over the weekend, a family - a husband and wife and two children, one of the children a special child - became homeless. They rang all of the telephone numbers to seek help and there was no answer. That is the basic failure of bureaucracy, of housing, of the Department, of anyone who should have been manning those phones, a failure to respond to the needs of that family. That is truly shocking when we consider the amount of money that is being poured into the local authorities to deliver on their housing programme.

I asked previously about zoned land that is already serviced and has been dezoned. The developer wants to finish the site, conclude the development and provide 30 to 40 homes but he cannot do it. Is that not a failure of bureaucracy? On the tenant in situ scheme, I am aware of two families in Kilkenny city who qualify for the scheme but the council will not respond. I cannot understand. If there is funding there, and we are told there is, and a duty to fulfil the needs of both those families, why does the council drag its feet on the tenant in situ scheme? Finally, the number of houses throughout Carlow and Kilkenny that are vacant and waiting to be refurbished, they say, to be allocated is truly shocking. All of that may be at a very basic level but it is a fact and it is a failure of bureaucracy. If the Minister is putting that amount of money into a system that answers queries in the manner I have experienced, how in the name of God can he expect them to spend the billions he is giving to them?

**Deputy Paula Butterly:** The housing plan 2025 to 2030 presents a valuable opportunity to rethink how we design and deliver homes in a sustainable way. A key element must be a shift towards building up rather than building out, ensuring we protect greenfield land while promoting compact growth. This does not mean high-rise development but well-designed,

high-density urban living that fits the character and scale of our town and cities. It is time we explored how ports like that in Dublin could be relocated and reconfigured, as has been achieved in other parts of Ireland. For example, the Port of Cork has shifted most of its operations from the city quays to Ringaskiddy, freeing up significant dockland space for regeneration. Similarly, Waterford Port moved its commercial activities from the city centre to Belview, which opened the way for new urban development. These examples show how relocating port functions can successfully unlock valuable waterfront areas for residential, cultural and commercial use. Indeed, Drogheda port area is crying out for such redevelopment and it could transform the town.

Returning to my call for exciting urban design and higher density, I am calling on the Minister to launch an international architectural competition, drawing in architectural talent from across the globe. We do not have to go very far. Róisín Heneghan from Belmullet, County Mayo, was recently the key architect in the Grand Egyptian Museum, bringing glory and a wow factor back into the city of Cairo. This is what we need. We need to be creating vibrant spaces that will transform the way we live but will also add a wow factor to Dublin, Drogheda, Dundalk, Cork, Galway and all the other towns and cities. It would be a leading light in how we decide how to regenerate these areas and, indeed, we could be a leading figure in such a project.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** I welcome the updated housing plan. The plan is only as good as the money that goes into it and ultimately this is the largest investment that has ever been made into housing. The launch of the infrastructure plan this morning will give the plan the credence it needs to go forward and actually deliver the homes. They have to be underpinned by the necessary infrastructure. Once we have the infrastructure and the funding, really there is no excuse but we do have a problem with red tape, bureaucracy and local authorities. If we want the housing crisis to be resolved or improved, we need our planning departments to look at every zoned site in towns and villages right across the country and ask how we can get homes built there, not how we can stop them or why we should stop them.

In my own town of Athenry, in 2023, over 200 homes were refused in the space of two months. We have 1,000 jobs on the way to the town now and housing is going to be a huge issue. We need our planning departments acting decisively to make sure that homes are being granted on these sites and that they are working in conjunction with developers and councillors to see homes delivered.

The wastewater shared treatment systems in rural villages are really welcome. Countless villages in County Galway have not seen homes built for 15 years because they would have been refused planning if anyone went for a small scheme of ten or 15 homes. Those small schemes provide people for those villages, for the GAA clubs, the local schools and the local community. They are the people who end up contributing to those areas, whose populations have declined in the last 15 years. It is vital that the spec on those shared wastewater treatment systems not be overkill and that when Uisce Éireann works with the developer, it can take them over swiftly and efficiently so that developers are not waiting for the ESB or Uisce Éireann but have collaborative partners that want to see them get the job done and get these houses built. The last point I will make is around the backyard modular units. I have a fear that whenever the guidelines come out for the updated exempted development guidelines, they will be over-specified and overkill, and people will not have that flexibility to do what they need in their own

back garden space. There is a huge opportunity there to provide units that could benefit communities and families and would act as a support to people as well.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** I want to take the opportunity to discuss my experience from a housing perspective. As someone who has been a councillor in County Kildare for a number of years and, indeed, a town councillor before that, I have seen the different tranches. I have seen a housing boom and a housing bust, and now I have seen continuing price increases in housing. We have seen that a lot of those houses have become out of reach for ordinary people. A lot of our friends and families have not been able to buy in the area and have had to move outside of the area, unfortunately. That is the reality, however. I would see this housing plan as a significant step in trying to allay that and to ensure that we do get development in our areas and in our towns and villages.

Previous speakers have spoken to their own experiences because, ultimately, in an area like housing, we are especially aware of how our own area is. When I talk about the story of north Kildare, I speak to where we have a lot of housing. We have a lot of housing in the likes of Naas, Leixlip, Celbridge and Kilcock. We all know those areas have had a relative boom in housing numbers but, ultimately, what those places are lacking is infrastructure, and they have lacked in infrastructure.

I also think about urban regional and development, URDF, funding over the last number of years. Typically, it has gone before to areas such as large towns where there might be a courthouse or an old building that needs doing up. Millions of euro are poured into these older towns. That is the one thing north Kildare does not have. It does not have huge old buildings and wide streets, but what it does have is a lot of small, old villages that ultimately now have rings of houses around them. However, they do not have the infrastructure, and they do not have the facilities. I spoke in this Chamber before about how between the towns of Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth, there is currently a population of 53,000, and that will expand significantly. We have a university, but we do not have a proper community centre. We do not have a cinema or a theatre. We do not have basic fundamental items that would be in a city that would encompass that number of people. Also, Kilcock is only a few minutes away, as is Clane. They are the types of issues we need to support, and I will be asking when the URDF funding comes out that north Kildare is looked on very favourably in order that we can deliver the facilities that need to go in behind the housing that ultimately will go into our area.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I, too, like the previous speaker, have been a public representative for some time. I have been a public representative for the last 11 years and I have to say, I have never seen the housing crisis as bad as I am seeing it now. To be honest, at this point, I nearly think it is with intent. I am dealing with people, and we know the homeless figures are increasing every month, but I also see the impact of the housing crisis week in, week out in my clinics.

On a practical level, however, when we are looking at Galway, south Galway emergency accommodation is always full. There is always a waiting list to get into homeless accommodation when someone is homeless in Galway. This is nothing new. This has been ongoing for a long time but the problem is that it is getting worse. I do not think it is good enough that we just have launches of plans, but nothing actually ever changes. People see through those words when they do not see it with action. Let me be clear; I want the Minister's

plan to work because I cannot face this continuing crisis worsening for the people of Galway year in, year out and week in, week out. When we look at Galway city, however, I would be interested if the Minister could outline how many new houses will become available to the council in Galway city next year. How many houses will become available in County Galway next year? How many sites will be ensured to be serviced? We do not have the sites that are serviced in the Connemara area to ensure that we can actually deliver housing that we need. When will the draft Gaeltacht planning guidelines be published? We have had this promise now year after year. Now, we have a housing plan that stated that we are going to have a planning statement instead of draft guidelines, so what is happening in relation to those things? We also have a situation whereby people who are in housing assistance payment, HAP, tenancies are seeing their rents increasing and they cannot pay them. There are, therefore, practical things I hope the Minister does. I hope that he acts on them because I cannot continue to see this hopelessness that is out there because the housing crisis is worsening.

Céard é an chraic leis na dréacht-treoirínte pleanála Gaeltachta? Tá an Rialtas tar éis a rá linn bliain i ndiaidh bliana go mbeidh siad foilsithe agus go mbeidh comhairliúchán phoiblí ann, agus níl. Anois, tá sé ag rá linn go mbeidh ráiteas pleanála ann ina háit. Céard é sin? Níl aon eolais againn mar gheall air sin. Ag an am céanna, tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta i gcathair na Gaillimhe ag éirí níos measa. Tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta atá againn i gConamara, sa Ghaeltacht agus sna hoileáin amach ón gcósta ag éirí níos measa freisin. Céard atá ag tarlú leis na dréacht-treoirínte pleanála Gaeltachta agus céard é an ráiteas pleanála seo ar a bhfuil an Rialtas ag caint?

**Deputy Charles Ward:** It is disappointing but, sadly, not surprising that there is so little mention of the defective concrete crisis in the new housing plan. It is a crisis that has impacted my native County Donegal and many countries throughout the whole country, and worse, it is referred in this to as a legacy issue. This is far from a legacy issue. It is alive and present and persistent. It is happening right now, and inaction will guarantee that this will continue into the future. It is a lived reality every single day for many of my constituents in County Donegal. It is the reason that homeowners cannot keep homes warm any more for families this winter. It is the reason children now fear weather warnings and the reason that every happy moment is tainted, as I said to the Minister, like me trying to put the Christmas lights up on a wall that no longer exists and is just plaster. This is not a legacy issue. This is my daily life and that of everybody else affected - thousands of us.

We have only seen the tip of the iceberg, and the denial from the Government is staring us straight in the face. We need this sorted. It is basically in every county in Ireland. It is in Wexford right now as we speak in the Minister's constituency. I have been down there. People have shown me. We have a pyrrhotite issue there and a pyrrhotite issue in Donegal. It is the same problem with defective concrete geographically at two different ends of the country. It is not going away, and the Minister needs to do something about it.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** In the limited time available to me, I want to call again for the declaration in law of a housing emergency. Housing is a human right enshrined in Article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A housing emergency exists in this State. The Government's own Housing Commission asserts that "Only a radical ... reset of housing policy will work". It further asserts that "It is critical that this housing deficit is

addressed through emergency action." Successive Governments have failed to solve this housing emergency. Housing plan after rebaked housing plan has failed dismally, and this one is no different. The Minister's own Department stated that it would take 15 to 20 years to address the housing situation, and this if - it is a big if - Government targets are met, which, of course, has never happened. There is precedence for such a declaration in law, such as the financial emergency measures in the public interests facilitating the bailout of banks, etc. The declaration in law of a housing emergency would make sure that the State and all its agencies - Departments of State, local authorities, approved housing bodies and utilities like Irish Water, ESB Networks and the Land Development Agency - would be required to take emergency action to solve the housing crisis. This approach is consistent with and faithful to the spirit and the terms of Bunreacht na hÉireann Articles 43.2.1° and 43.2.2°. We urgently need large-scale building of social and affordable housing on public land. We need to stop evictions, we need to freeze rents and we need a massive plan for the purchase of vacant homes by local authorities to refurbish for letting. The first step in that process is the declaration of a housing emergency.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Even I, as a socialist and somebody who critiques and challenges the market and the capitalist system, never thought I would be here, 11 years after first getting elected, and that the housing crisis would have been left to fester and become as rancid as it is. I want to ask about Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs. Where have they been? It has been like "The Silence of the Lambs" over the past 11 years as this has worsened. There are a few of them in here tonight. The only time I heard a peep out of any of them was when the investigation was taking place over the presidential election. Suddenly a couple of younger Fianna Fáil TDs started piping up that maybe the Government was not doing very well on the housing crisis. The reason I mention it is I represent Dublin West, which has been at the epicentre of the housing crisis for over a decade. There are 105 families who have told Fingal County Council they have eviction and termination notices. This is in Dublin 15 alone and not the entire constituency. One of the families on our list comprises a woman, her teenage sons and her husband. They had paid their rent for the house they were living in since 2009. The landlord wanted to sell and the council could not buy it because it did not have the money under the tenant in situ scheme. Every legal process was gone through. Phone calls were made to the sheriff. Ten male bailiffs came to the house when she was there alone in her pyjamas. They pushed her out of the house like a criminal. This woman has done nothing wrong. There was no emergency accommodation to be found by the DRHE or Fingal County Council. This family was literally on the streets and they are not the only ones. The Minister has been told about this for ages and absolutely nothing is happening. I do not know why Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs for Dublin West are not in here banging on about this but I presume they do not care.

The other issue I want to raise is that we have a massive land bank up the road where we had been told that 7,000 homes could be built, and apparently now the figure is 20,000. It is a strategic land bank in Scribblestown, Dunsink. I have raised this five or six times since I got re-elected, as have our councillors on the council. I am pleased to hear it seems to have had some impact because it will be moved from the long-term strategy under section 28 of the NPF. This could solve the housing crisis in Dublin West. It needs to be moved on now. Fingal County Council needs to be given whatever money is needed to make it occupiable so we do not continue with this human misery we have had.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** We need a housing plan that is going to work. Rents are up sky high and will get higher in March. House prices are up sky high. Evictions are up sky high. There were 15,000 notices to quit and eviction notices in the first nine months of the year. We need a plan that will work. The Department has set out that County Laois has to increase its population by 35% between now and 2030. I see the Minister's plan to roll out infrastructure and I will welcome it if it is done but without the infrastructure in Laois, it will not happen. The northern orbital route in Portlaoise needs to be built to free up land for housing. The bypass in Mountmellick needs to be built. The southern orbital route in Graiguecullen, County Carlow needs to be built. These projects need to be fast tracked or the houses will not be built. This is along with the sewerage plants and water plants that are also needed.

Housing targets were missed last year and we were 1,129 short on social housing. Cost-rental housing targets were missed by a country mile. I fully support affordable house purchases and these targets were down by more than 60% and were completely missed. The housing plan has to be accompanied by increasing those targets.

We also need standard house plans. I am back to this again. We need the same plans for all counties. We would need seven or eight different types of plans. The officials in the Department will say they use standard design but that is not a standard house plan. We need this if we want to mass produce something that is good quality, produce it quickly and reduce the price. It could reduce the cost between 11% and 16% by cutting out the nonsense of councils having to go to a blank canvas every time and bringing in architects when they want to build a house. Why is this not being done? Why are we not doing mass production?

Please row back on the proposal for rent changes in March. The 2% limit will be gone in March and it will be set at market rent. I can see where this is happening in my area already. Changes to tenancies happen more regularly than every six years. The average is two and a half to three years, according to statistics. We need to go back on this again. The Minister will cause more evictions and I plead with him to stop it. Let us mass produce houses. Let us up the target for social houses and row back on the rent proposals for March.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I only have two and a half minutes so I will make two or three points, beginning with the planning system. As the Minister knows, most local authorities are reviewing their development plans, which I welcome. It is long overdue. There is one issue I want to raise with the Minister and it is something I only became aware of in the past couple of days. It is a document on housing densities entitled Sustainable Residential Development and Compact Settlements Guidelines for Planning Authorities. My understanding is that at least two local authorities, and thankfully they do not include the local authorities in Cork city or county, are referencing this document in relation to the request of them to increase zoned land, particularly on serviceable sites. The document gives a provision for increased densities and these two local authorities are saying the request of them to zone additional land has been satisfied because densities were increased in this document. Some local authorities are saying their job is already done. This is unacceptable in the situation we are in. I would really like the Minister to examine this and ensure it is not allowed to happen. It is a bit of a pass by those two local authorities.

I am losing count of how many times I have raised Irish Water in the Chamber over the past six years. I welcome the change that is due to be made, whereby we will have more developer-

led infrastructure. Unfortunately it is the only resolution I can see for the current impasse on the lack of wastewater infrastructure, in particular, that is servicing most of these sites. I have often referenced the case of Carrignavar. It is a village ten minutes from Cork city centre. It is due to be connected through BusConnects. It has everything going for it. It has a new school and a new special school. A new community centre is on the go as well. This village has everything going for it but it has been hampered for the past 15 years with no growth and housing land dezoned. We are being told the treatment plant will not be built for at least seven years. Unless we crack this wastewater and Irish Water issue I have a feeling that many of the Minister's efforts will be futile.

A couple of weeks ago I asked a parliamentary question about the number of one-bed and four-bed properties that had been delivered by local authorities throughout the country. It is quite clear, particularly in the case of Cork city, that they are not delivering one-bed and four-bed properties in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, larger families and single applicants are lingering on the list for the longest time. We need to do more to address this and perhaps consider levying quotas on local authorities to facilitate this.

**Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere:** The programme for Government commits to investing additional capital in Uisce Éireann to support reaching housing targets. We are going to prioritise water and wastewater infrastructure to deliver the capacity to facilitate housing development in our towns and villages. I welcome the recent investment of over €12.2 billion in Irish Water but we need delivery on it. At the moment the respect shown to me and other Oireachtas Members by Irish Water in their engagement is absolutely disgraceful. If I asked somebody to do something or come back to me, I would not expect an answer in a minute but when we are waiting two, three, four or five weeks for a reply it is disrespectful at best. If we are funding it with this level of money, that needs to stop. Towns and villages in counties Carlow and Kilkenny that I represent are hamstrung. They cannot grow because the wastewater infrastructure is not there.

I acknowledge and welcome the Minister's recent announcement whereby from January up to 40 houses can be developed in a local area. It will potentially give a lifeline and create a ripple effect in schools, shops and GAA clubs across Carlow and Kilkenny. Now that we have a record level of investment, what is so important is that delivery is there. This is key. The big challenge is that Uisce Éireann has to be able to do this on time and with a sense of urgency. My one ask of the Minister is that he puts a rocket up Uisce Éireann and gets it going. What is happening at the moment is not acceptable.

I want to raise housing adaptation grants and housing for older people. They are designed to support older people and those who live with disabilities to live safely and comfortably in their own homes. Whatever their needs may be, the Government has to be committed to providing meaningful assistance. These schemes have been, and continue to be, a great success. We have to ensure our older people and disabled people can live and stay in their homes as long as possible. I acknowledge the significant increase in funding from the Minister. It was €75 million two years ago, €100 million last year and it has now been increased to €130 million, so credit where credit is due. That will make a huge difference to families across Carlow and Kilkenny, including in Ballyhale, Gowran and Ballyragget, and in Dungarvan, all those towns I represent. I implore the Minister to continue to invest in that particular scheme because it makes a massive difference to families right across the constituency.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I apologise to my colleague. I was on the wrong clock and I was thinking, "He has gone a minute over time" but he was within time. He will be looking back at the video asking, "What was your man doing there behind me?"

I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this. The Minister and Minister of State, Deputies Browne and O'Donnell, are two good men leading the Department. This plan is ambitious and I want it to succeed. Everyone wants it to succeed; the country needs it to succeed. There will be 300,000 new homes over the lifetime of the plan, major investment in water, energy and transport with over €9 billion committed to housing alone in 2026. The plan is good, the money behind it is good but how it is delivered is what we will really be tested on here.

I am concerned we may not have the workforce to do this. I have said many times that we need to follow the lead of countries like Australia and Canada where there are specific visas to bring back tradespeople that are domiciled overseas, as well as tradespeople from other countries, to work in their countries to help build houses and other critical infrastructure. We need to have such a policy. We have critical work visas for urban town planners and architects but we have no critical work visas for the people who build. We have all the people who will design houses, talk about them and engineer their way through a solution but nobody to actually build, plumb and wire them. They are the people I would like to see in this country, whether they are Irish people enticed to come home or people from other countries with skills we need here. I would really like to happen.

I also want to mention the villages of Broadford and Cooraclare in County Clare. They have been funded for two years today to have sewerage schemes. More money was topped up last week but we do not see it happening quick enough. That needs to happen. I am looking for the Minister's intervention at this time, two years on, to get the logjams moving.

I hope Deputy Coppinger is up in her office watching the TV. She might come down later and answer why in 2020 she objected to 211 apartments in Clonsilla, not just apartments but homes for families. She can throw her little grenades in this Chamber and get nice little clips for TikTok but it does damn all to house families.

Speaking of grenades, the objection fee is €20. I own a farm and I applied for planning permission to build on it but a solicitor in Ranelagh, for €20, objected to that and blew it apart. That is not right. In the same spirit, what Deputy Coppinger did in Clonsilla was not right. If someone is going to object to something, the fee should be commensurate with the actual cost of the project. There has to be something more than a €20 fee for holding up a Clonsilla apartment block worth millions of euro that would have housed 211 families. There has to be an equal playing field.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** Housing is the greatest issue affecting my generation and I will not apologise to any Member of the permanent Opposition that will stand in this Chamber and ask where young Fianna Fáil TDs are. I am proud to be a young Fianna Fáil TD. I am proud to come from a working-class republican background. I am proud to stand in this Chamber and represent young people across rural Ireland because I am impacted by the housing crisis. My generation is impacted by the housing crisis and I know what it means to face unaffordable rents, unaffordable housing and unaffordable purchase prices, and I will stand up in this

Chamber and say it. I will not apologise to a Member who asked where the Fianna Fáil TDs were and when she had the chance to sit here and listen, she got up and left because it is more important for her to post her video on social media than actually listen to what is going on.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** She is a serial objector.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** It is more important to that Member to object to 211 homes in her own constituency than contribute positively to policy in this country. It is more important to that TD to sit in Opposition and oppose and object time and again when 211 homes could have been built in Clonsilla but she delayed them.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** As regards wastewater treatment plants, if Deputy 'Chap' Cleere puts a rocket up Irish Water, I will light it, if it means we will get a wastewater treatment plant in CloghJordan and Ballycommon.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I will provide it.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** We can build houses there if Uisce Éireann will provide the infrastructure. Time and again, every chance I have had to raise housing in this Chamber, I have done so and at every opportunity, I will again. We want houses in CloghJordan and Ballycommon and they can be built if we provide the infrastructure, but it is urgent. It is needed now, not in five or ten years. My generation needs it now.

We need affordable housing schemes in Nenagh, Roscrea, Thurles and Urlingford and I am proud to represent all those towns. We need affordable housing for my generation, for those young people who have gone abroad who want to come home and build a life, and for the people I went to school with who want to raise a family. Rural planning needs to be loosened. We need to give GAA clubs and rural schools a chance. We need to repopulate rural Ireland and allow those of us who can get a site in rural Ireland to not have to jump through ridiculous hoops to be able to build in our own parish and our own home.

Now is the time for urgency, now is the time for action.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The housing plan the Government has outlined doubles down on policies that are not working and is ultimately not going to address the affordability issue. We have policies that are adding fuel to the fire and encouraging inflation in the cost of housing.

One of the most frustrating conversations I have in constituency offices is with people who are on an income - a person or a household - between €40,000 and €90,000. That is not to gainsay people below that level because there are huge challenges for people on social housing waiting lists but at least there is an avenue for them, even if the wait is very long and sometimes there are huge issues with that. However, for people who fall into that bracket between €40,000

and €80,000 or €90,000 in Cork city and in large parts of the country, there is nothing for them. Many of those people have done everything right. They have gone to get the best jobs they can. They have worked hard, studied, trained, got apprenticeships and are working all the hours they can. They are saving as much as they can yet they are being approved for mortgages that are absolutely laughable and will not buy them anything.

Houses in some of the affordable schemes in Cork city cost nearly €400,000. It is just not realistic. These are not affordable housing schemes and nothing in what the Government has outlined has suggested it is going to get to grips with anything that truly resembles an affordable housing scheme. I am more than disappointed. The Government is going to keep on repeating the same mistakes again. Given the price of housing at the time Government entered office, I would be very worried it will be much beyond that by the time this Government leaves office.

I have two suggestions in this regard. First, it seems obvious that if there is a social housing income threshold and there are people earning above that who will not be touched by any realistic commercial mortgages, they need to be considered for social housing. The Government needs to raise the income thresholds. The other issue is some of these people can afford to buy properties that are effectively derelict or shells and so on. It is logical that if those people in that window can afford to buy those properties, they should get specific help with the renovation of them. In addition to their mortgage, they should get a grant, or interest-free loan at the very least, which will also help local tradespeople and contractors to say, "Yes, you go and buy that house that otherwise you would not have the money to make liveable and we will help you make it liveable. We will help you make it a place where you can set up a family." Currently, there is not anything like that.

Housing lists need serious reform. There is a lack of transparency and huge issues there where maybe somebody exceeds the limit for a year and comes back in under it, they lose 13 years on this. That is no good.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** It is a breath of fresh air when I hear that people over there agree to something I suggested five years ago. One Member said he is a young person representing Fianna Fáil representing that generation. I have four sons. I started out in Fianna Fáil, until it tried to put me in cotton wool and would not let me speak. The Deputy is part of the Government that is part of the problem because it did not listen. It is now listening, after listening to people with experience.

I am in construction all my life. We know how to deliver on budget and on time, otherwise I would not be in business. I am looking forward to us being able to deliver, now that the Government is finally listening on developer-led infrastructure. I have been saying it for six years and it has only taken six years for the Government parties to listen because I can bring it on budget and on time.

I am delighted Deputy Dolan is representing Fianna Fáil but he is also representing the mistakes of it not listening to us. That is coming from a person who was a member of the party.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Will the Deputy rejoin us?

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** However, I will look at it and support the people from Clare. The lads are all singing from the one hymn sheet now and they are agreeing on it.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** It is €20 to get back in.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** They will go home and tell their constituents that they spoke up for them today.

7 o'clock

However, they did not listen for five or six years to the people with experience who could have helped to address the problem. As I have said, I will give them praise all day, every day, if they deliver what we have asked.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Will the Deputy rejoin us?

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** It is €20 to rejoin us.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I am delighted that the Government is now taking the advice of an Independent who is giving it the roadmap so it can deliver infrastructure, on budget and on time. I am delighted that the Deputies are speaking from my book. They might bring this to their parties and drive it home. I will provide the rocket they are looking for, and as Deputy Crowe said, he can light it but he would want to light it under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael first.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** That sounds like a rejoining speech.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I agree with the speaker across the floor who wanted to put a rocket under Uisce Éireann but I would say that it would take a hell of a lot more. Unfortunately, it has been protected long enough by Government. It is a law unto itself right now. There is a massive housing crisis now, not alone in the want of housing but also for the people who have the houses. I hate calling them landlords because they are house owners. The way they are being treated and the way they have spoken to me with worry in the last few weeks about legislation that is coming through here, they have had it. They are running and getting the hell out of the market because we have treated them so badly. We have left them wide open and we need to turn it around. They have no protections. The other day, I spoke to a man in Skibbereen. He has a guy in his house who does not give a damn. He told the man that he would not pay because he knew that he would get a year or a year and a half's grace and he could laugh at the house owner.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Sit down-----

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Stop, please. When the tenant meets the man on the road he is hooting at him and putting the thumbs up, because he knows the RTB and everyone else is there to protect the tenant but there is no one to protect the landlord. Someone needs to talk on behalf of the house owners. I want to avoid using the word "landlord" as much as I can. Imagine, a year to year and a half, and he will not have to bat an eyelid. It will not worry him, because

he is quite safe and he will get protected. It is time to kick these people out. One or two months without paying, the hell out the door they should be put and end of story. The RTB is asleep at the wheel. We need to move on and straighten it out. Some people want to get out of the market at the moment and they said that they cannot sell a vacant tenancy. They are in an awful state. I am getting phone calls from all over the place on this. A while ago Deputy Danny Healy-Rae told me he is getting the same barrage of phone calls. This needs to be moved on immediately.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I spoke before on this. I hope this solves the housing thing, that is being honest. I do welcome the likes of the modular on it and different steps where we are going to go designing the same type of house and all of those things. These are things that should have been done years ago but I welcome them. I cannot see a lot on rural housing. I believe that family members should be allowed build houses. We need to make sure that we accommodate people now but the devil will be in the detail. I hope we build the 300,000 houses but we need to change our tune. I have said for the last four or five years, that this is not us against the Government or the Government against us. We need to bring in emergency legislation that if a site is designated for housing, if it is zoned, be it for 27 houses or 30 houses per acre, there should be not debate about it. Give it planning and get it going. If we want to deliver, we have to ride roughshod over it, whether we like that or not. Emergency legislation is what I believe is required. I know the Government is trying to stop judicial reviews and stuff like that but if we keep fiddling around, what will happen is, at the end of the day, with the best regard in the world, they will go to the courts and they will keep going to the courts and they will keep blocking it. This bullshit is to stop if we want to build houses. We have got to get hard and get heavy at it if we want to deliver for the people. I welcome the things and I wish the Government luck with it but the devil will be in the detail over the coming years and I think the Government will need the emergency legislation. I hope I am proved wrong.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The average price of a house sold last year was €426,000. This is eight times the average income at the moment. The average rental price for a two-bedroom apartment at the moment in this State is over €2,000. It is an incredible situation. We talk about the homeless figures and we do not realise how serious it is. A total of 402 people have died in homelessness just in Dublin in a five-year period. Nobody is actually recording those figures in any other local authority in Ireland. It is incredible.

I want to raise a couple of the issues that have been brought about by the accelerated infrastructure report the Government launched today. We in Aontú have been focusing on the dysfunction in the building system for many years now. We have been raising the issues of the slowness in planning, permitting, licensing, tendering, and judicial reviews. In those sectors, we are the slowest in the whole of the European Union in those terms. This is holding back the building of houses in this country. This report today is basically like something from "Yes, Prime Minister". Fine Gael has been in government for 15 years and only now realising there is an infrastructure problem. This particular accelerator programme was started last January. Some workshops were done in June, employment of people began in July and it is only now that the actual report is in place. Most of the elements in the report talk about planning, examining, and talk about actually fully implementing those plans and examinations by 2027. In fairness, this is just another layer of slow bureaucracy from the Government. As for some of the powers there, in terms of the judicial reviews I welcome that there is going to be reform

in it but hear this, the whole courts system is really slow in this country. Judicial reviews are taking far longer than they should because we are not resourcing the courts. In the planning system as well, the local authorities do not have the staff they need. Regarding An Cóimisiún Pleanála, I was talking to a builder yesterday who has had an application for 100 houses with this body for the past 20 months and no sign of it coming out. Resourcing these aspects are just as important as reforming them as well. I fear that the Government's timeline for this is still far too slow.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I note the Government's plan and in the limited time I want to focus on one aspect of it, namely, the incoherence in terms of infrastructure and facilities tied in alongside. To give an example, four years ago I proposed rezoning land beside Liffey Valley Shopping Centre in an industrial area right beside the M50. It would have made perfect logical sense to build housing right opposite a major shopping centre. People could just walk across the road to it and there was space for a school as well. However the commissioner overruled it saying that it was premature and that we had enough zoned land in the county. Now, four years later, South Dublin County Council gets a diktat saying it has to identify bits of land left, right and centre, one of which is in the actual Liffey valley. This is St. Edmundsbury, where there is a proposal to put houses along a so-called transport hub that is regularly congested because of traffic rat-running to avoid the tolls on the M50. Throughout the constituency of Dublin Mid-West where there are identified tracts of land, one thing is missing. Every one of these suitable tracts of land should be proper, ring-fenced SDZs. Adamstown will have 3,000 more houses and Clonburris will have 8,000 houses but they do not have proper tie-ins of facilities and infrastructure, of having the bus services running beforehand and having trains and schools. We have DART+ South West now pushed back by five years. We cannot just build houses without building communities.

**Deputy John Connolly:** In the sphere of policies and strategies that the Government has announced today and possibly will over the term of the Government, I think this is one of the most important if not the most important. Together with the announcement today of how we are going to accelerate infrastructural development over the coming years also, the combination of these really will determine, I believe, how this Government will fare. However, that is not the most important thing. It will determine the well-being and welfare of our citizens, particularly the most vulnerable, into the future. I can concur with much of what has been said. I even concur with my colleague from Galway-Roscommon, Deputy Fitzmaurice, that the devil will be in the detail and the detail is important. We have a lovely plan with significant figures in it. We have strategies laid out in it but we need to see how these strategies will be implemented on a minute level.

One of these I refer to specifically is the affordable housing programme. In my time in the local authority, going back some years, there was a very clear and obvious way that the affordable housing programme worked. There was a clear and obvious way that people could access the affordable housing programme. People went on an affordable housing list. As the local authority developed a suite of affordable houses in conjunction with social houses, they were sold to those people on the list. That is not as clear to me any more. I recognise that we have many options in terms of how we aim to deliver affordable housing. The ambition is clear with over 300,000 new, affordable homes by 2030. We have a starter homes programme. We reckon there are 15,000 supports a year between first home, help to buy, starter home purchase

and the vacant property grant. I would like to see the role of the local authorities clearly outlined in developing affordable houses and selling them to people in their local electoral areas. Is maith an rud é chomh maith go bhfuil Údarás na Gaeltachta luaite sa phlean seo. Chuala mé daoine ag rá níos luaithe nach raibh an t-údarás luaite sa phlean. Tá sé. Tá siad ann. Tá sé ráite sa phlean go mbeidh ról ag an údarás chun oibriú leis an Roinn tithíochta agus Roinn na Gaeltachta chun tithíocht a chur ar fáil do mhuintir na Gaeltachta. Is mór an rud é sin agus is maith an rud é.

One of the things we have already done that is particularly welcome is we have reduced the funding of social housing and how local authorities obtain that funding from a four-step process to a single-step process. That should be more seamless and should get rid of extreme bureaucracy and make it easier and quicker for local authorities to develop housing.

One measure in this plan that is really positive, which I have not heard many speak of is, we will reward local authorities. Local authorities that are ambitious and will develop more housing will be rewarded with additional funding for social development, be that sporting or community facilities. That is great. Many members of local authorities talk to me about the lack of funding for those facilities. Here is their option. If the local authority housing section gets moving building social and affordable housing, it will be rewarded with additional moneys for social amenity facilities. I welcome that. I have gone over my time slightly.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** It is always worth listening to Deputy Connolly on housing. He made a lot of good points.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** There is a bit of leeway.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I welcome the plan. The housing crisis is a societal blight. Owning a home is part of the social contract in Ireland, yet for many young people, that remains a dream. Housing supply and affordability are international problems, such as in the UK, Australia, Canada and in the European Union. The first ever housing Commissioner has been appointed because of these issues.

One in 10 people in the European Union cannot afford to pay their mortgage or rent on time. The price of houses in the Union has gone up by 60% in the past ten years. In the United States they have gone up by 60% since 2019. However, we have to solve our own problems. Nobody can be satisfied with our homelessness figures and the fact that our young people cannot get skin in the game and put down roots in our own country. This document moves us from planning to delivery. Delivery has been too slow; held up by inconsistent planning and resistance to planning. It takes too long to deliver wastewater and electricity infrastructure. It takes twice as long as the EU average. We cannot pretend that a seven- to ten-year wait to produce a wastewater treatment plan is acceptable. I welcome the fact that we will have developer-led wastewater treatment plans, especially in the small towns and villages around County Roscommon and east County Galway, as Deputies Dolan and O'Meara pointed out. That is a game-changer because it will let it allow communities to grow. I am delighted that in my own town of Ballygar, County Galway, our wastewater treatment plant will start next year. However, it has been 15 years since a block has been laid in our own town. It is simply not good enough.

I welcome the new planning framework but I hope the Minister and Government will put pressure in our local authorities to deliver social housing, affordable housing and rezoned and de-zoned land. We have a situation in Roscommon town where there are 48 houses that were zoned in the early noughties and fell out in the economic crash. They have all the facilities, including electricity and wastewater treatment, and there is difficulty getting them rezoned again. That is simply not good enough in the midst of a housing crisis.

I have four children in their twenties who are relatively privileged. They are well educated and have good jobs and they cannot get to the front door, even with a leg up, of a one-bedroom apartment. If they cannot get to it what hope is there for the rest of the young people in our community. This is a generational crisis and we must face it head on.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** There are three issues I wish to raise in regard to housing. The first is homelessness; something we see across the length and breadth of the country, particularly in urban areas. I come from a rural part of the country, Sligo–Leitrim. We have a homelessness crisis. We have a lot of people sleeping out in doorways, which we did not have before. We have many people staying with relatives or friends or in their cars. It is something we have noticed in the past couple of months that has come to the fore.

Big efforts are being made by the local authority but there simply is not enough homeless accommodation to deal with the crisis. We have single mothers with young children staying in hotels with no facilities to cook, wash and so on. These are serious issues that we need to deal with. The State needs to provide its own homeless accommodation. That needs to be looked at in every constituency around the country. They are simply not there. Local authorities are finding it very difficult to find homeless accommodation for people. They are sometimes taking children far away from the schools they go to try to find them somewhere to stay. Most of this involves people being given notices to quit and having to leave rented accommodation because the landlord is selling up or whatever, which is his or her entitlement. However, if the people do not have anywhere else to go, they are in a huge crisis.

The second issue I wish to raise relates Uisce Éireann and water services particularly. The water in south Leitrim is produced in a plant beside the River Shannon in Carrick-on-Shannon. That covers all of south Leitrim through Drumshanbo, Ballinamore, right over to Carrigallen, Mohill and all of that region. It has been at 110% capacity for the past number of years. It is bursting at the seams. If a pipe bursts somewhere, people are without water not for a day or two, but for up to a week, because it has to take so long to fill reservoirs, etc., and the plant cannot cope with the capacity pressure on it. There is a real case for proper infrastructure to be put in place as far as Uisce Éireann is concerned, and it is the same with wastewater in many small towns around the country. If somebody goes looking for planning permission in any of those towns at the moment, they cannot get it because Uisce Éireann cannot guarantee the supply of water or in many cases wastewater services either. That is a serious issue. I know builders who want to build and do not have that.

The final issue I want to raise is rural housing. A lot of my constituency is rural. We saw the report from the GAA recently across the whole western seaboard where the population is in decline in parishes and they are having serious issues. It is the same across many areas where we have declining populations yet people cannot build in their own areas where they want to build. Some of it is because of restrictions in place, and some of it is because of soil

conditions or whatever else, but the result is the same everywhere. We have no families to keep the schools going and our rural parishes alive. The only way we can do that is to take emergency action to look at all of these rules and regulations again and set the rules aside to start to provide solutions for people. It is solutions that people want so they can live and flourish in their own regions.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I welcome the fact of the engagement we had on this plan. The affordable housing scheme is something that needs to be prioritised. It is my generation that is facing the consequences of the decisions of past Governments. I am supporting this Government in the hope it will listen to me. I know it has in regards to the cabins of the back of gardens but the other thing that really needs to be done is to address the red tape and bureaucracy. It is said across this House but are we just saying words or are we actually going to remove it? I welcome the judicial review proposal. It is great that people will not be able to stop developments as easily, but one of the things that needs to be done is that we need to get local authorities and developers all together to stop these mass objections. It is the most hypocritical thing when I hear TDs across this Chamber say we need to build more houses, yet they have objected to 50 units here or 100 units there. This is NIMBYism because they are afraid they will not get elected in the next election. I am not afraid. I am supporting the Government to get things done. These TDs need to do that as well. I see it constantly and it is the most annoying thing coming into this House.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I am deeply concerned by certain proposals in the national housing plan. Although it has been described by the Government as unprecedented in terms of investment, it comes at a time when homeless figures have hit a record high of 16,350 people. Within that number is a total of 5,145 children who are estimated to be living in emergency accommodation. The fact is we have been here before on a number of occasions, with plans to finally tackle the systemic barriers to the homeless and the lack of social and affordable housing. Nothing has changed. If anything, the situation has become increasingly desperate across all metrics.

From what I can see, the Minister is saying the national housing plan is expected to place an emphasis on ending child and family homelessness, including the allocation of €100 million in 2026 to house families who are on the list the longest. That is a derisory figure in the grand scheme of things. Some €100 million may sound like a lot, but in reality, it would only get 400 houses at an average price of €250,000.

I am also extremely concerned about the new housing laws coming in in March. I have been contacted by many small property owners who tell me they are leaving the housing market. That is going to put more pressure on. I ask for those housing guidelines to be reviewed quickly, or we are going to have a mass exodus of small property owners. They are too extreme. We need to have a balance and protect the small property owners. The guidelines that are coming in in March need to be reviewed quickly or we are going to have a mass exodus of small property owners.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am glad to be able to speak tonight. I welcome the proactivity of the Minister, Deputy Browne, and his junior Minister from Port Láirge.

Is the Minister going to extend the situation whereby commercial properties can be used for housing without planning permission? That is so important. Is he going to do something about backyard developments behind houses, which are not mentioned in this plan at all? What about a case in which a man houses himself in a mobile home? Seán Meehan from outside Clonmel in County Tipperary is being brought to the courts for putting up a nice timber house around a mobile home. He needs to be looked after, as do other people like him. There are thousands of Seán Meehans. We need to deal with that issue.

We also need to do something meaningful regarding small and accidental landlords, who should not even be called "landlords". These are people with a second, third or fourth property. They are being crucified. They have no rights whatsoever. They are getting no support. The Government needs to make it easy for them, especially now that holiday lets are going to be banned. The Government is going to make the situation worse. Small landlords need to be supported. I hate calling them "landlords" because they are not. The big landlords are very different. We are giving too much say to bad tenants. I love good tenants and we all like good people who pay their way. If you have bad tenants, you must be able to remove them from a house.

Those are the things I am asking about. The extension of the ability to transfer commercial property to residential property without requiring planning permission is crucial. We must deal with situations like that of Seán Meehan, who so badly needs his situation rectified. He will be before the courts again in January. There are many more like him. It is not good enough.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** The Government's plan to lock people who are renting houses into six-year tenancies is not going to work in Kerry. People get on to me every day because landlords are refusing to continue leasing properties to them. Trying to force people into six-year tenancies is not going to work.

The plan the Government has to force Airbnb properties into long-term letting is not going to work either. That is how people have been getting their livelihoods up until now.

The only ones who are getting planning permission for one-off houses in Kerry are farmers' sons and daughters. That is fine, and we appreciate it. However, anyone else out in the country who has been there all their life is not getting planning permission. I have been asked several times to do something about that.

The tenant in situ scheme is not working simply because the county council will go out to look at a house and will find anything, something or many things wrong with the house, and will not buy it. The council will not buy any second-hand house in Kerry, only new houses. I want the Minister to address those issues.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I thank all the contributors to what has been a wide-ranging debate. I want to touch on what the Government is doing generally on housing.

The housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*, is one of a number of items. The first was the national planning framework, which has been revised and updated to deal with the increase in population. We want local authorities to look at their development plans and to cater for that increased population.

One of the points that came up earlier related to local authorities. We want them to provide for up to 50% more housing than the targets that were laid down by the Department. We need more land zoned for development. That is important. Then we had the national development plan, which provided funding. We then had Delivering Homes, Building Communities. Today, we have the accelerated infrastructure task force report and action plan. They are all parts of a comprehensive plan, led by the Government, to get an increased supply of homes. That is the ultimate objective.

Listening to the debate, it is all about supply. It is all about putting in those additional measures for supply. If you look at the Delivering Homes, Building Communities plan itself, some of the areas have worked very well for people who are looking to purchase or rent a home. The help-to-buy scheme has helped over 59,000 people. They are getting their own tax back, in many cases, to use as a deposit for a home. Some 8,400 people have availed of the first-home scheme. There is also the vacant property refurbishment grant, from which nearly 15,000 people have benefited. Many of the Opposition parties were opposed to all those schemes but they have benefited a huge number of people. We are extending many of them to 2030.

Deputies spoke about affordable homes. That issue came up consistently. What does this plan do? It sets a target. We want to provide 15,000 supports for the people who qualify for the help-to-buy and first-home schemes and through local authority loans and the vacant property refurbishment grant. A point that came up earlier was that people may not have read the plan. I suggest they go back and do so.

It was suggested that people who want to purchase a derelict or vacant property for a period should benefit from the first-home scheme. We are going to engage in that to see what we can do. Such people would probably also qualify for the vacant property refurbishment grant. That point is generally being missed.

The issue of helping small builders also came up. Within the plan, there is €400 million for an equity risk capital investment programme. Some €200 million is going to Home Building Finance Ireland. There is also a scheme there at the moment, the ready-to-build scheme, which will be available to small builders in towns and villages to allow them to work with their local authority to build mixed units in those areas. That scheme is there for small builders. The key focus for us is increasing supply.

Other issues arose. Local authorities are critical to increasing supply. We want to work with the local authorities. How are we doing that in the plan? We want them to zone more land. We need more land for residential purposes. The population has gone up. The national planning framework states that. We want to get the message out that we want local authorities to zone 50% above their targets. That will be zoned land that will be built on.

Every local authority will now have an affordable purchase target. We want every single local authority to build affordable purchase homes. It is now called the smarter homes scheme. That scheme is available for people who are having difficulty purchasing on the open market. They can get a discount of up to 40% on the value of their house. They can also hold onto the help-to-buy scheme. We want the local authorities to be in that specific space.

For social housing, we have a target of 12,000 units per year, which is an increase of more than 3,500 on what local authorities are currently delivering nationally. That would be a big

increase in delivery. We are providing €500 million in an acquisition fund for local authorities to go out and purchase land that can be built on for social and affordable housing.

We have also set up the housing activation office, which has a €1 billion fund to work with local authorities to do the enabling works on sites upfront. These sites are available and can be built on. Local authorities can enter agreements with builders to build affordable purchase and cost-rental homes. Social housing is obviously hugely important. If the local authorities exceed their self-build target, they will get funding for other activities within their local authority areas. That is important.

Defective concrete blocks came up. Legislation was introduced by the Minister, Deputy Browne, yesterday. We are looking at that area.

I want to deal specifically with my area of responsibility in housing, which is housing for older people. I will make a few points. We have increased the allocation for the housing adaptation grant to €130 million. It is up by €30 million this year and it will apply across all categories, including older people and disabled people. Furthermore, we are looking to increase delivery of housing for older people in social housing and private housing. In the area of the rental market we are doing a body of work because the incomes of people who are retiring will drop and we want to ensure we deal with that issue. We also want to give choice. It is all about choice. If people wish to purchase a smaller home, we will support them by looking at bridging finance. If people wish to adapt their homes to suit their needs within the home, perhaps with a smaller or separate unit, we will support that. We are looking at planning exemptions. Modular homes came up. A body of work is under way at the moment to look at planning.

The point is that this is a co-ordinated and comprehensive plan, including the national planning framework, the national development plan, the plan we have now that we are discussing today, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, which goes up to 2030 and the plan we published today, Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan. Members say they want to see the barriers removed. The plan that was published today is aimed at removing barriers and dealing with judicial reviews. Water services came up repeatedly. Within the housing plan, we want to support private builders and developers to get schemes going in areas.

The critical issue with the measures we are putting forward in Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan is that I expect and hope that Opposition Members will support what we are doing. Ultimately, we have choices to make and there will be issues that people will find difficult. When it comes down to it, at times the common good has to override private interest. It has to. The bottom line is that we must get an increase in supply. People have spoken about measures for apartments and that is all about viability. Everything here is about practical options - they are not theoretical - to support building. The State cannot do it all. We have to work with the private sector. We have put in €9 billion. It costs approximately €20 billion per year to build 50,000 homes so ultimately, it is about a co-ordinated approach involving the State and the private sector. I hope we can work in a collaborative way across the House so we can continue to increase the supply of housing.

### **Arrangements for Parliamentary Questions: Motion**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** Before we move to the National Training Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025, I understand the Government deputy Whip intends to make a proposal.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** I move:

It is proposed, notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, that—

- the Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) that were due to be answered by the Minister for Finance on 23rd October, 2025, will be answered on 9th December, 2025, in accordance with the ordinary routine of business;
- the Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) due to be answered by the Minister for Finance on 9th December, 2025, will be answered on 18th December, 2025, in an additional session to be ordered by the House; and
- the rota of Ministers or rota for priority Questions shall not be affected in this regard.

Question put and agreed to.

### Message from Select Committee

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** The Select Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy has completed its consideration of the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

### Meastacháin i gcomhair Seirbhísí Poiblí 2025: Teachtaireacht ó Roghchoiste

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** Tá Roghchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge tar éis a bhreithniú a chríochnú ar na Meastacháin Forlíontacha seo a leanas i gcomhair seirbhísí poiblí le haghaidh seirbhís na bliana dár geríoch an 31 Nollaig 2025: Vóta 42 - an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta.

### National Training Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

- “(c) these payments to only relate to training and upskilling and not for any other purpose; these payments to only relate to the construction or reconstruction (not retrofitting) of a premises that is only used for training and educational purposes.”.”.

The diversion of a portion of the employer-contributed fund to cover costs typically associated with Exchequer capital expenditure, such as retrofitting or repair of a premises, means a fundamental and unacceptable deviation from the core mandate of the National

Training Fund, NTF, to measures other than direct skills and training initiatives and could rapidly deplete the surplus without delivering any impact on skills development. That is why I have tabled this amendment, which stipulates that any moneys used for the purchase of land, construction or reconstruction only be used for training, upskilling and educational purposes. We may have a verbal guarantee now that it will not happen, but there is no guarantee that a future Minister will not change that. I welcome that this NTF funding will be unlocked and commend the Minister on working on this, but this amendment is important.

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless):** I thank the Deputy for her engagement on the Bill, including on Committee Stage. I understand the intent or rationale behind the amendment. However, I do not propose to accept it and I will give the reasons. There are two parts to the amendment. I will take each one separately. The first part of the amendment, which provides for "these payments to only relate to training and upskilling and not for any other purpose", is surplus to requirements. I sought legal advice on the drafting of the Bill. We considered carefully what was required to be put into the legislation. The strong advice was that overcomplicating it with unnecessary restrictions could do more harm than good and could have unintended consequences. We could tie ourselves up in knots with different restrictions. The Bill is already clear on the purpose of the fund. That is called out in it. The Bill already provides that payments for "the acquisition of lands, premises, furniture or equipment" and "the upgrading, construction or reconstruction, including repair and maintenance, of premises" can only be made for the purposes specified already in section 7(1) of the National Training Fund Act 2000. Those purposes have not been changed. They are "to raise the skills of those in employment", "to provide training to those who wish to acquire skills for the purposes of taking up employment" and "to provide information in relation to existing, or likely future, requirements for skills in the economy". That provision has been in the Act for 25 years and it will stay in the Act. While I understand the Deputy's motivation, it is superfluous to put it in again. It might complicate the legislation and would certainly be difficult for anyone to follow and try to apply were it to be added. It is the case that the capital funding can only be used "to raise the skills of those in employment", "to provide training" to those seeking employment and "to provide information" about skills needs. It is my view, following advices, that the proposed amendment is not required.

The second part of the amendment, which provides for "these payments to only relate to the construction or reconstruction (not retrofitting) of a premises that is only used for training and educational purposes", could potentially have unintended consequences. The Bill provides already that the capital funding can only be used "to raise the skills of those in employment", "to provide training" to those seeking employment and "to provide information" in relation to skills needs. If we were to provide that the payments may only relate to "construction or reconstruction" of "a premises that is only used for training and educational purposes", it could have the unintended consequence of preventing alternative uses of that building at a later stage. Such uses could be for community education, other community uses, as part of other educational facilities or for other community or societal needs. One of the things we are striving towards with the real estate within my Department and across government is to maximise utilisation of buildings. If we have a building that is used as a training centre from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and a local community group wants to use it from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m., we would be saying here that the door is closed and locked, and nobody else can go into it or ever use it at any future time. I am sure that is not the intended purpose of the amendment. We have to

be careful that we do not unintentionally apply unwarranted and unnecessary restrictions, particularly at a time when we are trying to utilise the infrastructure we have to the maximum.

The proposal that the payments should not include payments for retrofitting is also restrictive. Capital funding from the NTF will be directed towards programmes with clear links to training and skills development. Where facilities under those programmes are being modernised or reconfigured to meet skills needs, some refurbishment and retrofitting work may still be required to ensure compliance with the necessary standards. The proposed amendment would prevent that necessary upgrading of the training and educational facilities. In my time as Minister, I have had the pleasure of visiting many of these facilities around the country from Killybegs to Kerry, across the midlands and in places like Merlin in Galway. I have seen many fine buildings. A few weeks ago I was in Killybegs, where an old historic building has been creatively and skilfully restored by the local ETB and is now being used to provide multiple blocks of apprenticeship and training in areas like woodwork, manufacturing, refrigeration and electrics. That is an example and there are many more all around the country. It would be unjust and unfair for us to say that an old building like this cannot be restored. The upshot of the amendment would be to condemn it, in effect. We should say to people that they can take these old buildings, put them back into use, refurbish them, retrofit them and get them back in action. This would allow us to deliver more training through these buildings, which are often well located. Given the strong potential we have in some of these buildings, why would we abandon them and go building on greenfield sites elsewhere? We have an opportunity to upgrade them for the purpose of upskilling and training. Everything that is done will be done in accordance with the original purpose of the Act, which we are not changing.

For that reason, I do not accept either part of this amendment. I understand where the Deputy is coming from. I accept her good intentions and I appreciate her solid engagement on this matter on Committee Stage and previously. For the reasons outlined, it would not be appropriate to accept these amendments.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I thank Deputy McGettigan and other Deputies very much for tabling these amendments. We had a good debate on this Bill in October. As a new TD, I am learning how all this process goes.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Me too.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** Forgive me if I am doing this incorrectly, even today.

**Deputy James Lawless:** We are all learners.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** We are all learning. We discussed a proposal that funding which had not been used already would be used and put back into buildings and things like that. I said at the time that I have worked in further education buildings which need to be retrofitted. I understand what the Minister is saying. For the learners and teachers in a building that is draughty and cold - it may have ivy coming into it - a retrofitting of the building is so important. It may not be too old. From an environmental point of view, I would like the buildings we have to be kept to the best capacity that they can be kept to. I would like us to be able to make sure

that they are maintained. I do not mind whether we use the word "retrofitting" or the word "maintaining".

I reiterate the point that I would not like to see surpluses being run again. There should not be an underspend in any of this area. The reality is that we have heard over the months since the Minister was appointed about the hopes and dreams of him and his Department. They will only be realised if the full funding for the Department is utilised. The Minister explained why there was an underspend, and that is fair enough. It will be used in these specific circumstances for these things, and I accept that. They need to be outlined clearly. I accept that the amendment provides for "these payments to only relate to training and upskilling and not for any other purpose" and for "these payments to only relate to the construction or reconstruction (not retrofitting) of a premises that is only used for training and educational purposes". If we are valuing education, particularly in fields like further education and community education, people need to feel as valued as people feel when a brand-new primary school, secondary school or third level institution is being built. If funds are being used for that purpose in this particular context, we recommend that this would be possible.

Notwithstanding that, please do not run underutilised budgets. I do not want to tell the Minister how to do his job, but it is so important that this funding used. I do not want us to be back here again in a year or two looking at budgets that have not been fully used when we know there are deficits with regard to people's contracts not being fully fulfilled. When we talked about science recently during Science Week, we spoke about the facilities that are needed. I would love any money that is available from the Department to be able to be used for the upgrade of science equipment in as many education settings as the Minister has authority over. As I said at the time, there is no point in people using a Nokia-blockia phone when they should be using the best and newest updated smartphone they can have. It is important. I am not knocking Nokia-blockias, by the way; I had plenty of them when they first came out. When there is a surplus, it is important to use it wisely. While I accept Sinn Féin's amendment, I do not accept it in full because I do not agree that it should not include retrofitting. I am sorry about that.

**Deputy James Lawless:** I thank the Deputy. She has eloquently outlined part of the rationale of this. She has spoken about the experience not just of the learners but also of the teachers. I agree that it is unfair to have them in draughty old buildings when we could take the opportunity to retrofit, refurbish and upgrade them and provide a state-of-the-art new facility by doing so. We are of like mind in that regard. I do not think Deputy McGettigan's amendment is appropriate. I suggest that tying our hands in such a way and precluding the possibility of upgrading these buildings would be a retrograde step. For that reason, I do not accept the amendment.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** Should moneys for this purpose not be coming from Exchequer capital expenditure rather than the NTF? As the Minister set out when he spoke on Committee Stage and again today, the NTF is to be used "to raise the skills", "to provide training" and "to provide information". We could very quickly go through that surplus if we were to use it for retrofitting and on buildings. In such circumstances, we could end up with no surplus or not enough for training. A lot of jobs are being lost to artificial intelligence. Those employers are

going to need uptraining and skilling. The fear is that we could run out of NTF funding very quickly.

**Deputy James Lawless:** A €1.5 billion retrofitting programme would create a lot of employment for apprentices. It would be quite extraordinary if we were to spend the entire NTF surplus on retrofitting. It is probably unlikely to happen. In any event, the provisions in the existing legislation set out clearly that it can only be used for particular well-defined purposes which have stood the test of time for 25 years. I do not propose to change that in any regard. It remains absolutely true to the original mission of the Act. I welcome the engagement, but it is not sensible to add in such extra constraints at this stage.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** We are debating something important here - the National Training Fund - but it is effectively a tax on employers. They have been quite happy to contribute to that fund over the years because ultimately they get the benefit of it from the upskilling of their current and potential future workers. While I have concerns with the proposed amendments, the spirit of what they are proposing is a concern I share as well. When the allocations for the NTF are being calculated and issued, how will the Minister ensure that they will benefit the skills sector and that the Department will not be tempted to use these moneys for other things that may not have been the intent of the original fund, potentially losing the goodwill of employers out there who need their workers to be upskilled? I am told constantly that we need new skills. AI is coming out there. It is something that is impacting our business. We need to upskill our workers. Skillnet and numerous other providers that are capable of doing this will be looking for funds to enable employers and support them through this. How will the Minister ensure the funds from the NTF are used for the purpose for which they were originally intended if we pass this amendment?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** An Teachta McGettigan has one more two-minute slot if she wishes.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** In terms of the purchasing of land, I think the amendment should definitely stand. I would be fearful if there is no guarantee preventing a future Minister from changing that to buy buildings for anything other than upskilling and training. It needs to be clear in black and white that that is what the payments are for, so I will press the amendment.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 38; Níl, 97; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Brady, John.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Buckley, Pat.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boland, Grace.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Brian.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brophy, Colm.	

Crowe, Seán.	Browne, James.	
Daly, Pa.	Burke, Colm.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Burke, Peter.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Butterly, Paula.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cahill, Michael.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Calleary, Dara.	
Gould, Thomas.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Chambers, Jack.	
Healy, Seamus.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Kenny, Martin.	Clendennen, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Collins, Niall.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Connolly, John.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Cooney, Joe.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Cummins, Jen.	
Murphy, Paul.	Currie, Emer.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Daly, Martin.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Nolan, Carol.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Dillon, Alan.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Dolan, Albert.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Fleming, Sean.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Foley, Norma.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Stanley, Brian.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ward, Charles.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
	Grealish, Noel.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kelly, Alan.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Lawless, James.	
	Lawless, Paul.	
	Lawlor, George.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Martin, Micheál.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	

	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGrath, Mattie.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe.

Amendment declared lost.

8 o'clock

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Bogaimid ar aghaidh go dtí leasú Uimh. 2 in ainm an Teachta Eoghan Kenny. Tá seacht nóiméad aige.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I move amendment No. 2:

In page 3, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

“(2C) A payment for a purpose specified in subsection (1) in respect of works referred to in subsection (2B)(b) shall, where practicable, be made subject to the condition that tenders for the procurement of those works shall include as a condition that apprenticeships or training opportunities, of such nature and number as are specified by An tSeirbhís, are provided by the contractor during the period of execution of those works.”.

The Minister will be well aware of why I am placing this amendment before the Dáil. It is essential that priority is given to young people across this country who wish to seek an apprenticeship. I think of the many young people I taught and the number of them who wished to seek a career as an apprentice. It is fantastic to see. However, they face constant barriers when it comes to apprenticeships. One of those main barriers, of course, is the financial aspect to being an apprentice and the significant issue apprentices face in terms of their income. The point of the amendment in its entirety is that if companies across this country wish to build public buildings, a part and a condition of that would be that they have to give young people the opportunity for an apprenticeship or training courses. From an outsider's perspective, what it would look like is quite simple and straightforward. I appreciate the conversations we have had on this and I understand legislation from Europe is involved in how we would implement such an amendment, but it is important the Department of further and higher education realise that amendments like this being tabled show it is clearly and utterly necessary to recognise the role of apprenticeships in every facet of building that goes on in this country. It is not just building; a significant amount of people want to do mechanics or hairdressing. There are loads of apprenticeship courses that can be offered now but it is about promoting them.

It is not so long since I was in school and I always felt there was a slight stigma about the role of apprenticeships. I do not know where that comes from. I spent a lot of time as a teacher encouraging students to do an apprenticeship because third level education and college life are not for everybody. People across the country appreciate that, as do most people in this Chamber. The point we try to get across is that when we try to encourage apprenticeships, we must also encourage employers to take on new apprentices. That is what this amendment speaks to.

From the conversations the Minister and I have had, I understand EU legislation has to be looked at in relation to how we would implement this amendment. I would appreciate if the Minister's Department would work with me on this. It is essential and it speaks to the core values of the young people we represent, or say we represent, across the country.

**Deputy James Lawless:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta for the amendment. I thank him for his engagement on this matter on Committee Stage and again today. I fully understand the intention behind the amendment.

If accepted, the amendment would impose a procurement condition on contractors to provide apprenticeships or training opportunities for NTF-funded works related to the acquisition of land, premises, furniture or equipment and the upgrade, construction, reconstruction, repair, maintenance, etc., of premises. I am unable to accept the amendment. I have looked at and engaged on it and I have taken advice on it, including legal advice from the Attorney General and advice from the Office of Government Procurement.

I will set out the reasons I cannot accept it. Essentially, Ireland's public procurement framework is a matter of EU law as well as domestic law. The awarding of contracts must be conducted in accordance with the general principles of EU law, emanating from the case law of the CJEU, including principles of non-discrimination, equal treatment, proportionality, transparency and mutual recognition.

Closer to home, the Office of Government Procurement has provided guidance in the area. In 2023, it issued an information note on apprenticeships and public procurement. These guidelines are based on established Government policy, which envisaged the adoption of any conditionality in respect of apprenticeship to be on a case-by-case basis, rather than being enshrined in legislation, which would be very restrictive and could create a risk of unintended consequences. It could be considered discriminatory or disproportionate and may lack flexibility for different types of tender, contractor or contracting authorities. I know this is not the intention but it could have the result of excluding smaller contractors and the supply chains which flow from them, which could reduce competition and undermine opportunities for SMEs to get involved. There would also be a need for an SME test and full regulatory impact analysis to be performed, which would be quite a complication and take considerable time. Unfortunately, it would require significant re-examination to consider accepting it and extensive legal parameters would have to be explored, along with a regulatory impact analysis. All of those other measures would have to be considered.

The guidance note on public procurement is something that can be examined. We can look at whether there are ways outside of a legislative amendment to achieve the same goal without binding legislation but by including within the guidance note some of the intention of the amendment, which is very fair.

On apprenticeships more broadly, the Deputy is right they should never be seen as second best or a second-choice option. It was interesting to look at our neighbours across the water in the UK. Prime Minister Starmer had a goal that one in every two students would progress to university and recently revised that at his party conference. The goal is now, rather than one in every two going to university, two in every three will go on to either university or an apprenticeship. That is exactly the right approach. They are not equal and opposite but are equally valid and strong career paths.

The Deputy knows because we have engaged on this a number of times in policy debates that there are many apprenticeships now across a range of areas. I think we are up to 78 apprenticeship courses, having started in the low 20s or 30s not so many years ago. It continues to broaden and I continue to be amazed when I visit training centres around the country at the range of apprenticeships available, everything from cybersecurity to planning digital marketing and wind turbine maintenance. New areas are being identified all the time. My Department is continuing to explore further opportunities to create apprenticeships and using that tried and trusted methodology as a pathway into careers across many areas.

I agree with the Deputy on advancing and supporting them as a career pathway but, unfortunately, I cannot accept the amendment for the reasons outlined.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I thank the Minister for his engagement on this. Going slightly off the amendment for a moment, he touched on an important aspect of apprenticeships more broadly. As I said and he referenced, there is still a slight mantra in Ireland that an apprentice is second best to a child or young person who goes on to UCC, UCD, Trinity or somewhere like that. There is still that perception out there. As a former teacher, I find that difficult to accept. I call on every teacher across the country to take on my fundamental belief that encouragement must be given to students to go into apprenticeships. We will always need plumbers, carpenters and hairdressers. The essential thing is that we prioritise those.

It is often the case that those who seek an apprenticeship are from a socioeconomically disadvantaged area. That was always the norm in this country but now we are seeing a different spectrum where people from all areas are going into an apprenticeship because they are figuring out the role they want to do. There has to be a significant culture change and, slowly but surely, we are moving towards it. That change has to involve accepting that apprenticeships are on the same level as third level degrees.

I know the Minister will say it is but I must say again it has to be a priority for the Government. There are so many young people out there. As the Minister said, there are 78 apprenticeship courses. It has to be an absolute essential for this Government.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I welcome the amendment and accept what the Minister has said on the EU legislation that could facilitate it. It would be great if it was facilitated. I agree with what has been said on apprenticeships. The further and higher education committee has spoken of it at length in recent months. Wonderful witnesses have come in and told us the stories of how amazing they have to be to motivate themselves, get involved with an employer and become an apprentice, and of the hurdles they face to get there. It is in a way easier to apply for a third level college course because you just go on the CAO and apply for whatever level is in question. I know I am slightly going off the general topic here, but I would love if people could log on and be able to apply for apprenticeships in the same way that they apply for a CAO place. I think the value of apprenticeships is returning to the level it used to be a number of decades ago. The snobbery is slowly being eroded and people genuinely feel doing an apprenticeship is the fastest way to learn and earn and then be guaranteed a job at the end. I met so many young people who are in college and wondering what they are going to do afterwards. Some of them have degree and a postgraduate qualification but they do not know what to do yet. I have yet to meet an apprentice who wondered what they will do now. They are already working and able to travel with these amazing skills they have learned.

To go back to the issue of releasing funding from the National Training Fund, the challenges apprentices face are significant with regard to some structural issues, such as going to Donegal to finish off an electrical apprenticeship or going to Clare to do different apprenticeships. Those sorts of issues are very difficult. We have also heard recently from employers about how much money it costs to release chefs for training days. I would love to see this structure working and this funding coming back in to support these young people and learners, as well as the employers taking on apprentices and the colleges where they are going to do the learning, skills and theory part. We have a real possibility to do a lot with this fund. As others said

earlier, I would love to see exactly where the money will go and what the plans are. We set out our stall a couple of weeks ago, and I would love to see a little bit more in this regard. Praise for apprentices is due but so is the infrastructure that goes around that.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** About 15 years ago, when I was a county councillor on Cork County Council, I put forward a similar motion looking for a proportion of all major Government contracts to be given to either local workers or to ensure that apprentices were being hired. At the time, I was told we could not do that because of EU procurement law. I went and researched it, and it turns out that Germany, Italy and other European countries have those quotas in place. This meant Ireland was implementing European law to the absolute maximum, while some other major European countries were abiding by it but not fully and were able to put their own nuance on it.

We are all in here trying to work together and come up with solutions. There is a crisis right now in apprenticeship. The Minister pointed out there are 78 different types of apprenticeships, which is great. People are studying courses now that were just handed down from family members or neighbours and they fall in with someone that way. My dad was a carpenter and my grandfather was a carpenter. I went to the North Mon and did woodwork, and I would say they got the fright of their lives when they saw me with a saw and a hammer. I just did not have a creative bone like carpenters and tradespeople have.

I met with University College Cork and Munster Technological University. I want to see a campus for trades on the northside of Cork city. We are trying to get more and more people into apprenticeships. I remember a couple of years ago there was a phrase in camogie, or it could have been in ladies sports in general, that went, "If you cannot see it, you cannot be it". I come from an area where there is a very low level of people going to third level, but there is a much higher take-up by people of apprenticeships. We want more to get more people into apprenticeships and third level. I want people to have the choice. For people on the northside of Cork city, there are no third level institutions. They are all on the southside. I know we are not going to build a new college, but we could build a campus on the northside of Cork city specifically for the trades. Great work is being done by MTU and the education and training board, but they will tell us they do not have the capacity. We have an issue now with lack of capacity and we have areas on the northside of Cork city where we could have a campus specifically for the trades. We could use the National Training Fund for this. It is constructive, would have cross-party support and would certainly go down very well in the communities I represent.

I am not sure if the Minister knows this but I know, from talking to people in the trades, that the minute they get their qualification, they are gone. I know of one course in particular where 15 out of 16 plumbers left the country. Someone looking for plumbers might say there will be 16 of them coming out next month, but they will not be coming out next month at all because they are all getting on a plane to Australia. The vast majority are going to Australia, with a few going to Canada and a couple going elsewhere in Europe. The reason, to go back to a debate we had earlier, is housing. What are newly qualified tradespeople going to do? Will they go back to their mam and dad and stay in the box bedroom at 23, 24 or 25 years of age? That is a huge issue. Until we get a grasp of housing policy, it will feed into the crisis we have with apprenticeships.

Another issue, which was touched on by a previous speaker, is that we have people trying to finish off their course being told they have to be up in Dublin for three months, but they cannot get accommodation. It is the same if people have to go to Sligo. We need to provide the training in areas where people are studying. I had a father contact me. His son could not finish his apprenticeship because he could not get somewhere to study. When he did get it, he could not get somewhere to stay. What was he going to do? Was he going to go up and down to Dublin every day from Cork? It cannot be done. There are huge issues there that need to be looked at. We are talking about priorities.

First- and second-year apprentices could go work in Supermac's or Abrakebabra because they would get better money. They are getting better money working in shops, fast food outlets, bars or wherever. If this Government is really serious about getting more and more people into apprenticeships, it has to improve the rates for first-, second- and third-year apprentices right across the board. It must also be made easy for employers to be able to hire them.

I know lads in the building trade. In the area where I grew up, almost half the fellows I know are in the building trade. Most of them are over 50. They are saying, "Tommy, we are not working seven days a week any more because our families are raised. We are doing Monday to Friday now." You cannot get tradespeople. The people there are getting old and they are asking me if the Government understands this. A lot of young people do not feel there is an incentive there to get into the trades. The thing about it is that when they do get into the trades, they really enjoy them because they are very worthwhile. The point is that when we look at the wages of first- and second-year apprentices, they are just too low.

I ask the Minister to look at this amendment again. At the end of the day, we want to get more people working and more people in the trades. We need them to build houses. I know it is not all housing, but the bulk of those trades are in housing. This would be a win-win for everyone. We need to start treating trades like they do in Europe, especially in places like Germany where training is on the same level as third level and is respected.

I will tell the Minister another thing. I was out canvassing in Kerry Pike at the weekend. I stopped afterwards in the petrol station and I met a fellow buying a house out there in Kerry Pike for €500,000, or the bones of it. He told me he is working every hour God sends and asked me if he was doing the right thing or if he should head off. He has got a partner and they have one child. He wants to live here. They want to stay close to the northside, but then he is looking at the cost. He will be going to work every hour God sends for the next 20 years. We need to look at that.

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless):** I think we are all in violent agreement that we need more apprentices. It is a programme for Government commitment I am working towards. The exact intention of this legislation is to give effect to it. We are opening up a €1.5 billion fund we can use for exactly the kind of things Deputy Gould spoke so passionately about.

Cork Education and Training Board has many proposals for training centres it can develop which will host apprentices. It has my support regarding those initiatives. These are the kinds of things we can look to do on with moneys from this fund once we have managed to unlock it. It will certainly benefit apprenticeships and apprenticeship training.

In the budget, we provided a record level of funding for apprenticeships, €410 million, which is an historic high, with an additional €79 million pledged this year alone. It is the largest increase ever. We are also working on the action plan for apprenticeships for the next five years. That is to run from 2026 to 2030. It is a work in progress. We are looking to go on from 78 to 79 to 80 etc., and to continually increase the number of occupations that can be accessed through apprenticeships. We are continuing to increase the numbers. As Deputy Cummins noted, we have a link to apprenticeships on the CAO page in order to promote a common entry point.

There is very high demand for tradespeople and for apprentices more generally. That is exactly why we are supporting them by means of this legislation. What this legislation will do is enable us to provide more training centres, training equipment, courses, skills and provision in order that we reach our shared goal of increasing the number of apprenticeships in the system.

Turning to the amendment, there are many ways to achieve a similar result, including by means of a guidance note and some procurement. I note Deputy Gould's point about how other EU countries may transpose directives in different ways. Right now, the European Commission is looking at the procurement directive. Perhaps engaging as part of that process would be the way to proceed. If we were to jump the gun and introduce domestic legislation that may be in contravention of the EU legislation that is currently being reviewed, the sequencing would be wrong. The Attorney General's advice is that it would not be appropriate in any event. For that reason, unfortunately, I cannot accept the amendment. The Deputy will understand that, but I absolutely support the goals outlined. We can achieve those in other ways.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Glaoim ar an Teachta Kenny. Tá dhá nóiméad aige.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** I thank colleagues for their contributions on the amendment. As the Minister stated, everyone is in agreement. We need apprentices. My constituency colleague Deputy Gould is right, however, in that we actually cannot get apprentices. There are people who have contacted my office and said that something broke at home, that it has been two weeks and that they cannot get somebody out to fix it. They need a joiner, for example, but they cannot seem to get one. The evidence is there that there have been systemic issues either in the Department or in government for many years whereby people did not appreciate the role of apprenticeships. I hope a change is happening in that regard.

I welcome the fact that there has been a historic allocation for apprenticeships in budget 2026, but we need to continue to progress that. We cannot allow it just to be an historic amount of money that is being given. In the context of each budget, every year the Department must look at how apprenticeships can be promoted even more. Third level education and apprenticeships must be on the same level. That is a fact. We must not stigmatise apprenticeship. We must make that very clear to people. The way we will have to do this is make it clear to people who want to pursue apprenticeships that they will be paid well. That is the bottom line. What we do not want is big employers and companies that are making billions in profits taking on apprentices and paying them a pittance. What we want to see is a good day's pay for a good day's work. Anyone taking up any of the 78 apprenticeships currently in place wants that also.

We need a clear focus on apprenticeships. I understand the reasoning behind the amendment and how the Minister cannot support it, but we need a clear understanding that this Parliament must support all young people who wish to seek a future by means of pursuing apprenticeships.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Bill reported without amendment, received for final consideration and passed.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Cuirfear an Bille chun an tSeanaid anois.

### **Social Welfare and Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages**

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I move amendment No. 1:

In page 11, between lines 11 and 12, to insert the following:

“(a) in section 10(2), by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (b):

“(c) act with fiduciary responsibility to the participants in the scheme in the discharge of its functions.”,

This amendment follows on from our discussion on Committee Stage regarding board composition and the responsibilities and profiles of members who are still on the board of the national auto-enrolment scheme authority. The Minister said on Committee Stage that members who have recently been appointed to the board are very capable individuals and will serve with distinction. I agree wholeheartedly with that. I do not doubt the credentials of anyone who has been appointed or, indeed, their ability to fulfil the functions as set out in the primary legislation for auto-enrolment.

My contention on Committee Stage was that we ought to have a more direct relationship between the kind of representation at board level, the participants who have a financial interest in the performance of the My Future Fund and auto-enrolment scheme and the people who sit on the board. I accept that there is an individual on the board who will have knowledge of the interests of workers. While I wanted the representative aspect of such an appointment to be stronger and more direct in terms of appointing an additional person enrolled in the scheme, if the board is to be composed as is, it crucial that we set out very clearly what the responsibility of those members will be to the participants.

As the Minister said in this House on 13 November, the funds entrusted to the My Future Fund will be those of the participants, namely the employees as opposed to the employers or the State. As the Minister stated on that date, "It is not the State's money but each individual's money". I think it prudent that responsibility for managing the money of the participants be made explicitly clear in legislation. That is why my amendment focuses on how the responsibilities of the board to participants in the scheme are elucidated in the Act, and establishing a clear and uncontestable fiduciary responsibility on the board members to act at all times in the interests of participants.

Of course, it can be argued that the code of practice for the membership of State boards contains sufficient guidance on the responsibilities for board members, which I assume all members will be subject to. Clarity on that would be very welcome. The code, however, is not referenced in the Bill, which maintains only that fiduciary obligations exist between board members and State bodies. It does not refer to board members having direct responsibility for the management of funds that belong to individuals. This is a first. On Committee Stage, the Minister was keen to stress that it is the individual participant's money. There is a need here for an added layer of fiduciary responsibility on board members which reflects that fact.

I spoke, on Committee Stage, about the potential to structure this scheme around alternative, non-individuated pension vehicles. Given that the current structures are being progressed, and the Minister's insistence on the funds remaining those of individual participants, I am arguing we need an extra measure so that the board members understand the very weighty responsibilities contained in the nature of the work they are carrying out, which involves being entrusted with the financial health of millions of people's final years, and that their fiduciary duties are to those people as individuals and not to an aggregated, risk-assessed group, financial strategy or the financial health of a body corporate or State body. That is a first, as I said. As such, it is appropriate that such responsibilities be properly accounted for in the primary legislation.

This gets to a broader point about the preparedness of the Government and of the structures put in place for the launch in just a few short weeks. I would argue we need clarity here about fiduciary responsibility but also more broadly about the board's other responsibilities. We still have not heard about the administration or management fees that we asked about in the Chamber last month. Will this be a board responsibility too, and when will we hear about it? Will it be the board's responsibility to ensure the integrity of the scheme if employers divert employees to less beneficial schemes for them? Will it be the responsibility of the board to provide financial literacy training to participants? Will it be the board's responsibility to craft annuity schemes for participants to purchase with their lump sums? All of these issues lack sufficient clarity. They have been raised with the Minister and were flagged with the Business Committee last month for further discussion in this House. We still do not have clarity on any of them. It appears to me right now that the Minister is not prepared for the launch date on 1 January. This amendment goes some way towards ensuring the board is not as unprepared as he seems to be. I commend it to the House.

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary):** Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as na leasuithe agus as an seans an Bille tábhachtach seo a phlé. I gcomhthéacs na leasaithe ón Teachta Hayes, ní bheidh mé ag glacadh leis an leasú seo. I will not be accepting the amendment. I absolutely reject the Deputy's assertion that we are not prepared for the launch of My Future Fund.

In respect of the amendment, section 10 of the auto-enrolment Act relates to the establishment of the board of the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA. Section 10(2) charges the board with ring-fenced responsibilities that relate specifically to its oversight role in the overall management of NAERSA and the automatic enrolment system. This includes arrangements relating to the delivery of the statement of strategy, the annual plan and the performance of the chief executive officer. Section 10(2) also requires the board to have oversight of the performance of NAERSA's functions, which are set out in section 9 of

the Act. Section 9(2) of the auto-enrolment Act mandates NAERSA to perform its function in a manner that operates in the best interests of the participants, which provides for the management of participants' retirement savings with appropriate care and judgment. The intent of this wording is similar to the wording in Deputy Hayes's amendment, in that fiduciary responsibility means acting in the best interests of participants. Moreover, section 11 of the Act provides that the duties of members of the board and the performance of their functions shall be owed by them to the authority and the authority alone. Additionally, the investment rules of the scheme, which are set out in section 74 of the Act, require the investment managers to invest participants' contributions in the best long-term interests of the participants. Given that the function of NAERSA includes arranging for the investment of contributions, the board of NAERSA will have an oversight role here in ensuring that the function is performed appropriately. Therefore, the inclusion of wording in section 10 requiring the board of NAERSA to act with fiduciary responsibility to participants is not required, as the intent of this wording is already provided for in this legislation.

In relation to preparedness, as the Deputy knows, this week we have launched the employers' portal of My Future Fund. Employers are signing up as we speak. Next week, we will be launching further details on that and we are continuing an extensive promotional campaign in this space around building people's awareness of My Future Fund. The notion that we are not prepared does not stand up to any fair or appropriate scrutiny.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I am disappointed at that response. I understand the logic the Minister has put forward and I accept that the Department is doing all that it can. However, I have very real concerns that the Department and the Minister are not sufficiently prepared for this launch date. As much as they have done a promotional campaign, there are equally some unscrupulous actors equally promoting themselves to divert employers from investing in this My Future Fund on behalf of employees to other funds. The Minister seems to have done absolutely nothing about it.

More typically, when we think about the investment management role of any organisation that is charged with managing funds on behalf of individuals, it is absolutely imperative that fiduciary responsibility is not implied or intended but is made explicit and is charged specifically to those who have the oversight and the role of ensuring that their funds are being managed appropriately. Saying that the investment managers - private pension funds - are going to do it is ridiculous. You need to have proper oversight and you need to ensure that the board is actually charged explicitly with that role. I am quite disappointed that the Minister does not agree.

**Deputy Dara Calleary:** I would draw the Deputy's attention to section 74 of the Act, which requires the investment managers to invest participants' contributions - the same people we are talking about - in the best long-term interests of the participants. We share the same thing. The function of NAERSA includes arranging for the investment of contributions. The board of NAERSA will have an oversight role in ensuring that this function, as set out in section 74, requires investment managers to invest participants' contributions in the long-term interests of the participants. That is the function. The board has a duty to make sure it is performed appropriately. I have confidence in relation to that.

My apologies, as I meant to update the Deputy. We will be bringing a memo to the Cabinet next week in relation to the fees. That will bring full clarity to the fees and will show the benefits of auto-enrolment and My Future Fund in terms of the number of people to whom we are bringing much lower fees than are available in any other space in this market. In respect of other products, we have drawn attention to that and have done a lot of work on it. We will also be bringing further regulations forward next week. In bringing attention, as has come back in the feedback, we have given many workers the information they needed to highlight this and to see they were being offered a lesser product than My Future Fund.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I thank the Minister. I genuinely welcome the clarity he will bring on the fees in the Cabinet memo next week. I also welcome the work he will be doing in regulating the allocation of funds for employees towards the right products. I would support him in bringing those regulations expeditiously, as reported in the media. I just do not agree that investment managers can be charged with the responsibilities here. This is employees' money. It is a State-mandated fund. The board has a responsibility here. I really do think that the Act is not sufficiently clear or explicit in that. I am quite disappointed that the Minister does not agree.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Amendment No. 2 not moved.

Bill received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary):** With the permission of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, I would like to thank the officials in the Department for their work on this social welfare Bill, in particular the officials who are implementing it as we speak across the country in terms of investing €28.9 billion next year in our social welfare funds. I want to put on record my thanks to every one of those officials both at Department headquarters and across the country who are investing this money as we speak.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Cuirfear an Bille chun an tSeanaid anois.

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

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I move:  
That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development Act 2024 (Modification) Regulations 2025,  
a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 18th November, 2025.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the draft regulations and set out the rationale and reasoning behind their development. First, I wish to take this opportunity to provide a brief update on the ongoing phased commencement of the Act of 2024. As Deputies will be aware, the Act of 2024 represents the most comprehensive review of planning legislation since 2000 and spearheads the ongoing reform and streamlining of the planning system without there being reduced delays in housing development and other critical infrastructure projects.

The commencement of the substantive planning provisions of the Act of 2024 began on 9 June 2025. Both Chapters 1 and 2 of Part 22 came into operation providing for the identification of suitable sites for urban development zones. On 18 June 2025, the commencement of Part 17 was completed, which provided for the establishment for An Coimisiún Pleanála, and on 1 August 2025, Chapter 1 of Part 9 was commenced, which introduced provisions for reformed planning during judicial review alongside section 180 to provide for the suspension of the duration of a planning permission during judicial review proceedings. On 2 October 2025, Chapters 1 to 4 of Part 3 were commenced and provided the new legislative basis for the national planning framework and regional and spatial economic strategies, as well as introducing the national planning statements that will be used to set up policy and provide guidance in relation to planning matters.

As things stand, 133 sections of the Act of 2024 have now been brought fully into operation and that means almost 50% more legislation has now been brought into effect from the first year of the Act of 2024 compared to the first year of the implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The next groups of provisions will be brought into operation at the end of this month at which point more legislation will have been commenced under the Act of 2024 than was contained in the entire 2000 planning Act after its enactment on 28 August 2000.

To follow on from the good progress that has been made this year, as we move into 2026, the third phase of commencement is set to proceed. This will provide for a range of important provisions, such as development consents, architectural heritage and enforcement matters. Going back to the proposed regulations, it is important to highlight that the ongoing phased commencement of the Act of 2024 and the corresponding repeal of the 2000 planning Act is a complex task and one that must continue to be responsive to Government policy and to stakeholder needs.

Subsequent to this is a revision of the national planning framework in April this year. Housing growth requirement guidelines were issued to local authorities that set out the housing demand scenario in the State up to the year 2040. These guidelines translated the national planning framework housing requirements into estimated average annual figures for each local authority. While it was originally intended to bring all of Part 3 of the Act of 2024 into operation in October this year to complete the new legislative foundation for development plans and area plans, upon discussions with stakeholders and local authority representatives, the decision was made to stagger the commencement of Part 3 to help facilitate the urgent variation of development plans using the familiar processes and provisions of the 2000 planning Act. This was done for the single purpose of implementing the housing growth requirement guidelines as expeditiously as possible.

As a result, some of Part 3 was commenced in October, while the rest of Part 3 will come into operation at the end of this month. The proposed regulations are, therefore, necessary in order to change the operative date from October to December for a transitional provision relating to

development plans variations that were initiated under the 2000 planning Act. They make a technical and straightforward modification to section 69(2) of the Act of 2024 to align the transitional provisions with the commencement of the development plan provisions under the Act of 2024.

The proposed regulations also make a similar modification to section 81 of the Act of 2024 with respect to the making and amending of local area plans. While the proposed regulations are technical in nature, they are an important component of the wider commencement process for the Act of 2024. I would like to give assurance to the House regarding the application of the specific legislative provision under which the proposed regulations are to be made, if approved, and to draw attention to the inherent safeguards that are provided for in that enabling provision.

Section 4(6) of the Act of 2024 allows the Minister of the day to make regulations to remove a difficulty that arises with respect to bringing a provision of the Act of 2024 into operation. In relation to the operation of any such provision, such regulations may modify the provision in question insofar as it may be necessary or expedient to carry such provision into effect.

In the case of proposed regulations, necessary modifications are required to remove a difficulty that prevents bringing subsection (2) of section 69 and subsection (6A) of section 81 into operation in the intended manner. For further safeguard use of subsection (6) of section 4, following constructive discussion on Committee Stage, an additional requirement was inserted into the Planning and Development Bill 2023 that will ensure a positive resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas was required before any draft regulations could be signed by the Minister. That additional safeguard is the reason we are here tonight. I see this as a prudent and sensible step in the process of enabling modifications to be made to the Act of 2024 in order to bring it into operation in the manner intended. It is also important to note that this enabling provision should not be considered pioneering or innovative, nor is the use of such a provision. Similar provisions are already found across the Statute Book empowering the Minister of the day to introduce necessary regulations to remove a difficulty with respect to the bringing into operation of a legislative provision. Examples of where such power have been used include section 2(2) of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2024 and section 3 of the Non-Use of Motor Vehicles Act 2013.

To conclude, the purpose of the proposed regulations is to facilitate measures that are being undertaken to assist in the provision of additional zoned land for residential development. I commend our proposed regulations to the House. Finally, if the proposed regulations are approved by positive resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas, as required under section 4 of the Act of 2024, the intention is to have the regulations signed into law at the earliest opportunity to prepare for the commencement of Chapters 5 and 6 of Part 2 of the Act of 2024.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I do not know if the Minister is a cinema fan, but he may at one point in his life have seen Terry Gilliam's futuristic sci-fi movie "Brazil". Having listened to the Minister's speech and having read the notes twice before and watched back his interaction with the committee - I was sick last week so I could not attend - it is a little bit like something from the movie, which means that I have no idea what he just said. I am going to be very honest with him. This is not to challenge it; we are not opposing this proposition in front of us. However, there is a need when we are making important changes to law that we should at least

try to explain them in plain English. I have some questions, which the Minister might an opportunity to respond to at the end if he could to help enlighten us and the public.

First of all, if I can put part of what he just said into plain English, as my colleague, Deputy Gould, confirmed with the Minister at committee last week, the Minister is using secondary legislation to change primary legislation. He is entitled to do so. It is set out in the Act. He has given a number of other examples. However, I do think it is very important that the public is clear that what is happening both in committee last week and here today is that we are using secondary legislation to change, albeit in a very minor way, primary legislation. That might not be legally problematic, but it is unusual. It is important that we do acknowledge the fact that it is unusual. I have been a TD for a decade. We have dealt with huge volumes of planning legislation, and it is an operation that I have never seen used before. I just want to put that on the record.

Obviously, the primary purpose of this change, as the Minister said, concerns the operative date for one of the transitional mechanisms governing county development plans and local area plans moving from the old Act into the new Act. The bit I do not understand, and I am genuinely asking the Minister to explain this in his concluding remarks, is what is the value? What do we get by changing that date? I am not questioning or challenging it. I have no reason to oppose what is in front of us. However, I do think a plain English explanation of what the benefit of this change is to the local authority in question or, indeed, to the process of material alterations to development plans that the Minister has requested and with respect to the new housing targets and zoning requirements would be very useful.

It is interesting that there is a Dáil debate and, again, this is a new procedure. In the Minister's concluding remarks, it would be useful to know why. Typically, when we deal with, for example, exempted development regulations in planning, there is a motion for it to go to committee, the committee scrutinises it and then unless there is something very controversial, the matter is just dealt as a matter of course by way of a motion without debate. Again, I am not at all suggesting that we should not have this discussion. I am just interested to understand the procedure.

The most significant thing I would like the Minister to address is about when he wrote to the local authorities at the very end of July and set out both the new housing needs demand assessment targets as well as the increased 50% headroom he is requesting.

9 o'clock

I am interested to know whether, in any way, what is here in front of us will impact or assist the local authorities in this process. In his opening remarks, and when the Minister spoke to the committee, he seemed to suggest there is some relationship but I just do not understand. It is not at all clear to me and if the Minister would explain this, it would be exceptionally helpful.

What I will say, and this is a more general comment, is that we were told by the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, that the planning and development Bill and then Act of 2024, on which myself and Deputy Richard O'Donoghue spent enormous volumes of our lives over two years, would be a once in a generation piece of planning reform. We were told the planning system would be clarified, consolidated and streamlined and then we were going to leave it alone and we were going to get away from the practice of month after month and year after year coming back and making more changes. It seems, on the basis of recent

announcements from Government, this is less likely. Having said that, we are not opposing what is in front of us but we urge the Minister to provide in his concluding remarks plain English explanations to some of the questions I have asked.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** At last week's housing committee I asked the Minister whether this Bill would lead to more homes being delivered, and he could not give me a straight answer on that or on why he was bringing these regulations forward. Is this more developer-led lobbyist-influenced policy or is it simply that there are problems that should not be there and now the Minister is trying to fix them?

To give the Minister a feel of things, there was an article in *The Irish Times* the other day by Sarah Burns about ten houses in Carrignavar that have been empty for 15 years. I have raised this in the Dáil and at the housing committee. The reason for this is that Irish Water cannot connect them to wastewater facilities. The Minister needs to be doing the things that need to be done and delivering housing, especially houses that are built. It is just not in Carrignavar but right across the State that there are houses that have been built that should be delivered. I raised with the Minister in the housing committee last week the thousands of boarded-up council houses right across the State. I asked him a straight question and, to be fair, he gave me a straight answer. It was the wrong answer but at least he was honest about it. He said he was giving no extra funding for local authorities for the boarded-up voids. He said it was a local authority issue.

Last Friday, the homeless figures came out and they were horrendous. We do not have the ability right here and now to solve the homelessness crisis but what the Minister does have the ability to do now is to fix long-term family homelessness, if he was willing to fund local authorities. There are children going into their third Christmas in emergency accommodation and the Minister has this in his power. The Minister and the Government have said they will look to end long-term homelessness by 2030. Is the Minister willing to give a commitment that if he and the Government do not do this by 2030 that he will step down as Minister? This Government made promise after promise that we knew on this side of the House were wrong and that could not be delivered. We told Darragh O'Brien, Eoghan Murphy and Simon Coveney they were wrong but we were told, no, we were wrong and they were right. Well, here we are now with the highest homeless figures in the history of the State, the highest number of homeless families and the highest number of homeless children, the highest house prices, the highest rents and the highest number of people on the social housing list. Who is wrong? We told the Government it was wrong and it is still saying it is right. Every figure in the book tells it that it is wrong. What will it take for it to admit it? I am asking the Minister a straight question and I am looking for a straight answer, and that is about the one thing the Minister can do. If the Government does not end long-term homelessness by 2030, will the Minister and this Government resign?

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** As far as I understand it, the position at the moment is that the 2000 Act is still partly in force and the 2024 Act is only partially commenced. My understanding of this is that section 4(6) of the 2024 Act allows the Minister, by regulation, to modify any provision of the Act if there is a difficulty with bringing it into operation. Such regulations cannot be made more than three years after the relevant provision has come into operation. The

unspoken assumption is that problems can only be identified in the process of bedding down a new law.

Sections 69 and 81 are both transitional provisions as far as I understand it. Section 69 states that if notice were given of the preparation of a development plan before Part 2 of the 2000 Act was repealed then that Part would continue to apply. Section 81 provided for the continuation in force of local area plans made under the 2000 Act for their stated period. Sections 69 and 81 were both deleted and replaced by provisions in the 2025 Act, which largely consisted of technical amendments. The two substitute provisions both refer to the continuing effectiveness of things done before the repeal of Part 2 of the 2000 Act. I am trying to work this out in my own head. Perhaps it has occurred to the Minister that Part 2 should not be repealed all at once, and he wants to replace a reference to things done before the repeal of Part 2 with a reference to things done before the repeal of a particular section of this Part.

It seems the Minister wants to modify not the original wording of the 2000 Act, to which, arguably, the enabling section 4(6) was intended to be confined, but to use secondary legislation to modify later wording inserted into the Act of 2025. It seems to be a bit of a stretch to argue that an uncommenced provision can be amended by legislation and then the legislation, as amended, can be overridden.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** To echo what my colleague has said, there is a need for a very clear plain language explanation of what is the rationale behind these changes. I was at the committee last week and while there is clearly a need to make changes they need to be explained. It is very frustrating for us as new TDs to come in here when we had heard from the previous Government, which the Minister was part of, that essentially the biggest piece of work on planning in decades and decades, possibly since the foundation of the State, had been done, and yet here we are now, back again, making changes that are opaque and unclear. What is the outcome going to be?

Fianna Fáil has been in control of the Ministry of housing since 2020. We are now six years in, and there are still planning issues that have not been dealt with, and I know there are more coming down the line. What it says to me is that Fianna Fáil has not taken this seriously. Neither has Fine Gael. They have not got on top of it. I read through the infrastructure plan released today and at least it had the honesty of saying that at least six of the 12 biggest barriers and blockages to the delivery of infrastructure are down to the Government itself, the State itself and how they operate, including slow processes, slow approvals and funding uncertainty. What we need to hear is what change these regulations are going to make, and particularly around the issue of land that will be zoned, as I have raised with the Minister before. We are going to zone more land for housing development but there are already significant amounts of zoned land across the country. We have 80,000 planning permissions that are not being built. The issue is not lack of zoning; it is the lack of development led by the State. We are going to inflate land prices, lead to speculation and ultimately come back to the housing needs and demands assessment, having excluded the half a million people stuck in their childhood bedrooms. Are they going to be included in the new housing needs and demand assessment? Is their housing need going to be included, and is the need of all those in hidden homelessness going to be included? These are the questions that need to be answered on this.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is the greatest cod that judicial reviews are what is delaying the development of housing and planning in this country. It is also the height of hypocrisy because we all know, when we go to community meetings where residents are up in arms over some development, the Minister's own party members will also be there giving it loads.

I attended meetings before the election. If the Minister recalls the other planning changes that were made, many developments went straight to An Bord Pleanála at the time rather than going to the local authorities, and people did not realise their local planning officials had maybe more of a connection on the ground. Now, there is this thing about judicial reviews. There are two facts. Lorcan Sirr, the housing analyst, has made it clear that only 0.22% of planning applications ever go to judicial review. It is double figures in one year for so many developments. It is not the cause of the problem. The Minister's Government and the previous government are the cause of the problem.

I will give an example of how I oppose any changes being taken to things that give residents power. Sure, we can all cite something that looks really bad that is being delayed. Unfortunately, with any law, you are going to get something you do not like, but in general, these are very important for communities to have a say. At present, I am involved in making a planning appeal to An Coimisiún Pleanála. I will not go into the details but I will mention how difficult it is for people to do that. To get a professional planning consultation, depending on the size of the application, it can be €2,500 plus VAT, for example. To get a traffic study done, it can be the same. That is a hell of a lot of money for a group of residents to raise for something they believe is fundamentally unjust, especially when you are up against a vulture fund that has so much money and power at its disposal to get all the analysts in. It is a David and Goliath battle we are talking about here. We should be very careful about agreeing to any of these changes. It is nearly always working-class communities who suffer the most because they do not have that wherewithal, professional expertise, cultural capital or whatever.

I want to cite the recent example of Blanchardstown Centre, where the owners are trying to introduce parking charges. The centre includes public facilities, such as the council office, the library, the post office and so forth. It is a vulture fund with no connection with the community, with the workers in the shops or even with the other companies there. For example, footfall in Liffey Valley went down dramatically there, loads of jobs were lost and people's hours were slashed. These things drive online shopping. They are not good for communities and, unfortunately, local authorities and so on are using these ludicrous examples of, "Well, you have a great public transport system there. Get out of your car and into the public transport." We are talking about residents being up against big vulture funds and the local authority, and Government is trying to take away even further their right to challenge things. I say this as somebody who does not object to very many developments, but sometimes you have to.

I utterly oppose this and it is being weaponised against the public good, to be frank. These changes the Minister is proposing are taking more and more power away from the small person and communities to object to proposals that are going to impact their lives severely, with no proof or correlation made that it is inhibiting development. We all know many of the developments being objected to tend to be high-rise vulture fund developments that are build to rent right beside, say, two-storey housing or, in the case of Blanchardstown, a vulture fund fleecing workers and the community for greed and nothing else. I am utterly opposed to these

changes. Government needs to get on and have its meetings with the local authorities sitting on public land banks that have not been developed for years.

There are two examples. I am very bored saying them and the Minister may be bored listening to them. The first is in Dublin West in Church Fields, which Government is now hailing as being a great development, and I agree it is very good - not perfect but good - but it was socialists in solidarity who highlighted that that land was sitting there during a housing crisis and put a lot of pressure on Fingal to develop it. Similarly, there is another huge land bank up the road in Dunsink, Elm Green, in Scribblestown, which could provide thousands of houses. Government needs to have meetings with councils on those land banks and get them developed because they will be the game changers in the housing crisis, not things like judicial reviews and curbing people's power to object to things that are justifiable to object to.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I said to the Minister earlier that I would pray if somebody would start to listen and I am going to give him a small bit of prayers. This is from the point of view of the part in the Bill that brings in developer-led infrastructure. Why am I so glad that is going to be introduced and that Government is looking at and encouraging this? I will tell you why. When you bring a business model into a development, you can then use the costing of that delivery of infrastructure and put it against the likes of Uisce Éireann and what it is delivering. It creates a competition network where you can actually see how much it is costing, how much it can be delivered for, and look at the likes of Uisce Éireann and ask why it is costing more for it to develop something that is the same. That is what I welcome.

The only way we are going to see ourselves out of a housing crisis is a business model. Accountability for building on budget and on time is the only way. I am in business all my life. I have said it here that I do not do any Government contracts and never have, but I am building all my life and I am accountable for the work we do, for the people who work with me and for their families, and to make sure at the end of the year that the business lasts into the following year. This model is the only way we are going to get out of a housing crisis. It is developer-led infrastructure where the business model is used against our departmental models to show what we can deliver, even on systems where we can come up with a system for even hospital building.

Somebody rang me today to say they are getting a house built by Murphy's New Homes. They can go to a catalogue, pick out the house and they can deliver it cheaper because it is out of a catalogue. It is the same; you pick this house, this house, this house. That is why it is delivery on budget and on time.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I suppose any movement is to be welcomed if we are going to make changes that are desperately needed regarding the housing market. We need to support any measure that can do that as long as it is a common-sense issue.

The problem I have is where the changes are going to be made. Sometimes, even before you go ahead anywhere, you have to go back. If you look at the actions of Uisce Éireann, we have waste treatment plants all over the country bursting at the seams and into waters and rivers everywhere. How do we intend to improve there? Those towns, whether it is Dunmanway, Shannonvale, Clonakilty, Ballydehob, Rosscarbery or Gully, to pick a few in west Cork, are pouring raw sewage into the tide and local public parks. There are no extra houses going to be

built there, so where is this plan going to work? Are the planning guidelines going to change for people who want to get one-off planning? I was with someone the other day in this position and mother of God, we spent an hour and a half with the architect. The conditions put on the person were frightening. They wanted to build a lovely little timber, three-bedroom house. It is not going to happen. They were told they could not do certain things and they had to draw up various reports. Before I left, I had figured out that he had already spent €30,000 and had not even a shovel put in the ground yet. We have a real crisis in this country. I know the Minister is trying to improve things. First of all, we need to make these Government bodies accountable to people in some way and accountable to public representatives. I look at the case of Aghadoe, where residents have had 14 bursts in their mains water supply since July. This has resulted in closures in the local crèche, the local school and, obviously, tourism businesses. Not once has the Government shared and come back and said to us that it will try to resolve the issue with us.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. I welcome this amendment in relation to variations of the local development plan. It is a practical step and it shows a level of flexibility regarding planning, which has become increasingly inflexible. While we are discussing this, I ask the Minister to consider allowing local councillors and local authorities more autonomy and more responsibility in relation to development plans and the direction of the areas. Councillors stand for election and are elected by local communities to represent them and provide a vision for their area. Increasingly, the entire local development plan is laden down with rules and bureaucracy and is actually overseen by the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR. I believe this is wrong and is actually stifling development in some areas. There is a housing development on the Killala Road in Ballina that was not allowed to proceed as a result of the housing, or population, ceiling that was built into the local development plan. This development plan and the ceiling were dictated by the OPR. If we were allowed more subsidiarity in relation to this, I think we would not have had that problem in Mayo. I ask the Minister to consider allowing councillors and local authorities more power in relation to development plans.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** Earlier on, I was talking about the fact that all newly development rezoned areas should be SDZs to try to tie in facilities and infrastructure. As regards taking away some community input by fast-tracking the process, I see the need to fast-track the process but we still have to have the input and we still have to allow it in some way. A lot of the times that An Bord Pleanála, now An Coimisiún Pleanála, dragged on were not because of any particular objection, but because the objection process and the planning process would be nine weeks together. People should be able to have their say.

In looking at developments going forward, there needs to be some sort of tie-in with facilities and infrastructure that makes it mandatory on Government agencies and Departments to guarantee that train stations will be open, capacity will be provided, schools will be built and bus routes will actually be planned on the map, ready to go with the NTA, before any housing construction commences. We had a situation where €4 million was spent redeveloping Kishoge train station because it never opened in 2009 as was planned. A car park that was supposed to be put in place ended up being developed instead. This was a complete waste of taxpayers' money, whereas if they had made sure that no house could be built until the train station was open, I guarantee that train station would have been opened straight away.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I am glad to have the opportunity to speak here this evening. There are a few points I would like to make. First of all, I think the Minister is doing a good job. It is a very difficult Department. I think everyone would acknowledge this, including predecessors who have held the position. The Minister has made a good start and I hope he succeeds in all areas that he is seeking to lead out on.

I want to speak about the lack of uniformity in council development plans. I was a county councillor in Clare for 16 years before getting elected to Dáil Éireann. There is a total lack of uniformity in terms of how different counties and jurisdictions classify a local, rural person or a social need. Even the definition of what is a farmer can be different. In some counties, it is enough to have a herd number and to be actively farming, while in others it must make up a majority of the household income. This does not recognise the fact that, in many farm families, one or two people have to go out and work in the PAYE sector or the private environment to supplement income. There is a total lack of uniformity in terms of what policy areas are and there is a lack of uniformity on the definition of ribbon development.

Across the board, I think it would be wonderful to see uniformity brought to all of this. I have often been bemused when I hear people talking about the number of houses that need to be built. If policies were right and the climate was right and development was right, a lot of these houses would not be built on the buck of the Government, so to speak. We would be facilitating people to build one-off rural homes and we would be facilitating developers to build small developments. The Minister has done really good work on developer-led sewerage infrastructure recently. If policy is right, I think a lot of the housing builds itself organically without too much State intervention, so I hope all of that can happen.

I concur with what others have said about developer-led infrastructure. I bought my own home in 2006. At the time, in my small community, there were three housing estates all being finished around the same time. All had show houses and there was a choice. With that, the market was buoyant and people could get a bit of value and could negotiate, but there has been no development there ever since. All developments in 2006 in my area had developer-led sewerage infrastructure. They had what we as local councillors called package treatment plants. The sewage was pumped to a facility in a corner of the site where it was treated. It became a dirty term afterwards. When Irish Water and, indeed, local authorities came into play, they did not want to know about package treatment plants because they were seen as being troublesome. We are nearly 20 years on from that. Infrastructure has moved on light years and I am glad that the Minister made a policy change in that regard in recent weeks.

I have a major concern at the moment. I stood up here in the past month in three different Dáil debates and I flagged that An Coimisiún Pleanála had a huge amount of in-house expertise in planning. Sure, why would it not? It is the supreme authority when it comes to all matters of planning. However, I made the point that it had no in-house expertise whatsoever in the realms of air safety, avionics, radar and all of those things. These are not run-of-the-mill planning matters. Rather, they are really specialised fields. I raised the lack of in-house expertise at An Coimisiún Pleanála with the Minister and the Taoiseach. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, took it another day during questions on promised legislation. The upshot of all of that was around a week and a half after one of my debates here in the Dail, I got a letter from An Coimisiún Pleanála stating that it had hired as an adviser an independent expert on air safety. I am my party's spokesperson on aviation. To my mind, there is only one independent

expert on air safety in this country, that is, the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, on D'Olier Street. That is where the buck stops. It is the regulator that sets the safety standards for Ireland. It is not just the planes that take off from Dublin, Shannon, Cork and Knock. Some 90% of flights between America and Europe pass over Irish airspace each day. They pay money to the State, so there is a dividend for the Government, but overall this is about air safety. The IAA is the only authority. However, An Coimisiún Pleanála flatly ignored the Irish Aviation Authority and hired a consultancy company from Britain named Sagentia Aviation. I am sure Sagentia Aviation has much expertise and is a fine company. However, one can easily find a page on the company's website on which it boasts about having helped over 300 wind farm companies get their planning across the line. I do not know, so I am posing the question rather than accusing. Is a company that boasts about this independent enough to be able to advise our State planning authority on matters relating to air safety and wind turbines next door to radars? Is the company qualified to do that? What due diligence did An Coimisiún Pleanála undertake to hire the company? What has it cost the taxpayer? It is a crying sin when we have a whole five-storey building on D'Olier Street with all of the air safety experts. They have been overlooked to hire a consultancy company in Britain. It is not the Minister's fault but someone from An Coimisiún Pleanála has to answer these questions. I have asked this question in the Dáil and I asked it again in the past week with a letter to An Coimisiún Pleanála, written in anger last Saturday night, and I am still awaiting an answer. It is fundamentally wrong to override the State body that is the supreme power when it comes to air safety. The reason I bring this up is because of the debate that has been going on here all day and all last week about wind energy. That is a debate in its own right. There is a spectrum of views on that issue in this House. The one thing I can tell Members, and I can share those documents with the Minister, is that the Irish Aviation Authority has said that in general it has no problem with wind energy, but it has a major health and air safety concern when planning permission for wind turbines is applied for in close proximity to primary or secondary radar. The pinging signal from the magnetron goes up, pings off an aircraft and positions it on the screen of air traffic controller. The accuracy of that positioning on screen cannot be guaranteed if there is a 180 m turbine blade spinning in close proximity. It is all very technical, but the IAA has raised a big red flag. It is the supreme authority on air safety. It says that it is not safe. What does An Coimisiún Pleanála do? It overrode this and granted planning permission for one wind farm in east Clare. It has now brought in a consultant from Britain. Something is radically wrong here.

During an earlier debate on housing, I mentioned the damage a €20 objection fee can do. It is like throwing a grenade at a planning application. The application could be for a multimillion euro bridge, bypass, hospital wing or whatever. It could be a major housing scheme that would cost millions of euro to develop, but the damage that a €20 objection can do is immense. During that debate, we were goaded by Deputy Ruth Coppinger. What she did not tell anyone was that during the time she was not in the Dáil, she opposed and objected, with a €20 note, to 211 apartments in Clonsilla. She was slagging off different politicians here earlier. It is wrong to deny 211 people a home for a €20 objection fee. It is fundamentally wrong.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It depends on what it is.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** It is incongruent with what the Deputy said earlier.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Duine amháin.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** It was all about getting a little TikTok clip for her social media earlier but-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** No, it was not.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** -----the Deputy has done huge damage to the housing needs of the people in Dublin West.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** No.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** She has done huge damage and-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Duine amháin.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Should people not have the right to object to any development?

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** In true wild west style-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Gabh mo leithscéal, a theachta.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** -----she dropped her grenade and she walked out of the Chamber.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** She objects, and then comes in here giving out about there being no houses.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Duine amháin, go raibh maith agaibh.

**Deputy James Browne:** The technical regulations before us do a very simple thing.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Gabh mo leithscéal, duine amháin.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is usually a Fianna Fáil member who objects.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** We are not objecting to houses.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that object to houses.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Gabh mo leithscéal, duine amháin.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Deputy Coppinger is a serial objector.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Má tá na Teachtaí ag iarraidh gearán nó comhrá a dhéanamh lena chéile, is féidir leo dul amach. Tá an tAire ina sheasamh agus ag críochnú na díospóireachta.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** There was something said that was not true. I am not a serial objector to housing.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** While the regulations before the House are very technical, what we effectively did was allow local authorities to commence variations under the existing 2000 Act as that is what they are familiar with, rather than commence the rest of Part 3 of the 2024 Act. As they have in some cases commenced certain variations, we need to have a transitional measure put in so that those variations that have commenced will not have to be restarted again when the rest of Part 3 of the 2024 Act commences. It is in the interest of the efficiency and effectiveness of our local authorities so that they can do what is necessary in terms of rezoning.

Question put.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Vótáil

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** In accordance with Standing Order 87, as the required number of tellers have not been appointed for the Níl side, I declared the question carried.

Question declared carried.

### Estimates for Public Services 2025

**Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I move the following Further Revised Estimate:

Vote 29 — Climate, Energy and the Environment (Further Revised Estimate).

That a sum not exceeding €980,504,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote put and agreed to.

**Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move the following Supplementary Estimates:

Vote 7 — Office of the Minister for Finance (Supplementary Estimate).

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Finance, including the Paymaster General's Office, for certain services administered by the Office of the Minister and for payment of certain grants.

**Vote 9 — Office of the Revenue Commissioners (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, including certain other services administered by that Office.

**Vote 11 — Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €800,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, for certain services administered by the Office of the Minister and for payment of certain grants.

**Vote 13 — Office of Public Works (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €34,553,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of Public Works; for services administered by that Office and for payment of certain grants and for the recoupment of certain expenditure.

**Vote 14 — State Laboratory (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,172,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the State Laboratory.

**Vote 17 — Public Appointments Service (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Public Appointments Service.

**Vote 18 — National Shared Services Office (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the National Shared Services Office.

**Vote 26 — Education and Youth (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €567,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Education and Youth, for certain services administered by that Office, and for the payments of certain grants.

**Vote 28 — Foreign Affairs and Trade (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €145,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and for certain services administered by that Office, including grants and contributions to International Organisations.

**Vote 30 — Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €98,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain grants and subsidies and for the payment of certain grants under cash-limited schemes.

**Vote 31 — Transport (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €208,900,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Transport, including certain services administered by that Office, for payment of certain grants and certain other services.

**Vote 32 — Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, including certain services administered by that Office, for the payment of certain subsidies and grants and for the payment of certain grants under cashlimited schemes.

**Vote 33 — Culture, Communications and Sport (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €42,658,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies and grants.

**Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €298,987,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage including grants to Local Authorities, grants and other expenses in connection with housing, water services, miscellaneous schemes, subsidies, grants and payment of certain grants under cash-limited schemes.

**Vote 36 — Defence (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €19,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Defence, including certain services administered by that Office; for the pay and expenses of the Defence Forces; and for payment of certain grants.

**Vote 37 — Social Protection (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €261,412,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Social Protection, for certain services administered by that Office, for payments to the Social Insurance Fund, for certain grants and including payments under cash-limited schemes administered by that Office.

**Vote 38 — Health (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €302,097,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025 for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Health and certain other services administered by that Office, including grants to the Health Service Executive and miscellaneous grants.

**Vote 40 — Children, Disability and Equality (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €213,706,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, for certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants.

**Vote 42 — Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht including certain services administered by that Office and for the payment of grants.

**Vote 45 — Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Supplementary Estimate).**

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €91,312,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for certain services administered by that Office, and for payments of certain grants.

Votes put and agreed to.

**Credit Institutions (Financial Support) (Revocation) Scheme 2025: Motion**

**Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Scheme in draft:

Credit Institutions (Financial Support) (Revocation) Scheme 2025,

a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd December, 2025.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 73; Níl, 62; Staon, 2.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	Healy-Rae, Danny.
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	Heneghan, Barry.
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGrath, Mattie.	

Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
Nolan, Carol.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connor, James.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

**Credit Institutions (Eligible Liabilities Guarantee) (Revocation) Scheme 2025: Motion**

**Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Scheme in draft:

Credit Institutions (Eligible Liabilities Guarantee) (Revocation) Scheme 2025,  
a copy of which was laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 2nd December, 2025.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 64; Staon, 1.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	Heneghan, Barry.
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	

Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

**Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025:  
Referral to Joint Committee**

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I move:

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

Planning and Development (Exempted Development (Act of 2000)) Regulations 2025, a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 27th November, 2025, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 103(5), which, not later than 17th December, 2025, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 110, and Standing Order 109(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put and agreed to.

**Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Brian Stanley 27 November 2025: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann 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."

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth)

**Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2024, which took place on Thursday, 27 November 2025. On the question, "That the amendment to the motion be made", a division was claimed, and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 75; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Stاون
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	

Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heydon, Martin.	Murphy, Paul.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nash, Ged.	
Lawless, James.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		

O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Brian Stanley and Seamus Healy.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 73; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	

Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Brian Stanley and Seamus Healy.

Question declared carried.

**Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks  
(Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed)**

**Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Bill 2025, taken on Tuesday, 2 December 2025. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 73; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Stاون
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	

Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Neville, Joe.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connor, James.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Charles.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Charles Ward and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

### **Irish Coast Guard Search and Rescue Services: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy David Cullinane on Tuesday, 2 December 2025:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the Irish Coast Guard's search and rescue (SAR) helicopter service serves a vital role in saving lives at sea and supporting emergency responses across the State;
- SAR air crews are required to work 24-hour shifts, yet these shifts are being recorded as only 16.5 hours of duty time under Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) approvals; and
- this under-recording arises from "factoring" schemes, normally applied only to standby or reserve crews, which reduce a full 24-hour continuous duty period to 16 hours and 30 minutes on paper;

recognises:

- the dedication and professionalism of Coast Guard SAR crews, who protect coastal communities across Ireland;
- that SAR crews are required to be fully deployable within minutes throughout the entire 24-hour period, meaning the time cannot reasonably be classified as rest time; and
- the necessity of ensuring strict compliance with all working-time, safety, and fatigue-management regulations;

expresses its full support for Coast Guard SAR crews and affirms their right to safe, fair and legally compliant working conditions; and

calls on the Minister for Transport and the Irish Aviation Authority to:

- urgently review the system of recording SAR crew working hours;
- ensure full compliance with S.I. No. 507/2006, Council Directive 2000/79/EC, and all relevant European Union (EU) and national safety legislation;
- end the use of factoring schemes, that prevent accurate recording of the full 24-hour working period undertaken by SAR crews; and
- ensure that working time, not merely duty time, is properly recorded and regulated in accordance with EU law.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

- the provision of an effective Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) service is critical to Ireland as an island nation with a strong maritime sector, and the sector depends on the reliability and professionalism of the Irish Coast Guard and all its component parts, including Coast Guard helicopter crews; and

— the aviation service contract allows the Coast Guard to meet its obligations as prescribed in the National Search and Rescue Plan, the National Maritime Oil/HNS Spill Contingency Plan and its capacity to support other State agencies, in particular inland SAR support to An Garda Síochána and provision of Air Ambulance services to the Health Service Executive, including day and night support to the island communities;

recognises that:

— the continued delivery of safe, efficient, and effective aviation services for the Irish Coast Guard is the overarching priority for the Government;

— the safety of SAR crews, in particular, is of paramount concern; and

— the introduction of new Fatigue Risk Management Systems, and enhanced crew rest facilities, under the new contract, provide a step-change in ensuring continued SAR crew safety and wellbeing; and

accepts that:

— by law, matters pertaining to working hours, flight time limitations, and shift patterns of SAR crew are entirely a matter for the Irish Aviation Authority, as per their regulatory remit; and

— as such, these specific matters are *de facto* outside the remit of the Minister for Transport."

-(Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Alan Dillon)

**Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the Coast Guard. On Tuesday, 2 December on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staan
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	

Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connor, James.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Stanley, Brian.	

O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Richmond, Neale.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brophy, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	

Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawless, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Lawless, James.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Martin, Micheál.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Nolan, Carol.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quaide, Liam.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connor, James.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Wall, Mark.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.	Ward, Charles.	
Richmond, Neale.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Emer Currie and Paul McAuliffe; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

**Trans Healthcare: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Marie Sherlock on 3 December, 2025.

That Dáil Éireann:

recalls that it is now a decade since the passage of the Gender Recognition Act 2015;

notes that:

— trans healthcare in Ireland is consistently ranked as the worst in Europe, with over 2,000 people on a waiting list for healthcare;

— stories from transgender people constantly highlight how Ireland's flawed healthcare system is not working, with invasive and insensitive scrutiny from the current National Gender Service; and

— the previous Programme for Government committed to a stronger model for trans healthcare in line with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) international best practice guidelines, but the current Programme for Government has watered down those commitments to the point where they are meaningless;

recognises that:

— there is a need to change the current approach to transgender healthcare in Ireland; and

— the Health Service Executive has initiated a new clinical programme for gender healthcare, is developing an updated clinical model, and has established a Clinical Advisory Group; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide a model of gender-affirming care in primary care settings, with a focus on General Practitioner-led (GP) care, based on informed consent as per WPATH and world Health Organization guidelines, and international best practice;

— replace the National Gender Service with a new national clinical programme for trans healthcare in Ireland, with integrated care pathways, recognising a key role for GPs, and the major need for recruitment of specialists providing gender affirming care;

— ensure that the new national clinical programme:

— is developed in collaboration with transgender people;

— has specific responsibility and oversight for governance and training, alongside ensuring transgender healthcare is based on informed patient consent;

— provides comprehensive training for healthcare professionals in gender-affirming care;

— has a comprehensive network of GP's providing that care in primary care community-based settings; and

- further provides appropriate resourcing of specialist gender affirming care and the expansion of gender affirming surgical services, so that the majority of trans persons requiring surgery do not have to travel abroad;
- confirm a timeline for the introduction of the new clinical programme for trans healthcare;
- establish guidance and facilities to allow for trans healthcare for young people aged under 18;
- implement a ban on conversion therapies that is inclusive of trans identities and healthcare;
- implement the recommendations of the 2018 Government Review of the Gender Recognition Act 2015, including to allow for the recognition of non-binary people and simplified non-medicalised gender recognition for young people under 18; and
- ensure that the bodily autonomy of intersex children and adults is respected.

**Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding trans healthcare. On Wednesday, 3 December, 2025 on the question, "That the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now. Will the Deputies claiming a division please rise?

*Deputies Michael Collins, Michael Fitzmaurice, Danny Healy-Rae, Paul Lawless, Carol Nolan, Richard O'Donoghue and Peadar Tóibín rose.*

**Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** As fewer than ten Members have risen, I declare the question carried. In accordance with Standing Order 87, the names of the Deputies dissenting will be recorded in the Journal of the Proceedings of the Dáil.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.45 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 4 Nollaig 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.45 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Thursday, 4 December 2025.