



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 4 Nollaig 2025

Thursday, 4 December 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Pleanáil Teanga

1. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht cén stádas atá ag na pleananna teanga i ngach Limistéar Pleanála Gaeltachta agus Baile Seirbhíse Gaeltachta; agus cén obair atá ar siúl chun an chéad ghlúin eile pleananna a fhorbairt; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [68522/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Is maith an áit í tosú ag uimhir a haon. Tá ceist atá agam don Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta, an Teachta Calleary, mar gheall ar an stádas atá ag na pleananna teanga in gach limistéar pleanála Gaeltachta agus bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta. Cén obair atá ar siúl chun an chéad ghlúin eile do phleananna a fhorbairt? An ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh sin agus i dtaobh na moille atá i gceist le cuid de na pleananna sin?

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist. Is é an sprioc atá leis an bpróiseas pleanála teanga ná an Ghaeilge a láidriú mar theanga phobail. Déantar é seo trí phleananna teanga a fheidhmiú i limistéir aitheanta a chuirfidh le húsáid na Gaeilge i réimsí áirithe sa phobal, mar shampla, sa teaghlach, i measc na hóige, sa chóras oideachais, san earnáil ghnó agus san earnáil phoiblí. Cuirtear tacaíocht ar fáil do na pobail leis na pleananna sin a chur i bhfeidhm agus fostaítear oifigigh phleanála teanga, OPT, le tabhairt faoin obair sin.

Ceadaítear maoiniú ar bhonn bliantúil do 29 ceanneagraíochta pleanála teanga leis na pleananna teanga atá faofa do 26 limistéar pleanála teanga, LPT, agus dhá bhaile seirbhíse Gaeltachta, BSG, a fheidhmiú faoi scáth Údarás na Gaeltachta. Mar chuid den mhaoiniú sin, ceadaítear do na ceanneagraíochtaí OPT amháin, nó beirt i gcásanna áirithe, a fhostú. Faoi láthair, tá ceadanna in áit le 35 OPT a fhostú sna 26 LPT agus dhá BSG.

Faoi scáth Fhoras na Gaeilge, tá seacht mbaile seirbhíse Gaeltachta taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht agus trí líonra Gaeilge ag feidhmiú. Anuas air sin, tá feidhmiú dhá líonra Gaeilge neamhreachtúil á mhaoiniú ag Foras na Gaeilge ar an taobh ó thuaidh den Teorainn, is iad sin, Carn Tóchair agus iarthar Bhéal Feirste.

Tá ról lárnach ag na hoifigigh phleanála teanga sa phróiseas phleanála teanga. Tá na hoifigigh phleanála teanga fostaithe ag na ceanneagraíochtaí éagsúla, ní hamháin sa limistéir phleanála teanga Ghaeltachta ach i mbailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta agus líonraí Gaeilge araon. Is iad na hoifigigh phleanála teanga atá freagrach as cur i bhfeidhm bhearta an phlean teanga faoina gcúram. Cuireann siad an Ghaeilge chun cinn, eagraíonn siad imeachtaí cultúrtha, cuireann siad acmhainní agus tacaíochtaí ar fáil d'fhoghlaimeoirí, agus bíonn siad rannpháirteach leis an bpobal agus na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge a bhíonn ag obair sna ceantair phleanála teanga.

Tá sé i gceist go mbeidh na pleananna atá in éag cheana féin nó a bheidh ag dul in éag idir seo agus deireadh 2025 bailí go deireadh na bliana 2027 nó go dtí go n-aontófar pleananna nua, cibé acu is luaithe. Beidh aon phlean a théann in éag tar éis an 31 Nollaig 2025 bailí go ceann bhliain tar éis dó dul in éag nó go dtí go n-aontófar plean nua, cibé acu is luaithe.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an gcuid sin dá fhreagra. Tá dea-obair ar bun ag na hoifigigh phleanála teanga agus na ceanneagraíochtaí. Bhí mé féin mar oifigeach phleanála teanga i nGaeltacht na nDéise tráth dá raibh. Feictear go bhfuil fás ag teacht ar líon na gcainteoirí Gaeilge laethúla i go leor limistéar phleanála teanga. Tá líon na nGaeltachtaí a bhfuil fás ag teacht orthu ag dul in airde de réir an daonáirimh is déanaí, ach tá moill i Roinn an Aire agus sa chóras. Tá ocht bplean tagtha chun deiridh. Tá plean amháin críochnaithe le trí bliana agus tá síneadh ama curtha leis. Ní fheictear go bhfuil aon dul chun cinn i dtaobh na bpleananna nua a fhorbairt. Tá seacht gcinn sa bhreis ag teacht chun deiridh i mbliana, rud a chiallaíonn go mbeidh 15 plean teanga as feidhm ag deireadh na bliana seo. Caithfidh muid an ghlúin nua de phleananna nua a chur i gcrích gan a thuilleadh moille. Bhí a fhios againn go maireann na pleananna seo seacht mbliana agus go raibh deireadh ag teacht leo. Ba cheart go ndéanfaí an obair seo cheana féin. Tá mé ag impí ar an Aire dul i ngleic leis an bhfadhb seo agus an mhoill a sheachaint.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá brón orm nach raibh seans agam mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta as a chuid oibre mar oifigeach phleanála teanga. Mar a dúirt mé, tá sé i gceist go mbeidh na pleananna atá in éag cheana féin, nó iad siúd a bheidh ag dul in éag idir seo agus deireadh na bliana seo, bailí go deireadh na bliana 2027 nó go dtí go n-aontófar pleananna nua, cibé acu is luaithe. Beidh aon phlean a théann in éag tar éis dheireadh mhí na Nollag 2025 bailí go ceann dhá bhliain tar éis dó dul in éag nó go dtí go n-aontófar plean nua, cibé acu is luaithe. Tuigim go bhfuil moill ann agus tá muid ag dul i ngleic leis an moill sin. Beidh €3 milliún bhreise sa bhuiséad le haghaidh an phróisis phleanála in 2026. Tá mé ag obair le hoifigigh na Roinne ar an moill agus bhí cruinniú ag oifigigh mo Roinne ar thaobh Oireachtas na Samhna i mBéal Feirste leis na hoifigigh phleanála teanga chun cúrsaí a phlé, idir cúrsaí buiséid agus eile.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as é sin a admháil agus an obair atá ag dul ar aghaidh. Creidim go bhfuil obair ag dul ar aghaidh sa Roinn le dul i ngleic leis seo. I ndáiríre, ní rud maith é go bhfuil muid sa riocht seo. Ba cheart go seachnófaí é seo

tamall ó shín. Caithfimid a admháil chomh maith go bhfuil fadhbanna le héiginnteacht. Tá sé go maith go bhfuil na pleananna chun a bheith sínte go dtí deireadh 2027 agus go mbeidh siad fós bailí agus a leithéid, ach caithfimid tuiscint go bhfuil difríocht idir an stádas agus an riocht ina bhfuil na ceantair Ghaeltachta ar an talamh anois i gcomparáid le seacht mbliana ó shín. Tá rudaí tar éis athrú. Tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta, mar is eol don Aire, tar éis dul in olcas ó shin, mar shampla. Tá éiginnteacht ann i gcomhar na noifigeach phleanála teanga. Tá sé deacair do na ceanneagraíochtaí iad a chóiméad ina gcuid post nó iad a earcú chun na poist a líonadh. Anuas air sin, i dtaobh chúrsaí tithíochta de, tá Conradh na Gaeilge agus grúpaí eile nach é ag iarraidh go mbeadh straitéis daonra agus tithíochta i ngach limistéir phleanála teanga. Ba cheart go mbeadh sé sin fite fuaite leis na pleananna teanga. Ba cheart go mbeadh an dá rud ag dul ar aghaidh ag an am céanna le chéile leis an taithí agus eolas céanna ag dul isteach sa straitéis agus phlean.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar a dúirt mé sa fhreagra, tá an t-uafás oibre ar siúl ag na hoifigigh phleanála teanga. Baineann cuid den scéal agus fuinnimh atá sa teanga lena gcuid oibre. Tá siad an-láidir sa scéal sin. Tuigim go mór an brú atá orthu agus ar na ceanneagraíochtaí, ach tá muid ag foghlaim agus muid ag cur an clár seo ar siúl sa tír. As an bhfoghlaim agus an cleachtadh sin, beimid in ann rudaí a dhéanamh níos fearr. Tuigim an brú atá ar na hoifigigh phleanála teanga agus na ceanneagraíochtaí, go háirithe ó thaobh oifigigh phleanála teanga a chóiméad. Tuigim freisin na fadhbanna atá ann ó thaobh tithíochta de. Tá siad go léir ceangailte agus tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil tuiscint ar an gceangal sin, ní hamháin ag mo Roinn – cé go bhfuil sé sin tábhachtach – ach ag Ranna eile, lena n-áirítear na Ranna oideachais agus tithíochta. Beimid ag plé na geleachtaí ón athbhreithniú le hAire eile, ní hamháin i mo Roinn féin. Tá suim mhór agam sa phróiseas seo. Tá suim mhór agam cleachtaí a fhoghlaim as an obair atá déanta go dtí seo agus leanúint ar aghaidh leis na hoifigigh phleanála teanga, na ceanneagraíochtaí agus ceanneagraíochtaí breise freisin.

Departmental Schemes

2. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if budget 2026 allocated any additional funding to the senior alerts scheme; if so, if this includes an expanded list of equipment such as assistive technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68382/25]

Deputy Mark Wall: Given the importance of the seniors alert scheme to so many people, will the Minister of State confirm whether budget 2026 has allocated any additional funding to it, and if so, whether that includes an expanded list of equipment, such as assistive technology?

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for his very important question and ongoing commitment to this particular area. When we were in the Seanad together, he raised this on many occasions. As he knows, our Department is responsible for the seniors alert scheme, which encourages community support for older people through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. Funding is available under the scheme for the purchase, by a registered community-based organisation, of a personal alarm or pendant. Since the scheme

was launched in 2015, 156,488 participants have been approved for the alarms, including over 15,000 this year, and since 2015, 4,819 people from Kildare have availed of the scheme.

My Department is reviewing all aspects of the seniors alert scheme, including the technology and services available, and I hope to launch a new iteration of the scheme in 2026. Any new iteration of the scheme will take into account the learnings from recent weather events - we heard this morning about Storm Éowyn being the most googled term this year - and will also have regard to modern technological advancements to ensure the most reliable, robust devices available are procured.

The budget for 2025 is €3.2 million and this allocation has been maintained for next year, with additional funding allocated as necessary from the Dormant Accounts Fund. As the Deputy knows, the seniors alert scheme is a demand-led scheme and to date everybody who has applied to the scheme and meets the eligibility criteria has been approved. We and our officials in the Department will continue to monitor funding to ensure all eligible applicants can avail of the scheme.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State very much for his reply.

9 o'clock

We are all aware of the importance of the seniors alert scheme. It has been a life-saving scheme for many people, not just in rural communities but also in urban areas. I am glad to hear that so many people have taken it up since it was launched in 2015, and that the Department is launching a new scheme in 2026.

In launching the new scheme in 2026, has the Department looked at those technologies we were asking about? The Minister of State mentioned weather alerts and so on. Unfortunately, much of that is dependent on electricity, and there have been outages. For older people in particular, when there is an outage and the electricity is gone, they have no contact with the outside world. That is where modern technologies need to play their part.

An important aspect of the scheme is the house alarm, which would give people security. The pendant is great, but it is about deterring those who might want to enter a house for illegal activity. A house alarm would benefit many people, particularly in rural areas.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy raises a pertinent point. The Department and its officials, in the review, are very conscious of new technological advances. However, the review will provide an opportunity to consider not just technological advancements but how to broaden the reach of the scheme to more vulnerable and older people. I will give the Deputy a flavour of it. The review has seen engagement with Pobal, telecoms operators, technology consultants and representative bodies for older people. In addition, on the Deputy's point concerning the storm's effect on electricity and broadband, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has been in consultation with Eir and ComReg on the replacement of the copper networks with fibre, which is another important part.

The one thing we want to do is keep the scheme broad and open. We must be conscious that we cannot do anything that, as the Deputy said, would regress the scheme or create uncertainty.

There is an impact due to the broadening of technology. We have to work to make sure we do not negate the scheme for the people who require it more than anybody else.

Deputy Mark Wall: I totally agree. This has been a great scheme. I thank the Government for the allocations to date. When I was a councillor in Kildare, we looked at other schemes. One of those was a public light or a light outside the door for people in rural areas, and we gave some funding from the LPT towards that. It was very beneficial. That is the type of scheme I would like to see included under the seniors alert scheme to ensure that older people, particularly in rural but also in urban areas, have that bit of security, whether it is a light, an alarm or assistive technology. We should keep our minds open, as the Minister of State said. Many schemes are being administered by local authorities, including in Kildare. They have benefited so many people, whether it is the house alarm or the additional light outside the door so they can see who is out there. The scheme really has been beneficial. Indeed, it has been life-saving for many people. Given the open mind that the Government has, I hope it can look at other schemes and other areas to ensure that older people have the quality of life they deserve, and that they all should have in their golden years.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will take the Deputy's point back, including the example he raised. What we envisage is that the scheme will take into account the use of modern technology to ensure that people who are vulnerable or older and require the alarm are not left isolated on regular days, or on extreme weather days where power and communications are down. An extensive consultative process is ongoing with the representative groups.

There is a potential impact given the replacement of the copper infrastructure, which is going to happen because it has to. We will have to phase that out, along with the use of remaining legacy devices. What we want to do, and are committed to doing as part of the review, is ensure that we include new technologies and broaden the target demographic, while ensuring there will be no negative impact due to what we do. The next iteration of the scheme will take into account the new advancements in technology and ensure that people who require the seniors alert alarm will have it. In particular, as the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I have discussed, it is important that during extreme weather events, people will not be isolated in their own homes.

Cúrsaí Tithíochta

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an bhfuil sé i gceist aige aon deontais a chur ar fáil arís de réir Acht na dTithe (Gaeltacht) (Leasú), 2001 chun dul i ngleic leis an ngéarchéim tithíochta; agus an bhfuil sé tar éis an chumhacht seo a phlé leis an Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht. [68523/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Faoi Acht na dTithe (Gaeltacht) (Leasú), 2001, tá cumhachtaí ar leith ag an Aire. An bhfuil sé sásta na cumhachtaí sin a úsáid? An bhfuil sé tar éis a bheith i dteagmháil leis an Aire tithíochta chun go mbeidh sé ar an eolas faoi na cumhachtaí seo agus gur féidir leis an Aire deontais ar leith a thabhairt do dhaoine atá ag iarraidh a bheith ina gcónaí sa Ghaeltacht?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim go maith na dúshláin atá ann i gceantair Ghaeltachta tithíocht a chur ar fáil ar phraghas réasúnta do dhaoine áitiúla. Is dúshlán é seo a ghabhann níos leithne ná an Ghaeltacht féin ach tuigim go mór an brú atá ar cheantair Ghaeltachta. Agus é sin ráite, níl sé i gceist ag mo Roinn ag an bpointe seo na scéimeanna tithíochta faoi Achtanna na dTithe (Gaeltachta), a cuireadh ar athló roinnt blianta ó shin, a thabhairt ar ais. Ó cuireadh na scéimeanna sin ar athló, tá scéimeanna eile bunaithe ag an Rialtas le tacú leo siúd atá ag iarraidh tithe a cheannach nó a thógáil. Mar go bhfuil na tacaíochtaí atá ar fáil faoi na scéimeanna nua seo níos flaithiúla ó thaobh airgid de ná na scéimeanna tithíochta faoi Achtanna na dTithe (Gaeltachta), is é tuairim mheáite mo Roinne nach bhfuil gá iad a athsheoladh ag an bpointe seo.

Tá an méid atá geallta i bplean tithíochta an Rialtais don Ghaeltacht soiléir. Anuas ar na scéimeanna tacaíochta náisiúnta a bheidh ar fáil don phobal i gcoitinne, tá sé geallta go bhfoilseofar ráiteas náisiúnta pleanála don Ghaeltacht sa chéad leath de 2027 agus go n-oibreoidh Údarás na Gaeltachta i gcomhar le hUisce Éireann agus na húdaráis áitiúla chun na féidearthachtaí a bhaineann le suíomhanna seirbhísithe a bheadh feiliúnach do thithíocht a fhiosrú. Anuas air sin, tabharfaidh an Bille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 cumhachtaí nua d'Údarás na Gaeltachta talamh a chur ar fáil ó phunann maoine na heagraíochta le haghaidh tithíochta do chainteoirí Gaeilge i gceantair Ghaeltachta.

Ó thaobh lóistín turasóireachta gearrthéarmach de, cuirfidh an Bille um ligean gearrthéarmach agus turasóireacht bonn reachtúil ar chóras nua clárúcháin le haghaidh ligean gearrthéarmach in Éirinn. Ní dhéanfaidh an Bille seo aon athrú ar na riachtanais phleanála atá ann cheana féin le haghaidh ligean gearrthéarmach in Éirinn, ach cabhróidh sé leis na húdaráis áitiúla na riachtanais phleanála atá ann cheana a chur i bhfeidhm ar bhonn níos éifeachtaí. Cabhróidh an Bille seo chomh maith le soiléireacht a thabhairt faoin gcuid seo de thionscal na turasóireachta agus chun a chinntiú go bhfuil sé ag feidhmiú ar bhonn inbhuanaithe.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is é an fáth gur luaigh mé Acht na dTithe (Gaeltachta) ná go n-aithníonn an chuid is mó de dhaoine gur cás ar leith í an Ghaeltacht, cé go bhfuil an chuid eile den tír i ngéarchéim thithíochta freisin. Muna bhfuil tithe ar fáil do lánúineacha agus daoine áitiúla chun cónaí iontu, ní bheidh an Ghaeltacht ann amach anseo agus ní féidir rud mar sin a atógáil in aon bhealach ceart. In 2009, tugadh €2 milliún i ndeontais faoin Acht seo. Tá sé ann agus is féidir é a dhéanamh. Dá réir, is féidir ceist eisceachtúil a dhéanamh den Ghaeilge agus cuidiú le lánúineacha atá ag triail le tithe a fháil. Ní féidir leo tithe a fháil mar níl siad ar díol. B'fhéidir go bhfuil siad á ligean ar Airbnb. Tá cás ar leith anseo. Is é seo an bealach chun infheistíocht a dhéanamh go tapa. Aithním an méid atá ag tarlú ach tá sé ag tarlú go an-mhall.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Ar an gcéad dul síos, is é seo an fáth go bhfuil an Bille nua faoi ligean tithíochta gearrthéarmach chomh tábhachtach is atá sé. Beidh treoirlínte ag na húdaráis áitiúla. Aontaím leis an Teachta go bhfuil brú ní hamháin ar chúrsaí tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht, ach ar an teanga. Táimid ag obair ar a lán rudaí ach níl sé simplí. Caithfimid a admháil nach bhfuil sé simplí. Táim ag bualadh leis an údarás chun obair leis maidir leis an talamh atá aige ag an bpointe seo agus chun a fháil amach an bhfuil an talamh sin ullamh le haghaidh tithíocht, ní hamháin ó thaobh seirbhísí ach ó thaobh pleanála freisin. Beidh muid ag déanamh na hoibre sin leis an údarás. Tá ról mór ag na húdaráis áitiúla, na comhairlí contae, maidir leis seo freisin.

Tá mé tar éis cúpla cruinniú a bheith agam le príomhfheidhmeannaigh na gcomhairlí contae sin. Beidh cruinniú eile agam i mí Eanáir chun brú a chur orthu, mar údarais áitiúla pleanála, chun obair a dhéanamh ar an bpíosa seo. Tá na Gaeltachtaí atá i limistéir na n-údarás áitiúil sin thar a bheith tábhachtach. Caithfidh na húdarais áitiúla, na comhairlí contae, an tábhacht sin a thuiscint. Ag an bpointe seo, tá deis leis an athbhreithniú maidir le rezoning atá ar siúl ag an bpointe seo. Tá súil agam go dtapóidh siad an deis sin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Cloisim cad atá á rá ag an Aire ach tá frustrachas ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta toisc go raibh siad ag siúl le treoirlínte pleanála Gaeltachta. Tá na treoirlínte sin tar éis bás a fháil. Tá an tAire ag caint faoi ráiteas anois a thiocfaidh agus a bheidh ag dul amach go comhairliúchán. Tá sé ag caint faoi bhlianta eile. Is an rud céanna é faoi Bhille Údarás na Gaeltachta. Níl sé rite so níl na cumhachtaí sin ag an údarás faoi láthair. Táimid fós ag fanacht air teacht ar ais le go gcríochnóimid iad. Nílimid ag iarraidh go mbeadh aon mhoill air. Tá gá go mbeadh na rudaí seo ag tarlú anois mar is é seo an áit atá an fhadhb. An fáth go bhfuil mé ag cur na ceiste faoin Acht ar leith seo ná gur bealach tapa é seo fad is atáimid ag fanacht ar na céimeanna eile. Mura dtarlaíonn sé sin, beidh sáinn ann. Beidh BÁNÚ, an eagraíocht atá ag tabhairt tacaíochta do cheantair Ghaeltachta maidir le tithíocht, ag éirí níos mó. Tá an ceart ag an Aire go bhfuil ról ag na comhairlí contae. Ach anois láithreach, cá bhfuil Bille Údarás na Gaeltachta? Cá bhfuil na cumhachtaí? Cá bhfuil an gníomh chun déileáil leis an gceist éigeandála seo ó thaobh na Gaeltachta anois láithreach?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Beimid ar ais ag an mBille go luath san earrach. Roimh an mBille sin, tá mé ag obair leis an údarás. Níl mé i mo shuí ansin. Tá mé ag obair chun go mbeidh tuiscint idir mé féin agus an t-údarás faoi stádas pleanála na talún atá aige i ngach chuid den Ghaeltacht. Níl aon fhadhb agam cumhachtaí a thabhairt don údarás don talamh atá aige ag an bpointe seo ach tá sé tábhachtach go dtuigfimid céard é stádas na talún sin ag an bpointe seo agus cén athruithe atá déanta. Níl aon phointe cumhacht a thabhairt don údarás murar féidir leis an chumhacht sin a úsáid mar gheall ar chúrsaí pleanála nó aon rialachán a bheidh ar an talamh sin. Táim sásta é sin a phlé leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh nó leis an Teachta McGuinness i rith mí Eanáir chun go mbeidh tuiscint ar an sórt treo ina bhfuilimid ag dul.

Rural Schemes

4. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will consider granting funding to homecoming festivals in various locations in the country in the interest of promoting tourism and increasing investment in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67914/25]

Deputy Brian Stanley: Will the Minister consider granting funding to homecoming festivals in various locations in the country to promote tourism and increase investment, particularly in rural areas? What is his opinion on this? What supports can be provided?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. My Department implements a wide range of schemes and supports that are available to community organisations and groups across the country. While my Department does not have a scheme specifically for community

or homecoming festivals, there may be an avenue of support under the LEADER programme or potentially the local enhancement programme.

In respect of the LEADER programme, in line with the programme for Government, LEADER has a strong focus on rural tourism and funding has been made available under the programme for festivals and local tourism initiatives. For example, I am sure the Deputy will be well aware of the Old Fort Quarter festival, which has been run very successfully in Portlaoise in recent years. That has received funding from LEADER.

In order for a project to be eligible for LEADER funding, the proposed activity must be compatible with the actions outlined in the approved LEADER local development strategy and comply with the EU regulations and operating rules. The programme is administered by the local action groups, LAGs, across the country. Prospective applicants organising festivals should contact their relevant LAG.

Moving to the local enhancement programme, which is run by the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and me, this programme provides small capital grants to community and voluntary groups to improve facilities or purchase equipment. This may support groups that help run local festivals. We are finalising local enhancement programme for 2026 and will announce details of the new programme imminently.

Deputy Brian Stanley: What the Minister said in the last couple of sentences, in relation to finalising plans for 2026, is timely. This is a great way of improving tourism and visitor numbers. As we all know, tourism figures are down this year and there are various reasons for that. Some of it is due to high prices being charged by some hotels and over-pricing, and the industry has to take that on board. The first homecoming festival was organised in Laois this year and it was a huge success. It took place on 4, 5 and 6 September. A lot of voluntary work and commitment go into these festivals and it is an area we need to target in terms of economic and tourism benefits. It also has community and family benefits, because people who had not seen each other for 50 years, in some cases, met again for the first time. The route to securing funding needs to be simplified. I take on board the point about the LEADER programme but it tends to be set. There are a lot of calls on it. A separate stream of funding needs to be made available for this.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely appreciate the role of any festival or gathering in any rural community. That is why we support the rural shows to the extent of €1 million right across the country, with over 130 of them. Fáilte Ireland, which is the predominant domestic tourism development agency, has a range of schemes in place for supporting local festivals and local community events, as do the local authorities. As I said, the LEADER programme supports festivals. There is one in Portlaoise and others in Ballinakill, Cullahill and Spink, across the Deputy's county. The LEADER programme has a very good track record of supporting festivals across County Laois. I know there are a number of local authorities around the country that provide current funding for festivals in local areas as well.

We are more than happy to assist with capital funding through the LEADER programme, but given the existing level of support through Fáilte Ireland and other organisations, I have no plans to look at this proposal further at this point.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister for his reply. I acknowledge the support given to the Old Fort Quarter festival and other projects in County Laois through the LEADER fund and I accept that. The key thing is that sometimes the information on what is available and where it can be accessed is unclear. I know some bureaucracy is necessary and it is important that money be accounted for properly and that things be done the right way. However, we need to try to streamline this. There can be a multitude of places to go to for funding but sometimes there is a fog in that regard. It needs to be kept very simple and straightforward. Maybe there could be something from the Department to state what is available. The Minister mentioned a number of avenues. Information is key for local communities to find out where to go for this.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. We did try to provide that information, but that feedback is coming back to me quite often, so we will consider a one-stop shop for that information. I acknowledge that it is predominantly volunteers who organise these festivals. These are people who are very busy elsewhere in their lives and are probably involved in multiple other organisations in their communities at the same time. We will try to ensure we have a one-stop shop to provide the information.

I wish to bring the attention of every Deputy here this morning to the fact we are finalising the current consultation on Our Rural Future, which is our scaffolding document for rural policy. The final date for submissions is 12 December, which is tomorrow week, and I encourage all Deputies to look at the current draft and to input into that review. If there are suggestions or proposals similar to those the Deputy has, every Deputy should try to make those and we will incorporate the views of Oireachtas Members into the document. It is the scaffolding document on which we will build projects and funding programmes over the next five years.

Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.

Foras na Gaeilge

6. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, cé go bhfuil sé le moladh as an ardú suntasach a baineadh amach i mBuiséad 2026 don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht, an bhfuil socrú déanta i dtaobh an €2 mhilliúin a gealladh a thabhairt d'Fhoras na Gaeilge ón 1 Eanáir 2026; agus mura bhfuil, i bhfianaise na bhfadhbanna struchtúrtha a bhaineann le maoiniú an Fhorais, an bhfuil réiteach eile socraithe aige maidir leis an airgead sin a dháileadh ar ghrúpaí pobail ón 1 Eanáir 2026; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [68856/25]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Cuirim ceist faoi fhorbairt an phobal Gaeltachta. Cé go bhfuil an tAire le moladh as an ardú suntasach a baineadh amach i mbuiséad 2026 don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht, an bhfuil socrú déanta i dtaobh an €2 mhilliún a gealladh d'Fhoras na Gaeilge?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Tabharfaidh mé seans dó a breath a fháil. Is í an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas a cheadaíonn buiséid bhliantúla na gComhlachtaí Forfheidhmithe Thuaidh Theas, an Foras Teanga san áireamh. Cuireann Rialtas na hÉireann 75% de bhuiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge ar fáil agus tagann an 25% eile ó Fheidhmeannas Thuaisceart Éireann, de réir an chóimheas maoinithe a aontaíodh nuair a

bunaíodh an Foras Teanga. D'fhreastail mé ar chruinniú de chuid an Chomhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas i gCampas Síochána Mhuineacháin inné, an 3 Nollaig, inar aontaíodh pleananna gnó agus buiséid 2026 d'Fhoras na Gaeilge agus do Ghníomhaireacht na hUltaise. Mar thoradh air seo, cuirfear maoiniú comhaontaithe de €20 milliún ar fáil d'Fhoras na Gaeilge agus do Ghníomhaireacht na hUltaise in 2026. Anuas air seo, cuimsítear sna pleananna gnó go mbeidh maoiniú imfhálaithe á chur ar fáil ag mo Roinn don fhoras agus don ghníomhaireacht le cláir agus gníomhaíochtaí ar leith a reachtáil in 2026. Cuimsíonn sé seo an maoiniú breise a fuair mé mar chuid de bhuiséad 2026.

Tá áthas orm a fhógairt go n-ardófar maoiniú chlár na leabhar Gaeilge go €2 milliún in 2026, an leibhéal is airde riamh. Chomh maith leis sin, cuirfear maoiniú breise os cionn €2 milliún ar fáil do chlár agus do ghníomhaíochtaí eile Fhoras na Gaeilge in 2026. Cuirfear €200,000 ar fáil do Ghníomhaireacht na hUltaise do thograí bainteach le gníomhaíochtaí ar leith i gContaetha Dhún na nGall, Mhuineacháin agus an Chabháin, agus níos faide ó dheas de réir a chéile. Tabharfaidh sé seo ar fad cinnteacht don bhForas Teanga agus do na heagraíochta agus grúpaí pobail ar fud an oileáin a bhaineann tairbhe as na scéimeanna tacaíochta agus maoinithe a chuirtear ar fáil.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Tá sé go deas é sin a cloisteáil. Maidir leis an maoiniú le haghaidh Foras na Gaeilge, ba mhaith liom míle buíochas a ghabháil ar son mo Dháilcheantar agus ar son muintir na Gaeltachta. Bhí mé ag caint le hionadaithe agus tá siad an-bhuíoch. An féidir leis an Aire an €2 milliún atá beartaithe d'Fhoras na Gaeilge ó mhí Eanáir ar aghaidh a mhíniú? Can this funding be channelled directly through Foras na Gaeilge from that date? What interim or alternative solution has been designed so that community groups do not lose time or opportunities?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá muinín agam anois mar gheall ar an airgead breise. Níl aon chúis ann go gcaillfeadh aon ghrúpa am nó airgead. Bhí mé soiléir le m'óifigigh agus leis an bhforas nach raibh mé ag iarraidh go mbeimid san áit céanna a raibh siad sa tréimhse dheireanach. Mar a dúirt mé sa fhreagra, tá cinnteacht ag Foras na Gaeilge faoin airgead breise atá acu le caitheamh ar ghrúpaí agus eagraíochtaí Gaeilge. Leis an gcinnteacht sin, beidh bord an fhorais in ann plean gníomhaíochta agus plean gnó a aontú leis na heagraíochtaí. Mar gheall ar an airgead breise, ní bheidh aon ghá leis na fadhbanna a bhí againn i rith na bliana. Tuigim, i ndiaidh na comhráite a bhí agam le príomhfheidhmeannach an fhorais agus le cathaoirleach bhord an fhorais inné go bhfuil siad ag ullmhú agus ag caint leis na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge. Tá oifigigh mo Roinne ag caint leo freisin. Tá muinín agam go mbeidh bliain fhada agus láidir ag an bhforas agus, go háirithe, ag na heagraíochtaí faoi stiúradh an fhorais.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ní raibh mé ag an gcruinniú sin; bhí mé ag cruinniú eile. Táim fíorbhuíoch as an €2 milliún sin d'Fhoras na Gaeilge. Bhí mé ag caint le hionadaithe aréir nuair a chuir an tAire an fógra amach. Gabhaim buíochas leis as sin. Agus muid ag caint mar gheall ar an nGaeilge agus Foras na Gaeilge, ba mhaith liom ceist eile atá ag goilliúint ar phobal mo dháilcheantar a ardú. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil an tAire in ann caint faoi. Tá mé ag caint faoi deighilt a dhéanamh idir an bhéalscrúdú agus ceist na gramadaí. Tá go leor daoine i mBaile Átha Cliath atá líofa sa Ghaeilge nach bhfuil in ann aon rud a chur ar pháipéar. An bhfuil éinne

sa Roinn oideachais ag smaoineamh mar gheall ar an nGaeilge mar ábhar scoile a roinnt idir an bhéalscrúdú agus an ghramadach?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Ní hé sin mo chúram. Baineann sé leis an Aire oideachais agus an Roinn oideachais.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tuigim é sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Fad is atáimid ag caint faoi, tá sé tábhachtach a rá go bhfuil Gaeilge ag gach duine sa tír seo. Ba cheart go mbeimid in ann í a úsáid gan ghearán. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh muinín ag daoine a gcuid Gaeilge a úsáid gan daoine a bheith ag magadh fúthu. Tá sí againn. Ba cheart go dtabharfadh daoine a bhfuil Gaeilge líofa acu seans do dhaoine nach bhfuil chomh líofa céanna a gcuid Gaeilge a úsáid agus a labhairt. Tá sé tábhachtach go gcuirfimid béim ar an nGaeilge ó bhéal. Is é sin ceann de na cúiseanna go bhfuil cúrsaí ag éirí chomh láidir i dtaca leis an nGaeilge anois. Anseo i mBaile Átha Cliath tá Gaeilge 365 againn, ar bhunaigh Comhairle Cathrach Bhaile Átha Cliath. Tá sé mar sprioc ag an gclár iontach seo cabhrú leis na húdaráis áitiúla seirbhísí a chur ar fáil trí Ghaeilge. Guím gach rath ar Gaeilge 365.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Funding

7. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will report on his engagements regarding the LEADER programme under the next EU budgetary cycle. [68487/25]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: LEADER funding, as the Minister will be aware, plays a vital role in our communities and businesses, especially in my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. A reduction in LEADER funding would be unacceptable for rural communities that are already struggling. Can the Minister assure us that LEADER funding will not be reduced?

Deputy Dara Calleary: For over 30 years, LEADER has delivered tangible benefits to rural communities in areas such as economic development and job creation, rural infrastructure, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and, as we discussed, rural activities. Therefore, the development of the EU regulations relating to the post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, and the new national and regional partnership plans is a matter of significant importance to me and to my Department. Ireland will continue to advocate for a well-funded CAP that supports farm resilience, environmental ambition and, crucially, rural development measures such as LEADER.

Within the draft regulations, the inclusion of the LEADER programme as a CAP intervention is to be welcomed. As part of the ongoing negotiation process, my Department continues to emphasise the importance of a ring-fenced allocation for the LEADER Programme. Detailed discussions on the shape and operation of the new regulations are ongoing at both national and

EU levels. To facilitate the current negotiation process for the post-2027 period, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has established a CAP consultative committee, which includes representation from my Department. I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, in involving my Department in this.

Separately, while in Strasbourg last week, I met with Irish MEPs, including Kathleen Funchion, to discuss a range of issues, including LEADER funding, in the context of the next EU budgetary cycle. I will continue to work with the Irish MEPs and my Government colleagues to ensure that the LEADER programme is supported and well funded into the future.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The LEADER programme has played a crucial role in rural development, especially in addressing and developing the rural community. It has, therefore, been a regressive move that LEADER has faced cuts in every programme for nearly 20 years. Prior to the financial crisis, the annualised budget for the LEADER programme between 2007 to 2013 was €57 million per year, reducing to €54 million post the crash. The annual allocation for the 2014 to 2020 programme was slashed by one third to €35 million. The Government signed off on a transition programme of €35 million to €36 million on average per year for 2023 to 2027. That is not only a cut in real terms. Taking account of inflation, LEADER funding must stand at half of what it once was. My question again is: does the Minister accept that the LEADER budget has been gutted and what can he do about it?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): If the Minister will hold on, Deputy McGuinness has a supplementary question.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: LEADER funding has been cut in 2024 and 2025 and now it has been cut in the budget for next year. I would like to know what the rationale is for that and I would like a breakdown of what will be affected by that cut. The cut in LEADER funding for next year is in the order of €10 million.

That has to be considered in the broader reconfiguration of CAP happening at European level and the Government's failure - this is bigger than the Department only as it is being led by the Department of agriculture - to come to terms with that and to exert influence at European level to ensure that rural development funding and, indeed, other measures are protected within that reconfiguration.

This is also part of a direction of travel here in Ireland where there has been a divestment in rural communities by successive Governments from 2014 on, with changes to the LEADER programme and, as my colleague Deputy Bennett said, year-on-year cuts to funding. It can be dressed up as being about transitional periods and an envelope of funding that lasts but in real terms, we are seeing cuts year on year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: One cannot talk about LEADER cuts without also talking about the fact that a whole range of new programmes have been invested in, including RRDF, TVRS, RSS and CCIF. They are now in place but were not in place over many years of the LEADER programme. They fulfil many of the duties LEADER did. LEADER funding is not cut for next year. We will spend the full allocation during the programme. The remaining €180 million has been allocated for 2023 to 2027. That maintains the funding with the previous programme.

I am confident we will spend that full €180 million. Approvals are currently slow, as has always been the method. We will ensure allocations are in place. I am working on a post-2027 scenario. That is why I have had meetings with MEPs. I encourage the Deputies to do the same in terms of looking at that cross-European support that we need to have a LEADER programme funded separately under the CAP measure. That is important. The MEPs left me under no illusion last week as to the challenges relating to the multiannual financial framework, MFF, and funding.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I am relaying the fears of my constituents. LEADER funding was cut in the immediate aftermath of the financial crash, was raided during the austerity years and it was cut further in real terms under the previous Government. The meagre increase is not enough to keep up with inflation. My fear now is the Government is seemingly not that put out about a European Commission proposal to cut CAP by nearly 25%, through which LEADER is funded, and that the European Commission, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will see our local development companies and rural development take the short straw once again. Will the Minister not only rule out further cuts to LEADER but commit at European level to advocating for the full restoration of LEADER funds to pre-crash levels?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not have the Waterford figures but the Cavan LEADER programme for 2023 to 2027 has an allocation of €6.37 million. There is €5.985 million for Monaghan. To date, under the 2023 to 2027 programme, 45 projects have been approved, 25 in Cavan and 20 in Monaghan to the value of €1.62 million in Cavan and €1.29 million in Monaghan. That funding continues but it is also in partnership with the other projects I mentioned. We have seen some of those projects in RSS, CCIF and RRDF. I will continue to work the Deputy and the Chair on delivering projects in Cavan and Monaghan. The development companies are very important partners in developing those projects. I was in Cork last weekend with the Minister of State where we saw IRD Duhallow using other projects. The Deputy can be absolute assured that I am very focused on LEADER. That is why I was in Strasbourg last week and met MEPs. Equally, it is not the Government causing the difficulties. A debate is under way about the entire European budget. I assure the Deputy the studs are on and we will defend the interests of LEADER and I will defend the interests of rural communities.

Questions Nos. 8, 9 and 11 taken with Written Answers.

Irish Language

12. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the indicators his Department will use to measure progress on the Clondalkin Irish Language Network and the Gaeilge 365 initiative from 2025 to 2028; the specific annual targets for the number of innovative projects to be developed each year; the number to be mainstreamed; the number to be scaled within the four Dublin local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68507/25]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Táim fíorbhuíoch as a bheith sa Chamber arís. Táim chun ceist a chur ar an Aire faoin Clondalkin Irish language network agus Gaeilge 365 idir 2025 agus

2028 agus faoi na targets, the number of innovative projects to be developed each year, the number to be mainstreamed agus an líonra atá ann idir na ceithre local authorities i mBaile Átha Cliath. When talking about giving constituencies stuff, I urge the Minister not to forget north Dublin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy will be aware, Muintir Chrónáin is the lead organisation, which prepared the Clondalkin language plan approved in 2020. Annual funding of €96,000 is provided to the Irish Language Network to implement its language plan and to employ a full time Irish-language officer. Foras na Gaeilge continually monitors the implementation of specified actions in the Clondalkin language plan in its role as the organisation tasked with supporting and funding Muintir Chrónáin. Separately, it is intended that a review of the Clondalkin language plan will be carried out in the sixth year of the implementation, a process I discussed with Deputy Conor McGuinness.

My Department intends to publish the first evaluation of language plans in the Gaeltacht language planning areas in the coming weeks. They will be used to further inform the methodology for monitoring plans under the Irish language process, including Clondalkin. Gaeilge 365 is the first innovation unit to operate through Irish in the public service. The fundamental aim of this project is to put an innovative approach in place to create more opportunities for the public to speak Irish through the services of the four Dublin local authorities including those servicing Dublin Bay North. Indicators used to measure progress include the following: for year one, to develop 16 innovative tested language projects; create 30,000 plus Irish-speaking opportunities through council services; root at least two innovative language projects in the councils; scale at least one innovative language projects through additional funding sources; at least three empowerment programmes in hand with over 45 participants annually; launch the policy book; and 100,000 plus social media views on related content. These targets will be built upon for years two, three and four of this initiative. Tá muinín agam go mbeidh seans ag muintir Dháilcheantar an Teachta úsáid a bhaint as Gaeilge 365 agus na deiseanna a ghabhann leis. Mar is eol don Teachta, tá gealltanas sa chlár Rialtais chun Gaeilge 365 a leathnú amach go dtí údaráis áitiúla eile sa Stát.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Táim fíorbhuíoch as sin. Tá na daoine atá ag obair le Gaeilge 365 ag déanamh obair na gcapall. Maidir leis an rud faoina raibh mé ag caint leis an Aire níos luaithe, níl sé greanta i gcloch. Tá a fhios agam nach bhfuil an tAire sa Roinn oideachais ach tá go leor eolais aige mar gheall ar an ábhar seo. Táim ag iarraidh an rud a dúirt mé a shoiléiriú. Nílím ag iarraidh dhá ábhar. Táim ag iarraidh an t-ábhar a athrú. Tá a fhios ag an Aire nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge i leabhair. Tá pop-up Gaeltacht sa teach tábhairne, tá Féile na Gealaí i Ráth Chairn agus tá go leor initiatives eile ann. Tá an fuinneamh atá sa Ghaeilge anois craiceáilte. Maidir leis an rud atáim ag iarraidh a dhéanamh, cén fáth go bhfuilimid ag foghlaim "An Spailpín Fánach"? Is cuma le gach duine faoi sin. B'fhéidir go bhfuil go leor daoine á iarraidh ach caithfidh daoine a bheith ag labhairt na Gaeilge. Tá sé beo. Níl sé sa leabhar. Ba chóir féachaint ar an rud a rinneadh sa Bhreatain Bheag.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Maidir le cúrsaí oideachais, ba chóir don Teachta ceisteanna a chur ar an Aire oideachais. Tá tuairimí suimiúla ag an Teachta ach ba cheart dó na tuairimí sin a phlé leis an Aire oideachais, an Teachta Hildegard Naughton. Thug mé freagra maidir leis an

méid atá ag tarlú le Gaeilge 365. Léiríonn sé sin an fuinneamh agus na cúrsaí nua atá ar bun chun an Ghaeilge a spreagadh. Táthar ag baint úsáid as na meáin shóisialta, as seirbhísí na gcomhairlí áitiúil i mBaile Átha Cliath, as seirbhísí daoine agus as leabhair. Maidir le ceist dheireanach an Teachta, tá €2 milliún bhreise tugtha d'Fhoras na Gaeilge le haghaidh clár na leabhar Gaeilge. Leis na leabhair Ghaeilge, beidh déagóirí agus páistí in ann an Ghaeilge a úsáid i gcomhthéacs difriúil agus suimiúil. Tá leabhair nua maidir le teicneolaíocht agus gach rud eile á bhfoilsíú de thoradh ar an airgead breise sin. Tuigim an frustrachas atá ar an Teachta ach, maidir le haon rud le haghaidh na Roinne oideachais, ba chóir dó an frustrachas sin a ligean amach ar an Aire oideachais.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tuigim é sin. Tá brón orm ach tá go leor eolais ag an Aire faoin ábhar seo. Tá fearg orm faoi. Táim 27 mbliana d'aois. Tá glúin nua ag teacht anuas agus iad ag foghlaim an rud céanna a d'fhoghlaim mé féin. Ní bheadh Gaeilge agam gan mo dheirfiúr. Nílím ag cur aon shade ar fhilí. Is file í mo dheirfiúr ach caithfimid an rud a athrú. Tá sé sean. Níl sé don ghlúin seo. Bhí mé ag caint leis an Aire faoi seo. Má fhéachann tú ar an teanga nádúrtha sa Bhreatain Bheag, is léir go bhfuil siad ag déanamh an rud ceart. Tá siad ag athrú sa roinn agus is é sin an rud is tábhachtaí. Caithfimid caimiléireacht a dhéanamh ar an rud seo agus an méid atá ag obair sa tír eile seo a dhéanamh leis an teanga dúchasach anseo. Tá a fhios agam nach hé an Teachta Calleary an tAire oideachais.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Níl mórán disagreement eadrainn. Tá mé ag súil go mbeidh deis agam staidéar a dhéanamh ar cad atá ag tarlú sa Bhreatain Bheag go háirithe maidir le cúrsaí teanga agus fuinnimh. Caithfidh an Teachta a admháil go bhfuil fuinneamh ann i gcúrsaí Gaeilge ag an bpointe.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar a dúirt mé leis an Teachta McGuinness níos luaithe, tá sé ann de bharr obair na OPTs atá ar siúl agus an obair a bhí á plé againn atá ar siúl ag na daoine in Áras Chrónáin agus i ngach chuid den tír. Tá na daoine áitiúla atá ag plé le cúrsaí áitiúla ag cur rudaí ar siúl agus ag cur clár na Gaeilge ar siúl. Tá an fuinneamh sin ann mar gheall ar obair TG4, Raidió Rí-Rá, Conradh na Gaeilge, agus na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge a bhíomar ag plé níos luaithe faoi chúrsaí Fhoras na Gaeilge agus an t-airgead sin. Beidh an €2 milliún breise sin ag dul i dtreo an fhuinnimh sin. Tá scéal maith agus láidir againn ach tuigim frustrachas an Teachta. Déanfaidh mé staidéar ar cad atá ag tarlú sna tíortha eile.

Departmental Schemes

10. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he plans to increase the funding allocation for the local improvement scheme for County Cork in 2026 given the large number of unfunded applications, particularly in rural parts of Cork North-West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67265/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, the local improvement scheme, LIS, supports the improvement of rural roads and laneways that are not usually maintained by local

authorities. Since its re-establishment in 2017, the Government has provided almost €184 million to local authorities under it. This funding has resulted in improvement work on nearly 5,000 roads, benefiting over 23,000 landowners and residents in rural areas. Once LIS allocations are made each year on a county basis, it is at the discretion of each the local authorities to select and prioritise roads for improvement under the scheme each year.

I announced additional funding for the LIS in August, bringing the total allocation for 2025 to €30 million. This is the highest annual allocation for the scheme to date, and it reflects the priority that the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I attach to it.

Since 2017, Cork County Council has received a total of €14.15 million in LIS funding, the second-highest allocation to local authorities nationally. Cork's allocation under the 2025 scheme totalled €2.33 million.

The 2026 scheme is expected to be launched early next year. I am reviewing the provisions in advance to ensure they will be managed as reasonably and efficiently as possible. My officials will continue to engage with local authorities across the country as next year's scheme is rolled out. I encourage Deputies to engage with their local authorities to ensure all funding for 2025 is expended. Details of the 2026 scheme, including county allocations, will be circulated among local authorities and published on the Department's website as they become available.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister. It is great to see that so much progress has been made on the local improvement scheme since it was re-established in 2017. The 5,000 improved roads in many rural parts of the country are very important to many of our constituents. I welcome the fact that the Minister has doubled the funding this year to €30 million, representing one of the largest increases for the scheme in the history of the State. It is great to see that Cork County Council has expended over €14 million on the scheme since its re-establishment in 2017.

There are many roads in my constituency, Cork North-West. We had the privilege of having the Minister down in Rylane last weekend. Many roads around Rylane and other areas are in significant need of refurbishment. Many applications have been received by Cork County Council and there are many on hand. As a public representative for the area, I urge the Minister to continue to push for further funding between now and 2030 so we can continue to address the backlog of roads that need to be improved during that time.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We had a super day in Rylane and Kishkeam. I thank everybody for their welcome, including Deputy John Paul O'Shea, Deputy Aindrias Moynihan and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan. There was a lot of really good progress in respect of the subject matter of the discussions we had here earlier.

Cork County Council reported 175 LIS roads awaiting repair at the end of 2024. Fifty-one roads, including four island roads, have been repaired to date in 2025. Cork County Council is one of our best-performing local authorities. I am very conscious of the size of Cork county in the context of all our allocations. We will continue to work with local authorities on the LIS.

The cost per road repair differs from local authority to local authority. I am carrying out an analysis of what is influencing this. We need to address the backlog. The Deputy has spoken

about the backlog in his area. I will do some work on this and am happy to take suggestions from all the rural Deputies on how we should address it.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister. It is good to see that Cork County Council is getting a lot of praise here this morning for its participation in the scheme and for ensuring many roads will be done this season. A total allocation of €2.33 million for 2025 is very welcome. I am sure many roads in my area, Cork North-West, and right across the county will be done. It is great that many roads on the islands off the mainland of Cork County have been done also.

It is important to get the allocations out early in the year so we can ask the local authorities about projects. The roads staff do all our public roads and are involved with the community involvement scheme and roads programme right across Cork county. It is important from a resource point of view to get the allocation as quickly as possible. I will work with the Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and others to try to address the long waiting list for Cork county. I can guarantee the Minister that we will spend whatever money we get.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely agree. We will try to get the allocations out early. Under the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, and under me and the current Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, where there were underspends in our capital area half way through the year, we put them in. That is why I was able to get the additional allocation. The initial allocation for 2026, which will be announced, is €17 million. I am confident we will be able to increase that. We will get it out early. I am confident, from engaging with my officials, that there are no major underspends in any local authority this year. It was astounding to me that any local authority would not spend its full LIS allocation. We have resolved that issue.

Department officials are engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and me on what a 2026 scheme would look like. I am very much open to suggestions, particularly on the backlog, on how to address it and how to achieve a balance in doing so. We will continue to engage with the Department of Transport on this in the context of the value my Department offers in this space.

Irish Language

13. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will outline the projects developed by Gaois in DCU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68148/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: An leagfaidh an tAire amach na tionscnaimh atá á gcur ar bun ag Gaois in DCU, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Go raibh maith ag an Teachta. Mar is eol dó, is grúpa eolais é Gaois i bhFiontar agus Scoil na Gaeilge in Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath. It comprises lecturers, researchers and postgraduate students. Gaois has received funding from my Department since 2027. I visited DCU just last month to see the great work it is doing. I was delighted to announce just over €4 million for Gaois for the next four years to help to significantly develop its major projects.

The projects developed by Gaois are research and reference resources of an exceptionally high standard, which provide a comprehensive facility to the Irish-language community focused on the development of innovative resources to sustain the language and the learning of Irish. Students, teachers, journalists, translators and the wider public can, depending on their areas of research, easily access the contents through searching some of the following sites: *dúchas.ie*, which entails digitisation of the Irish folklore collection; *logainm.ie*, the Irish placenames database; *corpas.ie*, the national corpus of the Irish language, which includes both written and oral material; *canúint.ie*, a repository of Irish dialects; and *ainm.ie*, the national database of Irish-language biographies. The sites will be of interest not only to ourselves but also to daoine i ngach chuid den domhan a bhfuil suim acu sa Ghaeilge agus i stair agus cultúr an oileáin freisin.

I am very conscious that the funding my Department is providing will enable Gaois to develop greater integration between the sites, provide more powerful search facilities and ensure a structured supply of information in a measured way to artificial intelligence models. Additionally, it will advance the Gaois working groups, develop the next generation of technicians and researchers, and sustain the resources' userbase. Previous projects undertaken by Gaois with the assistance of funding received from my Department include the LEX Project, which has provided terminology support for the EU institutions from 2008 onwards, and an líonra saineolaithe a bhí forbartha with the aim of providing high-quality technical advice to Irish-language translators and terminologists in the European institutions. I look forward to continuing work with Gaois sna blianta atá romhainn.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: As the Minister mentioned, the €4 million investment is a very substantial commitment from the Department and I welcome it. Gaois's building in DCU is a big northside institution right on the edge of Dublin Bay North, my constituency, and it serves that entire area well. Tá sé iontach go bhfuil an infheistíocht seo ag tarlú ach go bhfuil sé lonnaithe sa tríú leibhéal. Tá an cumas acadúil ag na hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal an taighde ar fad a tharraingt le chéile agus na huirlisí seo a chur ar fáil. Luaigh an tAire *dúchas.ie*, *logainm.ie*, *corpas.ie* agus *canúint.ie*. They are some of the big projects that are being expanded. They are great tools for students of all levels, for researchers and for the Irish-language community across the country and abroad. They are a great reference and can really bring people in. There is significant potential for these projects for the next generation of Irish-language speakers. A renewal is happening which is huge and is great to see. I ask the Minister to continue on the investment track, build these projects and invest in third level so we can build out those tools for generations to come.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas as sin. Is infheistíocht an-mhór é €4 milliún. Táim fíorbhuíoch as sin. Tá an tAire ag cur go leor airgid i mBaile Átha Cliath thuaidh so tá sé iontach é sin a fheiscint. Is iarmhac léinn mé de chuid Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath. Bhí mé ann dhá bhliain ó shin. Tá sé iontach. Bhí mé sa Chumann Gaelach ann. Tá mé fíorbhuíoch as sin. Mar a dúirt an tAire, tá mic léinn a thagann go Baile Átha Cliath ó gach tír in ann an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim. Tá sé sin iontach a fheiceáil. Táim fíorbhuíoch as sin. Gabhaim míle buíochas le mo constituency colleague, Deputy Ó Muirí.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Muirí agus an Teachta Heneghan as an deis a thabhairt dom caint faoi Gaois. Bhí an mhaidin sin coicís ó shin in Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath iontach. Bhí fuinneamh agus suim sa seomra sin agus súil ar an ábhar freisin. Bhí siad ag úsáid na websites sin, *dúchas.ie*, *logainm.ie*, *corpas.ie*, *canúint.ie* agus *ainm.ie*. Tá siad ag cur súil ar an todhchaí agus tá tuiscint acu faoi chúrsaí intleacht shaorga, go háirithe na deiseanna atá ann le AI agus an teanga, agus na dúshlán atá ann freisin. Tá a lán oibre ar siúl i Gaois faoi na dúshlán ach faoi na deiseanna freisin. Tá muinín agam san obair atá ar siúl ansin. Tá muinín agam go mbeidh an Roinn in ann obair le Gaois chun clár eile a chur ar siúl. I am confident that we will be co-operating further with Gaois. I am always happy to invest in the north side of Dublin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Bím breá sásta i gcónaí ardán a thabhairt don Teachta Heneghan. Bíonn sé liom gach uile áit a dtéim. Nach bhfuil sé sin fíor? Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Tá an-fháilte roimh an infheistíocht i dtuaisceart Bhaile Átha Cliath. Tá an institiúid sin thar cionn. Déanann Dáire Keogh agus an grúpa ansin an-jab. Tá na fréamhacha leagtha acu ó thaobh an obair a dhéanamh. Ar aghaidh linn leis an tionscnamh.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Cuirfidh mé nóta go dtí an Teachta McGuinness. Tá sé láidir sa troid sin. Bhí an ócáid sin iontach. Mar a dúirt an Teachta, tá an togra seo tábhachtach ní hamháin do na mic léinn ollscoile ach freisin do mhuintir na teanga anseo agus go hidirnáisiúnta. Tá siad in ann staidéar a dhéanamh ar *dúchas.ie*, *logainm.ie*, *corpas.ie*, *canúint.ie* agus *ainm.ie* cibé cén áit ina bhfuil siad. Tá an LEX Project an-tábhachtach le haghaidh chúrsaí an EU ionas go mbeimid in ann na seirbhísí a chur ar fáil san EU, including translation services. I met Irish MEPs last week, including Cynthia Ní Mhurchú and Seán Kelly, who are very frustrated at the slow progress of full translation services at EU level. The work we are doing at DCU and under Gaois is very much central to our case. Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine i Gaois agus san ollscoil, ina measc uachtarán na hollscoile, Dáire Keogh, agus an foireann bainistíochta as a suim i gcúrsaí teanga.

Rural Schemes

15. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to give a detailed report in regard to the CLÁR funding approval process (details supplied); if further funding will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68477/25]

Deputy Michael Cahill: The CLÁR programme exists to support less well-off areas and remote areas. I thank the Minister for the funding he announced recently. He may have seen a recent report on RTÉ News, fronted by Marty Morrissey, outlining the effects of depopulation on local GAA clubs in remote rural areas, particularly in south Kerry where up to five clubs have to amalgamate at under age level in order to field a team. Will the Minister accommodate the immediate and timely set-up of a depopulation task force in south Kerry? I appreciate that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Cahill as an gceist agus as an deis caint faoi CLÁR. The CLÁR programme provides funding under a number of different measures for small-scale infrastructural projects in designated rural areas. Measure 1 provides

funding for community facilities and amenities and accounts for the vast majority of funding. Measure 2 provides funding for vehicles to support the transport of people with reduced mobility, community first responders and Meals on Wheels. Measure 3 is targeted at our island communities. As the Deputy said, I was able to announce funding of almost €12 million for 198 projects under measure 1, which included funding of almost €700,000 for ten measure 1 projects in Kerry. Across all measures, this brought the total CLÁR funding in Kerry this year to over €911,000.

Under measure 1, local authorities seek applications from local community groups in designated CLÁR areas in their county. They then assess the applications received in order to prioritise those applications which they submit to my Department as a request for CLÁR funding. This year saw the highest level of funding allocated under CLÁR since it was relaunched. Notwithstanding that, I understand that some groups will be disappointed. I would advise such groups that we will be relaunching the scheme in the new year. As part of our consultation regarding Our Rural Future, which is the scaffolding documents for all these rural policies, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I met the demographics committee of the GAA in September. We asked it for input into Our Rural Future. I understand it is launching its report today and I look forward to engaging with it about that report. I have heard the reports from Marty Morrissey this week. They have been interesting and challenging. I will certainly engage with Deputy Cahill about the specific challenges in south Kerry, but given that Kerry has just won another all-Ireland, I think that is not a challenge facing it.

Deputy Michael Cahill: We want to continue to win all-Irelands. The problem with depopulation is that it will filter its way upwards in the coming years, through the more senior age groups, and wipe out many locally organised volunteer sports clubs and force parents and players to travel long journeys to take part, if indeed they continue. I sincerely thank the Minister. The Minister has already helped Dingle GAA, An Ghaeltacht GAA, Listry GAA, Rathmore GAA and many more. As stated by the Kerry GAA county board demographics officer, GAA clubs are a reflection of the communities they serve. It is vital that young people are encouraged and supported to live and work in rural areas, in our towns and villages and in our vibrant economic and social hubs. Population change is having an effect across our wider rural communities, with fewer people in the area to support local businesses, shops, post offices, restaurants, pubs and so on. When fewer children are attending local schools, teaching and SNA posts are in danger, if not entire schools.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy. We are concerned about rural depopulation and the inconsistency in population growth around the country. That will be a focus of the new version of Our Rural Future, which, as I said, is our scaffolding document for rural policies and programmes in Ireland.

10 o'clock

We have a draft document that is available for consultation at the moment. The deadline for consultation is 12 December and I encourage each Deputy to give a formal submission ahead of 12 December, which is tomorrow week. We want to address the areas that are causing depopulation. We want to ensure that we continue the level of capital investment that we have made in counties such as Kerry in the CLÁR areas. Equally we have to engage and ensure that rural services are provided. This is not just a matter for Department of Rural and Community

Development and the Gaeltacht; it is an all-of-government approach. The document within Our Rural Future will seek to capture an all-of-government approach to address challenges Deputy Cahill has just outlined.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I urge the immediate initiation of a task force and I again call on the Government today to set that up with strong guidelines and short timelines to put the expertise of the hand-picked members to work as efficiently and quickly as possible to identify the many causes of depopulation and find solutions to it. In that news segment, south Kerry was highlighted not only by the Kerry county board demographics officer, Michael Murphy, but also by the south Kerry GAA board chairperson, Joe McCrohan, and of course one of the all-time great Kerry footballers from the region, Bryan Sheehan. South Kerry Iveragh is the perfect location for this task force on depopulation where the problem is most acute. Last November, I brought a delegation to Kerry County Council with the name "Three" to make a presentation. The causes are many and include housing and employment, but locally many more are at play. We need to have them identified, targeted and solved in as short a timespan as possible. I plead with the Government to set up this depopulation task force for south Kerry.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I accept there is a challenge and I want to deal with. We will deal with it through Our Rural Future. I will certainly consider the Deputy's proposal in the context of the scaffolding that Our Rural Future will provide. I encourage him to engage with Kerry County Council in relation to a specific focused task force. I would be happy to engage with its proposals. I ask all local authorities in rural areas to engage with the Our Rural Future process by providing detailed submissions. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I had a very useful meeting with the GAA demographics committee in September. It was a very stark meeting in relation to the challenges by its clubs and most importantly by the people living in rural areas. I want to address those challenges in a comprehensive and structured manner. The best way we can do that is through Our Rural Future and through the new document. I again remind people that Friday, 12 December is the last day for submissions.

Women's Sheds

14. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht when the facilitator's work plan with women's sheds representatives will be completed; the way in which his Department will support its implementation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68388/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: We have seen the excellent work being done by men's sheds throughout the country and now at women's sheds. I commend the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Department of Health on establishing a workforce to establish a national governing body for women's sheds. When will the facilitator's work plan with women's sheds will be completed? How does the Department plan on working with that governing body, particularly on funding for individual women's sheds?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for this very important question. He is right that the work of men's sheds has been tremendous. Every community has benefited and equally women's sheds are emerging. The emergence of women's sheds has been a very positive

development for communities across Ireland. They provide a safe, comfortable and inclusive environment where women of all ages can share skills, work on meaningful projects and connect with their communities.

The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are committed to providing any support we can for the development of a national governing body for women's sheds to ensure that individual women's sheds can benefit from having a strong national representative body to advocate on their behalf. I am pleased that our colleague in the Department of Health, the Minister of State, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, shares our view.

A number of meetings have taken place between representatives of women's sheds and officials from our Department and from the Department of Health. Both Departments have jointly funded the provision of a facilitator to assist the representatives of the women's sheds in their discussions on the formation of a national body. The facilitator is also providing advice to the representatives from the women's sheds in the context of appropriate governance structures. Several meetings have taken place, both online and in person, and further meetings will be scheduled in the coming weeks.

The women's sheds representatives and the facilitator are working together to outline a work plan to determine what the next steps should be. Officials in our Department along with their counterparts in the Department of Health hold regular update meetings with the facilitator to discuss progress, the most recent of which took place last week.

Discussions on the work plan are ongoing and it is expected that these discussions will continue into the new year, given the Christmas break and the sensitivities of the matter being discussed. Once the work plan has been completed our Department will review its recommendations and we will continue to engage with the women's sheds representatives to determine the most appropriate support for its implementation.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As the Minister of State said, the work of men's sheds nationally has been rightly recognised. It is now time to recognise the work of women's sheds. It is a different space. While traditionally there would have been the ICA, women's sheds offer a different type of social space and give women different options for engaging in their community. This came about initially because representatives of Naas Women's Shed were in touch with me about funding in September. They said the same grant opportunities were not available to them as there were for the men's sheds. I hope the completion of this work plan and the establishment of a national governing body will afford more funding opportunities and more grant opportunities for women's sheds, such as the women's sheds in Naas and Celbridge. It would be wonderful to see men's sheds, not only in Kildare but throughout the country, looking to establish women's sheds as part of their men's sheds and share that space with women.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We all share the aspiration to fund and support because it is a programme for Government commitment to continue to form both men's sheds and women's sheds. The women's sheds do not have the current umbrella body like men's sheds do and there needs to be a mechanism to channel the funding that is needed. Our Department has a number of schemes through which women's sheds can avail of support, such as LEP, SICAP and LEADER. We are committed to working with women's sheds post the facilitation to ensure

that we provide support and funding. As the Deputy said, this is an important new departure, doing different work from other women's organisations, the benefit of which can be seen in our communities. The Deputy mentioned Naas as an example and it is tremendous to see what is happening there. I thank him for raising the matter again. We stand ready. We will engage further post the publication of the recommendations by the facilitator and I hope that we will come to an agreement on the way forward in the new year.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I appreciate that the lack of an umbrella body has made it more difficult. I acknowledge the work that the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht and the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, are putting in, working with representatives from women's sheds throughout the country and ensuring good governance structures are put in place to ensure that there is longevity in what we do and that it is not just for one year or for two years. We need these groups to last and we need funding streams that can be guaranteed in the future. I acknowledge the work that is being done and if there is anything I can do at any stage, I would be more than happy to put my shoulder to the wheel.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I know the Minister of State is aware of the Déise Women's Shed in Dungarvan. I believe he has met some of its representatives, probably several times at this point. It was one of the first women's sheds in the State alongside the sheds in Naas and Midleton in east Cork. We all know and recognise the social, health and personal development benefits that come from these wonderful social spaces. While I do not want to pre-empt the results of the work plan and the facilitator's report, facilities and space will be key recommendations in it.

I know the Minister of State is aware of the situation in Dungarvan, which despite its size has no community centre and no family resource centre. There is a huge limitation on space available to all sorts of community organisations. It is really impacting the ability of the women's shed in particular to recruit and retain members to conduct all the activities that they would like to conduct. It is limiting them. Tá sé ag cur srian ar a gcuid oibre. I ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to do all that they can to facilitate and speed up the process of developing a community centre for Dungarvan.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank both Deputies for raising the matter. There has been significant engagement. Progress has been made and the most important point is that if we did not have engagement both Deputies would be coming in with a different set of questions in terms of governance and in terms of structures and the appropriateness of that. We have seen record investment in community by Government over the past decade. There are deficits in some cases and we will work to fill those deficits. Both the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are very committed to the enhancement and support of local community organisations because our country is a better place by the strength of the voluntary and community endeavour we have. The Deputy will see in the coming weeks and months further investment by us as a Government in terms of the local enhancement projects and other community initiatives. We are, as a Department, very aware of the benefits of women's sheds to communities and aware of the importance of them. We will work together, le chéile, to ensure we have an appropriate and proper governance, administrative structure and funding to women's sheds in the future.

Offshore Islands

16. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the current and planned supports for Mayo's offshore islands, including Inishturk, Clare Island, and Achill Island; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68006/25]

Deputy Keira Keogh: Can the Minister outline the current supports available to Mayo's offshore islands, including Inishturk, Clare Island and Achill Island in the areas of transport, housing, health, education, digital connectivity and community development, the efforts that are set out for the planned initiatives and funding streams for these islands over the coming years, including measures to sustain population levels, promote tourism and protect the cultural and linguistic heritage of these areas?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an cheist seo a ardú inniu. As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government commits to ensuring that Our Living Islands, which the national islands policy, is fully implemented to support sustainable development for island residents. Our Living Islands is a ten-year policy for the whole of Government backed up by rolling three-year action plans so the Departments and agencies across Government will be held accountable. This is a policy supporting communities in all of our inhabited offshore islands, including those in Mayo.

My Department provides a range of dedicated supports specifically to our inhabited offshore islands with significant annual investment in subsidised transport services to ensure our island communities can avail of reliable, affordable, year-round transport services. In 2025, over €700,000 will be invested by my Department in support of the Mayo island transport services, including daily passenger ferry services for Clare Island, Inishturk, and Inishbiggle. My Department also provides dedicated annual funding of €152,000 each to the community development companies on both Clare Island and Inishturk, which represents a 26% increase in funding which I approved earlier this year. Separately, Údarás na Gaeltachta administers funding of over €113,000 to Comhlacht Forbartha Áitiúil Acla in addition to dedicated funding to implement the island's language plan. Last month, I attended the AGM of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann on Clare Island where I also announced funding of €500,000 to complete an upgrade to the existing Clew Bay bike trail park on the island. Last Friday, I was pleased to announce core funding of over €60,000 for community power solutions on both Clare Island and on Inishturk, and as the Deputy knows, we are currently running a pilot scheme of TFI Anseo on Achill Island through Local Link.

These are just some examples of practical supports my Department is providing or supporting. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is working on these programmes in terms of my Department and the Department of Transport.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I am lucky enough to have been with the Minister on Inishturk when it got its new helipad and at the launch of TFI anseo, so I can definitely see all the improvements we are making. Last week the people there were very happy and they welcomed the likes of the solar panel to help their generator keep going. We know that, like all communities around Ireland, the islanders are particularly struggling with housing, childcare and access to jobs, given they are so dependent on tourism. The Minister has recently announced funding for the

business case at Roonagh Pier. We can both agree, especially with Storm Éowyn and even recent storms that were not so bad on the mainland but were terrifying for the residents, we are not yet there with reliable year-round transport. The islanders, as the Minister knows well from their stories, struggle when their cars are at Roonagh and they have to go to Achill Island if ferries are cancelled. Can we look for a dedicated engineer to be assigned to those three piers, Roonagh, Clare Island and Inisturk around the breakwaters?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am absolutely focused on Roonagh at the moment and at how we can invest in it to make it more reliable and to make it climate proof in the context of the very changing weather. We have been working very closely with Mayo County Council to progress this. At the end of September I announced funding of over €157,000 for Mayo County Council to commence the development process and I want to acknowledge the Deputy's work in that space too. This funding has enabled Mayo County Council to appoint consultant engineers to prepare a preliminary business case, including a strategic assessment for marine infrastructure improvement options. In early November, subsequent to that, Mayo County Council advised us of immediate risks to part of the pier as a result of the storm damage the Deputy referenced. A detailed survey has now been completed. They are compiling a series of recommendations. I assure the Deputy we will provide all of the necessary support and funding to Mayo County Council for the emergency works and also for the development of the pier into the kind of pier we need it to be.

Deputy Keira Keogh: That will be welcome news to the islanders and I know when we have one announcement we are always looking to the next announcement. Regarding the piers at Clare Island and Inisturk, when we arrived there the islanders spoke about the difficulty getting the ferry right up to the shore with sandbanks and different things. Even though we are progressing Roonagh, there will still be lots more work to do. I am sure that after that, there will be even more. I was struck by my visit to Clare Island where people talked about the struggles accessing housing, the reliability on the fish farm and the lack of a hotel given that it was difficult to sustain a chef on the island. We have much work to do. There were fears about the school closing down and lack of childcare. We are doing great work but they are depending on us to do more. I would like to come back at a later date and talk about TFI Anseo. I am hearing fantastic things from constituents. It would be great to see that rolled out even further.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I join the Deputy in praising the work of the TFI Anseo pilot. I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, for choosing Achill Island. I encourage people to use it because it is a pilot not just for Achill but for the entire rural community. It is Local Link on demand, effectively. We are very aware, and engage regularly, with Joanne Carroll and her committee on Clare Island and Sinead Cahalan and her committee on Inisturk. The two development organisations on Clare Island and Inisturk, along with Achill, do fantastic work. They definitely keep us aware of the challenges. It is important that we address those challenges within the framework of Our Living Islands but also through the process we now have. I welcome the process the island communities have with Mayo County Council where they meet regularly to discuss and action these things. I know from working with Deputy Keogh and our other colleagues in the county that we will continue to put pressure on Mayo County Council and as Mayo County Council submit business cases they will receive a very favourable hearing.

Cúrsaí Tithíochta

17. **Deputy John Connolly** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht cé na féidearthachtaí atá ann d'Údarás na Gaeltachta obair le hUisce Éireann agus le húdaráis áitiúla chun tacú le tógáil tithíochta do phobail Ghaeilge mar atá curtha san áireamh sa phlean Tithe a Sheachadadh, Pobail a Thógáil 2025-2030; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [68405/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Táim ag tógáil na ceiste seo ar son an Teachta John Connolly. Mar is eol don Aire, tá géarchéim thithíochta ann sa Ghaeltacht. Cén féidearthachtaí atá ann d'Údarás na Gaeltachta obair le hUisce Éireann agus le húdaráis áitiúla chun tithíocht a thógáil do phobal na Gaeilge agus na Gaeltachta, go háirithe leis an bplean Tithe a Sheachadadh, Pobail a Thógáil 2025-2030?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Ó Cearúil agus leis an Teachta Connolly. Aithníonn an Rialtas go bhfuil fáil ar mheascán oiriúnach de thithe cuí rithábhachtach chun inmharthanacht pobail rathúla Gaeltachta a chinntiú. Dá réir, foilseofar ár ráiteas náisiúnta pleanála do thithíocht sa Ghaeltacht chun soiléireacht agus leanúnachas a chur ar fáil den chóras pleanála maidir le cosaint na Gaeilge. Gealltar sa chlár Rialtais go leanfar ag obair le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta agus le páirtithe leasmhara eile chun a chinntiú go bhfuil soláthar leordhóthanach tithíochta agus seirbhísí pobail ar fáil sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. De réir Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012, tá an t-údarás freagrach as forbairt eacnamaíoch, teanga, sóisialta agus cultúrtha laistigh de na 26 limistéar pleanála teanga. Tacaíonn Údarás na Gaeltachta le níos mó ná 9,000 fostaithe i gcliantchomhlachtaí dá chuid. Beidh soláthar tithíochta do chainteoirí Gaeilge atá fostaithe sna comhlachtaí seo, sa tionscal, i ngnóthaí eile san earnáil phríobháideach agus i gcomhlachtaí san earnáil phoiblí ag feidhmiú laistigh den Ghaeltacht rithábhachtach sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé seo mar rún againn chun deis a thabhairt do chainteoirí Gaeilge fanacht ina gcónaí sa Ghaeltacht.

Ina theannta sin, tá Údarás na Gaeilge le roinnt blianta anuas tar éis saineolas a fhorbairt maidir le cúrsaí fuíolluisce tríd a bheith ag freastal ar a gcuid líonra páirceanna gnó agus le heastáit tionsclaíochta atá faoina chúram. Tá sé i gceist go ndéanfar measúnú ar an fhéidearthacht go bhforbródh Údarás na Gaeltachta, in éineacht le hUisce Éireann agus na húdaráis áitiúla, suíomhanna seirbhísithe ó phunann maoine an údaráis a bheadh feiliúnach do thithíocht do chainteoirí Gaeilge laistigh de na limistéir pleanála teanga. Tá sé ar intinn agam go mbeidh cruinniú agam le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis chun an teagmháil sin le hUisce Éireann agus an gá le comhoibriú idir an dá eagraíocht a phlé, ní hamháin do chúrsaí tionscail ach do chúrsaí tithíochta freisin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Is dea-nuacht é sin. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire go bhfuil sé ag buaileadh le príomhfheidhmeannach Údarás na Gaeltachta le breathnú air seo agus ar na féidearthachtaí atá ann. Mar is eol dó, tá grúpaí éagsúla ann ar nós BÁNÚ agus Tinteán atá ag déanamh iarracht an cás seo a chur os comhair an phobail. An cás ná nach bhfuil tithíocht nó cead pleanála á fháil ag muintir na Gaeltachta agus go bhfuil sé deacair dóibh fanacht sa Ghaeltacht agus go mbeadh daonra óg sa Ghaeltacht freisin. Tá sé sin fhíorthábhachtach go háirithe do thodhchaí na Gaeltachta agus go mbeadh sé tarraingteach do dhaoine óga agus do

phobal labhartha na Gaeilge chomh maith b'fhéidir bogadh go dtí an Ghaeltacht. É sin ráite, fáiltim roimh an dea-nuacht ar maidin go mbuailfidh an tAire leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach agus go mbreathnóidh sé ar na féidearthachtaí atá ann ó thaobh pleanála de.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an tAire an-dáiríre agus tiomanta mar gheall ar an gceist áirithe seo. Tá an plean tithíochta a nochtaigh an tAire tithíochta cúpla seachtaine ó shin lag ina iomlán ach tá sé thar a bheith lag i dtaobh cúrsaí Gaeltachta ach go háirithe. Ba mhaith liom rud éigin a chur ar an taifead anseo. Tá dhá píosa talún sa Rinn, i nGaeltacht na nDéise, ceann amháin gur leis Údarás na Gaeltachta í agus ceann eile gur cheannaigh an chomhairle áitiúil le tamall anuas. Tá na seirbhísí uisce timpeall orthu. Chun a cead a thabhairt d'Uisce Éireann, tá infheistíocht an-mhór curtha isteach aici sa Rinn le cúpla bliain anuas. Tá córas iomlán séarachais nua timpeall air seo agus tá cosáin. An rud atá in easnamh ná toil pholaitiúil ón Rialtas seo chun dul i ngleic leis seo agus tithe a thógáil. Tá an t-údarás áitiúil tar éis iarratas a chur isteach sa Sean Phobal, an dara leathpharóiste i nGaeltacht na nDéise, i gcomhair tithíocht shóisialta. Tá sé sin fós leis an Roinn, cúig bliana i ndiaidh don iarratas dul isteach. Is í sin an fhadhb atá ann i dtaobh an ghéarchéim tithíochta.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím leis an Teachta agus táimid ag iarraidh é sin a phlé. Ar mhiste leis an Teachta McGuinness na sonraí sin a chur chugam go díreach agus déanfaidh mé iarracht breathnú orthu? Is é sin an saghas ruda go gcaithfimid obair air; áiteanna a bhfuil talaimh agus sites cosúil leis sin ann. Pléifidh mé an píosa le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis nuair a bhuailim leis. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbainfear úsáid as an talamh atá ag an údarás nach bhfuil sé ag úsáid do chúrsaí tionscal. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go leanfaidh sé ar aghaidh leis na pleananna tionsclaíochta agus poist a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht. Tá talamh ar fáil le haghaidh tithíocht nach mbeidh an t-údarás in ann a úsáid le haghaidh cúrsaí gnó nó fostaíochta. Ba cheart go mbeadh muid in ann é sin a dhéanamh. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go bhfuil tuiscint ní hamháin ag an údarás ach ag na húdaráis áitiúla nó na comhairlí contae áitiúla faoi chomh réidh is atá na talún sin agus na sites sin. Beidh suim agam na sonraí on Rinn a fheiceáil.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Nuair a bhreathnaímid ar ról an údaráis go dtí seo agus poist á gcruthú aige, is dócha go bhfuil sé deacair poist a chruthú nuair nach bhfuil éinne ann chun obair sna poist sin. Go dtí seo, bhí mise ag ceapadh an t-am ar fad go raibh na cumhachtaí sin ag na comhairlí áitiúla ó thaobh cead pleanála de agus ó thaobh pleanáil timpeall an chontae, go háirithe sna contaetha sin a bhfuil Gaeltacht iontu. Is léir, áfach, nach raibh na comhairlí contae go dtí seo ag déanamh idirdhealú idir an Ghaeltacht agus áiteanna eile nach bhfuil sa Ghaeltacht maidir le dul chun cinn na Gaeilge agus pobal na Gaeltachta agus cead pleanála a thabhairt dóibh sin i gcomparáid le daoine atá ag tógáil tithe samhraidh, mar shampla. Fáiltim go mór roimh an méid atá ráite ag an Aire inniu. Ba bhreá liom cloisteáil conas a éiríonn leis an gcruinniú sin leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach, más féidir an t-eolas sin a roinnt linn ina dhiaidh, agus faoin obair a dhéanfaidh an t-údarás agus an Roinn lena chéile as seo amach.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Táimid ag obair leis an údarás ach tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil na húdaráis áitiúla ag obair freisin agus go bhfuil siad ag cur béime ar chúrsaí pleanála sa Ghaeltacht agus ag obair leis an Roinn tithíochta. Beidh mé ag obair leis an Aire tithíochta ar an bhfadhb seo agus ar an dúshlán. Tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil cinnteacht againn faoi stádas na talún sin agus faoi stádas na sites atá ag an údarás agus fios a bheith againn an bhfuil siad

réidh don pleanáil. Luaim ní hamháin cúrsaí seirbhíse, cúrsaí uisce nó séarachais ach freisin dlí pleanála agus gach rud mar sin. Is é seo príomhthosaíocht na Roinne tithíochta agus beidh mé ag obair leis an Aire. Tuigeann sé. Bhí cruinniú ag an mbeirt againn le BÁNÚ agus le Tinteán i rith an tsamhraidh faoi seo. Beimid ag obair agus beimid ag cur béime air sin. Má tá sonraí ag aon Teachta faoi thalamh nó faoi site sa Ghaeltacht, iarraim orthu na sonraí sin a chur chugam agus déanfaidh mé obair orthu.

Community Development Projects

18. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the projects under way in Counties Sligo and Leitrim that are receiving funding under different schemes with financial support from his Department; the other projects that his Department has committed funding to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68271/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Scanlon. He is constantly putting pressure on. He will be pleased to know that since 2020, Sligo has been allocated in the region of €57 million and Leitrim nearly €66 million in funding from various schemes and programmes administered by my Department, which includes €7.5 million for Sligo and €8.5 million for Leitrim in 2025 alone.

Sligo and Leitrim have secured significant funding under my Department's rural regeneration and development fund, including €1.1 million for the National Surf Centre in Strandhill and €3.4 million for the Mohill public realm works, which I had the pleasure of visiting earlier this year. Just last week, I was pleased to announce CLÁR funding of just over €537,000 for County Leitrim and €502,000 for County Sligo. Successful projects included €100,000 for the Leitrim village playground and €54,000 for facilities in the Cliffoney men's shed.

In addition to these capital schemes, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and committee services programme are providing current expenditure supports to organisations throughout both counties. I look forward to continuing to work with the Deputy on our strong record of investment in rural Ireland, including in Sligo and Leitrim.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

International Protection

73. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the progress that has been made to secure a bilateral agreement with Britain to ensure those international protection applicants who should be processed in Britain can be returned there in a timely manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68314/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister has stated publicly on a number of occasions that a significant proportion - in fact, the vast majority - of those seeking international protection in this State are coming from Britain via the common travel area. It seems logical to most people that we need a bilateral agreement with Britain to ensure those international protection

applicants who should be processed in Britain are returned there in a timely manner. What progress is being achieved in securing such an agreement?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Carthy for his question. He is correct in identifying that there clearly is a lot of fluidity between asylum applications in the United Kingdom and Ireland because individuals can travel freely from Britain to Northern Ireland and, because of the common travel area, there is no barrier to individuals travelling south from Northern Ireland into this jurisdiction. Similarly, it operates in the other way. Many people can fly into Dublin Airport, freely travel up to Northern Ireland and then readily transfer over to Britain. It is an issue in the context of assessing applications for international protection.

It is important to set out the situation that pertained previously. Prior to Britain leaving the European Union, Britain was part of the Dublin III regulation and, therefore, returns could operate in respect of people who had come from Britain and applied for asylum here. After Brexit that changed. Promptly after Brexit, we designated the United Kingdom as a safe third country but that was fairly rapidly challenged and the court ruled it could not be categorised thus for a period. Then, earlier this year, on 11 March, I designated the UK as a safe third country. However, because the UK is outside of the EU, we do not have an operationalised system of returns between the UK and Ireland at present. My officials are in discussion with officials from the Home Office and I will be talking to the Home Secretary again in the week after next. I had very good engagement with the previous Home Secretary and I assume I will have the same good engagement with the current one. That said, I have to point out that the political reality is such that the UK is not going to enter into an agreement with Ireland whereby it simply takes back individuals who have applied for asylum in Ireland because they emanated from the UK. We can see what is happening in France. I agree with Deputy Carthy that there has to be greater engagement with the UK and I am in the process of doing that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister will be aware that this week, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in its pre-legislative scrutiny report on the international protection Bill asked that consideration be again given to opting out of the EU migration and asylum pact because that pact does not take cognisance of the fact we operate within a common travel area. Ireland is in the unique position of being an EU member state that also has a common travel area with a state outside of the EU. It is becoming increasingly clear that the pact fails to take account of Ireland's unique challenges. I am concerned at the lack of priority that the Minister is giving to what is a programme for Government commitment to prioritise working with the British Government to introduce further measures in respect of the common travel area. No progress has been made.

Is the Minister going to take account of the pre-legislative scrutiny report from the committee and prioritise this issue? It needs to be prioritised.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Progress has been made with the British Government. There is very good engagement between my Department and the Home Office. The only way we will be able to resolve the issues of concern to the Deputy and me is through collaboration and co-operation with the British Government. He keeps mentioning that we should not have opted in to the pact, but he must then present to the public the consequence of that. The consequence

of not opting in is that the 2015 International Protection Act would still apply, as would the 2004 directives giving effect to that. It is not as simple as saying that we should not have opted in to the pact. If we had not opted in to the pact, we would still have the same issue under the 2015 legislation and that does not resolve the issue we are facing. There needs to be an awareness that opting in to the pact has not precluded us from doing what we want to do. The reason we have had a significant change is that the British have left the European Union. It is as a result of the British leaving the EU that we have this issue in our common travel area. I would appreciate if Deputy Carthy and Sinn Féin would say that the common travel area is for the benefit of citizens of Ireland and the UK and not for anyone else. That would be a considerable contribution.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will say that if it makes the Minister happier.

Deputy Niall Collins: Well done. That is one in a row and the first time he has said it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister should also say, as all of us in this House should say, that managing migration would be much easier if we were doing it on an all-Ireland basis within a unitary state framework and that, therefore, we should try to advance the reunification of our country for that and many other reasons.

In 2020, Ireland and Britain agreed informal, non-legally binding operational arrangements to return asylum seekers to each other. How many have been returned to Britain from Ireland? I ask the Minister to provide real figures. Different percentages have been cited in terms of the numbers that are coming through the common travel area. We do not know the numbers for sure because we are not compiling data on people who might, for example, have come for tourism or on student or work visas and subsequently applied for international protection, or on those who applied in any other way. If the figures are anywhere close to those that have been cited, then it is negligence that ensuring we have an arrangement in place is not at the top of the Minister's list to . As he rightly says, the British Government has a potential benefit from this as well if what it is stating is the case.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In response to the Deputy's specific questions, in 2019, of 35 people transferred, 33 were sent to the United Kingdom. In 2020, of eight people transferred, seven were sent to the UK. This is at the top of my list. In fact, I am criticised for trying to deal with issues in respect of international protection and for giving too much priority to it but it is an absolutely essential issue. In terms of what the Deputy said about the figures, what we have is an assessment that the figures are very high because huge percentages of people are applying for international protection at the International Protection Office, IPO. They are not applying at the airport and while it is not conclusive, we believe it is strongly persuasive evidence that those individuals who apply for asylum at the IPO are coming south over the Border. That is supported anecdotally as well. The percentage of people applying for asylum at the IPO is 87%.

As I have said previously, there are many people going in the other direction. When I speak to the Home Secretary, she will be saying to me that she has great concern about people flying into Dublin Airport and coming into Britain through Northern Ireland.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Then let us have a bilateral agreement.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They have a bilateral agreement with the French and it is one in, one out. They are realistic politicians.

Deputy Matt Carthy: We have a common travel area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: That agreement is one in, one out.

An Garda Síochána

74. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the full details of the remuneration packages and any other financial costs to the State related to the appointments and terms served of the current Garda Commissioner and the previous Garda Commissioner. [68764/25]

Deputy Alan Kelly: As the Minister is aware, I asked a number of parliamentary questions regarding the remuneration of the former Garda Commissioner but the information provided to me was not accurate. It was misleading. There was a deal with the former Commissioner in relation to his accommodation and that rent was not indexed, so there was a loss to the taxpayer. Essentially, his rent was subsidised and paid for. Is the Minister going to provide the full details? Will he apologise and correct the record? In future, will he ensure his answers are not misleading to this House?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I want to start by apologising to Deputy Kelly. He asked a question on 23 September and asked the same question on 9 October. In both questions, he asked about the total remuneration package paid to the current Garda Commissioner and the former Garda Commissioner. The answer he got was incomplete. It was very restricted in that it outlined only the salary of the current Garda Commissioners and stated that the previous Commissioner had had the same salary. It did not include, as Deputy Kelly has said, details about the fact that the previous Garda Commissioner had been provided with accommodation in Phoenix Park by the Office of Public Works and that the rent on that had been paid by An Garda Síochána. The rent was €1,800 per month. While I am conscious that the personal tax details of individuals are confidential, I can confirm that the former Commissioner paid benefit-in-kind in respect of that arrangement.

The question Deputy Kelly is asking goes further than those he asked in September and October. It also seeks information on other financial costs to the State related to the appointments. In respect of that and on foot of a security assessment by An Garda Síochána, expenditure of €212,000 was incurred by the Garda Vote for security at the house. An annual monitoring charge of €2,500 was incurred for those security arrangements. Neither I nor my predecessors have commented on those security arrangements for serving Garda Commissioners. In respect of the pension arrangements, the former Commissioner had the option to join the single public service pension scheme or receive a pension contribution, equivalent to 18.4% of the salary, into a pension scheme nominated by him. He waived that

and, in fairness to him, that resulted in a considerable financial gain that he did not seek to accrue.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Minister for correcting the record. Only for my party colleague Deputy Eoghan Kenny, asking questions in the Committee of Public Accounts, we would not have found this out. I asked numerous questions about this. I spoke to the Garda Representative Association today and was told about so many gardaí who are resigning because they cannot afford to pay rent. The Minister is probably aware of this. Accommodation was provided to a Commissioner and the rent was not indexed. There was a considerable loss to the State where, basically, the rent was not being paid. This is the Accounting Officer for An Garda Síochána and it is low rent. Why was this arrangement not advertised as part of the package when we were looking for a Commissioner? Why was it not part of the job evaluation afterwards once it was awarded? Why did An Garda Síochána look for a house in 2017 prior to a Commissioner even being appointed? The head of the OPW at a meeting of the public accounts committee two weeks ago said it had actually been leased in 2017. Is that accurate? Will the Minister also confirm whether there were any other costs during those seven years in relation to this accommodation that were, in any way, met by the taxpayer?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Obviously, there were unusual aspects to the appointment of the previous Commissioner because he was from outside An Garda Síochána. He came externally and, obviously, issues arise in respect of that. However, I went back and looked at some of the coverage of the new Commissioner's appointment. On 13 December 2017, *The Irish Times* reported, "The Government may pay the accommodation costs and education fees for dependent children if an international candidate is selected for the role of Garda Commissioner." It was obviously envisaged at the time that if someone were going to be appointed to the job of Garda Commissioner from outside of Ireland, accommodation costs would have to be paid in respect of that individual. That situation arose. As I said, the information should have been provided to the Deputy in respect of the rent that was paid on the former Commissioner's behalf by An Garda Síochána. That should have been provided to the Deputy previously.

As for any other costs, aside from the payments the former Commissioner received which I have already provided to the Deputy, namely, the rent and property and the other financial costs associated with expenditure on doing up the house for security reasons, I am not aware of any other expenditure or extra package that was available to that Commissioner.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Why was this hidden for seven years? That is a real question. Second, other candidates were not aware of this accommodation scenario. Was it, therefore, a fair competition? This is not the first time that I have submitted questions to the Minister's Department that have not been answered. When the Minister commenced in his role, I asked questions regarding holsters. The Minister wrote to me in that regard, but his response was inaccurate. On that occasion, I went to him and he wrote to me again but, again, the response was inaccurate and I had to tell him that. The Minister had to write to me three times on the one question. I am also the Member who had to tell the Minister about the arms in the boot of the car in the Evan Fitzgerald case. The Minister was not aware of it. He said a narrow interpretation of my parliamentary question was taken, but am I meant to basically second-

guess all answers now as being narrow interpretations? How is it possible the Minister was not aware of this issue?

I have a deep concern about how policing is administered from the Minister's Department, as opposed to other sections. I have said to him that any of three things could be happening regarding these questions because I cannot, as an Opposition spokesperson, continue to ask questions and receive narrow interpretations. It is either incompetence or a deliberate act or the people answering the questions genuinely do not know at this stage what is accurate or inaccurate. Any or all of them are deeply worrying for this House. Will the Minister guarantee that the answers he gives to questions from Opposition spokespersons will be accurate and he will not mislead the House in the future?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am checking something that is of significance to the answer. I take answering questions in this House extremely seriously. Obviously, parliamentary questions come in. I was searching for a figure. Since I have been appointed as Minister, somewhere in the region of 3,500 to 4,000 parliamentary questions have come in and each one of them deserves a full and complete answer. I have instructed officials in my Department that when it comes to answering parliamentary questions, in cases where there can be either a broad or narrow interpretation, they are to adopt the broad interpretation in giving an answer.

Deputy Alan Kelly: When did the Minister tell them that?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have been telling them that consistently. Part of the reason the Deputy received a previous answer by way of a letter from me a number of months ago is that I am insistent that information is given, not just to the Deputy but to all TDs, as thoroughly as possible.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I told the Minister it was inaccurate.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: With regard to the Deputy's point that this was hidden, having referred to what was in *The Irish Times*, I do not think it can be said it was hidden. Anyone applying-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: It was not public.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Anyone applying from outside of Ireland in 2017 would have been aware that one of the options or packages applied would be accommodation fees and education fees, if they arose.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The candidates were not aware of it.

Refugee Resettlement Programme

75. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to provide an update on pathways to resettlement for Palestinians in Gaza who wish to come to Ireland. [68957/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a simple question. We have all seen the horror and genocide in Gaza over the past two years. Despite the so-called ceasefire, it continues. There was an attack on an apartment block last night, with children murdered again by Israel. We have all been contacted by people who have connections to Ireland in various ways and who are looking to get out of Gaza and become refugees to resettle in Ireland. It has been difficult to help those people. We have had sympathetic responses from the Minister and the various people we write to, but little practical help.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: What is happening in Gaza is horrific. My Department continues to work closely with the Department of foreign affairs to ensure a co-ordinated national response to the situation. This includes working with Irish citizens and their families who may require visa assistance. Many visas have been granted to individuals coming from Gaza to Ireland.

In common with the position for all non-EU nationals, entry of Palestinian nationals is undertaken through the existing legal immigration pathways available. Palestinian nationals are visa required and must have a valid Irish visa before they seek to enter Ireland. Palestinian nationals can apply for a visa and permission to remain in Ireland for a variety of reasons, including employment, education or to join a family member in the State. That information is available on my Department's website.

Visa applications are part of a screening process, designed to establish that a person has a legitimate reason to come to Ireland prior to travel. All such applications undergo this process. Separately, there is also the process of applying for visas since October 2023. I understand that the total number is 1,790, of which 1,068 have been granted. Visas are being granted in respect of Palestinians who seek to come to Ireland. Obviously, individuals who come to Ireland and claim international protection having emanated from Palestine will have their applications considered.

This is an international crisis in terms of trying to provide humanitarian assistance to people in Gaza. It is particularly difficult to get out of there, but Ireland plays its part in assisting people who want to leave, whether that is through immigration visas or someone making an application for international protection. Of course, that will be considered as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: When Putin invaded Ukraine, the Irish Government was clear in its welcome to Ukrainians who were fleeing a brutal invasion and war. The Palestinian people for two years - longer in reality - have been facing absolute horror and they continue to face it. It is fine to say the information is all on the website, but the Minister and I know that many of these cases are quite complex. We write to the Minister and then we are told that, for example, guidance cannot be provided on visas applications that have not yet been submitted. In many cases, however, what these people need is assistance in making the best application they can. We need practical guidance on how to advise people of their visas options. We do not really have that knowledge. Ideally we would have a dedicated contact point to assist with some of

the more challenging cases that come to us so that people can make whatever application they need to make.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: There is a significant difference between Gaza and Ukraine. People cannot leave Gaza but they can leave Ukraine. The European Union decided that the temporary protection directive would be commenced in respect of individuals emanating from Ukraine. We also want to be careful in that we do not want to facilitate an Israeli policy of seeking to compulsorily move people out of Palestinian territory.

The statistics confirm that a lot has been done. Looking at the total number of visa applications received from Palestinian nationals since October 2023, which is the past two years, 1,700 have applied and we have granted over 1,000. A lot of visas are being granted to individuals who apply for visas from Palestine. It probably does require a broader international humanitarian response. There was a broader European response with Syria and Afghanistan but there are very particular issues arising given the Israeli policy of precluding people from leaving Gaza that have an impact on policy developed by European countries.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I accept entirely the point about Israel's role, and the Jordanian authorities have also presented an obstacle to this. I have met with many Palestinians who are here who have family members, be it brothers and sisters or whatever, stuck in Gaza in this absolute horror. I agree that we do not want to facilitate the ethnic cleansing of Gaza but we also do not want to say "No" to people who want to come and join their families here. These people come to us, and I am sure the Minister has also heard many awful stories. These people have lost many members of their families, they are trying to get out and they are trying to join their families that are here. What should we tell them? At the moment we write to the Minister through parliamentary questions and we write to the immigration service, but we just get boilerplate answers that do not facilitate them. Can more practical assistance be provided to them with a point of contact in the Department in order to be able to give more assistance to people in those sort of circumstances?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The officials in my Department give a very sympathetic response and an efficient response. The numbers of applications for visas to come here are very significant and it takes a long time to process them. I do not know whether it is the case that priority is given to applicants from certain countries but the best way of dealing with it is to ensure that we improve and increase efficiency, which is something that can always be done.

In terms of what else is happening, the Irish Red Cross has offered to assist families in Ireland to apply for entry visas for their family members still in Gaza. Applications from eligible family members will be processed as swiftly as possible. This is what my officials say to me. I understand that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Irish embassies and consulates are limited to providing assistance to non-Irish citizens but they are actively exploring options for the provision of assistance to individuals in Gaza who wish to travel to Ireland. The Deputy will also be aware that we did a lot in terms of the medivac scheme. In September 2024, the Government approved Ireland's participation in the initiative to evacuate up to 36 children from Gaza. So far, 19 paediatric patients and members of their families have arrived.

Coroners Service

76. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will provide an update on the urgent discussions referenced in his written reply of 22 October 2025 regarding the planned discontinuation of coronial post mortems at University Hospital Waterford from 1 January 2026; the interim arrangements that have now been agreed for counties Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Tipperary and Carlow; and the way in which his Department intends to ensure that bereaved families in the south east are not subjected to further delays or distress as a result of these changes. [68836/25]

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Following a recent meeting in University Hospital Waterford, UHW, attended by representatives and officials in my Department, I am advised that the pathologists employed at that location have indicated they are not available to carry out post mortems. On foot of this, my Department has been engaging with locum pathologists with a view to agreeing a solution to the situation in UHW from 1 January next. This approach is an unfortunate necessity to minimise any impact on bereaved family members who are engaging with the Coroner Service. A long-term sustainable solution is, nevertheless, required whereby locum pathologists are not relied upon to provide for the autopsy service and instead this service to the community is provided from within the pathology profession in Ireland generally.

I am afraid that I am also advised there are issues arising with respect to the performance of post mortems within the pathology profession generally. These include issues relating to training and recruitment as well as competing demands on pathologists in areas of diagnostic and research work. These are concerns that I am particularly worried about. There is an overlap here between my Department, which has responsibility for the Coroner Service and inquests, and the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

In April 2022, my Department established a standing committee on the provision of coroner-directed post mortem examination services, membership of which consists of representatives from the Department of Health, HSE, Office of the State Pathologist, Garda, Coroners Society, and other officials from the faculty of pathology in the Royal College of Physicians. While this committee is an important forum with appropriate membership to discuss issues in relation to the autopsy service, I am conscious that the situation in University Hospital Waterford has reached a critical juncture and an urgent solution is required. I will consider and continue to seek to engage on this issue but it is an issue over which I do not have full control in light of what pathologists are doing at present.

Deputy Michael Murphy: We are little more than 40 days from a cliff edge that the Minister has just described as a "critical juncture". From 1 January post mortems will no longer be carried out at UHW, a service that carries out 700 cases every year, which are often the most tragic and traumatic of deaths. Behind every one of these cases is a family in shock waiting for answers and waiting simply to lay a loved one to rest yet today, with the deadline fast approaching, there is no clarity on who will perform these examinations, where they will take place, or how families in counties Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Carlow and Tipperary will be protected from delays that could last days or weeks. How will the Minister ensure that bereaved families in the south east are not plunged into a crisis of delays, distress and indignity from 1

January? Families deserve certainty, they deserve compassion and a plan, and they deserve it now.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy that it is a very traumatic experience for a family after there has been a death if they are told that there has to be a post mortem and then there can be a considerable wait prior to the funeral. I would not like to see Ireland develop in the same way as other countries where there is a significant delay between death and the funeral. One of the things we do very well in this country is death and it is not something that we want to change by having a big gap between death and a funeral.

Where a coroner deems a post mortem examination to be required, the coroner concerned will arrange the post mortem examination to be conducted as expeditiously as possible to ensure timely release of the remains to the next of kin. Depending on the circumstance of the death, a post mortem examination is carried out by a pathologist or, in State forensic cases, by the Office of the State Pathologist. I am in the process of seeking to review the law in respect of coroners. We need to examine the circumstances of when we order a post mortem. A post mortem is not needed in all the situations that we have them at present, particularly for elderly people, but that level of reform will not be in place by 1 January. I am concerned about what the Deputy has narrated as to the circumstances in University Hospital Waterford.

Deputy Michael Murphy: This is not an abstract policy issue; this is a human one. There are 700 cases every year. Every day that a family waits for a post mortem is a day they cannot hold a funeral, cannot begin the grieving process and cannot find closure. That is the reality that awaits hundreds of families across the south east if this service collapses on 1 January. Coroners, funeral directors and front-line responders still have no guidance. Families deserve reassurance that they will not be left waiting in deep distress for a service that is their right. I again ask the Minister, respectfully but firmly, to commit to guaranteeing that no family across the south east will face avoidable delays or uncertainty on the most difficult days of their lives. The people we represent in the south east deserve nothing less.

11 o'clock

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I will give the statistics in respect of University Hospital Waterford. There are nine sanctioned consultant pathology posts of which eight are currently filled with one vacancy to be filled next year. Two posts were filled earlier this year and these appointments have not been made on the basis of the autopsy element being excluded. The remaining six pathologists have provided the autopsy service with three taking on the bulk of the workload. All six have confirmed that they will withdraw the service from 1 January. This is happening because consultants are withdrawing from a service. We need to look again at the contracts of individuals we are hiring as pathologists, so that there is a requirement that they perform post mortems and autopsies.

As the Deputy said, approximately 700 autopsies are conducted in University Hospital Waterford every year. The local pathologist services with which the Department is engaging will be contracted to provide a service from pathologists not already providing services in Ireland. In practice, this will be from the UK.

Legal Aid

77. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he has initiated an immediate review of the Legal Aid Board's capacity to administer the current civil legal aid scheme, as recommended by the review of civil legal aid; when he expects this review to be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68322/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is now several months since the Minister received the report on the civil legal aid review, which in itself took three years to complete. Recommendation 22 of that report called for an immediate review of the Legal Aid Board's capacity to administer the current civil legal aid scheme. Will the Minister advise whether that has been commenced and when it is expected to be complete?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As the Deputy knows, the Legal Aid Board is the statutory body responsible for the provision of civil legal aid and advice to qualifying individuals. There are two parts to it, one is legal advice while the other is legal representation. Eligibility for the scheme is determined by reference to a financial assessment. The Legal Aid Board provides enormous assistance, particularly in the area of family law and, indeed, going back to what we were talking about earlier, international protection.

The Deputy is correct in that the former Chief Justice, Mr. Justice Frank Clarke, was asked in June 2022 to conduct a review. Two reports actually were published in July 2025 which contained recommendations relating to the income threshold allowances and other financial aspects of the scheme. Since the overall available income eligibility threshold is influenced by the level of deductible allowances any changes must be considered in the round and the potential implications that such changes might have on the operation of the scheme. While the review highlights the need for comprehensive legal aid reform it also recognises that the current legal aid system must function effectively in the meantime. A critical aspect of any implementation will, therefore, be careful sequencing of reforms. However, I want the Deputy to know that in my Department, officials are considering the reports and are putting together proposals that will come to me for the purpose of implementing the recommendations.

The Deputy is correct in noting that the review group recognised that immediate action is required on the financial eligibility thresholds. It favoured an increase in the available income threshold from €18,000 to €23,500 as soon as possible. I want to see that achieved. I have instructed officials in my Department that I want to see it achieved. However, I have to inform the Deputy that I cannot just do that by the stroke of a pen. Once I do that, the demand for services is going to increase quite significantly. I need to ensure that I have the lawyers available to provide the increase in services. It is an important question and progress is being made on it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Having heard the number of announcements the Minister has made over the past year without any changes happening, it concerns me when he has not even made an announcement in respect of this. That says to me that there is not an appreciation yet of the urgency here. There is a real crisis right now in accessing civil legal aid. That means there is a crisis in access to justice. The income limits, incredibly, have not changed since 2006. We are told by everybody involved that the fee structure means we do not have enough private

lawyers carrying out legal aid work. That is creating problems in some parts of the country where there are basically no supports available, particularly for vulnerable people, including victims of domestic violence, who just cannot get the representation they need.

I am told by those who work in the area that the civil legal aid services are virtually on the brink of collapse, unless something is done urgently. I hear what the Minister is saying in terms of asking his officials to do this and wanting to do that. Will he give us a timeframe and clarity as to when we will see action in this area?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is important that I got the report, read it and published it and that we tried to consider how we could implement it. I regret to say that it cannot happen overnight. The Deputy might think that can happen in government, that a Minister can say, "I am going to do this" and that it happens. It is important to announce what one's policy objective is, however. It is important for me to say that I want to see the recommendations in respect of the financial eligibility set out in the majority report implemented.

It is also important to emphasise that funding for legal aid and legal advice has increased significantly in recent years. In budget 2021, my Department's allocation to the free legal advice centres, FLAC, trebled from €98,000 to €294,000. It is important that I made an announcement this year which was followed up with actual money. The budget allocation for FLAC for 2026 increased significantly from €500,000 to €750,000. The increased funding will allow them to prioritise callers and assist people who are seeking legal aid and legal assistance. Work is, therefore, being done. I am not going to just give a timeline but I have instructed officials in my Department that I want to see the recommendations set out in Frank Clarke's report implemented in respect of financial eligibility.

Deputy Matt Carthy: For all the recommendations and the fact we need a whole overview of the civil legal aid scheme, two things need to be addressed, namely, income thresholds and fees. I do not believe that even the income thresholds suggested in the majority report are going to be sufficient to provide for access to the justice that I think the Minister will agree is integral. We need to get those two things sorted very quickly. While there has been no movement on that side, there is potentially a lot of additional pressure coming. I do not know whether the Minister followed the pre-legislative scrutiny discussions but people who work in this area have highlighted the burden that will be placed on them by the international protection Bill. Additional work is going to be put on the civil legal aid process. The Minister is adding to the pressures but not providing the solutions. What does the Minister intend to do to address the concerns around the international protection Bill? Crucially, when are we going to see the income thresholds and fees addressed?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In terms of international protection, Deputy Carthy is right about that. A significant number of people are seeking legal aid from the Legal Aid Board in respect of international protection. In fact, 11,689 applicants sought legal aid services in relation to international protection last year, which was an increase from nearly 10,000 the year before. That is hugely demanding for the Legal Aid Board. I am increasing the funding to the Legal Aid Board. The current budget allocation for the board for 2026 is €72 million, which is made up of €36.5 million for the pay budget and €35.6 million for the non-pay budget. When it comes to international protection and the enactment of the new international protection Bill,

obviously there is a requirement within that, that we are going to provide legal counsel to individuals who are seeking assistance in respect of the international protection process. I will have to fund that. That funding will have to be made available. That will happen immediately, as of 12 June next year.

I am committed to changing the financial eligibility rules. However, I am not going to give a date here when I do not have certainty that it will be complied with by that date.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 78 and 79 taken with Written Answers.

An Garda Síochána

80. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of Garda recruits that have entered Templemore in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68340/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Last year more than 11,000 people applied to join An Garda Síochána. It was a very successful recruitment campaign. At this point, how many of those people have come through Garda training? What is the capacity of the centre to train and put gardaí on the street?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. One of the great privileges of being Minister for justice is to attend passing out ceremonies in Templemore. I have been to four already this year. They are wonderful occasions for the new Garda recruits and their families. One thing that stands out for me is that the numbers are increasing each time I go to each passing out. At the recent one I was at with the Taoiseach, 194 new Garda recruits passed out.

On the Deputy's question, overall 794 trainees entered the Garda College this year. This is the highest number since 2018. Recruitment into the Garda is gathering momentum. I was delighted to see not only the 194 new recruits coming out but also 223 enter Templemore the following Monday. That is the largest single intake in over a decade. This was the second intake of 200 or more this year. If I can get 200 or more new recruits going into Templemore for each training period, that will have a huge impact on the numbers coming out. We can see the advantage when large numbers come out of Templemore.

The Commissioner decides where new recruits go but in Dublin we have been able to see increased Garda visibility in the city centre. In Cork we have been able to see increased Garda visibility in the city. The Commissioner shares my view we want to see that visibility and that Garda presence apparent throughout the whole country and not just in our cities, towns and villages, but we also need a mechanism to make gardaí more visible in rural areas. That is what the public want. They want to see more of An Garda Síochána. It is a great credit to the organisation so many members of the public want to see members in their community, but the only way we are going to be able to continue doing that is by encouraging people to join. I am

pleased the recruitment campaigns this year have resulted in expressions of interest from over 11,000 people.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. Over 11,000 is a huge number and a very strong statement of interest and of the appetite for joining the Garda. It is a very positive sign. That recruitment has reached out to various communities. What particular efforts have been made to reach different groupings for recruitment? What is the capacity to bring people through the training centre? Some 794 entered last year. That is a very big number and possibly the largest in some time, but how many at a time are coming through there? How soon does the Minister expect to have to undertake further recruitment?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am being told by the Garda it could put 1,000 people a year through Templemore, which is an extremely encouraging number. It can take up to 225, perhaps more, in each intake. When an intake is approaching, a huge amount of effort is put in by Garda HR to try to process applications faster. I am pleased there is a very efficient processing within An Garda Síochána now. Previously I had heard complaint about people having to wait a considerable time to get a response but now we are emphasising the urgency of this valuable human resource.

On looking to recruit people from various backgrounds, it is essential the police force reflects the society it serves. That means we need to go to the new Irish communities, people who may not have born here or whose parents may not have been, and encourage them to become part of the Irish police force. It is a fantastic attribute that we have attracted so many people from diverse backgrounds into An Garda Síochána. I hope to see that continue.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Leis an dá shruth gur tháinig isteach anuraidh, bhí 245 duine a tháinig tríd an sruth Gaeilge i mí Feabhra agus 128 tríd an sruth Gaeilge san fhómhar. Is léir go bhfuil laghdú ann i líon na ndaoine atá ag teacht tríd an sruth Gaeilge. Cad iad na hiarrachtaí faoi leith atá á ndéanamh chun Gaeilgeoirí a mhealladh isteach tríd an sruth Gaeilge agus chun neartú a dhéanamh ar an líon Gaeilgeoirí laistigh den chóras? Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil iarrachtaí faoi leith á ndéanamh le fógraíocht, ach an bhfuil aon rud breise á dhéanamh? An féidir céimeanna breise a thógáil do na chéad sruthanna nó ghrúpaí eile a bheidh á bhfógairt?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist. Tá an ceart aige. Tá a lán Gaeilgeoirí sa Gharda Síochána. Beidh mé ag dul go dtí Dún na nGall inniu agus beidh mé ann amárach. Níl aon dabht ach go mbeidh mé ag labhairt Gaeilge leis na gardaí i dTír Chonaill. Tá scéim sa Gharda Síochána. Táimid ag lorg Gaeilgeoirí. Chuaigh mé go dtí Contae na Mí cúpla seachtain ó shin agus bhí mé ag labhairt Gaeilge le go leor gardaí. Tháinig siad isteach sa Gharda Síochána tríd an scéim Ghaeilge. Tá súil agam go mbeidh níos mó gardaí le Gaeilge ag teacht isteach sa Gharda Síochána. Tá sé ceart gardaí atá ábalta Gaeilge a labhairt a fháil mar tá a lán daoine inár dtír ag labhairt Gaeilge. Níl a fhios agam cén fáth nach mbeidís siad ábalta labhairt Gaeilge leis na póilíní freisin.

Question No. 81 taken with Written Answers.

Naturalisation Applications

82. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of naturalisation applications received, rejected, and approved from 2021 to 2024 inclusive, and to date in 2025, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68265/25]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister, Ministers of State and their staff for their work so far and their responses.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy for his question and his remarks. Earlier this week I was delighted to attend the citizenship ceremonies held in Killarney along with the Ministers of State, Deputies Collins and Buttimer. It is a wonderful ceremony to go to. We had 5,200 new Irish citizens there.

Last year the number of naturalisation applications received by the Department was 27,032. Separately, the number of people who received a letter of approval was 29,868 and 187 were refused. Despite the substantial increase in applications received in recent years, the fact processing times have significantly reduced is a huge credit to the work of the Department and the staff in that particular area. The median processing time for a decision on an application in 2024 was eight months. This is a significant improvement from the median processing time of 15 months in 2023, 19 in 2022 and 24 in 2021. The Department has taken a significant number of steps to speed up the process for applicants. These included introducing an online digital application, online payments and the introduction of evetting. This digitisation has facilitated a record number of citizenship decisions made last year. In just over two years, my Department has gone from processing around 12,000 applications a year to processing over 20,000 applications in 2023, more than 31,000 decisions in 2024 and over 32,500 to end October 2025.

I assure everyone who has an application for naturalisation submitted to the citizenship division that the Department is doing everything to progress it. However, it is important to note that no two naturalisation applications are the same and some take longer than others to process. It is important the citizenship process be robust and comprehensive. Checks are carried out on each application. Unfortunately some of the international checks can take considerable time and this is largely outside of the control of the Department. I am sure the Deputy receives, as I and many others in this House do, receive representations on that. For that reason, while I expect going forward more applicants will receive a decision within one year, it cannot be guaranteed.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I again thank his departmental staff. He mentioned Killarney last week and I know people who were there. Friends of mine got their citizenship and were very proud to do so. Again, I ask him pass on my thanks to all the staff.

It is important the Department continues to plan ahead as application numbers change. In that context, does he foresee an increase in naturalisation applications next year? Has the Department put in place the necessary planning to avoid any risk of new backlogs?

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Department is always planning ahead and looking at that. We have put, as I said, additional resources in place. I do not believe additional backlogs will come in. Every effort is made. As I know people will listen to this, I reiterate that no two applications are the same. Some individual applications that come in take considerably longer, particularly in relation to checks that have to be done by An Garda Síochána, which are outside our direct control in terms of reply lines. That leads to a frustration where people ask why their application is taking X amount of time compared with those from others. As a general rule, the Department is working towards a processing time of within 12 months for applications coming in.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed response. With the ongoing modernisation of the immigration system, many applicants are keen to see how these changes are working. Will the Minister of State update the House on how the recent digitalisation measures have affected processing times so far, and whether further reforms or improvements are planned for 2026?

Deputy Colm Brophy: As I indicated in my initial response, we have seen very significant reductions in processing times. The objective is to try to provide that service within as tight a 12-month timeframe as we can. We will continue to do that. As I mentioned, there will always be individual cases where that is not the case. In the context of a significant increase in the number making applications in recent years, we have seen the processing time decrease in the handling of that increased volume. I would like to put on record that this is a result of the excellent work being done by the staff in that area in the Department. They are based in Tipperary and do an excellent job in processing these applications.

Questions Nos. 83 to 85, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

An Garda Síochána

86. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the actions he is taking in response to increased incidents and thefts in the north west; the way in which his Department is supporting An Garda Síochána, who do excellent work locally, in providing increased visibility and resources to respond to these incidents; his views on whether the Sligo-Leitrim division is not receiving enough gardaí, given no new gardaí have been allocated to the division from the latest round of training in Templemore; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68267/25]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I can assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána is fully committed to tackling all forms of crime and theft everywhere in the country. The Government's first priority is to increase Garda numbers and Garda visibility so all of our communities, rural and urban, can feel safe and be safe. This is reflected in the record allocation of €2.59 billion in the Garda Vote for 2026, which will support investment in equipment and technology and, importantly, the continued recruitment of Garda personnel.

I must be clear, though, that it is the Garda Commissioner who decides where to deploy Garda personnel. Neither the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, nor I, nor, indeed, any official from the

Department, can direct the Commissioner on where gardaí are to be stationed. I am pleased to confirm, however, that recruitment to An Garda Síochána is gathering real momentum, and we now have a steady pipeline of new recruits entering the Garda College. Some 194 new gardaí attested from Templemore in mid-November, taking the total this year to 619, the largest number of new gardaí in a single year since 2018. A total of 794 new recruits entered the college this year. We can look forward to seeing those probationer gardaí assigned throughout the country in 2026 as they pass out of Templemore.

It must also be noted that the allocation of newly attested gardaí allows for currently serving gardaí to move on transfer to other divisions across the country and into specialist units. In this regard, I understand that a number of gardaí have been transferred into the Sligo-Leitrim division during the course of 2025.

With regard to theft, the Government takes this issue extremely seriously. Thanks to the effective work of An Garda Síochána, almost all property crime types have seen decreases at a nationwide level. In the Sligo-Leitrim division, there has been a 50% reduction in reported burglaries in the year to date. In addition, thefts and related offences, thefts from shops and vehicle thefts are also down by 26%, 29% and 39%, respectively, in the first half of this year when compared to the same period last year.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Earlier this year, Sligo Garda station was identified as one of several stations that experienced crime rates above pre-pandemic levels in 2024, with theft accounting for nearly one third of all incidents. It is imperative that we shine a spotlight on rural crime and the emerging trends in the north-west. In Donegal and Sligo, there has been a marked rise in theft and arson, leaving communities anxious and unsettled. County Leitrim has witnessed an increase in burglaries. Only last Friday, a property was broken into in broad daylight at 1 p.m., which is a stark reminder of the growing boldness of criminal activity.

The Minister of State said 194 gardaí and 17 reserves were sworn in last month, but none of those were assigned to the Sligo-Leitrim Garda division. It is a continuing pattern. More gardaí should be assigned to that area, when we consider the crime statistics.

Deputy Niall Collins: It was encouraging to see that the CSO crime statistics, released last week, show that detection rates for crime incidents reported in 2024 were equal to or above those in 2023 for nine of the 14 crime offence groups.

The Department is currently progressing work to develop a retail crime strategy to tackle the complex and evolving nature of retail crime, which the Deputy mentioned. We are all too conscious that this is not just about organised retail crime, and that there is a large amount of lower level, everyday shoplifting, which has just as serious an impact on smaller retailers and their staff. The retail crime strategy will build on existing initiatives to tackle this criminality, integrating the latest national and international evidence-informed approaches for enforcement and prevention strategies, in addition to supports for retail workers.

In September, at the National Ploughing Championships, the Department published the rural safety plan for the period from 2025 to 2027. The plan's vision is to ensure people and communities in rural Ireland feel safe and are safe in their homes, places of work and local communities.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: While I have the opportunity, I wish to extend an invitation to the Garda Commissioner, Justin Kelly, to visit Sligo Garda station to witness first-hand the current working conditions, and to address the ongoing staffing shortages.

The proposed Garda division headquarters at Caltragh has faced repeated delays, stemming from earlier plans to merge the Sligo-Leitrim division with Donegal. The existing station at Pearse Road is not fit for the future needs of An Garda Síochána in the region.

The OPW has confirmed refurbishment works for a vacant State-owned building adjacent to the current station in Tubbercurry. We urgently need clarification on when this building will be occupied. It is a matter of critical importance for both community safety and public confidence. The existing station, dating back to the 1960s, is wholly unfit for purpose. Tubbercurry Garda station is the third busiest station in the Sligo-Leitrim division. It requires facilities that meet the demands of a modern, functioning Garda station, yet the current building falls far short of that. There is a State-owned building. I know plans are afoot to move the Garda station into the newly refurbished building. When can that go to planning, if it needs planning? When will the new station be opened?

Deputy Niall Collins: The Department has been informed by the Garda authorities that works are planned for Sligo Garda station in the immediate term. These works will support a scene of crime task force relocation. The project is at the tender evaluation stage. In accordance with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines, a preliminary business case for a new Garda divisional headquarters in Sligo is also being undertaken by An Garda Síochána. Once complete, the preliminary business case will be issued by An Garda Síochána to the Department for review and approval. Following approval of that preliminary business case, An Garda Síochána will then advise the Office of Public Works regarding the prioritisation of the programme. We will convey the Deputy's invitation to visit the region to the Garda Commissioner, and the Deputy will be duly informed.

International Protection

87. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if there is a strategy to spread the location of IPAS accommodation and avoid having large clusters in one area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66709/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: It is important that in all our discussions here, we choose our language carefully. We must not say anything that might inflame situations or give encouragement to any extreme positions. We must stick to the facts at all times. Let us remember that we are talking about fellow human beings.

I ask if there is a strategy to spread the location of IPAS accommodation and avoid having large clusters in one area.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I appreciate the comments in relation to the language and tone that must be used at all times in having conversations around this issue. It is very important, and important in this House. During the period from 2022 to 2024, over 45,000 additional international protection applicants arrived in Ireland. Prior to this, a typical three-year period

would have seen between 8,000 and 9,000 arrivals. IPAS was accommodating approximately 7,000 people in total at the end of 2021. By the end of 2024, that figure had risen to 32,000.

During that surge, the State was obliged to urgently source over 26,000 beds for international protection applicants, and in parallel, up to 60,000 beds for people fleeing the war in Ukraine. Centres were opened across the country, often at short notice, in order to ensure that people were provided with shelter. Given the emergency, the State was not in a position to implement any deliberate policies in relation to dispersal or distribution of accommodation centres during this period. However, I note that the 318 IPAS accommodation centres currently in operation are distributed and operational in every county across Ireland.

Due to the reduction in the numbers seeking international protection in 2025, my Department has been able to progress a range of very significant actions; to work to improve oversight, particularly of value for money; and to increase the proportion of State-owned beds across the system. The new rate card that has been implemented for contracts has delivered savings of over €59 million since May of this year. While commissioning emergency commercial accommodation will continue to be necessary in the short to medium term, it is being contracted on a short-term basis, which enables the State to decommission this capacity with agility as contracts expire or to meet fluctuating demand.

Ireland has adopted and is now working to implement the EU pact on migration. Reforming and speeding up the processing of applications should serve over time to reduce the scale of the demand for international protection accommodation, as we have seen starting in recent years.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister of State for that information. I understand the massive pressures that commenced three or four years ago. The most important thing is that we have open and frank discussions. By having open discussions, we lessen the possibility of false information and extreme positions taking hold. Two years ago, I stated publicly that we should have an open discussion on immigration. Only now is this beginning. We need to discuss this openly and not brush it under the carpet. We have nothing to hide. As a nation, we have been very generous. It is important that centres are not all located in one area or that small towns and villages do not have very high numbers. In my own county of Wicklow, the majority of IPAS centres, and of the numbers of applicants, are located in one municipal district. That district is west Wicklow. This district is also the most poorly served by public transport and services. This was not well planned. We need now to develop long-term strategies for IPAS locations.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I assure the Deputy, as I did in my initial reply, that this is what we are doing. We fully recognise that we went through a period where we had an effective emergency. We had a massive surge in numbers and we had to respond to those on a humanitarian basis and to provide emergency accommodation as necessary. The operation that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I have been working on, literally day and night since we came into office, is to ensure we put in place an IPAS system that is fit for purpose, delivers value for money for the taxpayer, is based on moving towards State ownership of facilities rather than commercial contracting, and takes into account impacts on communities and local people. We also want to meet our key central requirement, which is to provide the accommodation that is needed, as we are obliged to do under our international obligations. In

the context of doing all of that and in the context of renewing the contracts as they fall due, we are very much aware of the need to have an even spread, to look at how impacted communities are by location and to take that into account in all future decisions we make. Overall, the way of dealing with this is to bring down the numbers, which will bring down the need for the centres.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I fully appreciate the great work the Minister of State is doing. I commend him and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on the steps taken. They are very much facing up to the reality because to date in this country the political classes have been out of sync with the views of ordinary decent Irish people. We need to be transparent in how we are dealing with the housing of people who are exiting the IPAS system. Our councils need to inform the councillors of any relevant policies that impact housing allocations. Also, in regard to expenditure, and I understand the Minister of State is dealing with this, I urge the Minister to work to renegotiate all contracts with a view to lowering the cost. Regular counts should be done to establish the numbers in each centre so we are not paying for people who are not living there. One of the cornerstones of any system is that all citizens of the State who are working are treated equally. In the case of IPAS residents who are working and earning a wage, there must be a contribution to accommodation costs. Rent should be calculated along the lines of the letting priority scheme and local authority rents.

Deputy Colm Brophy: There is very little of that I would disagree with. To be absolutely clear, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I have announced a contribution model which we will implement. We believe absolutely in a system based on fairness, which means that people who are working and being provided with accommodation through the IPAS system should make a contribution to the cost of that provision. On the actual cost of providing the IPAS system, as I mentioned we have implemented a new rate card as part of contract renegotiations. As each contract comes forward for renegotiation, the new rate card kicks in. That is delivering savings to the State on providing IPAS accommodation of million and millions of euro. The real long-term saving to the State is the switch, which we have also implemented, to State-owned facilities. As the cost of a State-owned facility is a fraction of that of a commercial facility, that is the way we want to move. We are also cognisant that once people have moved through IPAS and have been granted permission to remain in this country, they should move out of IPAS centres and move into their own accommodation.

Question No. 88 taken with Written Answers.

An Garda Síochána

89. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the measures in place to ensure timely Garda statements and preservation of evidence where a victim is incapacitated; the measures in place in Garda stations to ensure suspected spiking incidents are treated as crimes, investigated promptly, and supported by appropriate policing protocols; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68475/25]

Deputy Michael Cahill: I ask the Minister to outline the measures in place to ensure timely Garda statements and preservation of evidence in suspected spiking incidents where a victim

is incapacitated. What measures are in place in Garda stations to ensure suspected spiking incidents are treated as crimes and investigated promptly? Are these measures supported by appropriate policing protocols? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Cahill for his very important question. As he will be aware, spiking is a crime that preys on vulnerability, undermines consent and can have devastating consequences for victims. I want him to know that as Minister, I am committed to the Government's zero-tolerance approach when it comes to all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Regrettably, it is the case that spiking incidents are generally accompanied by sexual offences as well.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to introduce stronger laws to combat the spiking of drinks. Spiking a person's drink or spiking someone by injection, which can happen as well, are, in effect, poisoning and are criminal offences under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 that can result in a term of imprisonment. Depending on the nature of the substance that is administered, it may be possible to charge a perpetrator with endangerment under section 13 of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997, which provides that it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly engage in conduct which creates a substantial risk of death or serious harm to another. The offence of endangerment carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment.

I know that An Garda Síochána takes all reports of spiking seriously and thoroughly investigates such reports to determine the exact nature of each incident, including results of toxicology reports in each case. I know Deputy Cahill will join me in advising all victims of these incidents or any form of spiking to come forward and report them to the local Garda. On the measures in place to ensure timely Garda statements and preservation of evidence where a victim is incapacitated, I am informed that on receipt of a report of any crime, gardaí are duty bound to gather and seize evidence at a crime scene. It is also extremely important that we procure the evidence promptly. If somebody believes they have been spiked, it is important for them to report it to the Garda in order that a toxicology report can be obtained to ensure the crime can be prosecuted.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I thank the Minister for his detailed response and I welcome everything he said. I believe the numbers involved are increasing. I am basing that on reports coming to my constituency office, and telephone calls and meetings I am having with young women and, on occasion, young ladies with their mums. Sadly, the Minister is correct in saying that many of these suspected spiking incidents involved rape. I believe we need to protect our women. We need to do everything humanly possible. Of course, it is difficult to prove, in that the person may have one or two drinks as well. Can the Minister outline in more detail the protocols that are in place for a patient who presents at the accident and emergency department and reports suspected drink spiking and the reason hospitals do not carry out intoxication testing in these cases, especially when requested by patients and families?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. This is an extremely serious offence. It is an offence that is targeted predominately against women so that other serious sexual offences can be perpetrated against them. Gardaí inform me that incidents of spiking are more commonly reported alongside other primary offences.

I also regret to say that it appears that the number of incidents of spiking is significant. I am informed by the Garda that of the 60 reported incidents in 2024, 28 were drink spiking, a needle was used in ten and the method was unknown in 22. There were fewer than ten prosecutions initiated relating to fewer than five of those incidents reported during the 2022 to 2024 period.

If you believe you are a victim, obviously report it to the Garda. Gardaí will refer you to the appropriate hospital if they do not have the facilities to take the toxicology test, which is the case in many instances. It is important there is co-operation from hospitals and I believe that co-operation is present.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I believe toxicology reporting and testing in these cases is critical and it should be carried out in all suspected cases. Will the Minister commit to establishing a clear national pathway across all hospitals and Garda stations to ensure suspected spiking incidents are treated and investigated promptly and supported, as I said, by appropriate clinical and policing protocols? I cannot emphasise strongly enough how serious this matter is. I genuinely fear that the number of such instances will increase. It is a sly way of people getting what they want. I would ask the Minister - he will be strong on this - to ensure that every measure is taken to ensure that the people who carry out these offences are prosecuted and treated extremely harshly by the courts.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will raise with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, the protocols that are or could be put in place if someone presents at an emergency department who believes their drink may have been spiked or they may have been spiked. It is obviously important, if that occurred, for the purpose of the investigation that samples are taken so that proof can be provided that the spiking did, in fact, occur. It can be difficult for an individual, if it is left for a lengthy period of time, to prove that the spiking occurred when it did, and obviously the corresponding offence occurred when it did immediately after the spiking.

I was encouraged by the fact that my predecessor, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, launched an information campaign in December 2021 with the Union of Students in Ireland to raise awareness of the signs of drink spiking and to give guidance on how to help a potential victim. I think the Deputy will agree that this is a particular concern for young people, particularly students, when they are out socialising and having a good time. The Deputy is correct that it is a particularly egregious and nasty form of criminal act that seeks to make a person even more vulnerable than they may be on a particular occasion.

Domestic Violence

90. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will seek greater supports for counties where there are difficulties in acquiring domestic violence refuges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [67257/25]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I raised with the Minister previously the situation in County Roscommon where they are having major difficulties in sourcing a building that meets the requirements to become a refuge. Will the Minister look at areas such as County Roscommon that, despite best efforts, are struggling to find such a building?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is an essential part of the Government strategy in respect of responding to domestic violence that we have in place appropriate refuges and safe houses throughout the country.

Under the third national domestic, sexual and gender-based violence strategy, this Government has committed to doubling domestic violence safe accommodation capacity to 282 units by the end of next year. Cuan, the statutory body that has responsibility under my guidance for this, has been working to accelerate the delivery of safe accommodation across the country.

Following a request from me, Cuan worked with services and partners to assess and review progress and identify a series of actions to accelerate delivery and to bring safe accommodation on stream as quickly as possible to meet the needs of those fleeing violence.

On foot of this review, completed in spring 2025, the following will be delivered: 52 new family refuge units by the end of 2026; 45 new safe homes by the end of 2026; and 50 new units will be under construction by the end of 2026. Cuan has a total budget of nearly €67 million to respond to that.

In the Deputy's area, plans are under way to develop an eight-unit purpose-built refuge in County Roscommon. Cuan has established a local stakeholder group to lead and support the development of domestic violence accommodation. This group includes representation from Roscommon Safe Link, Roscommon County Council, Cuan and other important agencies. Site feasibility is being completed on a potential site. Safe home accommodation was developed in the county with two safe homes being operational in July 2025 and Roscommon Safe Link received additional funding from Cuan for the development and delivery of these safe homes.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I acknowledge Cuan, the agency, and the work it is doing and the efforts that are being made to increase capacity when it comes to refuge spaces and safe houses for those who are fleeing domestic violence or violence typically in their own home.

A number of sites had been identified by Roscommon Safe Link but, because of the criteria being so rigid, none of those sites was found to meet the criteria in place. We all hope that the site identified now will be the site. I would ask that in certain areas, such as County Roscommon which is rural, where the need is established and where genuine efforts have been made to find a site, that the criteria could be looked at with a little flexibility in engagement with both the safe link and the local authority because it has been a challenge in County Roscommon.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Kerrane for her question. No doubt there will be an element of flexibility in respect of considering locations for refuges.

It is essential that we have refuges spread geographically throughout the country. What I want to see is not necessarily a refuge in every county, because in some counties you may need two because of the size of them, but locations that are close to where people are and are equidistant from each other so that where there are higher population levels people will know that there is a refuge available.

I have visited many refuges since I have become Minister. I visited a refuge last week and I was impressed with what was going on and the level of commitment there.

It is also important to point out, however, that we cannot have it as the automatic response that when there is domestic violence, the women has to leave the home. We need to look at barring orders as well. There will be an immediate requirement for emergency accommodation but the solution should be that the abuser leaves the home and the victim gets back into her home.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I hope we will see that development of a refuge in County Roscommon because, as I said, the need is there. I hope the site that has been identified will be successful. The Minister is correct that in most of these cases, it is the woman who flees the home. That should not be the case. We should be looking at turning that around, where the abuser is the one who has to lose his home, typically, as the case may be. That is the way we should look at it. For the refuges we need, particularly in the west in counties like Roscommon and the county part of Galway, there is a need to ensure there is an adequate number of refuges, particularly in parts like the west, where there are many very rural areas. I thank the Minister. I hope we will be successful in the refuge for County Roscommon.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I should have pointed out that the refuge I visited on Monday was in Clonmel. I was extremely impressed by the service provided and the commitment of the staff. I was also at another event this week which is relevant to the discussion we are having about domestic violence. That was the launch of a report by an organisation called Men Overcoming Violence, MOVE. We are never going to be really able to resolve or properly confront the scourge of domestic violence unless we engage with and try to give counselling and an avenue out of it for men involved in committing violence. MOVE produced a useful report and gave an insight into the motivating factors that led men to perpetrate violence against their intimate partners. In many instances, it was insecurities, fear of losing the partner and substance abuse. It can be difficult for State bodies or State-funded bodies to engage with perpetrators. It is extremely important that we continue to do that because we will not be able to confront this issue without doing so.

Housing Schemes

91. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration when he will introduce changes to the accommodation recognition scheme in the light of its impact on the private rental market and the fact that landlords are using this scheme to avoid tenancy obligations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [68324/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister and Department seem to have at last recognised that the accommodation recognition scheme paid in respect of Ukrainian accommodation has had and is having an impact on the private rental market and what I consider the undisputed fact that landlords are using the scheme to avoid tenancy obligations. Will the Minister outline when he intends to bring forward proposed changes to the accommodation recognition scheme?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As the Deputy will be aware, this year we changed the payment under the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, from €800 per month to €600 per month. I know there were concerns about that change as to what impact it would have on those individuals being accommodated. I am pleased to say it has not had, in our opinion, a significantly detrimental impact and has not led to very many people who were being accommodated pursuant to that payment losing their accommodation. The accommodation recognition payment was a useful measure. It was a goodwill payment to recognise the contribution of hosts who opened up their homes to temporary protection beneficiaries from Ukraine. Some 41,500 people are being accommodated in over 23,000 hosted accommodations supported by this scheme. The ARP is not intended to be a substitute for rent. Indeed, it is not payable where there is a rental agreement in place between the host and the guest. According to research from the Irish Red Cross, the vast majority of hosts who avail of the ARP were never and have no future plans to be landlords. I am aware of concerns about the impact of the scheme on the private rental market. Analysis carried out by the RTB for my colleague, the Minister for housing, suggests that some landlords could be diverting accommodation from the private rental sector to benefit from the ARP. It is difficult to reach definitive conclusions on the matter given wider issues impacting housing supply. I can, however, confirm that the Government agreed to a proposal brought jointly by the Minister for housing and me for the governing legislation to be amended to limit eligibility for the ARP to properties that are not rental properties. I think that will meet the Deputy's concerns. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that drafting of the necessary legislative amendments to give effect to the decision is well advanced. The proposal follows the measure implemented earlier this year where we reduced the ARP from €800 to €600.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will agree with the Minister on one point - the accommodation recognition payment was a goodwill gesture for people who opened up their homes to Ukrainians fleeing war. It is very laudable and supported by everybody, I think, in this House. It was then extended and since then the impact of the ARP scheme on the rental market is seen in communities across the State. The Minister and the Government have refused to accept amendments Sinn Féin has brought forward that would limit the scheme to avoid the damage being done in the private rental sector. I welcome that there has been a belated acknowledgement by the Government that the scheme has impacted the private rental sector. We know landlords are availing of the scheme because they are incentivised to do so. Under the ARP, landlords get a tax-free payment. Crucially, and this is the reason we have not seen any distinction in the number since the reduced payment, they are able to avail of a top-up payment from their tenants without any regulation whatsoever. They are completely freed of any tenancy obligations that they would have for any other tenant.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It was blatantly obvious this was going to have an impact on the private rental market, and it is blatantly obvious that it is having an impact on the private rental market.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Please conclude.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When will changes actually be brought forward, rather than just these cloudy timelines the Minister has been providing?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I disagree that it was blatantly obvious at the time it was introduced that it was going to have an impact on the private rental sector. We are not even sure at present that it is having an impact. There may be issues in respect of it. It is hard to definitively establish that. We are ensuring it will not be able to affect the private rental sector because we are going to limit eligibility for the ARP to properties that are not rental properties. That will ensure it will not have any distorting impact on the private rental sector. We also reduced the fee from €800 to €600 per month in respect of individuals giving goodwill accommodation. We also need to recognise, when you look at the number of people accommodated under the ARP - at present, it is about 41,500 - if it fell apart, if it was taken away and if there was no ARP, where would those people be accommodated? The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I are trying to insist that if people with temporary protection are working, they have to pay for their own accommodation. There are people who will still need to be provided with State accommodation. This is probably the cheapest mechanism available at present.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Here we go again. The Minister finally announced that there would be a recognition of the potential impact on the rental market months ago and he is still talking about himself and the Minister for housing bringing something forward at some unspecified time. What is really infuriating for so many people is the Government has yet to recognise that this scheme is deeply unfair. It provides a non-means-tested housing support to one group of people in need of housing that is not available to others. There is a situation where one person might be in employment, on good wages and is able to access housing support through the ARP and somebody else who might be on a lower income is not able to avail of it. Landlords tell me this is the absolute best in terms of their conditions because they have no obligations to the tenant and they can get a tax-free payment and top-up payments. For most of the period this scheme has been in place, the Government has refused to accept Sinn Féin's concerns or take on board any of our amendments. Now, the Minister is saying he recognises there are problems and he will bring forward some changes but will not specify exactly what they are or tell us when they will actually be brought in. It is time for real clarity and honesty.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not recall Sinn Féin objecting to the ARP when the previous Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, introduced it at the time temporary protection was granted.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It was for hosts in their own homes at that stage.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It was a necessary measure for the purpose of providing accommodation to the large number of people from Ukraine who came here. The Deputy said the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I have not done anything but we have. We reduced it from €800 to €600. I would have thought it is clearly the case we are gradually trying to introduce further measures in respect of it. We are bringing forward legislation to ensure it cannot be used in respect of rental properties so that the issues about which the Deputy and I are concerned will not apply. It is wrong to suggest it is having a completely distorting impact on the rental sector. It is predominantly used to accommodate people who have been granted

temporary protection and individuals whom, if they are not accommodated pursuant to the ARP, the State will probably have to look at some other mechanism of accommodation.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome to the Visitors Gallery the group of women, including Patricia Walsh, from Rock Street, Tralee, which I am told is the street of champions. They are very welcome to Teach Laighean inniu. Cuirim fáilte rompu.

Ar phríomhleathanach an *Irish Daily Mail* inniu, tuairiscítear bhfuil sé ráite ag an Tánaiste go gcuirfidh sé airgead ar ais i bpócaí na ndaoine. Gheall an Tánaiste roimhe seo go mbeadh laghdú ar cháin ioncaim do ghnáthoibrithe. Bhris sé an gealltanais sin. Gheall sé go mbeadh laghdú ar chostais fuinnimh, ach tá na costais sin níos airde ná mar a bhí riamh. Tharraing sé siar na creidmheasa fuinnimh a bhí daoine ag brath orthu. Bhris sé an gealltanais sin. Gheall sé go mbeadh plean aige taobh istigh de 100 lá a chinnteodh go mbeadh costais cúraim leanaí ar €200 sa mhí. Arís, bhris sé an gealltanais sin. Gheall sé sa toghchan go n-ísleodh sé táillí triú leibhéil do mhic léinn. Bhris sé an gealltanais sin agus chuir sé in airde iad. Níl daoine bómánta; déanfaidh siad breithiúnas ar an Rialtas bunaithe ar na gealltanais atá déanta aige agus ar cé chomh rialta is atá na gealltanais sin briste aige.

On the front page of the *Irish Daily Mail* this morning, the Tánaiste is quoted as having said he will put money back into people's pockets. He even describes himself as "Sensible Simon" in his new role in the Department of Finance. However, for workers, families, carers and students listening today, that claim collapses when measured against the promises the Government has made and broken. Let us take these promises one by one. The Government promised to cut income tax for ordinary workers but instead produced a budget that delivered huge tax breaks for developers and wealthy executives, while PAYE workers were left behind. The Tánaiste promised that energy bills would go down under Fine Gael. People have never paid higher energy bills and the Government withdrew the energy credits they depended on. The Government promised to abolish student fees but instead hiked them by €500 compared with what parents were paying last year. The Government promised that within 100 days it would produce a plan to reduce childcare fees to €200 per month. The 100 days are long gone and there is still no plan and no reduction in childcare fees in the budget the Government introduced. It promised to protect households from fuel price shocks but it is now driving up the prices of petrol and diesel through further carbon tax hikes. It promised it would increase the rent tax credit, yet the budget failed to do so, while landlords received tax breaks and rent pressures continue to spiral out of control.

These are not minor oversights; they were clear, repeated promises of the Government and each and every one of them is broken. The Government has done the exact opposite of what it promised. This is the real issue. People are not stupid. They are judging the Government on the promises it made and how consistently they have been broken. At the same time as breaking promises to workers and families, the budget found millions in taxpayers' money for banks and

developers. To be absolutely clear, this is not putting money into people's pockets; it is taking money out of their pockets.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Tánaiste accept that his €9.4 billion budget has left ordinary workers and families worse off? Does he accept that what he is promising in the *Irish Daily Mail* today is directly contradicted by his own litany and record of broken promises? Will he now commit to a real cost-of-living reset, including the immediate restoration of the energy credits, €10 a day childcare, a ban on rent increases, meaningful rent relief, the scrapping of further carbon tax hikes on petrol, diesel and home heating oil, the abolition of the universal social charge on the first €40,000 of income, and ending the means test for carers and, maybe, the sweetheart deals for banks, developers and vulture funds?

After everything that has happened, why should anybody take the Tánaiste seriously when the promises he made before the general election have been broken one after the other and he has done the opposite of what he promised?

The Tánaiste: Of course, Deputy Doherty chose not to start today, in his question about our economy and the budget, with the economic figures that have been published in the past hour, which show that, thanks to sensible and careful management, we have an economy that is performing well. We see modified domestic demand, which is pretty much a good proxy for domestic economic activity, growing by 5% annually for the third year. We see consumer spending remaining good, with record solid growth of 2.5%. We see investment in building and construction contributing positively to growth in the third quarter, and we see activity in the sector expanding by close to 9% annually. That is what we want to see at a time when we want to build more homes and infrastructure. We see employment growth as well and an economy doing well in a very challenging environment.

It is against this backdrop that we will continue to pursue sensible economic policies. It is not that long ago since we had high unemployment in this country and people felt they could not get a job. It is not that long ago since we had ghost estates in this country. It is not that long ago since we had to seek help from others to keep the economy running. That is why we will continue to run budget surpluses. It is why we will continue to put money into funds to protect the economy from any shocks, despite Deputy Doherty objecting to the legislation to establish those funds. It is why we will continue to be prudent and sensible in the time ahead.

The Deputy continually comes to this House and does two things. First, he suggests that everything said during an election campaign and stated in a programme for Government must be implemented immediately. The people of Ireland are not stupid.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: The Deputy's cacophony of assistance here is great. What was implied is obviously not reflective of how a programme for Government works. To the people at home, I say we have a programme for Government that commits to what we are going to do over five years. It is a published document, available on *gov.ie*. We have only delivered budget one of five. The Deputy will be pleased to know there will be another four. He will be 19 years

delivering his ripostes to our budgets by the end of this Dáil term. We will deliver four more budgets. In the most recent budget, which the Deputy again fails to acknowledge, we have already taken a number of measures to assist people with the cost of living, and we have tried to target those most in need, which I believed the Deputy might support.

For example, we introduced the largest ever increase in the child support payment, under the Minister, Deputy Calleary. It is a targeted measure to help low-income families and children most in need. We have extended the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance to preschool children, helping those children most in need and their parents with the cost of going to preschool. We have increased the domiciliary care allowance. We have expanded eligibility for student grants under the Minister, Deputy Lawless, meaning more families are benefiting. We have continued with the roll-out of free schoolbooks and free hot meals. All these measures assist families with the cost of living in the here and now. We have expanded the working family payment so more families can qualify. We have increased the State pension. As we speak today, people right across the country are seeing the benefit of the Christmas bonus. This initiative, which costs around €370 million from the budget, is to assist pensioners, carers, people with a disability, those on low incomes and vulnerable people. We will see further expansions to the fuel allowance. We have reduced the VAT rate applying to energy costs to 9%, permanently, or certainly for many years to come. These are practical measures.

The Minister for children will update the Government this month on an action plan on childcare. This week, as Deputy Doherty will be glad to know because he is very worried about this, as he should be because it is a big issue, the Minister announced a capital plan that will see a very significant level of funding for State-led childcare facilities. I am sure the Deputy welcomes this. It is a welcome development. We will commit, with Deputy Doherty and everyone in this House, to delivering during the lifetime of the Government the kind of childcare system on which I believe there is almost a consensus. Childcare is not just a social issue but is now a real economic one as well.

The Deputy should please not continue to come into this House and misrepresent what the Government is doing. The Government has taken action to stimulate housing supply. It has taken action through the budget to help in respect of jobs in rural and regional Ireland, in towns and villages including in County Donegal in the hospitality sector. We have also taken measures to help people with the cost of living, starting with those most in need. The Deputy can be assured we will fulfil the remaining programme for Government commitments over the next four budgets.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Maybe the Tánaiste should read his own ESRI research.

The Tánaiste: It is not mine.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am referring to the Government's own economic research body. What does it say about the budget? It states there will be income losses next year across the board. It states these will be even higher for those on lower incomes, affecting their disposable income. It states this will lead inevitably to reductions in household living standards in 2026. That is what the Tánaiste has been able to achieve with a €9.4 billion budget. This is because

he prioritises his buddies. He has left behind and abandoned ordinary people. I put to him, to Sensible Simon-----

The Tánaiste: Angry Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How did he break all these promises? He should answer the question. He made pledges to people over and over again. He is Tánaiste and he wants to be Taoiseach in a couple of years. He promises tax cuts every year to workers. There are no tax cuts in this budget, as he pointed out. He said energy would be cheaper under Fine Gael. People have never paid more. The Government knew that and withdrew the energy credit. People now have to get €321 extra. The Tánaiste promised cuts in third level fees. People are paying €500 more than they paid last year. The Tánaiste promised no shocks in fuel prices. The Government is pushing up fuel prices with carbon taxes. The Tánaiste promised things over and over again and broke them one after another. The question is simple. Why should anybody take the Tánaiste seriously in relation to his latest promise that he will put money back into people's pockets? The ESRI and everybody else knows that what the Tánaiste has done is taken money out of their pockets and left them worse off in a €9.4 billion budget. How the hell could he do that? It is unbelievable in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, Simon.

The Tánaiste: You can debate the use of the word "sensible", Pearse, but one thing is for sure, no one would ever call you "Prudent Pearse". Had we followed the economic plans of Deputy Doherty's party, God knows where we would be. He has some cheek, coming into this House and raising the issue of college fees, because I am sitting beside a Minister for higher education who has permanently reduced fees and will continue to do so in the time ahead.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty took to social media yesterday. He will probably recognise the First Minister and leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill, in the picture I am holding up.

Deputy Matt Carthy: College fees are up.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Yesterday, on its social media account, Sinn Féin heralded the fact that it had managed to freeze fees at £4,855-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Are fees up or down?

The Tánaiste: -----and put this up on its social media as though it was good news. It is more than twice what students in this jurisdiction pay.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin are hypocrites and phoney. Your faux outrage, Angry Pearse, does not convince anybody.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Are fees up or down? Are they more or less than last year? They are more.

The Tánaiste: We are reducing fees in this jurisdiction. Fees in the North are more than double, and Sinn Féin thought to take to social media to say this was great news. Sinn Féin are hypocrites. People see through it and that is why they are sitting over there, giving out, rather than actually being in government, because they have no credibility on this. They say one thing here and do the exact opposite in Northern Ireland. Shame.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Are fees up or down?

Deputy Denise Mitchell: We need to get in on this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We had that regular Thursday pantomime at the end of the first part of Leaders' Questions. I want to focus on an issue that is important to the Labour Party, which is Garda resources and Garda recruitment. Specifically, I want to raise with the Tánaiste the lack of new Garda stations and the Government's continued lack of meeting Garda recruitment figures. According to a reply to a parliamentary question I submitted earlier this year, since 2017, only two new Garda stations have been delivered in the country, despite the population increasing by nearly 1 million citizens. One of those stations is on O'Connell Street in the centre of Dublin. The other was a replacement of the divisional headquarters in Wexford. There has been only one new Garda station in eight years. It is simply unacceptable. In my town of Swords, the third largest town in Ireland, we have a Garda station that is only fit for a village. The town of Donabate, just up the road, which is served by Swords Garda station and will be 20,000 people strong in a couple of years, has no Garda station or plans for a Garda station.

This is not unusual throughout the country. My colleagues and I are screaming out for more resources throughout the country, particularly in rural Ireland, where we are being gaslit by the Minister about Garda resources. In a response earlier this year, the justice Minister said that 56 stations in this country were not closed but were simply unstaffed. That is absolute nonsense. If the door is not open and there are no opening hours for people to go in and meet and talk to gardaí, that station is, in effect, closed.

Here is the reality. Figures show that 129 of 567 stations had a reduction in the number of gardaí assigned to them in the last year, and one in ten stations is without any designated garda. Overall numbers in An Garda Síochána have actually grown, by a paltry increase of 193. However, if you dig into the detail, the number of front-line gardaí has actually decreased, from just over 12,000 to 11,928, a net decrease. Warning lights are being flashed for the Government. At its conference this year, the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors stated that we could lose 30% to 50% of our force due to upcoming retirements. Fine Gael has always identified itself as the party of law and order, yet the Tánaiste's party has stood over this lack of delivery for nearly a decade. The Tánaiste was one of the Ministers responsible for this portfolio, lest we forget. This situation is now beyond urgent and we need to see this

Government make big changes to ensure greater recruitment and retention of gardaí and investment in Garda stations. The Government needs to look at increasing the training allowance, at pension reform and at building more stations.

Will the Tánaiste increase the Garda training allowance to really incentivise new recruits? Will he reform the pension for our uniformed service members, including our gardaí who were hired post 2013, who upon retirement will receive no support from the State for possibly ten years? Will this Government commit to significantly increasing the number of new Garda stations being built around the country, prioritising large towns that have unfit-for-purpose stations, such as my own, Swords, and for really rapidly growing towns such as Donabate and many others throughout the country?

The Tánaiste: I agree with the Deputy that we obviously need to get more gardaí on our streets. We need to recruit and train more gardaí. The Deputy has made some suggestions as to how he thinks that can be done and I will come back to that in a moment. I need to make a few points about the level of investment we are now making in the Garda budget to empower the Garda Commissioner and Garda authorities to increase the numbers. We have a Garda budget of €2.59 billion for next year. This will fund recruitment of up to 1,000 new gardaí and 200 more Garda staff and also a doubling of the Garda Reserve to over 600 next year. We have run two Garda recruitment campaigns in 2025 and we have seen more than 11,000 applications to join An Garda Síochána received this year. There is genuinely a sense when I talk to the Minister and Garda authorities, as the Deputy can probably see himself, that there is some momentum with the number of people going into Templemore, though I admit it has been a challenging number of years. We saw, for example, 194 gardaí attested last week. This brings the total number of newly attested gardaí so far this year to 617. We saw 223 trainees enter Templemore in the last couple of weeks as well. This was the largest intake in Templemore since 2014, so the largest intake in 11 years. We have seen 794 trainees enter Templemore so far this year, which is the most since 2018. There are larger attestations, the largest training classes going on and the largest number of people overall training in Templemore in many years.

As of October this year, which is the latest month for which numbers are available, there are a total of 14,290 gardaí across the State. For comparison, in 2015, there were 12,816. There are now 3,487 Garda staff, which obviously helps to free up gardaí to put them on front-line duties as well. The Deputy asked specifically about the Garda training allowance and pension. I hear these issues too. I was in Coolock Garda station not too long ago. This discussion came up last year too. I need to say that all of these matters are for discussion and engagement through normal processes, public pay processes and the likes, rather than for me to give loose commitments on the floor of the Dáil.

Specifically on the third point, about Garda capital, I know the Minister for justice had approval at Cabinet this week for the Garda sectoral plan, as part of the sectoral investment plan in justice. That will see a significant increase in the number of Garda stations being constructed in the time ahead. I am conscious of the point the Deputy makes and I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, about this, particularly with the fast-growing populations around Swords, Donabate and the likes, and the particular need for additional infrastructure there. I will ask the Minister to come back on that.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The capital plan that has been drafted does not seem to be rooted in the reality of how towns are growing. My colleague Deputy Conor Sheehan talked about the Garda station and Garda needs in Castletroy. Every Member in this House will say the same. There needs to be a commitment to the reality. I did not mention investment, because we have had no shortage of money; it is a shortage of delivery. There has been some creativity in how the figures for recruits into Templemore have been published over the last couple of years, with recruitment classes starting very late in the year, where in essence they were beginning in the following year. All this has been revealed through parliamentary questions from our justice spokesperson, Deputy Alan Kelly, and other Members in our party. Fundamentally, two things are happening here. We are not recruiting or attracting enough gardaí. As a result, our communities and people are not feeling safe or protected. That is a real issue that the Government has not got a handle on despite the amount of money we have in the coffers. I ask the Tánaiste again to properly recommit to a training fund and to pension reform, and to prioritise those towns and villages all over this country that need proper Garda resources invested in their communities.

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge the point the Deputy makes, and do not want to jump over it, that it is not now an issue of shortage of money. It used to be. It is an issue now where we are actually able to invest properly, but that also means that we need to look at the processes. If 11,000 people put up their hand and say they want to join An Garda Síochána, the Minister for justice and the Garda Commissioner are eager to make sure that the pipeline is as efficient as possible in taking expressions of interest to join An Garda Síochána, robustly vetting and training those individuals and then having them on the streets, serving the people of this country and keeping people safe as well. There are some signs of positivity in Garda recruitment at the moment, albeit admitting that, with the closure of the college twice during Covid and the financial crash, there was lost time, which caused significant disruption. We have also made changes to the recruitment age, the maximum age at which someone can join An Garda Síochána and the retirement age, and we have seen some positive effects from that too.

I will take the points the Deputy made back to the Minister for his conversation with the Garda Commissioner about matching investment in Garda stations and population growth. It is not an unfair point. Many parts of this country are growing much more quickly than other parts. The other issues of how to improve incentivisation for recruitment and retention are matters for the normal engagement and industrial relations.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: In advance of the last election, the Tánaiste said disability was "an absolute priority issue". He said, "We've got to look after people with disabilities". He could not have been any clearer. However, those words now ring hollow. That is not me saying that; that is the assessment of disabled people who feel forgotten, abandoned and betrayed by this Government for good reason. The Disability Federation of Ireland called the recent budget a devastating setback for disabled people that leaves them poorer, unsupported and excluded. In a €9.4 billion budget package, the Government managed to leave disabled people worse off. They have lost €1,400, an enormous sum for people who are living on the breadline. The budget was a deliberate attack on people with disabilities by a government awash with cash. Not only did the Government get rid of energy credits, it cut all the once-off payments. This included a once-off payment that for the first time recognised the additional cost of having a disability. Does the Tánaiste think that the costs associated with having a disability just

disappeared overnight? Does he think those costs are temporary? It was a cruel and callous cut.

We have heard a lot from the Government about the need to target resources at those who need them most and the Social Democrats agree. Nearly 40% of disabled people live in forced deprivation, a staggering figure. They are precisely the people that resources should be targeted at. That is why in our alternative budget we included a permanent cost-of-disability payment, an increase to the disability allowance of €15 a week and a targeted energy credit of €400. Taken together our package would have meant an additional €2,200 for disabled people. That is what targeting resources looks like, not slashing payments to disabled people already living in poverty.

There is cold fury in the disability community about this Government's treatment of them. Services are threadbare, waiting lists are endless and now even the temporary cost-of-disability payment has been abolished. The *Daily Mail* today reported today that the Tánaiste promised to put money back in the pockets of people, yet with the stroke of pen he took €1,400 out of the pockets of disabled people at a time prices are rising. Disabled people have had enough of this Government's broken promises and duplicity. The Irish Wheelchair Association, Access for All and the Disability Federation of Ireland will hold a protest outside Leinster House on Tuesday. They want the Tánaiste to live up to his commitments, put his money where his mouth is and introduce an emergency winter payment for disabled people. Will he do this? When will he introduce a permanent cost-of-disability payment?

The Tánaiste: Disability issues and disability services are an absolute priority for this Government. That is why one of the things the Deputy will have seen published in the past number of months was the new national human rights strategy for disabled people, which is a really good piece of work. A huge amount of work was done with representative groups and with people with disabilities directly. It is a Government strategy that involves all parts of government. Because the Deputy has raised it, I will deal with it directly. He raised a very specific issue in relation to costs. It is a very valid and important issue. All aspects of how the State's policies interact with people with a disability respect their human rights and enable them to live their lives. We took a number of decisions on permanent increases in this budget. We were always very clear that we were moving away from the temporary measures that were brought in at a time inflation was extraordinarily high. We were very clear on that and we have to be clear on it because we have to make sure that we move back to a regular rhythm of an annual budget with clear parameters that works.

As part of that, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, specifically increased the disability allowance, increased the domiciliary care allowance and made improvements to payments for carers as well. I agree with the Deputy, the Minister agrees with him and the Government as a whole agrees with him on the importance of a cost-of-disability payment. I am pleased to tell him that there was a meeting as recently as this week where groups representing people with a disability were in with the Department of Social Protection to discuss the work on designing that payment. That is something that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is leading on, something on which he will have the support of Government as well.

We also made another change so that people who are leaving the disability allowance to move into employment are able to retain their fuel allowance, something people had sought for quite

a period of time. This is the week in which the Christmas bonus is being played out. It is the last of the direct one-off cost-of-living payments to help people at this period. It is being paid out to people in receipt of disability allowance and indeed other payments too.

The budget did, though, make a very big investment in disabilities. Even organisations have accepted this in other areas. In the capital budget for disability to deliver the specialist disability infrastructure that we need across the country, the respite facilities, the residential homes, the multidisciplinary teams, we have seen a doubling of the current capital levels. We had €278 million announced in terms of disability services in the capital plan only this week. Quite rightly we also saw a very significant increase in the level of funding for disability services in the HSE with hundreds of millions of euro extra in funding provided. It was one of the largest areas of increase in the budget but I accept and Government accepts the work on the permanent cost-of-disability payment is an important piece of work. We are engaging collaboratively on that with groups, organisations and people with a disability. I know it is something that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, will be working on in the months ahead.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Does the Tánaiste not see something fundamentally wrong with producing a budget that leaves disabled people €1,400 worse off, pushing disabled people even further into poverty? It was a €9.4 billion budget package and that is what the Government produced. That is a huge problem that it needs to address now. For years, the Government has promised a cost-of-disability payment but where is it? We have had years of promises on this. There was huge disappointment in the disability community that there was no permanent cost-of-disability payment this year when the Government abolished the temporary supports.

The removal of the disability support grant is regressive and shameful. The budget "locks disabled people and their families into another cycle of exclusion". Those are not my words; they are the words of the Disability Federation of Ireland. Will the Tánaiste listen to disabled people? Will the Government introduce an emergency winter payment, which is needed now? When will it end the talk that has been going on for years about a cost-of-disability payment? When will it actually introduce it?

The Tánaiste: The Minister, Deputy Calleary, is eager to work collaboratively and is eager to engage with the Social Democrats and others on the composition of a cost-of-disability payment, what it looks like and who qualifies. He will engage with the Deputy and others on that. I have provided a status update in the sense that that work is under way with groups in the Department of Social Protection this week specifically on the issue of a cost-of-disability payment; I welcome that. I accept that it is something that has been discussed and debated in this country for a significant period. However, I would push back somewhat on the idea that the budget did not prioritise disability services because as the figures clearly show, there were a number of areas where we quite rightly took a conscious decision to significantly increase the level of funding to our disability services. We are seeing the benefits of that now in some areas, including CDNTs and the numbers of staff on them.

The Deputy asked when we would listen; we are listening. He asked when we would engage; we are engaging. We want to work in collaboration with representative groups. Indeed, we would welcome the Deputy's own input as we seek to design the payment.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There is quite an incredible display of cognitive dissonance here. The Tánaiste went to the media and told them he is going to put money back in people's pockets. He then comes in here and he is asked on behalf of disabled people who are crying out for this to put money back in their pockets via a winter emergency measure, with a one-off payment, and he just bats it away. He did not engage with it at all. These are the people that the Government made poorer, not just a little bit poorer, but a lot poorer. They are €1,400 worse off as a consequence of the budget. It cut the disability support grant, a loss of €400. It cut the living alone allowance, a cut of €200. It reduced the fuel allowance, a loss of €160. It cut the October double payment, a loss of €254. It cut the electricity credits, another loss of €250. Altogether over €1,400 has been taken from the pockets, not put into the pockets, of disabled people. Yet, the Tánaiste still thinks he can go to the public and say, "Don't worry; we're still going to put money back in people's pockets." The excuse before the budget, from the Tánaiste's predecessor as Minister for Finance, was to say we do not need cost-of-living payments because "inflation has now returned to normal rates. We now know that was a load of nonsense. He is now in Washington where he is on over €600,000 a year. I am sure he is not bothered by the cost of groceries, but ordinary people here are left with the highest inflation in two years. They are out preparing for Christmas, and they are seeing the reality of still-soaring grocery prices with over 4% food price inflation and 3.3% energy price inflation. It is going to be a cold, hard Christmas for a lot of people. The cost of 1,000 litres of home heating oil has shot up, yet in a country with a massive budget surplus, a rich country, the Government had a budget that made everyone poorer except if they were a fast food giant, a multinational corporation or a developer. In particular, it hit the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, the bottom 10%. As a result of the withdrawal of one-off payments they had an income decrease of 4.4%. The next 10% had a loss of 3.9% and then there was the particularly cruel approach to disabled people. The Government abandoned the promise to introduce a permanent cost-of-disability payment and then withdrew the one-off payments. They are not going to take this lying down. The Government is telling them everything is great and that it has actually improved disability services. All the organisations are screaming at the Government saying they need an emergency winter cost-of-disability payment. The Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland and Access for All, will be together next Tuesday outside the Dáil from 12.30 p.m. to 2 p.m. Please, do not continue to be Scrooge, do not continue to be the Grinch and give this little amount back into people's pockets.

The Tánaiste: I do not remember the Deputy welcoming budgets where we brought in cost-of-living measures before the election. He is kind of opining wishing we had the budgets of the past number of years. I do not remember him ever supporting measures we brought into this House over the past several years to try and assist people at a time of extraordinarily high levels of inflation. The Deputy seeks to slag Paschal Donohoe, whose view I would take on the economy more seriously than his, for his views and call them nonsense. There is a reason the World Bank hired him. It is because he knows a few things about economics.

Deputy Paul Murphy: He was wrong though, was he not?

The Tánaiste: Surely, the Deputy would acknowledge that, while we would like to see inflation fall further, that inflation both in Ireland and in the eurozone is at a much lower level than it was when those cost-of-living packages were brought in. The inflation was off the

Richter scale for a period. It may be the Deputy's position, and in fairness to him I think it is as he is quite clear about it, that he wants to have two annual budgets effectively - a budget that runs from now to Christmas and then another budget that runs next year. We cannot run the economy like that. We just cannot; it is not sustainable. We have to get back to an annual budget and that is what we said we were going to do, and that is what we have done this year.

The Deputy talked about a cold winter. I am really conscious that people look in on this from home. I want to talk to those people and for them to know there are a number of measures in place to help people with energy poverty this winter. If someone is an older person living alone, this week, he or she will, quite rightly, have received a double payment of their State pension. Older people will receive the fuel allowance, which is now up to over €1,000 a year. That fuel allowance is due to go up again in the new year. They will see the household benefit package in terms of that cost coming off their energy bill, which is worth over €400, during this period. We have reduced the VAT rate which other parties proposed allowing that go back up including some who thought the rate should go back up in April. We did not do that. We have extended that for quite number of years more. I know we have different political views, but the Deputy makes these snide comments saying all we care about is helping the multinationals. Did he see the Exchequer returns yesterday? What does he want us to do - send the jobs and the money back, somewhere else? We are very proud to be a Government that is pro-enterprise, and we are going to continue to pursue policies to keep jobs in Ireland, to keep revenue in Ireland, because that is helping to fund the country. It is helping to provide so many employment opportunities, including in the Deputy's constituency. He is getting very close to the "Ah, sure, send them all away" brigade. We need to continue to make sure we support policies in this country that attract the jobs because there are many people in the Deputy's constituency and mine that got in a car this morning and drove to work in one of those multinationals that he dismisses our support for as though it is irrelevant. He also mentioned our support for "developers". He likes to call them "developers" because that is, in his view, a dirty word. I like to call them people who build houses and people who build houses in a housing emergency. It is a serious point. Deputy Murphy can laugh and have his little ideological view of the world-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Do you know who builds houses? Workers build houses, not developers.

The Tánaiste: -----but we need to build apartments. All of the decisions we take are to protect jobs because that is how we keep people in employment, and it is also how we run the country in terms of funding public services and we also make sure we can stimulate the building of houses and apartments in this country. These are good things to do. However, I want people with a disability to know, as I have directly said in reply to Deputy O'Callaghan, unlike Deputy Murphy's comment, that we have not abandoned anything. Work is under way on a cost-of-disability payment and as recently as this week organisations representing people with a disability did not need to stand outside the gates, they were in the Department helping engage on this very payment.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Whataboutery from the Tánaiste to avoid-----

The Tánaiste: Except when you say it. When you say it you are such a wise sage.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----the point. Can the Tánaiste answer a yes-no question? Did his budget make almost everybody in the country poorer, "Yes" or "No"? Did his budget affect those who are poorest the worst by the budget, "Yes" or "No"? Did his budget leave disabled people substantially worse off? The answer to all of those questions is "Yes". I am interested in hearing the Tánaiste try to spin how the answer is "No". He asked what I want him to do. He has a substantial budget surplus and in that context he should not be making disabled people poorer. That was a mistake made in the budget. The Tánaiste presumably agreed to it. I am appealing to him in the days running up to Christmas to use the resources he has to reverse that decision. Do not make disabled people poorer next year. Therefore, do what they are asking of the Government and introduce an emergency, one-off winter payment. It is very simple. That is what I am asking. It is a political choice for the Tánaiste to do that or not to do that. I do not know if he is suggesting that by doing that somehow all the jobs will flee the country. Is that the type of scaremongering he is engaged in? He can make a choice not to deprive these people, many of whom are living in deprivation, and not drive them further into poverty when we are a rich country with a substantial budget surplus.

The Tánaiste: No, the point I am making is very clear. The Deputy stands up and makes snide remarks about supporting multinationals or snide remarks about supporting developers.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are not snide.

The Tánaiste: I make the point that is about supporting jobs and building homes. That is the difference between the Deputy's ideology and ours. He is proud of that difference and I am proud of that as well. We have a different view in on this. The multinational jobs in this country are important. They help to actually fund through income and corporation taxes the running of this State and it is a bloody good thing we have them. We need to work to continue to make sure we attract investment in to this country, particularly at such a volatile time. Does the Deputy know how to make people poorer in the country? You make people poorer by continuing to go along in the hope that everything is grand and wake up one day and realise that, actually, the fiscal vulnerabilities that in the paper that I published yesterday in the Department of Finance have come to be realised.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can we get some answers?

The Tánaiste: We are not planning on opening the budget process again because we are delivering one annual budget. Within the context of the budget we delivered, we have delivered a progressive budget. The budget documentation shows it is a progressive budget, helping those most in need over those who have the most. That is the budget we ran. That is the budgetary process and we will continue to run progressive budgets. In the context of that we have made a number of decisions to increase weekly supports to people with a disability and invest significantly in services for people with a disability. Work is under way on the development of a cost-of-disability payment and we want to work in partnership with representative groups and political parties on getting that right.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Peter Roche: All Members hold constituency meetings with constituents and issues that affect them are presented to us. In the case of Galway East, one issue that has repeatedly come to the attention of my office is the re-evaluation of commercial rates. I refer to two small businesses, one a nail manicure outlet and another a hair salon, that had commercial rates heretofore of €600. That has risen to €1,448, which is a 200% increase. One of the liveliest and busy but well run filling stations in Headford, County Galway provides better access and all the stuff that goes with having the best possible business from a safety point of view. Some of these measures were forced on the owners by the council and their commercial rates went from €8,900 to €52,000, which is a 484% increase. I was absolutely astonished when those figures came to me because I did not think that, regardless of how the old system was, there could be that much of an incremental increase. While I do not like to hear it, I hear from the owners of smaller businesses such as hair salons that they will not continue and they will instead operate in their own homes. That is what makes me sit up. We are all pleading for better support for businesses, and we need to support our businesses because that is what makes Ireland, in particular rural Ireland, tick. I am not sure what measures the Government can introduce. We are not a basket case in Galway East but commercial rates are a major issue for many small businesses. I am shining a spotlight on this today. We need to focus on how the valuation is done. Is it done based on ground space or turnover? Some businesses use a premises for storage but there is no value in storage. What is required is to examine those businesses that are trading and have reason to believe they would be liable for commercial rates. The ones I just mentioned are just a snapshot. There are many more like that. I am trying to have a conversation on how that can be managed going forward.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche for raising the issue. I agree that we do not want people who are running a business to decide it makes economic sense to run it from their home. Last Friday, I was in Macroom where we saw the opposite. I met a woman called Nickie who owns a business called Juniper Lane, which makes homemade products, including jewellery and the like - very nice stuff. She had been doing that work from home and availed of a Government grant for a derelict property and converted an old derelict pub on the main street of Macroom. She took the business from her kitchen table onto the main street and brought a derelict building back into use. That is the direction of travel in which we want to go as a Government. It is important in terms of the vitality of main streets, in particular in rural communities. I had the pleasure of being with the Deputy in an abbey in Craughwell and in Kylemore recently, where we spoke to cheese producers. Rural Ireland is the beating heart of our indigenous economy.

The Deputy raised a specific issue regarding rates and I thank him for doing so. It is stating the obvious to say that commercial rates are an important contributor to the funding base of any local authority in terms of the provision of services. It is important that we are always aware of the challenges that can sometimes be posed to ratepayers and employ the suite of options available to try to support them. This is governed under the Local Government Rates and Other Matters Act 2019, which was commenced in late 2023. I am informed that this adds to the suite of options already available to local authority to try to support local businesses. Local authorities are using have used this new legal framework since January 2024. Provisions include new rate waiver schemes to be decided by local authority members as part of the annual

budget process. I do not say that pressure on councillors; I know they often have a difficult job to do in making everything add up.

There is now an ability to have a rates waiver scheme and this is designed to support not just national policy objectives but local policy objectives that Galway County Council might have in terms of certain initiatives it wants to see take place in rural communities. It is now open to local authorities to design a waiver scheme that supports their county development plans and local economic and community plans. Regulations to support the making of a rate waiver scheme require a local authority to consult with the public in its administrative area and get the views of the public.

It is never the purpose of a revaluation to increase the commercial rates collected. Sometimes this is a misnomer. It is actually about balancing. Where somebody's goes down or somebody else's goes up, the pile stays the same size. I am told by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage that large increases are rare, although I am sure they can happen. The Deputy has outlined one very large example about which I want to learn more. I have also been told that in terms of revaluations to date, the trend is that about 60% of ratepayers have experienced a decrease in their commercial rates bill. Next week we will welcome our Galway council group to Government Buildings for engagement. Perhaps we can have further discussions on this then.

Deputy Peter Roche: I would be the first to acknowledge Government supports for businesses such as those we have spoken about. I have suggested for quite some time that our local authority, Galway County Council, is chronically underfunded. As a consequence, our poor councillors have had to make that ultimate bad decision. The consequences of that have been felt because businesspeople do not want to condemn, criticise or complain. They are in the business of making money, if they can, employing staff and ensuring that they are doing things in a prudent rather than a greedy way. I honestly believe that in the case of the filling station in Headford, which saw an increase from €8,900 to €52,000, some consideration should be given to the fact that the business was forced to do things by the local authority in terms of car parking and has paid a big penalty for doing that.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche. I do not want to comment on a specific case for obvious reasons, including the fact that there are appeals mechanisms open and anybody can appeal a valuation to the Valuation Tribunal. The business to which the Deputy referred may or may not have done that. The level of increase to which the Deputy referred is not the general experience but is cause for concern.

Perhaps we can have engagement with the Minister for local government and my Department on these issues in Galway. Now more than ever we have to support indigenous industry. We spoke about multinationals earlier. We benefit hugely from foreign direct investment into this country. It is a really good thing in terms of job creation and revenue. A majority of people in this country are employed in Irish SMEs and we want to continue to support Irish business. I look forward to engaging further with the Deputy on how we can better support those businesses in Galway.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 without amendment.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Confidence in the Government's stated opposition to the EU Mercosur agreement has been further undermined in recent days by the withdrawal of Brazilian beef from sale across Europe and the fact an Irish MEP, Regina Doherty, from the Tánaiste's party, gave a full throated support for the deal on RTÉ radio - I am not sure if he heard her - contradicting the Government's stated position. I would appreciate if the Tánaiste answered my questions. What action has been taken by the Government to help construct a minority blocking mechanism at EU level to stop Mercosur? Can he state clearly to the House and, more importantly, to farmers that Ireland will vote against the deal at EU Council level? Can he take this opportunity to call on other member states to vote against the deal?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Doherty. The position of the Government remains the same and as outlined in the programme for Government in terms of our concerns regarding the Mercosur deal. A lot of significant work is being undertaken, in particular by the Minister for agriculture and other Government colleagues, to engage with other like-minded countries or those which have similar concerns about the Mercosur deal to ascertain whether the blocking minority remains in place. The Government still has concerns about the Mercosur deal, despite some of the protocols that have been announced. We continue to engage with those like-minded countries and will continue to engage directly with farming organisations. The Government's position has not changed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Tánaiste not answer the question?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ahern.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will it vote against it and will you call on others to do so? Please answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ahern.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I asked simple questions.

The Tánaiste: I outlined that the Government-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is Ireland going to vote against the deal?

The Tánaiste: -----remains opposed to-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Government vote against the deal?

The Tánaiste: I am not going to be heckled in the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Just answer the question.

The Tánaiste: I talk directly to farmers every day of the week.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, you have asked your question. The Tánaiste has answered. Can we move on to Deputy Ahern please?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The IFA called on the Tánaiste to clarify the position.

The Tánaiste: I talk to-----

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Earlier this week, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, waved the white flag on the M50. It basically said it is full and there is nothing it can do to address congestion. Commuters are stuck in their cars and wasting their time. The situation is costing our economy, climate and public health. Instead of focusing on the causes of this gridlock, which is a lack of public transport in this country, the Government has chosen this week to launch a transport plan that returns to old vices like building roads and bypasses while delaying much-needed public transport projects.

The Government is giving out about judicial reviews delaying critical infrastructure projects but DART south west has planning permission and is shovel-ready yet the Government has chosen to push it out to 2030 at the earliest. The same goes for the Fingal Luas and the Cork Luas. The Government is choosing to build a ring road around Galway rather than a Luas, despite the fact that the M50 is a perfect example of a ring road that just does not function any more. Adding more lanes has simply added more cars and more congestion. We are failing to learn the lessons of the past. Will the Government rethink its plan and give the Dáil an opportunity to debate it in the House next week?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ahern for his question. Obviously, in terms of debating these things, that is a matter for the Business Committee but I have no issue with debates taking place. There is a lot of legislation to get through between now and the Christmas break but I am sure there will be an opportunity to debate and discuss the transport plan. I would make a number of points on it. First, we are investing a very significant amount in the capital budget of the Department of Transport. Second, I do not think it is either-or in terms of road infrastructure or public transport. We need to do both and in all of our constituencies our constituents are keeping us under pressure to do both. Third, the NDP is not the final word on the matter. There will be an annual TII capital plan published for projects below €200 million. I am expecting the first of those to be published in January 2026. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to correspond with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The trial of Kerry man Seán Binder begins today in Greece. As perverse as it sounds, Seán is going on trial for saving people's lives. In 2017, while volunteering with a search and rescue organisation in Greece, Seán saw rubber boats in distress off the coast of Lesbos. Instead of watching people drown, he and other volunteers rushed into the water to help. Thanks to their swift and courageous actions, lives were saved. Instead of receiving a bravery award from the Greek Government, Seán ended up in jail. Serious charges, including people smuggling and membership of a criminal organisation, have been pending since then. This trial is a travesty of justice. Amnesty has said that it is not just Seán who is on trial; humanity and solidarity are in the dock with him. If Seán is convicted, what kind of message will that send? Is it that migrant lives are so worthless that they should not be saved from drowning? Is it that if one does not stand back and watch them die, one will end up with 20 years in prison? Is the Tánaiste concerned about this case? Has he raised his concerns with the Greek Government? What support is the Irish Government providing to Seán?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Rice for raising this important issue. I want to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves in terms of getting the latest update from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I will make sure that the Department makes contact with Deputy Rice today in relation to that issue. I will not say anything regarding an ongoing case in the European Union but I know that the consular service in support of our embassy is always very active in relation to these issues. I will link directly with our embassy and make contact with Deputy Rice later today in relation to this case in terms of seeing what supports are being provided and the latest view on the matter.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Like Deputy Rice, I want to raise the situation of Seán Binder and the 23 other human rights defenders who are appearing in court in Greece today. Their crime is volunteering as rescue workers and saving the lives of those who are distressed at sea. In the seven years since he was arrested, Seán Binder has posed this question, "If you come across somebody in distress, what do you check first, their pulse or their passport?". These human rights defenders now face up to 20 years in prison but this trial is not just solely about them. It is also about the broader message sent to those who choose compassion over indifference. If the Tánaiste could also update me when he gets a briefing from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on its specific intervention in this case, I would appreciate it. I ask him to speak to the issue of what this trial says about the broader question around the approach the EU is taking to people who are found in distressed conditions in these boats. What is the prioritisation here?

The Tánaiste: I will absolutely ensure that Deputy O'Gorman is also briefed in relation to this situation. I am being intentionally cautious in what I say until I speak directly to the Department of foreign affairs on this because of the active nature of the case that the Deputy has raised today. I appreciate the seriousness of it and appreciate the importance of timely intervention. I will seek the latest from the Department as soon as I leave here and will come back to Deputies Rice and O'Gorman on it shortly.

Deputy Michael Collins: I got a text from a constituent whose brother tried to commit suicide on Monday. He did not just try in one way. He slit his wrists and took an overdose.

This man was not leaving anything to chance. He wanted to die. I have consent from his family to read out the text that was sent late last night to me:

We spoke yesterday about my brother in Mercy [hospital]. He's being discharged tomorrow to CUH for wrist surgery, but still hasn't had a proper mental health assessment. They claim he was seen, but it was only the nurse and the discharge letter says "low mood". No mention of his suicide attempt, no care plan discussed with the family. She just told him to call the Samaritans or his GP and get a taxi or arrange his own lift home. He's still suicidal and the family are desperate. The family rang the ED last night. They said he saw a specialist but couldn't say who and my brother insists he didn't. We, the family, are frustrated and angry. He has 24/7 observation inside for three days, yet they deem him fit for discharge. Where do we go from here?

Our mental health services have questions to answer here and in other cases too. The message in this text is simple. On Monday this man tried to kill himself and on Thursday he is being discharged from hospital and has to find his own way home. If he feels low again, he is to call the Samaritans or his GP. Where in the name of God does his family go to try to save his life? I fully respect that I am landing this on the Tánaiste's lap without warning but I would appreciate his help on this issue. It is a very serious matter.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins for raising what is clearly a very sensitive matter but he does so with the affected family's consent. I want to reply with the same sensitivity. I am conscious that this is a public forum but my heart goes out to that man and his family in what is an extraordinarily difficult and challenging time. I am also concerned by some of what the Deputy has said there. I will immediately ask the Minister for Health to look into that matter, engage with the Deputy and get back to him directly to see what can be done to assist.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The guidelines for wind farms date from 2006. They have not kept up with advancements in technology. I am receiving representations from every corner of my constituency in relation to the inadequacy of guidelines for wind farms. Renewable energy is absolutely essential-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Deputy voted with the Government.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The vote was last night.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: -----and we cannot regulate it out of existence, either for solar, wind or anaerobic digesters. Last year the Tánaiste said that the Government was listening and would revise the 2006 guidelines. Last night the Taoiseach gave a commitment to the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party that we would see draft guidelines for wind turbines next year. Setback distances, noise control and flicker must be part of this. Will the Tánaiste commit on the floor of the Dáil today that we will see draft guidelines for wind farms? Furthermore, can we get a commitment-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: And the vote last night?

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Deputy Lawless gets enough time in this House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order please, Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I have my time and I will not be interrupted.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Deputy is a hypocrite.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: He is a hypocrite.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Deputy Lawless and his party get more time than anyone else here, as glorified Independents-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Hypocrite.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: -----and I will take my time to represent my constituents.

Deputy Paul Lawless: And vote accordingly?

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Will the Tánaiste also commit-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow Deputy O'Meara-----

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I am speaking for the people of north Tipperary-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: He is not voting for them.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: -----and north-west Kilkenny right now.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is he voting for them?

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I do not need Deputy Lawless to speak for them.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is he voting for them?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless, order please.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: He can stand up here as a glorified independent and do what he will but I will speak for the people I represent and I will not be shouted down.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Why not vote for them?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Vote for them.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Can I also get a commitment from the Tánaiste on guidelines for offshore wind farms? They are absolutely essential and have to be the future.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Meara who represents the people of Tipperary North with distinction and hard work. I thank him for raising this important issue today, which he has also raised with the Taoiseach. This is an issue about which people right across the country feel very strongly. Indeed, I have had a number of meetings with a number of community organisations that are simply asking for the publication of guidelines to bring clarity to this and, as the Deputy rightly says, to update the guidelines. There was a debate in this House last night and the Government position is very clear that those guidelines will be published in 2026. That is the commitment the Taoiseach gave to Deputy O'Meara last night and I am happy to --

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That promise has been around for as long as the Tánaiste has been in the Dáil.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy just has to sit over there and ask us to do things; we actually have to do them. We will publish these-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste promised that in 2015.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín, allow the Tánaiste to answer.

The Tánaiste: Deputy O'Meara makes a fair point. There are 48 of them. When he stands up to try to ask a question, the Deputies try to shout him down. They should give him a second. He is asking a question on behalf of the people of Tipperary North.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am just correcting the Dáil record.

The Tánaiste: He has a right to hear from me on behalf of the Government. I thank Deputy O'Meara for raising the issue. We are actually going to deliver the guidelines and not just shout about it.

Deputy John Clendennen: Licensed firearms, namely shotguns and rifles, have an important place in rural Ireland from their use in controlling vermin and predators to their use in protecting crops, livestock and poultry. Many of the groups representing licensed firearms users have expressed concerns about inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of firearms legislation. In 2016 a firearms consultative panel was established which brought together a number of groups including the Irish Farmers Association and the National Association of Regional Game Councils, but this panel has not met since 2019. It is my understanding that the Department is currently holding a series of meetings with individuals and experts. This is not the permanent forum for national representative groups that the leading organisations want. Will the Government consider reinstating the permanent forum for national representative groups advocating on behalf of licensed firearms users?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen for his question. This is an issue, as he rightly says, that has been discussed for quite a number of years. A consultative panel was established, as he says, in 2016. I understand that the Department of Justice is holding meetings with individual firearms organisations on request and engages with various firearms stakeholders in other ways, while An Garda Síochána also meets with stakeholder organisations. The firearms consultative panel was a non-statutory forum comprising various firearms interest groups.

1 o'clock

It last met in 2019. There was a breakdown in relations between some of the major firearms interest groups represented on the panel and the Department viewed that it was not possible for meetings to take place with all groups represented. One of the issues raised during the course of the engagements was the need for more regular and structured engagement between policymakers and firearms users. I understand the Department organised a series of engagements earlier this year. In February, three national forums were held with registered firearms dealers in Wicklow, Limerick and Carrick-on-Shannon, while a further two were held with firearms owners in Mullingar on 19 June. A new forum has been established by the Department involving more than 20 representatives of the shooting community and shooting stakeholder organisations. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, engaging with the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, to specifically consider the proposals the Deputy has made and whether any further action can be taken in that regard.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: With the school secretaries and caretakers pension dispute now referred to the Labour Court for 12 January, these dedicated staff are deeply anxious. They engaged in the process in good faith and ended their strike on the promise of a resolution. Given the recent breakdown at the WRC, the fundamental commitment to a fair pension comparable to teachers and SNAs and all their long years of service, will the Tánaiste give a direct assurance to these workers now that the Government will engage constructively with the Labour Court process to deliver this and will not, through inaction or inadequate offers, force them out on strike again?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I agree with Deputy O'Rourke on the point that we all want to see a successful resolution to this. School secretaries and caretakers play an important role in our communities. They are engaging, as is the State, in good faith to try to make progress. I welcome the fact that it has now been referred to the Labour Court. The Labour Court has a strong track record of resolving such disputes. Of course, the State side will engage in good faith to try to find a resolution.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Killarney Chamber of Tourism and Commerce has been campaigning along with Kerry County Council for a CCTV system to be provided in Killarney town for over 20 years. Promises have been made and repeated time and time again. Promises were made that camera systems would be installed at several locations in the town centre and in key areas on the outskirts. The matter has topped the agenda of both the council and the chamber on a constant basis. Apparently, funding had been provided yet no progress has been made. I wish to acknowledge the tireless work of the local councillors in Killarney. The whole

issue seems to have hit a roadblock. While there is lingering hope, there is no great confidence in the town that CCTV will be delivered until data protection issues are addressed. There has been considerable engagement between all stakeholders regarding CCTV cameras and, in particular, the preparation of a data protection impact assessment for the Killarney scheme. The final approval of that assessment is still awaited and no commencement date, project timeline or installation schedule has been provided. I plead with the Tánaiste to intervene and, maybe, speak to the relevant authorities, as well as An Garda Síochána and Kerry County Council.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this important matter for Killarney. One can see the compelling case for a need for this in such a vibrant and busy town. CCTV can play an important role in assisting the Garda and acting as a deterrent to crime. I am going from my memory but I thought the policing Act in this House brought in new kinds of structures to try to help to ensure clarity around how CCTV could be rolled out in areas where An Garda Síochána is seeking it. On foot of the Deputy raising it today, I will ask the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, to directly engage with the Deputy, the local authority and the chamber to see whether we can make progress on this.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Saturday will mark the tenth anniversary of the death of Aoife Winterlich who was a 14-year-old girl. She went on a trip with Scouting Ireland. The trip went on an unplanned excursion to Hook Head during a storm, which was not properly supervised. She fell in the water and drowned. A report commissioned by Scouting Ireland found there was no failure in its duty of care. Last year, however, after a long time, Scouting Ireland finally settled a court case that Aoife’s mother took against it and accepted liability. Since then, Scouting Ireland has refused to apologise for a failure of duty of care. In correspondence with Scouting Ireland, it says it is sorry for the loss of her daughter but it refuses to apologise for any failure in its actions. It has also not relooked at its report. It had a report that found it had no failure, but then it later accepted liability. It raises questions whether there are any lessons learned into the future for the organisation. Scouting Ireland is in receipt of public funds and I am asking whether any possible pressure can be applied on Scouting Ireland to do the right thing, apologise to Aoife’s mother for its failure and commission a new report.

The Tánaiste: My heart goes out to the family of Aoife. We think of them particularly as they approach the tenth anniversary. It sounds like the most horrifically sad and tragic situation. From what I recall, Scouting Ireland may receive money from the Department of children. If that is not the right Department, I will bring this matter to the relevant Minister’s attention and ask him or her to consider the Deputy’s point and liaise with him directly on the issue.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Despite the Government telling us for years that there was no need for a special school in County Monaghan, a sustained and dignified campaign by families of children with disabilities, which we in Sinn Féin were very proud to support, led to the announcement in the run-up to the last election that an interim special school would open. I am very pleased to say that that school has now opened but it was already clear beforehand – it has since crystallised - that additional capacity would be needed. Today, I am appealing to the Tánaiste to put the full force of the Government behind the campaign to deliver a permanent special school in Monaghan with the capacity for every child who needs it. In too many

instances, we have special schools operating in interim or temporary accommodation. That has to end. We need the plans for the permanent school in Monaghan to begin right now. Will the Government promise that every child who needs a place in this special school in Monaghan actually gets one?

The Tánaiste: I remember the long and frequent exchanges in this House around the need for that special school in Monaghan. I am pleased to hear that it is now open but I take the point that there is a need for a permanent building. In the education capital allocation that was recently given to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, there is a significant additional allocation for special schools. I will ask the Minister and the Minister of State to come back to the Deputy regarding that permanent build to see what the timeline is in that regard.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am raising the issue of bus drivers over the age of 70 for the school bus scheme with the Tánaiste. When I raised it with him in the first week of February, I pointed out that as it is a part-time job, most of the drivers are retired from their full-time careers and are between 60 and 70 years of age. People over the age of 70 can drive 50- and 60-seater private coaches for long distances, but they cannot drive a 12- or 14-seater minibus to the local school. The Government is committed to expanding the school transport scheme. I am proposing that the age limit be extended to 75 on the condition that the drivers pass a strict test. The local media picked up on this issue the last time I raised it with the Tánaiste. One paper said, "Tánaiste Simon Harris backs Laois TD's call for over 70's bus drivers".

The Tánaiste: I do.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Tánaiste, therefore, became popular with 69-year-old bus drivers in Laois. The Tánaiste said at that time that this is quite a farcical and bizarre situation. I have been back and forth with the Minister since and I have raised it a number of times in the Chamber. This is something that we can do, and there is a problem already with drivers. There is a shortage of school bus drivers because it is a part-time position and it suits retired people. I am asking the Tánaiste to fix this. This needs be caught and fixed. I hope we can do it.

The Tánaiste: I hope it does not make the Deputy uneasy, but I find myself agreeing with him on this issue. Along with a number of Government colleagues, I must acknowledge, I have been trying to pursue this. There is significant institutional resistance - let us call it that - to what I see as a common-sense proposal.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Government runs the show.

The Tánaiste: I am trying to work my way through it. Someone who is 71 years of age could drive kids to a football match but that same person could not drive the same kids to their school. If it is safe to drive them to the football match, it must be safe to drive them to the school. It has to be logical. Bus Éireann has a very specific view on this. I think they are entirely wrong. On foot of the Deputy's question – he has riled me up - I will now raise this issue again.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Hopefully the Tánaiste will agree with me in the same way he has agreed with Deputy Stanley.

The Tánaiste: I will do my best.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: He is asking in advance.

Deputy Colm Brophy: It is almost Christmas.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Tánaiste does not need me to tell him about the importance of the DART+ South West project. We have seen now is that the project has been shelved for a minimum of four years before any works will take place. We have heard at length about the impact judicial reviews have on delaying significant infrastructure projects. This project has no judicial reviews. It has full planning permission. An Coimisiún Pleanála approved the railway order back in 2024. Under questioning this week, the Taoiseach said he will speak to the Minister. Will the Tánaiste join him in trying to get this project back on the cards? The people of Kildare need this. The M50 and M7 are all full. We do not want more people in their cars; we want this project. Will he commit to that today?

The Tánaiste: In my new role, I practice prudence every day but I take the broader point regarding the importance of this project. I have heard it from a number of colleagues as well as from Deputy Farrelly. In the context of capital budgets, often capital budgets are announced but not every project moves at the same time. There can often be an opportunity to make amendments or additionalities because not every plan necessarily proceeds in one go. That is obviously not how our processes work. I will join with the Deputy in engaging with the Minister in relation to this and keeping an eye on this project. I know it is one that has a lot of support but I also know there is a very particular congestion issue. Indeed, we have seen comments on the limits on solving any of that congestion issue in relation to roads in recent days. I will come back to the Deputy on it.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Every housing target and every infrastructure project in the country depends on a skilled workforce. Instead of opening the doors and making the apprenticeship system much more attractive we are actually going in the opposite direction. I believe apprentices are treated like second-class citizens in that third level space. There is a significant lack of capacity and this is causing significant delays. The contribution fee has actually increased this year. Phase 4 apprenticeships starting in January will be hit with an almost €1,000 fee. These are students who are working below minimum wage and with significant costs for tools and vans for getting to work. They do not avail of SUSI grants either. I ask the Tánaiste to start prioritising the apprenticeship system. It is crucially important. There is a skills shortage in the country. I speak to builders all the time and they fear five, ten or 15 years down the line. I ask the Tánaiste to start prioritising apprenticeships and reinsert the support that was at 33% last year.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right to highlight this issue. In every report, in particular in the housing report, the need for more apprentices is very apparent. I would just make the point

that we are making good progress in the number of new apprentices and in the number of programmes in which apprenticeships are available. We need to make it continually attractive for people to be an apprentice. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy James Lawless, is looking at ways we can do that. Going from memory from my time in that Department, we do have a cost of education paper that comes out each year. I understand that apprenticeships are considered as part of that. Let me ask the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to look specifically at the issues and I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I wish to raise with the Tánaiste the issue of BusConnects. This morning the National Transport Authority, NTA, and Dublin Bus met with elected representatives in my area and they accepted that the roll out of the F spine has been incredibly poor. They have committed to putting in a new timetable, which would reflect congestion, and to having additional drivers in place compared to the number at the beginning. Would the Tánaiste agree that we have to get better at implementing these BusConnects programmes to instil confidence? This involves having a sufficient number of drivers, picking the right time of year for it to be implemented and including local elected representatives who can often help them balance some of the decisions. For example, today they have confirmed that the No. 23 and No. 24 will now service O'Connell Bridge and the quays. This is a really important change. Working with local elected representatives will, I believe, assist the NTA. It is not about answering every query but they will assist them in balancing the changes that need to be made. We need to be including elected representatives far earlier in the roll out of each BusConnects phase.

The Tánaiste: We do, and we need to see a bit of respect from State agencies for the people's elected representatives. This is a point I make frequently. I have made it this week in relation to one State agency. If an elected representative is trying to engage in a project, they are doing so because it matters to the people they are elected to represent. It is very important that mechanisms are put in place in this regard. Unelected officials will often find that if they engage with elected officials, they can actually roll out a project like BusConnects, as the Deputy suggested, in a much smoother fashion. I will raise that broader issue with the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who I know would be supportive of that idea of plugging in local representatives at that earlier time. I am pleased to hear the progress Deputy McAuliffe has made with the new timetables and the additional drivers. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Brennan: The Tánaiste will be aware that in my constituency of Wicklow and Wexford there is a very proud and vibrant agriculture sector. There is huge concern on the ground in relation to Mercosur. We read recently that the *Irish Farmers' Journal* sent a delegation out and they found they could access antibiotics without any checks or documentation. We also heard over the past couple of days that a batch of meat was taken off the shelves in Europe because it was full of hormones. These hormones have been banned in the EU for the past 30 years. I am all for free trade. We continue to be told that these checks are being done at the EU level but if this does not set off alarm bells, then nothing will. We have a proud history in Ireland of top-quality meats, and by word "meats" I mean white meat and red meat. However, if we get a tsunami of meat that is not up to the standard that is required, it will have a detrimental effect on the agriculture sector and on the health of our

nation. I ask the Tánaiste to reassure us that he is stronger, if anything, on our programme for Government.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brennan for raising this issue on behalf of farmers in Wicklow and Wexford. I know the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Martin Heydon, is working very hard in relation to this issue. In fact, he is working very hard on a number of issues, be it the nitrates derogation, Mercosur, and getting a properly adequately resourced CAP with less bureaucracy that works for farmers in the new multi-annual financial framework. I support him in all of that work too.

Deputy Brennan is right to highlight this issue. The EU does have very stringent standards, which we know as the sanitary and phytosanitary standards, SPS. They are there to protect everyone - to protect human health, animal health and plant health. The standards are among the highest in the world and they are non-negotiable. They have to apply equally to food produced in EU member states and they have to apply also to food that comes in from other countries. Ireland continues to engage through the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and others in relation to all of these issues, and also in ascertaining if the blocking minority in relation to Mercosur is still in place. The Minister, with the full support of the Government, is very actively involved in all of these issues. I thank the Deputy for raising it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Placing an adult in a Tusla residential unit is a very serious breach of child protection. Aontú has raised this issue a number of times with the Government and we have been told that the Government is doing everything it can to make sure that it does not happen. We are being told that the immigration services know exactly who is coming into the country and that checks are being done. Vadym Davydenko was a Ukrainian boy who was placed in a residential care unit very recently. The suspect in that alleged murder was also placed in that residential home. We now come to understand that the suspect was an adult. Today it has emerged in a report that 192 adults have been placed in children's residential homes in the past three years. This is an incredible figure.

It has been reported to me by people who are working within the sector that not enough work has been done on the documentary research to find out the age of an individual and not enough work has been done on the scientific research to be able to pinpoint an individual's age. Is it not the case that in many instances the State does not know the age of the individual or, indeed, the identity of the individuals who are coming into the country?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Tóibín raises a very important and very serious issue. We have seen a very large increase of about 500% - that is the figure in my mind - in unaccompanied minors presenting. I am sitting beside the Minister of State with responsibility for migration, Deputy Brophy. It is a reality that an increasing number of people are now travelling by themselves and they present to the international protection office as minors without any family members. Age verification is an important part of the international protection application process. The Government had a meeting with Tusla on this just this week. The age identification process and the possibility that people presenting as minors may not be minors presents significant child protection issues. The Deputy is correct that it is an area of concern. These concerns are being addressed with the new statutory scheme now being set out in the international protection Bill, which will be introduced into these Houses very soon. The new legislation will set out in

far greater detail how age is to be assessed, which I think is the core of the Deputy's point, by a multidisciplinary team. It will also provide for regulations governing the standards, qualifications of personnel and so on for the purpose of that process. We have different views on the EU asylum and migration pact but, as required by that pact, the Bill would also make provisions for the appointment of representatives to assist and safeguard the interests of unaccompanied minors.

Gender Recognition (Amendment) (Prisons) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Gender Recognition Act 2015 to make provision for single-sex accommodation in prisons; and to provide for related matters.

I want to first make a quick reference to the motion that was brought by the Labour Party yesterday on trans healthcare. It was startling for a number of reasons. First of all, it is probably one of the biggest examples of a disconnect between the Dáil bubble and the people of Ireland on issues. The vast majority of people in this country believe that a woman is a female adult, and do not believe that a man can get pregnant. They also believe that education should be on the basis of science. The second issue that struck me about yesterday's debate was that TDs were willing to throw out scientific evidence on the basis of ideology. The safety and protection of children was actually being forgone on the basis of an intellectual fashion. That is a major threat to well-being. The third issue was that only eight TDs out of 174 actually stood up for a vote on this issue. There were 166 TDs who stayed silent and stayed seated in relation to it. A number of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs mentioned to me during the day that they saw the speech we gave on the issue and that they agreed with the speech. That is a problem. I say to TDs, especially new TDs who may be here for a term, or two or three, in that time if they do not stand up for what they believe in, if they do not vote for what they believe in, they may as well not be here. Somebody else might as well be in that seat. If we are not actually voting on the basis of our own principles, somebody else is in that seat in many ways. My advice to those TDs is to wake up and make sure they use the time they have here in the best way they can.

I mentioned yesterday that Aontú is a pluralist, republican political party. We believe all citizens are equal and should be treated equally and valued no matter what their identity, ethnicity, religion or orientation is. I mentioned that gender dysphoria is real. It is not easy. People who have it should be treated with respect. However, the treatment they get should be on the basis of science, not on the basis of ideology. Basing treatment on ideology is actually quite dangerous.

I want to talk about the gender recognition Act. The gender recognition Act is problematic at the moment. I will tell Members why. It includes self-identification which means that anybody, for any reason, can identify themselves as the opposite gender. I am sure that the vast majority of people who use the gender recognition Act, absolutely feel that they themselves are the opposite gender. However, the gender recognition Act has no gatekeeper. As a result, no doctor or psychiatrist determines whether or not a person is transgender. Anybody can use a gender recognition certificate. That allows for potentially bad actors to seek to use that

loophole for opportunistic reasons. I am not saying for a second that any person who has gender dysphoria is any more likely than the general population to have a propensity for bad action. I am not saying that for a second. I am saying that the gender recognition Act is designed without a gatekeeper and as a result it allows people to use it for bad reasons.

Women and girls have the right to safe spaces. It is actually shocking that I have to say that. We have understood that for hundreds of years. The vast majority of physical and sexual attacks that happen to women are carried out by men. Incredibly, many of the parties that sit right beside us here on a regular basis talk about gender-based violence, but they develop a blind spot in relation to the protection of women-only safe spaces. One of the consequences of the gender recognition Act is that it allows for male-born criminals to be placed in women's prisons. That is quite incredible because the female prisoners and the female staff have no option but to be in that location and the State is putting male-born sex offenders, men, into those prisons.

We have this absurd situation where Barbie Kardashian, who was found guilty of threatening to kill, rape and torture his mother, was granted a gender recognition certificate by the Department of Social Protection and as a result was placed in a women's prison. The Government stood over Barbie Kardashian being placed in a women's prison. That is a horrendous dereliction of duty in relation to the Government. It is against all the prevailing winds on a medical basis, the science basis and even the political basis. Yet, the Government stood up for that.

The ministry for justice in Britain released very interesting statistics in relation to people in prison who declare themselves as transgender. Many of them are in prison because of sexual offences. The vast majority of these trans sex offenders were born male. The ministry for justice statistics show that transgender women exhibit male-type patterns of criminality. It is clear that this data shows self-identification unfortunately is being used opportunistically. The Aontú Bill is designed simply to prevent male-born criminals being placed in women's prisons. Our Bill provides for a gender recognition certificate that does not affect whether a person is deemed male or female for the purpose of applying for the existing rule of single-sex accommodation in prisons. I urge the Government to support it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): It is not being opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.25 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.06 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.25 p.m. and resumed at 2.06 p.m.

Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad]: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time".

I am pleased to introduce the Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025 to the House. It was initiated in the Seanad on 14 November and passed through the final Stages there on 26 November. I look forward to hearing Deputies' contributions and I hope they will support this Bill. Officials from the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport will be with me shortly and can provide any information anybody here might like.

This is a short, technical Bill. The Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025 has one important objective, namely, to increase the statutory limit on the cumulative capital outlay, commitments and liabilities that can be advanced by Screen Ireland, which was formerly known as the Irish Film Board. The limit will be increased from €500 million to €840 million. As is the case with some statutory bodies that receive public funding, a limit was set by statute on such outlays in the Irish Film Board Act 1980. This limit must be reviewed by the Houses of the Oireachtas every six to seven years. In this way, the Oireachtas can monitor cumulative capital funding to this statutory body each time the limit needs to be increased. Since the Irish Film Board Act 1980 was first enacted, the funding limit has been adjusted upwards on six occasions. It is now proposed to increase this limit to €840 million to allow Screen Ireland to continue to operate within an appropriate statutory limit. The proposal to increase the limit on advances is an enabling provision. Funding of Screen Ireland is, of course, subject to the normal Estimates procedures as set out by the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. The proposed legislation will not, therefore, mean any additional cost to the Exchequer as Screen Ireland's annual allocation is set by the Oireachtas each year.

Section 2 cites this Bill as the Irish Film Board (Amendment Bill) 2025 and, together with the Irish Film Board Acts 1980 to 2018, will be cited as the Irish Film Board Acts 1980 to 2025.

Screen Ireland is the national development agency for Irish screen sectors including feature film, TV drama, animation, creative documentary and digital gaming. Screen Ireland operates within the framework of the Irish Film Board Acts 1980 to 2018. Its statutory remit is to assist, encourage and develop the screen sectors across the State. Screen Ireland supports these sectors by providing investment loans for the development, production and distribution of film, television and animation projects. The allocation to Screen Ireland will be €42.96 million in 2026. This is an increase of €2.1 million, or 5.1%, on the amount allocated this year. The additional funding in 2026 will allow Screen Ireland to keep the indigenous production levels at a pace consistent with previous years. It will enable Screen Ireland to encourage more regional production in the Irish language, continue the talent academies and have an increased focus on digital games.

Screen Ireland is the creative partner to the screen sector, investing in talent, creativity and enterprise. With a comprehensive range of practical funding supports across development, production, distribution, promotion and skills development, since 2018, Screen Ireland has

assisted in the production of 115 feature film projects, 44 television dramas, 80 documentaries, 41 animation projects and 69 short films. Screen Ireland has also supported projects for distribution and has seen the development of over 1,100 projects in the period.

With the success of Irish screen productions, activity is increasing in the sector. This is made evident by the dramatic increase in applications for funding to Screen Ireland. In 2025 alone, Screen Ireland reported an overall 65% increase in the number of applications for its various funding streams when compared with 2024, which itself was a dynamic year. Screen Ireland-supported films won 78 national and international awards in the fields of film, TV and animation. Through Screen Ireland, Irish film has sustained a presence at A-list festivals, from the historic selection of “Kneecap” and “Small Things Like These” at Sundance and the Berlin Film Festival to an unprecedented showing for Irish film at the Cannes Film Festival, which listed “The Apprentice”, “September Says”, “Kinds of Kindness”, “On Becoming a Guinea Fowl” and “The Surfer”. The selection of a film to be shown at A-list film festivals, whether Cannes, Berlin, Venice or Sundance Toronto, is a huge honour, and only the world’s best productions are chosen. Screen Ireland continues to support emerging Irish talent through screenings, networking events and talent promotion initiatives at major festivals throughout the year.

Screen Ireland began funding TV drama in 2015, and since then, the output for TV drama production in Ireland has seen a remarkable increase, almost tripling in production spend. Deputies may be familiar with some of the fantastic Irish-based TV dramas made possible in recent years by Screen Ireland’s support. These include “Obituary”, “The Dry”, “Hidden Assets”, “The Young Offenders” and “The Walsh Sisters”. Feature films include “That They May Face the Rising Sun” and the Irish language film “Báite”. One to watch out for is “Saipan”, which is coming to our cinemas in January. It is about the events at the 2002 World Cup, and stars young Cork actor Éanna Hardwicke as Roy Keane, alongside Steve Coogan as Mick McCarthy. This is apt timing, with the World Cup draw taking place tomorrow in Washington DC. I really hope to see the Republic of Ireland take part. These are just a few of the many wonderful productions with which Screen Ireland has been involved.

Screen Ireland operates a dual approach to industry development. It is one that maintains a balance between indigenous productions and incoming internationally mobile projects. That creates a range of opportunities for Irish creatives to work in partnership with Irish or international studios. The success of this approach has resulted in a stronger and more sustainable environment for screen production. As our screen industries continue to grow, balance and partnership remain priorities, alongside an enhanced focus on sustainable production.

Screen Ireland is committed to the development of the indigenous audiovisual industry into the future, supported by the agency’s strategic plan 2025-2029, and working with all stakeholders and industry partners to collectively deliver on the Government’s ambition to establish Ireland as a global production hub. As an agency, Screen Ireland remains deeply committed to best practice and the principles of sustainability in all aspects of industry development, including environmental protection, green production, dignity in the workplace and nationwide development.

A skilled workforce in the screen sector is a crucial component for the development and maintenance of our screen industries. Screen Ireland has a skills and training division that is

responsible for monitoring the needs of the screen sectors and ensuring that those needs are met at all levels. As part of its skills programme, for example, Screen Ireland has co-developed a bachelor of arts in screen industry practice, in conjunction with TU Dublin. The degree course is aimed at experienced professionals within the sector who do not have a level 8 qualification. There are currently 30 people enrolled in this course. Screen Ireland also supports initiatives across animation, digital games, TV, VFX and the unscripted and extended reality sectors, aimed at all levels, from new entrants to experienced professionals, as well as engagement with our next generation of young filmmakers in the 15- to 19-year-old age category.

A skilled workforce is achieved through partnership and collaboration, and building a stronger ecosystem supported by stakeholder organisations, Screen Ireland's national talent academies network and Irish production companies nationwide. The national talent academies network is a recent initiative of Screen Ireland and includes the national talent academy for film and television, led by Ardán in Galway, the national talent academy for animation, led by Animation Ireland, the national talent academy for VFX, led by Cultural & Creative Industries Skillnet, and three regional crew academies in Galway, Limerick and Wicklow. This network has been established to develop a highly skilled, diverse talent and crew base throughout the country, offering a wide range of activities for the Irish screen industry, including courses, programmes and career opportunities. The overarching aim of the national talent academies is to address and support current educational skills gaps in the screen sector and support the next generation of creatives - filmmakers, producers, directors, screenwriters, animators, VFX artists, game developers and production crew. The approach that Screen Ireland has taken is the envy of many of our competitors.

Screen Ireland aims to support and promote Irish film, television and animation through fostering Irish artistic vision and our diverse creative and production talent, growing audiences and attracting filmmakers and investment into the country. Recent years have been significant in terms of Irish creative talent and the Irish screen industries for the commercial and critical plaudits of Irish film not only at home but also on the international stage. Our highly trained and skilled shooting and construction crews are crucial in making Ireland an attractive location for projects, with record-breaking productions like “Wednesday” locating here. The Irish screen industries are now in a strong position as a result of years of investment by the Irish Government.

Regional production taking place across Ireland brings cultural and economic benefits to the entire country. Crucially, this can also provide the opportunity to build cultural infrastructure in new geographic areas and to tell more diverse, cultural stories on our screens. Alongside its national talent academies network and support for film festivals in Cork, Galway, Dingle and beyond, Screen Ireland has committed to regional development by ring-fencing its funding in its annual budgets in recent years to provide targeted support. This year alone, its nationwide additional production fund has supported seven different productions to film in counties Sligo, Cork, Donegal, Louth and Kerry, while large-scale TV productions like “Wayfinders” set up their base in Troy Studios, Limerick. This is providing skills development programmes to local crew and new entrants based nearby. Over the next year, we will see a range of productions of all sizes being encouraged to film in regions around the country, including season two of the very successful Irish language series “Crá” in Donegal.

The need for continued Government investment is vital to build on these success stories. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels. We must seek out new opportunities to give our industry the help and opportunities it deserves. Screen Ireland supports the games sector with its innovation in storytelling development fund, in partnership with Animation Ireland. This initiative is now in its fifth year and has supported digital games prototypes to support existing series, new tech workflows and the exploration of a range of new storytelling formats.

More recently, Screen Ireland has launched several funding initiatives for digital games, including IndieDev, the first all-island initiative to support the development of games prototypes, as well as talent incubator schemes designed to encourage cultural, creative and commercial growth in the sector. The agency is also working jointly with IMIRT, the game developers' representative organisation, to develop a competency framework for the industry. This will support and further build a skills development pipeline that can sustain growth into the future. Ireland's digital games sector has shown sustained momentum in recent years. Despite the real challenges posed by a very competitive global landscape, we are witnessing a growing ecosystem of studios, talented artists, supportive programmes and international investment.

The Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, has indicated that he intends to bring forward further proposals to amend and update the Irish Film Board Acts next year. There is potential for growth in the Irish digital gaming sector. This is a sector in which Screen Ireland will be taking a greater role over the coming years. In an increasingly competitive international environment, Screen Ireland will be able to continue to effectively discharge its vital role of promoting our indigenous film industry and marketing Ireland as a location for incoming internationally mobile productions.

Our cultural and artistic identity gives us a competitive advantage. The benefits of high levels of film and television production in Ireland include increased international investment in the economy, increased employment in this sector, positive spin-off effects for promoting the country as a tourist location and as an industrial location for all aspects of creative endeavours.

That is why I am really pleased to commend this Bill to the House.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is Bille teicniúil é seo chun deis a thabhairt d'Fhís Éireann leanúint ag tacú le scannáin in Éirinn sna blianta amach romhainn. Ní chuirfidh Sinn Féin i gcoinne an chuspóra sin. Tá éacht den scoth bainte amach ag an earnáil scannánaíochta in Éirinn leis na blianta anuas. Tá Sinn Féin tar éis tacú go mór leis an earnáil. Anuraidh, d'fhoilsigh Sinn Féin plean cuimsitheach le deich dtosaíocht maidir le scannánaíocht mar chuid d'ár bpolasaí ealaíona. Táim tar éis trí Bhille a thionscnu sa Dáil seo chun tacú le hoibreoirí scannán, le déantús scannán lasmuigh de Bhaile Átha Cliath agus Chill Mhantáin, agus le rochtain a chinntiú do chách ar sheirbhísí closamhaire trasna an oileáin.

The reason we in Sinn Féin have put so much time and energy into producing dedicated policies and introducing Bills to support our film industry, performers and audience access is film is vital not only for the creation of jobs and bringing investment to our regions, but also to the nation both in terms of how we are seen by others and how we view ourselves. When Irish films succeed, our economy, society and culture benefit. Thanks to the tremendous work of screenwriters, cinematographers, producers, directors, editors, cast and crew, as well as the hard work and investment of State bodies, including Fís Éireann, Ireland can boast of enormous

success in recent years, from which we have all benefited. Not alone has Ireland witnessed unprecedented wins, from the Oscars to the Sundance Festival, but a golden age has emerged, in particular for film-making in our native tongue. This golden age has been a long time in the making. Last year marked 90 years since the seminal documentary, "Man of Aran", which focused on saol na hÉireann, and since then we have seen many other films. In particular, of late we have had "Kneecap" and "An Cailín Ciúin" but they are not the only ones that have been cited by many. We have also had "An Taibhse", "Fréamhacha", "Arracht" and even "Foscadh" and "Róise agus Frank", which have put the spotlight on many of the contrasting ways our society operates and brings grief, in some cases, and joy in other cases. They often revolve around strong women working together and carrying out, in one of the films, "Aontas", a heist on a credit union in, or the women's naomhóg race in "Tarrac". I urge everyone who is listening in, if they are at all, to look at the Irish language films and at the Irish made films in the first instance and see they are products of our investment and the likes of this type of legislation, which encourages films to go a long way.

Major changes are required and this is one of them. We are supportive of the intention of the legislation. It is a practical step, and a technical step in some ways. It is an acceptance of the real life of cinema. We must acknowledge there are problems within the industry. The Minister of State will be aware of some of the issues I and others in the opposition have been raising consistently over the past few years. I have had this conversation with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and he has indicated he will examine some of the issues and maybe in other legislation that has been mooted there will be changes forthcoming.

The three major issues that must be addressed are the rights of workers and performers, the imbalance in the regional development of the sector and the failure to deliver funding potential for our cultural sector. I raised the issue of rights for workers and performers only last week in our discussion on the Finance Bill and I welcomed the commitments given by the Tánaiste in response because we need to ensure that from wherever State support is being provided to film productions, whether it is through Fís Éireann or another form of tax relief, that it does not contribute in any way to undermining worker's rights and conditions or it is not in violation of copyright law, in particular the EU copyright directive, because that directive outlines that performers have an unwaivable right to equitable remuneration and we know there are incidents where State-supported film productions are forcing performers to waive their rights and accept remuneration as proportionate before knowing what proportion it is in terms of their future revenue. That is unacceptable.

I quoted from one company last week that is in a coproduction with a US company that filmed in Ireland this year and was in receipt of the section 481 tax relief. The contract stated:

The artist acknowledges that the fees payable herein constitute a complete buyout of all rights contemplated hereunder and the artist shall not be entitled to any further sums whatsoever by reason of the exploitation of the film or other exploitations permitted hereunder ... No further sums are payable to the artist, or to the artists under this agreement, whether in respect of the hours worked by the artist or under any collective bargaining agreement, or in connection with the use or the exploitation and/or the promotion of the film unless otherwise expressly stated herein. ... To the extent that the artist becomes entitled to any use, fees or residuals in respect of the film, no obligation shall be placed on the company in relation to the collection of payment of such moneys.

The law is meant to protect the vulnerable from being pushed around and having their rights denied. That is exactly what that contract would do and it is in breach of the EU directive. We need to expose this when this happens and back those who wish to take a stand because the problem is if someone refuses to sign these contracts, he or she will not get the work. In an industry where work can be precarious and consist of going from film to film, if people are cut out, while they may not be blacklisted, they will not get another contract because there are only a certain number of them. We need to send a message that any State support, whether through Fís Éireann or a licence under section 481, will not tolerate any undermining of those rights.

I encourage the Minister of State to meet Irish Equity in particular, in future, to hear out the concerns around the contracts and the buyouts and to speak to film workers who have been raising issues of industrial relations and blacklisting in the industry for years.

The other issue I want to raise is that of the regional imbalance. There was an attempt to address this in 2019 when there was a short-lived regional uplift on top of section 481. That did not have an effect because it was truncated in the middle because of a two and a half year interruption due to Covid. While it was extended for an additional year, it was being tapered out anyway so we did not have the full effects of that. Maybe the Minister of State could look again at reintroducing it to see whether it would address the imbalance whereby most of the film productions and companies are located on the east coast, and in the Dublin region in particular. A "Gaeltacht uplift" is another way to look at it but it is something that would help and the Minister indicated he would look at it again. I am just using the opportunity to encourage him to do so again.

The other issue that needs to be considered is how to ensure Irish music, musicians and composers are used and get the full benefit of all of these films being produced in Ireland. We have some of the best musicians in the world and we have seen that on every world stage and through every genre of music. There is no guarantee while the film companies are benefiting from the section 481 tax credit that Irish-based composers should continue to be used but also that the companies would be encouraged to consider them. None of the high-end productions that are filmed in Ireland have been using the composer of late. The Screen Composers Guild of Ireland has collected data that show that the level of productions in receipt of section 481 credit who employ Irish-based composers or use any Irish-based contribution continues to remain static at 30% and none of these productions are in the high budget bracket. This falls short of what the guild has said is an acceptable level given that the tax credit is, in fact, tax foregone by our society. If we are going to give away taxpayers' money or at least not call it in, we should ensure that we get the best and the most possible benefit and that includes ensuring composers have a role in productions.

The Irish Music Rights Organisation, IMRO, in its prebudget submission last year, expressed its concern that despite music being a vital component of film success, most section 481 schemes do not specify or mention music in their applications, unlike schemes in Britain. That is one of the key points. We need only look across the shore and see the benefits of investment in music in film, but also that many working in the film industry, actors or screenwriters, have a better contract than their Irish counterparts are being asked to sign. In fact, in some productions in Ireland, people are directly recruited to the film in London and the ones recruited in Ireland have two separate contracts, one of which, the English, is more beneficial.

Screen composers have outlined that music for film is highly international and competitive and in order for Ireland and Irish-based composers to compete successfully, it is important that music creation be supported overtly within the Irish audiovisual tax credit mechanism and that this is comparable to similar incentives offered by international coproduction partners to ensure that there is no in-built disincentive to bringing music departments to Ireland where coproductions are availing of multiple incentives. We believe that there are constructive solutions. They might not be ones that we will fully address in this Bill, but I intend to table one or two amendments to the Bill on Committee and Report Stages, to address some of these issues as they relate to this, as I said, technical Bill. We will have that discussion next week when this Bill comes before the House again. I tabled those amendments earlier, which, I think, was the deadline even though we are only on Second Stage. I sent them in and we will have the opportunity to discuss them next week. We would be standing up for Irish workers and artists if the amendments and the suggestions I and many others have tabled were adopted. My amendments are not aimed at hampering the industry in any way. They are aimed at enhancing it to all of our benefit.

Sin an méid atá agam faoi láthair. Tá brón orm. Ní féidir liom fanacht mar tá grúpa ón bPalaistín istigh agam faoi láthair. B'fhéidir go mbeidh mé ar ais roimh dheireadh na ráiteas.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all love the idea of a thriving Irish film industry, whether we look at it, historically, through the likes of "My Left Foot" and "In the Name of the Father" right through to "Kneecap" and "An Cailín Ciúin", a lot in between and many smaller enterprises. We all should take great pride in this. We are only too delighted if section 481 is used as a means of enhancing the film industry and ensuring that we continue with this and we can improve upon it.

When we talk about the cultural test that is meant to be implemented and we look at the industry that we should have, we all would like to say that there would be some sort of State buy-in and, beyond that, that we would ensure that we would have a well-looked after and well-paid professional workforce that also ensures the sustainability of the film industry. That has been raised by Deputy Ó Snodaigh. I also have had many interactions on this particular point. Last week, Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I had an interaction with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance on section 481, and Deputy Ó Snodaigh withdrew his amendment to the Finance Bill on the basis of a promise made to examine this properly. We have all seen the cases that have been before the courts on the specifics of who is an employer. When a film is being created, a designated activity company, DAC, is put into operation. The DAC lasts for the entirety of the film but the fact is it is the employer but then it disappears. When we are talking about the European working time directive and ensuring its enforcement and other issues, they are not necessarily issues because the producer draws down the section 481 relief but the DAC is the employer. Unfortunately, I am almost like a broken record on this because this issue still has not been resolved.

My big fear around this is workers highlighting how their rights have been overridden and even being blackballed. Blackballing can happen in the film industry a lot easier than in other industry because, even though for many years somebody could be in constant employment almost with the same production company, multiple DACs are formed for every film being produced. If there is a particular issue and somebody needs that looked at, be it in relation to the working time directive or whatever, the fact is he or she might not necessarily get the phone

call the next time. This is about ensuring workers' rights, which are taken for granted. I do not want to overegg it but we have used the analogy previously of the 1913 Lockout. People require to a call for a production and if someone makes a determination across the board that they or a number of their cohort have been involved in looking for rights for workers and ensuring that those rights are enforced, they might not get the call and the phone will not be as much use as it was beforehand. This is something that definitely needs to be looked at.

An issue has been brought on multiple occasions relating to Irish Equity, copyright and so-called "residuals". Deputy Ó Snodaigh brought it and I have no doubt Deputy Boyd Barrett will as well. It is Christmastime. Could the Minister of State imagine if somebody was forced into a contract that meant that moneys that would be due to them were not due to them into the future and were owned by somebody else altogether and what should be theirs had been taken away from the point of view of their creative endeavours? Let us imagine that person was George Michael or Mariah Carey. They would be down a huge amount. While we are not quite sure that "Die Hard" is a Christmas film or not, if Bruce Willis had to sign away his residuals that would be very different.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There would be hell to pay.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Indeed, there would. "Yippee KiYay", and all of that. That is the reality. I am not trying to make light of it. That was not going to happen in these sets of circumstances but it has happened to loads of people who work in the Irish film industry and that is not okay.

This is not some industry that is operating away on its own independently. This is an industry that is rightly supported by the State. We need to find a mechanism whereby we continue with section 481 but we ensure that section 481 ensures there is the correct cultural output required and that we have a film industry that gives people the correct type of work, be they directly involved from in the crew or appearing in the set and being filmed. If we do not have that, we might have the horror stories we have all heard about phone calls not being made to the people who have all the experience. While it is important to have trainees, sometimes the ratio can be the wrong way and there may be too many trainees. This might result from someone looking at it from the point of view of saving money. The film industry is a fabulous thing. We all want to see it continue and be supported, but we need to make sure that workers' rights and artistic endeavours are looked after and that there is a sustainable industry, particularly when the State looks into it. We have an industrial relations infrastructure and framework but it is a very different situation in the film industry from many others. I would like the Minister of State to look at this issue and follow up with the Tánaiste on his promises.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I congratulate the Minister of State on her uplift to higher office. I welcome this Bill. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on it and more broadly in support of the arts, one of the most powerful forces shaping our culture, society and reputation around the world. The success of the Irish film industry is something we in the Labour Party are very proud of. It was Michael D. Higgins, as Minister for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, who established the Irish Film Board way back in 1993. He had the foresight and vision to put in place the building blocks of what has become a really remarkable Irish success story, with tax incentives, training initiatives and direct supports that laid the foundations for a thriving,

world-renowned screen sector. These State supports were transformative. They turned Ireland into a leading international filming destination attracting major productions from "Saving Private Ryan" to "Braveheart" while nurturing our own creative talent and storytelling traditions. Most recently, the Netflix series "Wednesday" was filmed in various locations around Ireland.

We are proud that our Labour Party vision helped to reshape Irish film and remains something we are very proud of. For that reason I welcome this Bill, which raises the cap on the supports that may be provided by Screen Ireland. Increased investment is essential to ensure high-quality indigenous productions continue to thrive. We want to see more extraordinary films like "An Cailín Ciúin" and "Kneecap", works that captured global attention and showcased the artistic brilliance emerging from Ireland. It is not only film; we have become a powerhouse across television, documentary, animation and games. Irish directors, writers, actors and craftspeople consistently punch far above their weight for our small but mighty country - long may that continue. Most recently, "The Traitors" was a huge success. It even prompted a Labour Party WhatsApp group to keep everyone informed. If this Bill were to be delayed, the essential funding pipeline for upcoming productions would also be delayed. That would put unnecessary pressure on producers, on employment and on Ireland's international reputation as a reliable partner for production so we are very pleased to support the legislation. At the same time, it is important that we use this moment to reflect honestly on where our domestic screen landscape can and must improve.

Section 481, the backbone of our internationally competitive film industry, has served Ireland well. The industry is changing rapidly across the world, however, and we need to ensure our tax relief remains fully competitive, agile and strategically aligned with the future needs of the sector. We should ask at this stage whether similar models of support should be extended to musicians. Far too many artists and performers are struggling in an era dominated by global streaming platforms where revenue models have shifted dramatically. If a version of section 481 could help to support film, why should we not consider whether it could also help to sustain Ireland's extraordinary music talent? Films and music go hand in hand as most films have a soundtrack that can often do just as well if not better than the film itself.

Above all, we must insist that our film and creative industries, which are built on imagination, innovation and collaboration, are places where workers are treated fairly, safely and with respect. Too often, we have heard stories of unfair work practices and of people, particularly younger people and women, being made to feel unsafe or exploited. If public money is supporting production, public values should underpin the conditions of that support. The Labour Party has long argued that access to section 481 relief should be conditional on offering secure, safe, high-quality employment with terms and conditions equivalent to those in other leading film nations. Workers' rights must be upheld not as an aspiration but as a requirement. I urge the Minister of State to take that commitment seriously.

I want to highlight the vibrant ecosystem that surrounds filmmaking - the festivals, community cinemas and local arts organisations that create space for Irish talent to be celebrated. I make this speech today on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Robert O'Donoghue, who unfortunately cannot be here. He asked me to give his constituency of Dublin Fingal West a twist. It has remarkable film festivals that bring people together, showcase Irish and international work, support local creatives and foster the next generation of filmmakers. These

events are part of the cultural fabric of our communities. They educate, inspire and connect us. Supporting the screen sector means supporting them too. Most recently in Dublin Fingal West, they had the beautiful film "Sunphlowers" set in Rush in conjunction with the local theatre, Millbank Theatre.

Let us remember the substance behind this Bill. Screen Ireland operates under the Department of culture and is tasked with supporting and encouraging the making of films, developing the industry and promoting Irish culture on screen. It participates in international collaborations, supports skills development across film, TV, animation and games and promotes inward investment. Under section 10 of the film board Act, Screen Ireland's total investment is capped. As of December 2023, €430 million of the €500 million limit had been reached. There were five previous increases to this cap, reflecting the sustained growth of the industry. Budget 2026 increased Screen Ireland's budget by €2.1 million, bringing it to almost €43 million, a 5% rise. Section 481 offers a tax credit of 32% for qualifying productions, capped at €70 million with requirements for cultural value, employment standards and skills development. These are not abstract policy measures; they are the engine of an industry that now produces acclaimed works such as "Small Things Like These", "The Wonder", "The Apprentice", "Normal People" and "An Cailín Ciúin" among many others.

The arts are not a luxury; they are a necessity. They shape who we are, how we see ourselves and how the world sees Ireland. They sustain jobs, drive regional development and help to build a society that values expression, diversity and creativity. By supporting this Bill, we are not simply adjusting a funding cap; we are reaffirming our commitment to Ireland's creative future, to our actors, musicians, screenwriters, designers, animators and cinematographers and to all those whose artistry enriches our lives. Let us ensure they have the funding, protections and respect they deserve. Let us keep building the conditions in which Irish creativity can thrive safely, fairly and proudly.

I would like to draw the Minister of State's attention to another pressing matter. While going slightly off topic, I want to address the sudden and deeply concerning closure of The Complex in Smithfield, a cultural and artistic space that has served as a vital hub for creativity, community and expression in our capital city. The abrupt nature of this closure is yet another stark reminder of how Dublin is steadily losing its cultural heartbeat. It is a consequence of unchecked commercial pressure, a lack of meaningful Government intervention and ongoing silence when it comes to the urgent need for nightlife and cultural space reform. As the Labour Party has consistently highlighted, since 2000 more than 522 cultural and arts venues have closed nationwide. In Dublin today, we are left with only 23 late-night venues in operation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): The Deputy should keep his comments relevant to what we are talking about today.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: This decline is not sudden; it is the cumulative result of years of neglect.

In the time I have available to me, I want to talk about the fantastic work being done in my constituency by Film in Limerick, which is an initiative of Innovate Limerick that provides valuable local supports and acts as a point of information and contact for film in the region. We had a film lab that launched in Limerick last July, bringing 18 producers from Ireland,

Canada and Scotland together. We really need to see a return of the regional uplift for film in Ireland.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025. Before I do so, however, and since we are discussing Irish screen production, I would like to formally express my condolences on the sad, sudden passing of Hugh Wallace, who was not originally a television presenter but certainly endeared himself to the Irish public on the many shows he presented. I express my condolences to his husband, family, friends and colleagues.

This is a short, technical Bill, as the Minister of State has highlighted, but it carries real significance for jobs, creative talent and the stories we tell about Ireland. Its core purpose is straightforward: it raises the statutory ceiling on Screen Ireland's cumulative capital outlay and commitments from €500 million to €840 million. In effect, it ensures the agency can continue to fund development and production without hitting a legal wall in 2026. This is necessary as, under the current legislation, the €500 million limit will be exhausted once the full 2025 allocation is drawn down. By the end of 2024, the aggregate figure already stood at over €467 million, meaning that without this Bill the 2026 programme would breach the limit. The sector is growing and the demand for Irish content is also growing. Screen Ireland has demonstrated its capacity to deploy funding effectively. This legislation gives the agency the headroom to continue this good work.

The Oireachtas has had to adjust the ceiling several times over the past decade as the screen sector has expanded. The increases reflect the success of the industry. Sustained investment has driven creative output, talent development and economic returns. That remains true to this day.

Screen Ireland, formerly the Irish Film Board, is the national development agency for film, television, animation, documentary and digital production. Its mandate spans development and production finance, distribution and festival support, promotion, and, crucially, skills and talent development. It sits on a lineage that has helped to transform Ireland from a location for other people's productions into a country with a rich, self-confident screen culture of its own.

Since 2018 alone, the agency has supported the development of more than 100 feature films, dozens of TV dramas and documentaries and a constant stream of animation and short films. This activity translates directly into opportunity for writers, directors and performers but also for the crews and craftspeople who make up the backbone of the industry. The industry means work for carpenters, costume designers, editors, caterers and post-production teams. That diversity of employment is one of the sector's great strengths.

Irish work has also made a decisive impact internationally. Recent years have brought a record number of Oscar nominations and global acclaim for films like "An Cailín Ciúin" and "The Banshees of Inisherin", as well as Irish-based television series that travel well, from "The Young Offenders" to "Hidden Assets", to name but a few. These achievements are grounded in talent but also in the strategic support Screen Ireland provides. The agency pursues a dual strategy: backing indigenous Irish stories and attracting incoming, internationally mobile productions. Both matter. Irish stories preserve and amplify our cultural voice. International productions bring investment, skills development and global visibility. Ireland can compete

successfully for these productions due to the consistent quality of our crews, our location and our policy environment.

Skills development is central to this. Screen Ireland's training and talent initiatives have expanded significantly in recent years. The National Talent Academies network, covering film and television drama, animation and visual effects, VFX, ensures that emerging talent across the regions can access structured development pathways. The Minister of State referred to the regional crew academies in Galway, Limerick and Wicklow. These are helping to deepen the skills base outside Dublin and ensure the growth is genuinely nationwide. This whole-of-pipeline approach is essential if we want a sustainable industry in the long term.

The Bill sits alongside the substantial Government support delivered through recent budgets. Through budget 2026, for example, funding for Screen Ireland will rise to €42.96 million, an increase of over 5%. This is a clear signal of the Government's commitment to building a competitive, future-focused screen sector.

On the taxation side, there have been important enhancements to section 481. The 8% Scéal uplift, introduced in 2025, strengthens the economics of live-action and animated features with budgets under €20 million, a zone where Irish and European co-productions thrive. A further 8% uplift for VFX in budget 2026 recognises the importance of post-production and visual effects to competitiveness and to high-value employment, especially as international demand for VFX capacity continues to rise.

The Government has improved the digital games tax credit, which is helping to develop a connected creative-tech ecosystem alongside film and television. We have increased the overall cap for section 481 productions to €125 million, and work is under way to introduce a new 20% unscripted programmes tax credit. This will support high-end factual and documentary formats, representing an area where Irish producers are well placed to excel.

All of this forms part of a coherent audiovisual strategy. This entails backing local talent, attracting global productions, expanding skills and ensuring Ireland remains competitive in a fast-moving international environment. The benefits are broad. A strong screen industry enhances our reputation, supports tourism and showcases Ireland's culture and landscapes to global audiences. It creates high-quality jobs across rural and urban areas. It sustains Irish-language production, children's programming and diverse storytelling that reflects modern Ireland. It also supports regional development, particularly where studio facilities and crew bases are emerging outside Dublin.

However, we should be honest about the challenges, some of which have been alluded to. Other countries are constantly reshaping their incentive regimes. The economics of streaming and distribution are shifting rapidly. Smaller companies and freelancers can be vulnerable to international disruption, as we saw during recent global strikes. If we want to keep our talent here, and avoid a drain to London, Budapest or Vancouver, we need to plan ahead and provide stability. That is exactly what this Bill does. By increasing the capital ceiling to €840 million, we are giving Screen Ireland the certainty it needs to deliver on its strategy for 2025 to 2029 to support both indigenous creativity and internationally mobile projects, and also to maintain a strong skills pipeline across the regions. We are also sending a clear message, which is that Ireland is open to investment and collaboration and committed to supporting our creative industries.

I welcome the Bill and commend the Minister of State and the officials on introducing it. This necessary and practical step will allow Screen Ireland to keep backing Irish stories, Irish talent and Irish jobs. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to expanding the funding, particularly for digital gaming. I want to be associated with the remarks of colleagues on the need to support workers' pay and conditions. Everyone must have fair, decent working arrangements. I am happy to support the Bill. I look forward to the next chapter of Irish film and screen production.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. As I understand it, it is about raising the aggregate amount that Screen Ireland can give out, presumably because we are near the limit of €500 million. The Bill proposes to raise this to €800 million.

3 o'clock

I have long and repeatedly argued that we should increase the amount of money that we put into artistic and cultural endeavour generally, and into film. At one level, I welcome an increased commitment to support the film industry but I also, as the Minister of State, and certainly as officials in the Department of arts will know, have concerns about the conditions attached to that funding and whether the requirements for state aid to the film industry, which are set down in EU directives and, in the case of section 481, are legislated for, that you have to fulfil certain requirements in order to receive state aid for film, and the culture and industry tests, are being met.

There is no doubt, and many people have talked rightly, about the huge talent we have, and the successes we have seen in the film industry. I do not think it is a surprise to anybody because we know we have a tremendous pool of talent and creativity in this country, including writers, actors, musicians, the crew and all the various people who work in film. Enormous talent exists. It should not be a surprise that given the right support, they can achieve absolutely incredible things. It is right to list the successes and awards that have been achieved. I applaud all of that.

I am also concerned that while we need to increase the supports, we are not meeting those tests, particularly the requirement for quality employment and training in the film industry. There are two main dimensions of that that I want to talk about. First of all, there is the issue which was highlighted again in the High Court in the past few weeks. I am not sure if the Minister of State or Department are aware of this. There was a decision by Mr. Justice Garrett Simons in the High Court, in a case taken by stagehands who have worked in the Irish film industry. I was just looking through the details. I have not had the time to look at all of it and I have not read the full ruling. The judge found in their favour against motions put by one of the major recipients of Irish Film Board grants and of section 481 funding, one of the two biggest film producer companies in this country, Metropolitan Pictures. Similar types of cases have been and are being taken against the other major recipient by people who worked on Irish film productions for Element Pictures, the other major recipient. They are the two dominant recipients. There are a few others but they are the major recipients of State support for the film industry.

The first thing I would ask the Government, as I have repeatedly, but on this particular ruling, relates to the Departments of Finance and arts. Finance is relevant to section 481,

although not so much to the Irish Film Board but obviously the film industry benefits from funding both from the Irish Film Board via the Department of arts and it and the Department of Finance through section 481. I ask them to look at that decision made in the courts because it related to a case taken by stagehands to the WRC over the failure over the film producer companies, which get money from the Irish Film Board and section 481 to vindicate their rights under the fixed-term workers legislation. It is complicated. I do not know how many times I have explained it. I will table an amendment on Committee Stage of this Bill saying that the giving out of grants and loans by the Irish Film Board should be contingent on very strict adherence to the obligations under fixed-term workers legislation, and that we do not have, as I certainly believe is the case, the issue with the cases taken by the stagehands. To try to summarise it, the WRC found in favour of the stagehands. The Labour Court then overturned that decision but then it went to the High Court and it essentially found in favour again of the stagehands. I do not think the Labour Court decision has been fully quashed yet but the High Court found in favour of the stagehands.

There have been many of these cases. It revolves around the fact that state aid to film producer companies in this country is contingent on giving quality employment and training. They get the money because they are providing employment but when people who worked on film productions made by those recipients and film producer companies which get the money take cases against their employer over, for example, not getting their employment rights properly vindicated, the film producer company goes into the WRC or the Labour Court and says it does not have any employees. It says the designated activity company, DAC, it set up has the employees, therefore the film producer company is not really their employer. That is sort of laughable. It is Russian doll sort of stuff. It is an abuse because, on the one hand, the company gets the money from the State on the basis that it is creating jobs, and on the other hand, when the people it is supposed to be employing say it is their employer but it is not giving them their rights, it says it has never employed them and has no employment relationship with them whatsoever. It might have set up the DAC but that is not the company but somebody else. To me, that is an abuse and should not be allowed to carry on. We have to stop giving money to film producer companies which are doing that until it is rectified.

What is the human cost of all of this? People who worked, in the case of that stagehand for 18 years in the film industry, are essentially cast out of the film industry because they try to assert their rights. They are blacklisted and they are left high and dry with nothing. Many of them would say they have been blacklisted out of the industry, having sometimes worked for 20, 30 or 40 years in the film industry. They are left high and dry with nothing because the people who have employed them again and again hide behind these DACs even though they are claiming large amounts of money.

Looking at the amount of money, if we have reached the limit of €500 million, half a billion has been given out since this started and we are now going to go up to over three quarters of a billion over the next few years. That is a lot of money. When you look at section 481 or its predecessors, it is probably €3 billion or €4 billion. That is a lot of money. I am in favour of that money being given out but I am concerned that we are giving out billions to people who say they have no employees.

The industry test as required by EU law is that we build up companies of scale. I think "companies of scale" is the phrase used in the EU directive. How can a company be a company

of scale if it has no employees? Again and again, they go into the court and their employees come in and say, "You're my employer", but the person running the company says, "No, I don't have employees. I've never had employees. There are no employees. They are employed by a DAC that is now wound up". It is an abuse and it has to be stopped. It is completely unfair. I hope I have explained that.

We need to make the giving-out of these moneys conditional on that abuse stopping and the rights of workers need to be fully vindicated. Similarly with the actors and performers, the issues are different but it is to do with use of buyout contracts. The officials will be familiar with this. I know the Minister of State is new in the job and she might not be as familiar. Most actors at the best of times have a pretty precarious existence and do not really know when the next job is coming or where the next paycheck is coming from. Once upon a time they got royalties or residuals for previous performances they did on films. When films or TV series were shown again, they might get a small cheque of a few hundred quid in the post, which would be very welcome.

Despite the billions coming out of section 481 over the years, at €500 million now to go to €750 million from the film board, most of our actors and most people who work in the film industry live in poverty. While there are a few A-listers, the vast majority of them are not A-listers but they are absolutely critical to the existence of the industry, an industry where there are no jobs and there is very little infrastructure for all those billions, by the way. Where are our studios? We sold the last bit of Ardmore to an American company. Where is our infrastructure for all the billions we put in? We do not have any. Where did it go? Who has it for all those billions?

I am sorry about going off the point there. For the actors, performers, writers and so on, those residuals are critical. Now, however, apart from those A-listers or those whose agent can negotiate a better situation for them, in order to get a contract, they are handed a buyout contract where to get the job they have to sign away their right to royalties and residuals in the future. It is supposedly voluntary but the truth is that if they do not sign that, they will not be getting the job.

The Minister of State may have heard the phrase "You'll never work in this town again". There is a reason that is a familiar phrase to most people because it comes from showbiz. It was probably first heard in Hollywood or somewhere. This is a phrase that exists in the culture and arts, and film industry. It very much exists here. That phrase probably did not originate here - it probably originated in Hollywood or wherever - but it exists in reality here. If you do not sign that contract, you will not be working in this town again. It is as simple as that. Everybody knows it. It is the dirty secret but we do not acknowledge it. People are afraid even to speak about it because if they speak about it publicly, they may never work in this town again but everybody knows it. What are we going to do about it?

Given that the producer companies are getting all this money - as I said, I actively want us to invest in these areas - I believe we have to safeguard the rights of the talent. By the way, when I use the phrase "the talent", all of them are talent, including the guys who build the sets and paint the sets, the transport workers, right up to the actors, the make-up people and all the rest of it. Often a distinction is made between those in front of the camera and those behind the camera. I completely reject that. We need all these people and all of them deserve to be treated with respect.

In reality, the people who do the best out of it all are the producers. This may be a little sign of the way the industry is going. I do not want to sound too nostalgic but in the old days when the credits used to roll on films, we saw the names of the actors, the directors and the various crew people who made it happen. They were the most prominent things. Now, with an awful lot of TV and film productions, the most prominent things, often coming up first on the credits, are a long list of the names of the producers, the suits. The suits come up first. I think that is emblematic of what is going on in these industries. I went into the Labour Court with those stagehands. They had no legal representation at all. The film production company, which gets a lot of money from the Irish State, had a phalanx of legal advisers, experts, suits. Who paid for them to sit there and say to people they knew had worked on film productions funded by the State, "We have no employment relationship with you"?

I do not know how many times these things have been said to the Government. When are we going to end this situation? It is just not fair that film crews have been blacklisted out of the industry. It is not fair that actors, performers and so on can be told to sign buyout contracts and not get their residuals and royalties as they did once upon a time. I believe that situation has to end.

I want to speak about the culture test. Ultimately these things may be somewhat related. I may be going slightly more out on a limb. Some good stuff has happened in the last year, with a bit more money going to indigenous, small, young, new people and so on. I am very glad to see that and it is great to see the success, which shows what is possible. However, why is there not more stuff done about the incredible historic and cultural heritage this country has? A few weeks ago on an American streamer, I saw a feature film about Daniel O'Connell, which was dreadful. It was made in America with an all-American cast. It was absolutely dreadful. I was wondering why we did not make a film about Daniel O'Connell. Then I thought, where's our *Gulliver's Travels*? Where is our *Dracula* seeing as the book originated here? Where are our productions about Robert Emmet and the United Irishmen? Where is our film about Constance Markievicz? Where is all this stuff? I know we have produced some like "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" and "Michael Collins" but it is quite a while since we did any of those big historical productions.

I have run out of time. There should be more going in to celebrate our cultural heritage, our rich history and so on and some of the incredible cultural artistic talent that we have in this country than is currently the case.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy did very well in 20 minutes. I have no doubt we will have a film about him at some stage.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: 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 Marie Sherlock - To discuss the parents notify system.

Deputy Sean Fleming - To discuss the transfer of patients from Erkina House in Rathdowney, County Laois, and the future of this facility.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss the issue of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in Ireland.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss the inclusion of commercial bus operators in the under-nine free-travel scheme.

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

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

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

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

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

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss water supply issues affecting Adrigole.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss accessibility issues at at Ardee Educate Together School, County Louth.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss special education in Wicklow.

The matters raised by Deputies Marie Sherlock, Séamus McGrath, Jennifer Whitmore, Ruairí Ó Murchú, Barry Ward, Ryan O'Meara, James Geoghegan, Gary Gannon, Michael Collins and Louis O'Hara have been selected for discussion.

Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Dáil and acknowledge the interest and support of Members for this technical but important Bill. It was really heartening to have the engagement and to hear so many of the TV shows and films that I watch being mentioned here today. It shows the fantastic talent that we have in Ireland and why it is so important that we continue to support the industry.

I am going to take a moment to respond to some of the queries and concerns raised here today. I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for his kind words about Screen Ireland and assure him that Department officials are in ongoing contact with Irish Equity and SIPTU in relation to the issues he raised.

Deputies Ó Snodaigh, Sheehan and Boyd Barrett raised the matter of section 481 tax relief. I confirm this is not part of this Bill and Screen Ireland has no competency in the area of tax. Screen Ireland gives grants and loans and, to be clear, is not involved in tax.

I thank Deputy Ó Murchú, who has arrived back just in time. We all love Irish productions and are proud of our talented creatives. I fully agree with him on that.

Deputy Sheehan spoke about "Sunphlowers", which premiered this year in July at the Galway Film Fleadh. It showcased north County Dublin at its best as well as the creative skills of the crew and the creatives involved. The Deputy also spoke about film in Limerick. I assure him that is part of the work and that Paul Ryan works with Screen Ireland. I also reassure Deputy Sheehan and his colleague in north Dublin that ongoing negotiations are happening with the developers regarding The Complex arts centre and that the Department is working to support those discussions.

I echo Deputy Devlin's deep condolences on the sad passing of Hugh Wallace. May he rest in peace. I send my condolences to his family, friends and colleagues. I thank Deputy Devlin for his comments and assure him the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, is very committed to increasing a focus on gaming. The vast majority of Screen Ireland funding goes to the indigenous screen industries.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about taxation and legislation, as I said. He also spoke about EU law, DAC and the industry test, which is part of the application process for tax relief. In terms of buyout contracts, the Screen Ireland copyright process includes the trade unions Irish Equity and SIPTU, employees, Screen Producers Ireland, Animation Ireland and the creative guilds representing directors, screenwriters and composers. They have all agreed guidelines on copyright and intellectual property rights. I hope that is welcome news.

Irish talent and Irish production companies supported by Screen Ireland have achieved outstanding international success over the last decade. Irish-originated films, TV drama, animation and documentaries have been enjoyed by audiences worldwide and have premiered at major international festivals. They have sold in every territory around the world and they have received critical acclaim and awards recognition at the highest levels. Major successful international films and TV dramas have also been produced across Ireland, generating a substantial contribution to the economy, providing significant employment and world-class skills development.

The Irish Film Board (Amendment) Bill 2025 has a single provision, to increase the statutory limit on the cumulative capital outlay, commitments and liabilities that may be incurred by Screen Ireland. I thank everyone who was involved in the Bill, including the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, and his team and the officials who are with me today. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Minister of State taking the Topical Issues?

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): Yes, ten Topical Issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: Ten Topical Issues, okay. We begin with Deputy Ó Murchú.

School Facilities

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister of State. Fair play to anybody who is going to sit through ten Topical Issues. It is a matter of actually getting delivery on some of these issues. This issue is one where you think there must be a simple solution, so it is a matter of us finding that solution. I was sent a letter from the board of management of Ardee Educate Together National School and its principal, Ann Middleton. I was lucky enough to go around the site for the new build. All I can say, which is no different from what is in the letter, is that it is absolutely fabulous work. It needs to happen as soon as possible. As I said, I had a site visit. They are great grounds. It is an absolutely spectacular building. It looks like something that is fit for purpose, as we would expect of any new build these days. However, there are particular issues and I think they could be very easily addressed now. If they are not addressed now, it will be very costly to deliver later.

These are the details that were sent to me regarding special needs provision, buses and transport. The school has five special needs classes for pupils with autism, comprising 30 pupils. They do not have enough drop-off and collection points for special needs buses. They barely have room for two minibuses, whereas they require five. The lack of bus parking will cause backup for the remaining buses and cars and result in huge traffic jams and delays. Special needs pupils with autism have difficulties with transferring and waiting and this could affect pupil regulation and cause meltdown for pupils with challenging behaviours. The present system will result in absolute traffic chaos. The principal has repeatedly raised this with Louth County Council and the architects, Kennedy Fitzgerald Architects. I went to Louth County Council myself and was told this had gone to the design team, which had refused it on the basis of cost, and that it would have to go back for planning. However, I agree with what is written in the letter in that this issue can be easily resolved by continuing the bus parking set-down area by three spaces to the west onto unused space, of which there is a lot, between the school and the boundary fence. The letter actually says "see map" but we do not need to get into that.

This is quite simple. If you are going into the school building, you will come off the road and swing a left. That is a road on the school property that could be extended. Regarding the school car park, I was sent a plan showing how it could be extended with a widened road. There are 21 spaces. There is a need for probably double that number. There are two set-down minibus spaces and you would almost have to park perfectly to get into them. Like I said, there are five minibuses that will leave children with challenging needs to the school. In addition, they come from various places, so it is not as though the school can just put more children onto one particular bus.

This has been in operation for a long time. The school building was promised in 2012. It may be that a ratio that was delivered earlier regarding parking spaces does not take into account the five autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes. Staff are coming from right across Louth, Meath, Monaghan and beyond, so it is not as though people are able to cycle or whatever else. I was shown the works and met the contractor. He will very soon carry out tarmacking and other works. If the work was done at this point in time, it could be done cheaply and would only involve removing stuff that has been put in from an aesthetics point of view. I ask that we find a solution as soon as possible.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton.

As he said, the brief for this major school building project is to provide an eight-classroom school with an additional four classroom special educational needs, SEN, base included. The project has been devolved to Louth County Council for delivery. The project is currently at stage 4, that is, construction, of the delivery process. It is envisaged that, pending no unforeseen delays or issues, the estimated completion date will be within the first quarter of 2026. It is great to hear that the Deputy had a site visit and saw with his own eyes how well the construction is proceeding. From his account, it sounds like the project is on track to meet the deadline.

The Department has been actively engaging with the design team and Louth County Council throughout the process and will continue to engage to provide practical advice and assistance on this important project. The Minister for Education and Youth acknowledged that the school previously submitted a request for additional car park spaces which was reviewed by the Department but was not approved.

The design team is now required to construct and progress the project in accordance with the project brief, as agreed in the service level agreement and in accordance with any local authority planning conditions. The number of car parking spaces currently provided for is what is in the planning conditions. What is currently provided for is in line with the approved planning requirements and what happens generally. While I appreciate the Deputy has said the problem could be resolved simply, it sounds like it would require changes to a planning application.

Since 2020, the Department has invested over €6 billion in schools throughout the country under the national development plan, involving the completion of over 1,300 school buildings. In addition, repurposing and optimisation of existing accommodation capacity across the school estate has been a key enabler of timely, local provision of special class capacity in a way that supports best practice in inclusion and integration. About 80% of new special classes in 2025-26 are being facilitated in repurposed classroom accommodation.

In July, the Government announced a capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth for the period 2026 to 2030 under the new national development plan, NDP. As part of this allocation, the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. Regarding project roll-out for larger-scale projects and the additional school accommodation scheme, the approach will be to continue to maximise capacity and prioritise the most urgent needs.

The Deputy spoke about a solution for his school put forward by the principal, namely, widening the road and extending the car park. To me, this might require planning permission and would be something he would need to engage on with Louth County Council.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Louth County Council is almost a facilitator. It speaks to the design team. I raised this issue with the Taoiseach in terms of the need to streamline regulation.

We all know the issues that exist in respect of planning. We need a system that can be more agile. While we need checks and balances, that should be possible.

If mistakes are made or issues are seen, they could be addressed in a timely manner. The project could proceed through the process and the problem would still persist and would need to be dealt with in six months. There may be a new planning application, but at that stage we would consider removing parts that have been added in, such as hedges, fencing, pavement or tarmac and other works that need to be done.

At any point in time, we could have a proper and speedy review of what is possible and how quickly we could fix this. There will be traffic chaos, which has been pointed out. There are very simple issues.

The process was probably simpler once upon a time when the school was given responsibility to deliver projects. I am sure there were problems and mistakes in that system, but at least schools did not have to go through three layers. Louth County Council is only one of those layers and then we have the Department, building unit, architects and contractors. This is not working. The process is taking too long.

There are issues in respect of the yard size. I have written to the Minister and will hand the Minister of State a letter later. I ask that she follows up with the Minister. We need to try to deal with this as quickly as possible. This will become a bigger problem very quickly and it will become a more expensive problem. It is an absolute necessity that action is taken.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy. I hear and appreciate his frustration. The number of car parking spaces currently provided for is in line with the approved planning requirements. In order to change the plans, there would need to be a new planning application. I appreciate he does not want to do that after the new school is built, given that it would involve additional disruption. The advice would be to engage now with Louth County Council to see if it is possible for the planning changes to happen.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It not the council; the Department has a role to play.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I will pass on the Deputy's feedback to the Minister to see if planning was granted whether it would be possible for the Department to fund those works. Right now, there is no planning grounds for it. That seems to be the problem and that is where I will advise the Deputy to take this next.

Schools Amalgamation

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. I want to raise the issue of the proposed amalgamation of Shanbally and Ringaskiddy national schools in County Cork. They are two existing schools in older buildings. Ringaskiddy has a school population of approximately 60 students and Shanbally is larger with approximately 199 students. The proposed amalgamation has been on the cards for a decade and a half at this stage. Unfortunately, despite this long time it is at the earliest possible stage, namely pre-stage 1 of the school building programme.

There are emergency needs in these schools. I have had the good fortune of being able to visit these schools in my time. I most recently visited Shanbally, the larger of the two schools. Of the nine classrooms in the school, six are prefabs. Many of the prefabs are over ten years old and are in an appalling condition. I witnessed it myself. Floors are collapsing and ceilings are bulging with dampness. There are health and safety issues, in that ceilings could collapse on students. There is dampness and mould. I could go on. There are significant issues with electrical trip switches, which are tripping because of the dampness in the school. There is a chronic need to develop the new school so that the students can get out of these older and dilapidated buildings.

As I said, despite the time involved, the project is at the earliest stage of the school building programme. There is deep frustration locally about the slowness of the process. This has been a long running process. A site was identified a number of years ago. Unfortunately, the site had to be acquired for the development of the M28 motorway. That was one setback. A new site was identified and is fully in place. Everything is now ready to go in terms of developing the new schools.

Given the issues I outlined earlier with the condition of the buildings, the principals of the schools have had to fight tooth and nail to get emergency funding to carry out works. They have been put through the wringer in trying to get funding to carry out works for roof repairs and to address dampness and other safety issues in school buildings. It is simply not good enough in this day and age that such a number of children are being educated in these facilities.

To be fair, the children receive a good standard of education. The principals and teachers in Ringaskiddy and Shanbally national schools are doing their level best to provide good levels of education. They are also doing their best with regard to special education and are certainly playing their part in providing places for students with additional needs. They need the school building programme to progress quickly and for this school project to be on a proper trajectory towards the delivery of a new school building.

I hope the Minister's response can give some hope to the communities, teachers, pupils and parents locally that the school building project will progress and they will see credible and substantive progress in the near future.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. This gives me the opportunity to outline to the Dáil the current position regarding the proposed amalgamation of Ringaskiddy Lower National School and Shanbally National School in County Cork. This project is planned to be delivered as part of phase 2 of the Department's Adapt 4 programme. That programme uses a professional external programme manager to co-ordinate and drive the integrated project team to achieve the best possible timeframe for the project through the stages of architectural planning, to tender and construction. This programme is being led by integrated project teams consisting of highly skilled and experienced design professionals, architects, engineers, project managers, quantity surveyors and various other consultants to deliver the projects.

The project manager for this particular project was appointed in the third quarter of 2023 and is in the process of preparing documentation for the tender process for the appointment of integrated project teams for the phase 2 bundle of projects. The brief for the project is to provide a new 16-classroom primary school with four classrooms for pupils with special

educational needs. The new school is expected to be located on a 6.068 acre site which is currently privately owned but is anticipated to be transferred into the ownership of Cork Diocesan Trust. Currently the two national schools are located off site, in two separate locations where they will remain until the new school building is completed.

From the account given by the Deputy today, it sounds like the conditions the students and staff are operating in are not satisfactory. I will pass that on to the Minister and ask that it be taken into consideration as the plan is progressed with urgency.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I appreciate the response. As the Minister of State said, this is to be a new 16-classroom primary school with four classrooms for children with special education needs. This facility is so badly needed in the local community and the constituency that I represent. My main reason for submitting this Topical Issue matter was to get a status update. I appreciate that the Minister of State has provided an update in relation to the project manager being appointed in the third quarter of 2023 who is in the process of preparing documentation for the tender process for the appointment of the integrated project teams for the phase 2 bundle of projects. While I appreciate the reply, it is lacking in clarity in relation to the timeline. It does not give me a lot to go back to the school community, parents or principal and teachers with, in relation to the timeline. If there is any additional information, I would be very grateful for it.

I note the appointment of the project manager and the preparation of the documentation for the tender process but at the same time, this school amalgamation process has been in the pipeline for so long that we do need some credible timelines at this stage, especially because the current conditions are so unsuitable. The facilities where the pupils are receiving their education are not fit for purpose. Despite the conditions, both schools are providing an education to the highest standard but they are really up against it in terms of the environment in which they operate. I visited the schools and saw first hand the conditions and they really are not acceptable. I ask the Minister of State to relay that to the Minister and to stress the urgency of this particular project.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy McGrath for his response, for his advocacy on behalf of the schools and for taking the time to go and visit both schools and provide feedback on the floor of the Dáil on what he has seen. This is a little bit more complex than some proposals because we are talking about the amalgamation of two schools. We are also talking about a site that is privately owned and that must come into the ownership of the Cork Diocesan Trust first. The fact that a project manager is already in place and is looking at this and preparing the tender documents is quite helpful but there is that added dimension of ownership which I assume will need to be sorted out.

I went back to the Department of Education to ask if would be possible to get a clear timeframe that I could give the Deputy today. As the Deputy said in his opening remarks, this is at pre-stage one which is why the Department was not able to give me either a start or completion date. The context is that the site needs to be transferred into new ownership and the tender needs to go live. The documentation is being worked on for that tender to go live, which I hope the Deputy will agree is very encouraging. I will pass on his feedback in relation to the conditions the staff and students of the schools are working in.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Today I want to raise issues in relation to special education needs in Wicklow. I am really concerned about children who have special education needs. I have been trying to raise this with the Minister of State and am really disappointed that he is not here today. I have been trying to talk to him on the floor of the Dáil for the past few weeks in relation to this issue. I am worried from a number of different perspectives but ultimately, there are three areas of concern.

First, the NCSE has set up a new system through which parents can get a letter of eligibility which they then use to get a special needs place in a school. The portal for that letter of eligibility closed on 1 October. That deadline was for children who need classes in 2026. We both know how difficult it can be to get the assessments done as well as the costs involved, the timelines and the waiting times. Therefore, there is a cohort of children who did not make that 1 October deadline. The NCSE's page on the portal says that the council will give guidance to those parents who did not make the deadline and that guidance would be available within a matter of weeks. That was on 1 October but the council still has not updated the page. I have asked the council and the Minister of State over and over what those parents and children are meant to do. It is not just an issue for Wicklow but across the country. I have been contacted by parents across the country whose children did not get their letters through the portal.

The second issue is that those parents who did get the letter of eligibility have not been able to secure a school place. They were told that this was the process they needed to go through and when they had done so, the supports would be there but they are not hearing anything at all about school places. Children who have special needs and their parents need not only to be sure of a place, they also need time so they can get their children ready for going to school. Any transition like this is very difficult for children with additional needs. The fact that parents still do not know whether their child will get a sanctioned place is completely unacceptable. The whole point of having this new online system was that it would take the uncertainty out of it for parents but that uncertainty is still there. I have spoken to principals who have yet to be told whether they will be sanctioned for classrooms for next September. Those principals need to get everything in place and they are not being told anything by the NCSE. I ask the Minister of State to pass this on to the NCSE and to the Minister of State with responsibility for special education needs. Parents need to be informed immediately. If there is a shortfall of places, those places need to be found somewhere. They need to sanction and open up new classrooms. It absolutely has to be done and they need to get on top of it now.

The other concern I have, which is really worrying, relates to what I have heard from medical professionals who do assessments for children. On multiple occasions when they did medical assessments and made recommendations, the SENO, who is not medically qualified, has refused to accept their recommendations. I was told of a child in Wicklow who is autistic, non-verbal and cannot toilet themselves but was deemed to be not complex enough to warrant a letter of eligibility. That information goes back to the parents and not to the medical professionals. I am wondering how many parents out there have been told "No" by the SENO when their medical professional has said "Yes". This is something that I am really worried about.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this really important issue. At the outset, I want to assure her that the Government is absolutely committed to the provision of additional special places for children with special educational needs. Budget 2026 secured funding for 3,000 new specialist places and the NCSE is currently examining where these places are best located for the coming academic year.

Deputy Whitmore raised three specific issues which I will address in turn. I have a number of pieces of information in relation to Wicklow but I will speak to the three points that the Deputy raised. The first concerned the NCSE, the new system and the letter of eligibility. Yes, the NCSE brought in a new system. It brought in a much earlier deadline in order to be able to do exactly what the Deputy has articulated, that is, make those offers earlier to give both parents and children the certainty they deserve and need. At the moment, the NCSE has done that and it will have a clear, locally-mapped picture of local demand right across the country for special place classes for the coming academic year once it reviews and assesses the information that was provided through the parents notification portal, which, as the Deputy said, closed on 1 October. I am informed the NCSE will start sanctioning new special classes for the coming academic year shortly. The Department and the NCSE will continue to consider options for increasing special school capacity for exactly the reason the Deputy outlined, that is, to ensure capacity where there is need. This can be achieved either through the expansion of existing special schools or the establishment of new schools.

The earlier notification deadline is about getting us to that point. It was introduced this year to support forward planning and earlier equip the NCSE with the local information as to the students who will be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary specialist places, seeking specialist primary places or placement or entering education for the first time. That information is absolutely critical to examine where provision needs to be placed in order to meet demand. That information is not fully collated or assessed yet. Once the NCSE has fully collated and assessed the information, it will then be in a position to engage with the schools and the principals across the country, which the Deputy spoke about, in order to open new special classes. In doing this, the NCSE will also have due regard to any vacant places in existing special classes in an area and any places that will become available through the normal movement of children leaving primary or post-primary school.

With regard to the Deputy's point about parents who missed that cut-off deadline, I am assured directly by the Minister and the NCSE that they will continue to support all children made known to them, whether that is after that deadline. It is important that we put this deadline in place for forward-planning purposes and that an earlier timeframe is worked to in which the NCSE has much more local knowledge and detail as soon as possible.

I appreciate the information is not online. That is probably causing an information vacuum. I am encountering it myself. Parents are coming to me saying they have missed that deadline. I have been in touch with the Minister in this regard. Ultimately, what needs to happen is that the NCSE will collate and assess the information which has gone in - it was only in the last number of weeks it has gotten the information – and it will make decisions based on that. I will also ask it to put that information up online.

In respect of SENOs refusing letters of recommendation, that is something the Deputy might raise directly with the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Moynihan.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I was hoping to.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I appreciate that. There is inconsistency around this from a nationwide perspective and it is quite important that every child, no matter where he or she lives, gets the same treatment.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am finding this really frustrating. In the response the Minister of State gave – I absolutely acknowledge that is the response she was given and I know this is not her portfolio – she stressed that the NCSE will continue to support all children made known to it after 1 October. First, how are children to be made known to the NCSE if the portal is closed? Second, this has not happened. There has been no contact at all in respect of those parents and children who were not able to get their letter of eligibility. They are now in a vacuum and the risk is that those children will not have a school place, or a suitable school place, for 2026. They could end up in a mainstream school but that is not the best place for them. That is the first point.

It is absolutely incredible that two months after the NCSE said that it would update its website to inform parents about the next steps if they did not meet the deadline, the website is still not updated, even though I have raised it by email with the Minister and the NCSE. I have also raised it on the floor of the Dáil. It is completely unacceptable. It is so un-child and un-parent centred; it is incredible. I am all for forward planning but please treat people with respect and provide them with the information they need to relieve some of their stress.

When it comes to developing a clear picture of local demand, I absolutely have no problem with the principles behind this process. The reality is that for two months now, the NCSE has had a picture of the exact number of children in an area eligible for a letter of eligibility. It has had that information for two months. While all of the children in mainstream schools are now being told whether they have a school place and the school they are going to, children with additional or special education needs have no idea because the NCSE still has not provided that information. I understand the need for a new process but the NCSE is absolutely failing to implement this properly in the first year of its existence.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I, too, agree with the need for a new process. Every year for countless years, we have had parents at the last minute not knowing where their children are going to school. This is about reducing, as much as possible, that stress, strain and uncertainty. We now have the information as of 1 October. The NCSE is working hard to collate, process and map that out to figure out the schools that may have physical capacity to take on additional classrooms and where we might be able to put in additional special schools.

It was great to see the sod turned for a new building for St. Catherine's Special School in the Deputy's constituency earlier this week. These projects are happening around the country.

The information is needed to be able to inform the strategy of the areas where those projects are needed the most. I will absolutely take it up directly with the NCSE as to why more information is not available for parents on its website, particularly for parents who missed that 1 October deadline because they missed it through no fault of their own; they were waiting for an assessment. I will absolutely do that.

While I am sure it will be written into the Dáil record, the Deputy should have information specific to Wicklow because this Topical Issue was originally to discuss special education in Wicklow. There are 132 special classes now in operation, providing capacity for 800 students. That includes 12 special classes for this year. That means the number of classes in County Wicklow has almost doubled in the past five years. The earlier notification system will help us when it comes to continuing to roll out new special schools and new special classes across the country.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I suspect I will be raising a lot of the issues Deputy Whitmore raised. I am coming to this from a position of enormous frustration because of the lack of co-ordination and planning within the Department of education in tandem with the Department of Health over many years. The parent notify system, in theory, is great. I know the date was, of course, brought forward this year to allow both Departments to be able to plan for the future. I very much welcome it. However, the actual process is failing a number of families really badly across the country. Families have contacted me who have put in their application for 1 October but because all parts of the assessment of need process, the service statement in particular, were not ready, they have been told by the special educational needs organiser, SENO, that they cannot get a letter of eligibility and they are just going to have to wait until next year. It is simply disgraceful for a system that was set up to try to identify children. The child has had the assessment of need; they are just waiting on the service statement but they are still told, “No”. It is another barrier being put up to these children.

For how many years have people stood up in this Chamber talking about the families who are having to apply 20 or 30 schools? Think of the cost of a birth certificate for every single application. We have to transform how special educational places are allocated in this country. There is a huge mismatch as it is. I welcome initiatives like the parent notify system but it is not working, particularly when these barriers are being put up at a local level.

We have to remember the assessment of need process takes three to four years in most areas across the country. The particular issue that I ask the Minister of State to look into concerns the service statements. We know there can be a delay of six months or more for parents to receive their service statement because of quality control issues with regard to outsourced assessments of need and co-ordination within children's disability network teams, CDNTs.

4 o'clock

We have that context. Then we have the context of the lack of special classes and special schools. Of course there is the whole issue of the lack of special needs assistants, SNAs, in certain primary schools across the country. We need a degree of common sense and cop on, which is not what we are seeing from some SENOs.

I have previously been very critical of parts of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. I think there is some fantastic work being done by the NCSE but it is really patchy. There is a lack of consistency with regard to what is being done across the country. We know that some SENOs are not applying common sense with regard to the letter of eligibility.

I want to use my remaining time to raise a related issue with the Minister of State. I understand what she will say about the new special schools that have been built. That is wonderful, but there are 16 CDNTs across this country that have no special school in their catchment area. One of those areas is Dublin 1. No child in Dublin 1 will ever be top of the waiting list for a special school because there is none in the Summerhill CDNT area. That is wrong. That is so wrong because the level of need in that area is higher than in many other parts of the country. We need a special school in Dublin 1.

I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is stepping in for the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan today. We had hoped he would be here. The specific point I am putting to the Minister of State is that we need to see a change to the parent notify system.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Sherlock for raising this important issue. We have just had a discussion on the same issue with Deputy Whitmore. I reiterate that the Government is fully committed to the provision of additional special places for children with special educational needs. In this academic year, we have surplus special education provision. It was provided based on the numbers notified through the parents notify process, and a number of these places still exist nationwide. Over 2,700 new special education places have been provided. Many of these are in special classes, meaning there are now 3,741 special classes in our education system.

We will further build our specialist provision next year by providing at least 3,000 new places, placing provision in locations where it is best placed to meet existing and future demand. The Deputy has outlined that in her own local area there is demand and there is no special school. This will be borne out in that plan because we are doing it to make sure that existing and future demand is catered for. In addition, special school capacity was also expanded across a number of special schools nationwide and 16 new special schools have been established in recent years.

The NCSE will soon have a clear picture of local demand for special classes and special school places for the 2026-27 academic year after they review and assess all the information, which is then provided through the parents notify process that closed on 1 October, as the Deputy pointed out. This new timeline was publicised widely and was communicated to schools, special education advocacy groups and parent representative bodies. Of course, it is not as if any parent missed this deadline; there was a delay in getting the information they needed to be able to provide that through the portal. The NCSE also undertook some work at local level to ensure that families were aware of the set of timelines and processes, a lot of which was outside of their control. As the Deputy will be aware, the earlier notification deadline was introduced this year to equip the NCSE at an earlier stage with local information on the numbers of students who would be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary specialist places, seeking specialist placements or entering education for the first time. This information is absolutely critical for forward planning and examining where provision needs to be best placed to meet demand. The earlier date in October coincides with when the schools begin enrolment processes and it affords parents the opportunity to enrol in existing classes. Many mainstream schools, particularly at post-primary level, start the admission process for the following year on 1 October. That is why the date was chosen.

The NCSE is working now on sanctioning as many new special classes as possible for the 2026-27 academic year by 31 December. This will be four months earlier than last year and it

will bring clarity and certainty for parents and schools as to where classes will be located. It will also afford greater lead-in times for schools that might require repurposing or major building works to get work started and completed. It will allow schools to recruit staff and undertake the training needed so that children are fully supported in those placements. Once the NCSE has fully collated and assessed the information they receive from the parents notify process, it will engage with schools across the country to open new special classes.

The NCSE will also have due regard to any vacant places in existing special classes in an area and any places that will become available through the normal movement of children leaving primary or post-primary education. They advise that the majority of children and young people coming through the parents notify process are already enrolled in school and are being supported by existing special education teachers and special needs assistants. I stress that the NCSE has committed that it will continue to support all children made known to them after that 1 October deadline.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister of State for that. We all appreciate the expansion in the number of places but the reality is that there was a time when Ministers here would get up and say that one did not need an assessment of need and that the education system did not need a diagnosis to provide additional support. Of course, that is the case for special schools but what we are seeing now is a potential deepening inequality between families. One of the families that approached me could not afford to go private for their child's assessment of need. They waited and their child is aged five now. They only got their assessment of need this year. They have been precluded from the process because they did not get all their service statement. They will now have to wait until next year. Another family with a child of the same age had the money to go and get the assessment done privately, and they have now got through the hoop and they are going to be assessed for next September. Why are we exacerbating this inequality between families with children with additional needs? It is beyond me why we would have a process put in place to supposedly show compassion and understanding, and to prevent the mismatch that we are seeing happening whereby children who should be in special schools are in autism spectrum classes, and children who should be in autism spectrum classes are in mainstream classes. This is a new barrier that has come into the education system.

I ask that the Minister of State would take this back to the NCSE. Something has to be done now, not for next year. It must be done now with regard to those families who have gone through the 1 October deadline and presented paperwork, even if it is incomplete, so that they are given a letter of eligibility. The second key thing is the need for a special school in Dublin 1. I ask that this be a priority for the Minister of State, of all the areas across the country, given the level of educational disadvantage. We need to see progress on that.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I agree with the Deputy. I do not think that an assessment of need should be a barrier to receive extra support. It is not in terms of preschool, or from an access and inclusion model perspective, or from an SNA perspective. I certainly want to get to a point where it is not a requirement for a special class or a special school either. That makes sense and I agree with the Deputy on that. This is something I will undertake. I am undertaking to work with the Minister for Education to get to that point.

With regard to a special school in the Deputy's constituency, these decisions will be made based on the data available to the NCSE. They now have new data available as of 1 October.

They will be using the time between now and the end of the year to ascertain where the need is greatest and make the decisions based purely on that. If the need is very big, as the Deputy has suggested, I am sure this will come out in the data.

I assure the Deputy that the NCSE will continue to support all children made known to them who require specialist support. It is important to remember that support comes in so many forms within our education system. The vast majority of students with special educational needs are supported to attend school in mainstream classes with their peers. Obviously, they get fantastic support from SNAs but it is also really important that we continue to grow the number of special school places and the number of special schools that exist. This is something the Government has done in the last year and is doing again this year. It is a huge part of our national development plan and infrastructure commitments going forward.

Bus Services

Deputy Barry Ward: I want to raise the issue of capacity on the E1 and E2 bus routes, on the E-spine of BusConnects. The E1 and E2 routes go between Northwood and Bray, and between Harristown and Dún Laoghaire, respectively. The E2 is the much-lamented old 46A. We in Dún Laoghaire miss it terribly. We have to call it the E2 now. I take the E2 bus and I am grateful for it. It is also a 24-hour service which is not to be sniffed at. I take it home from Kildare Street after late votes on a Wednesday. There is not a capacity issue after midnight during the week, but there is a capacity issue in the mornings. I receive representations about this all the time. There is a problem with capacity. I know from getting the bus in the morning that there can be times when the bus passes full. It affects people on the E1 and the E2, particularly before the Foxrock church bus stop, because each of the buses serves that part of its route on its own. If there is a ghost bus as it is known locally, or a bus that does not turn up because a driver has not turned up at the depot in Dún Laoghaire or Ballywaltrim and the bus therefore cannot leave, the next bus is so full that nobody can get on it at Galloping Green and Stillorgan, etc., on the route to town. It is a significant problem.

I acknowledge that this is an excellent service for the most part. It runs every seven or eight minutes during rush hour, morning and evening, and every nine or ten minutes during the day. It is a great service. It provides a really important link for people in the suburban areas to the south east of the city into town. I am not taking it down in that way. However, it is a long bus route. I know from talking to people and from people emailing my office that there are several instances at rush hour when the bus arrives at a bus stop locally and they cannot get on because it is full, or the bus does not turn up. That is a major problem.

I have been engaging with the Department and the National Transport Authority, NTA, on the issue. I acknowledge that a review took place in September. A review was undertaken. I understand that other buses have been added to the system and that is welcome. The problem continues, however. It is particularly the case on the E2 service, with which I am familiar. There are times when you are standing at the bus stop, but the bus is full when it comes.

We have invested a huge amount of money in BusConnects. I have supported that. It has been problematic in areas like Shankill, where I have opposed it on the basis that it will cause knock-on impacts for local communities. However, BusConnects as a project has been really positive. It has shown the commitment of the State and the Government to providing public

transport that is attractive, usable and incentivised for people all over this city, so it is a good thing. If we want people to use that public transport, however, we have to make it easy, comfortable and reliable for them. The problem I have with the E1 and the E2 is that is not always the case. The bus can be rammed, first of all. We would live with that but what is much worse is not being able to get on the bus at all. When people go to their normal bus stop to get to work and an earlier bus has not arrived, it causes a backlog at the bus stop. Similarly, the previous bus stops will have been more crowded than usual. This means that when the bus arrives, it is so crowded that people cannot get on. In that situation, it cannot be okay to tell people they are not going to get to work on time today because the bus they normally get - the bus they expect to be there at a particular time with capacity to get on - cannot take them. That is not okay. Such unreliability is not fair to the people who live in these areas.

I have engaged with the NTA and I accept that a review has taken place. I am certainly anxious to hear what the results of that will be. However, can we please make a commitment to drive with the NTA to ensure there is capacity and reliability so that people can depend on that service?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this really important topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Darragh O'Brien. From the outset, it would be remiss of me not to clarify that while the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, neither the Minister nor his officials is involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The NTA, to which the Deputy referred, has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. It works with the public transport operators who deliver the service and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. That said, I would like to reassure the Deputy that, as outlined in the programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future, the Government is strongly committed to enhancing transportation networks and infrastructure development. Public transport obviously plays a key role in delivery of that goal.

To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department of Transport secured €940 million of funding for public service obligation and TFI Local Link services. That was a 43% uplift, a really significant uplift and an increase from €658 million in 2025 to €940 million for next year. This package includes funding for the continuation of various fares initiatives such as the young adult card and the 90-minute fare until the end of 2025. Funding has also been provided to extend free child fares on public service transport to include those aged five to eight years of age and to support the roll-out of new and enhanced bus and rail services under programmes such as BusConnects, to which the Deputy referred, and Connecting Ireland. BusConnects, as Deputy Ward acknowledged, is a transformative project and investment in the bus system that is providing better bus services right across our cities. It is the largest investment in the bus system in the history of the State. It is managed by the NTA with the aim of improving the existing Transport for Ireland system through enhanced services with high-frequency spines and new local orbital and radial routes.

In terms of those high-frequency spines, Deputy Ward's constituency is a beneficiary of the E1 and E2 routes. As he said, the E2 was formerly known as the 46A. In relation to capacity on those routes, Dublin Bus has confirmed that its operation teams have identified capacity issues with the E1 service. I know the Deputy has been working closely with Dublin Bus and the NTA, which have helped to make sure those problems were addressed by providing

additional morning and evening services. He spoke about how much of a pinch-point rush hour is. These additional services, which are now implemented, are there to tackle the morning and evening pinch-points on the E1.

Dublin Bus has informed the Department that along with the NTA it is monitoring the E2 service, and the data available show that customer demand is currently being met. I know that does not tally with the experience shared by the Deputy today. That is something I will definitely ask the Minister to take back to the NTA.

I want to reassure the Deputy that the Department of Transport, the NTA and the public transport operators are working to ensure the optimised deployment of resources across the network to best meet passenger demand.

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge the points made by the Minister of State about the investment in the bus service and the provision of the 90-minute fare. These are all positive things. I do not dispute that for a moment. I also welcome the acknowledgement by the NTA that there are capacity issues on the E1 route. I think that is correct. I do not agree that passenger demand is being met on the E2 route, although I will say that when it works the way it is supposed to work, that is probably true. The problem arises when a bus driver is sick and does not turn up for his or her shift in Dún Laoghaire that morning. His or her bus then does not leave Dún Laoghaire. I do not know what provisions are in place to replace that driver to ensure that a bus leaves. The service is then a bus short and there is a knock-on effect all along the route. People cannot get on the bus when it gets to Honeypark, where I live, or when it gets to Deansgrange or wherever it might be. That is the issue. Maybe the review shows that when it works well, it works well. I would not dispute that. However, I know from hearing from people and, unfortunately, from standing at the bus stop myself that there are times when the bus comes and you cannot get on it. That is not okay.

This is a long route so that knock-on effect continues right the way along the route, all along the N11 and into town. With such a long route, maybe there are issues that could be addressed by starting a bus somewhere along the route; for example at Donnybrook garage. Donnybrook garage sends chills down people's spines because when you get to Donnybrook garage, you can sometimes sit on the bus for five minutes as the drivers change over, which is not ideal either. If an empty bus started at Donnybrook garage, however, it could deal with many of the capacity issues created by a ghost bus coming through the system and causing problems.

I acknowledge that a review has taken place. I acknowledge what the Minister of State said about Bus Átha Cliath continuing to monitor the E2 route. I welcome that. I ask that it would take into account the fact that it does not always work the way it is envisaged to work. It does not always do what it needs to do. It does not always meet passenger capacity. Unfortunately, my neighbours and I are sometimes left standing at a bus stop because we are not able to get on the bus.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I know the frustrations the Deputy and many of his constituents are feeling. It is not satisfactory to be left waiting at a bus stop as a full bus passes by. I am pleased that the Deputy worked so successfully to ensure there have been additional commuter services on the E1 route. As the Deputy suggested, if the E2 ran on time it might meet demand but some of the issues arise from the fact that there might be driver shortages. I assure the Deputy

that the performance of all public transport operators is monitored by the NTA as part of the contractual arrangements in place. As part of this, and in line with the regulatory powers available to the NTA to measure performance, it reports on and seeks to maintain standards across the network. There are also instances where, as the Deputy has mentioned, performance can drop and financial penalties are therefore applied, unless the cause of the performance issue is outside the control of the operator. There are measures the NTA takes to try to mitigate any such issues.

On driver shortages, changes were made to the employment permits system to allow for the issuing of 1,500 permits for bus and coach drivers with the aim of alleviating recruitment challenges by supplementing our workforce with drivers from outside the European Economic Area. The goal is improving service reliability. Public transport operators are hopeful that successful recruitment and retention of critical staff, especially drivers, will lead to improvements in reliability in the coming months. It is clear from what the Deputy has said that his issue is the reliability of the E2. I am really pleased the E1 route now has these additional buses. On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank him for bringing this matter forward. I will of course provide his feedback to the Minister.

Public Transport

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I thank the Minister of State for being here on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I congratulate her on her recent elevation. The matter I am raising affects families, especially in rural and regional Ireland, in a way that is unfair and out of step with the Government's transport and climate objectives. I am referring to the exclusion of commercial bus operators from the under-nines free travel scheme. Successive budgets have introduced measures designed to reduce public transport costs and these have been broadly welcomed as they are very good, but there is a significant and unexplained gap in policy and it affects the children and families I represent in rural Ireland.

Children under the age of nine travel free on public service obligation, PSO, services but not on commercial bus routes, even though these routes are often the only public transport options in rural towns and villages such as those in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny. Commercial operators play a central role in our transport system. The private bus sector is responsible for carrying over 75 million passengers a year. It supports 11,000 jobs and contributes more than €600 million to the economy. It is already participating in the free travel scheme and the young adult card. Despite this track record, it was left out of the under-nines initiative without a clear rationale even though this should be low-hanging fruit. It is a very inequitable system for rural and regional areas. A two-tier system has been created. In cities with extensive PSO networks, children travel free. In rural Ireland, where families have few alternatives, children continue to pay full fares. This creates an obvious urban-rural disparity and it is difficult to justify.

The exclusion of these children from this initiative also runs counter to our climate ambitions. A single coach can remove as many as 40 cars from the road. Even a modest shift of 10% away from car travel at peak times would reduce annual emissions by more than 14,000 tonnes. We cannot credibly ask families to leave the car at home if public transport for their children is more expensive simply because they live outside big cities or large rural areas. Importantly, there is an easy fix to this problem. Including commercial operators in the scheme would cost

less than €1 million per year. As the Department of Transport has an annual budget of €4 billion, it would be money well spent in rural Ireland. The Leap card technology is already in place and can deliver the scheme without an administrative burden on the State. More importantly, the benefit goes to families, including those I represent in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny. It eases the cost-of-living burden on parents of young children at a time when everyday expenses continue to climb.

My questions are quite straightforward. Will the Department move to include commercial bus operators in the under-nines free travel scheme as a matter of priority? When can we expect this to take place? Families across the country deserve a consistent and equitable transport system. This is a small change but it would have a large and immediate impact. I mentioned that this would cost less than €1 million from a budget of €4 billion. I mentioned that this inequity within our system means that the people I represent in rural Ireland - in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny - are not getting the same access to transport as those in large urban areas. At a cost of less than €1 million, from a budget of €4 billion, it is low-hanging fruit we can deliver for the young people and families I represent in rural Ireland.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy O'Meara for raising this important issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport. While the Minister has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, neither the Minister nor his officials is involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory obligation for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority, NTA, which works with the public transport operators that deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. The NTA has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under PSO contracts. They are the PSOs and the actual public ones.

I assure the Deputy that improving the accessibility, reliability and affordability of public transport, while ensuring the system remains well funded and responsive to passenger needs, is a core priority of the Government under the programme for Government. The 2026 PSO funding allocation of €940 million represents a significant 43% uplift from last year. It further supports subsidised bus and rail services across Ireland, including rural Ireland. This allocation also maintains targeted fare initiatives, such as the recently introduced free travel for all children up to the age of nine and the young adult card for those aged 19 to 25, as part of the NTA's national fares strategy. That of course is in the PSO contracts.

I am pleased to confirm that the free travel for children between the ages of five and eight initiative, which launched in September of this year, extends free travel on PSO services, thereby building on the previous policy that granted free travel to children under the age of five. This measure was announced as part of the budget 2025 package. It delivers on a key programme for Government commitment to make public transport more affordable and accessible for families. Uptake of this initiative has been really strong. Approximately 25,000 child Leap cards were issued in the first month after the launch of this scheme, and applications are continuing apace.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Government's decision did not include provision for extending free travel for children under the age of nine to commercial bus operators. While the NTA is responsible for licensing commercial bus services, any decisions regarding fares

charged by these services are managed by commercial operators themselves, which largely operate without any State subvention. As such, while commercial operators are licensed by the NTA, they determine their own fare structures independently. I am sorry to not have better news for the Deputy on this. I am aware it is something he has campaigned on, cares very passionately about and wants to see provided for children in the areas he represents. All I can say is that this is now policy, is now law and is now happening on PSO services. I will provide the Deputy's feedback on licensed commercial bus services directly to the Minister, but his proposal is not currently in the plan.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I appreciate the response the Minister of State has given me on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I appreciate that a lot of the work that has been done has been really positive, but I really do not appreciate where the policy stands. I hope the Minister of State will carry that back, while she is at Cabinet, to the Minister. I represent a constituency that does not have PSO routes and does not have public routes either. A number of years ago we lost the X12 and X8 routes, which were direct routes that travelled through County Tipperary.

Deputy Ward spoke earlier about the 46A, which I had quite a fondness for during my years in UCD. We all mourn its loss. Interestingly enough, during that time I travelled on the X12 regularly. It ran from Limerick to Dublin. That is gone. We do not have it anymore. We have private operators. We do not have the PSO routes but we have children under nine who cannot qualify for free transport or the free travel scheme in the way that their peers in areas that have PSO routes or urban areas can qualify. It is, quite simply, an inequity in the system.

In her response, the Minister of State stated: "I would like to assure the Deputy that improving the accessibility, reliability, and affordability of public transport, while ensuring the system remains well-funded and responsive to passenger needs, is a core priority under the programme for Government." I ask the Minister of State to carry that exact sentence back to the Cabinet and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. If we want to improve the accessibility, reliability and affordability of public transport, particularly public transport for young children under nine in rural Ireland, we need to give them the same access to those routes as children in urban areas or areas with PSO obligations. Just because we are unlucky enough not to have them does not mean that the children and families I represent in rural Ireland should be unlucky enough not to be able to access the system.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy makes a very good argument for this, and I fully appreciate where he is coming from. Something that might help to strengthen the Deputy's case is the fact that the young adult card scheme was broadened in 2022 to include eligible services operated by commercial bus operators on an opt-in basis. Individual commercial operators chose to participate, and the NTA then compensated them for the agreed discount and the fare that was forgone, effectively. This was done to ensure that young people benefited from the reduced fares across both subsidised and participating commercial services. Perhaps there is some hope for the Deputy in the fact that this has happened from a young adult card perspective. It may bolster his case to put forward a proposal that would mirror this specifically for young children. If he does that, I will make sure it gets into the hands of the Minister for Transport, who has asked me to reaffirm that the Government remains committed to making

public transport as accessible and affordable as possible, while also ensuring that our system remains financially sustainable in the long term.

International Protection

Deputy James Geoghegan: First, I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment to her new role as Minister of State with responsibility for disability at Cabinet. It is a very important and challenging role.

The issue I am discussing is not unrelated insofar as it concerns the safeguarding of children. Some weeks ago, the CEO of Tusla appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts. We probed her in respect of the issue of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection and how they are cared for within a Tusla setting. At that meeting, the concern that Tusla has on the whole area of age verification was revealed to us. As it happens, that particular meeting predated a number of incidents, which I will not speak about here, including some tragic incidents that have taken place. It is a real worry and concern. Today, we have the figures, given in response to a parliamentary question, that there are over 200 people who Tusla has identified as, in fact, being adults, not children, and who have resided in a centre designed for children with international protection applicants who are unaccompanied minors. This is a real child safeguarding issue.

My concern is that it appears two State agencies - Tusla and the Department of justice - are somewhat at loggerheads and in dispute. Some weeks after the appearance of Tusla before the Committee of Public Accounts, we heard from the Department of justice, which was very firm in its view that the responsibility for carrying out age assessments or age verification rests solely in the hands of Tusla. However, when the Department wrote back to the committee several weeks later, it acknowledged that as a matter of law - the laws that have been passed in the Dáil, Seanad and Houses of the Oireachtas - the legal responsibility for carrying out age verification is, in fact, vested in the Department of justice and the Minister for justice.

It has been the practice for at least a decade that Tusla and its predecessors have, effectively, been given this function as an outsourcing function. When we think about what Tusla's responsibilities are, they are not to carry out legalistic determinations as to whether or not the people who are in its services require its services. Its job is to look after some of the most vulnerable children in this country, no matter what nationality the child may be, no matter in what circumstances the child entered its services.

There is now this additional challenging issue. Perhaps this is why it has not come to the fore previously but it has now. The issue is that the number of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in Ireland has risen significantly at a time when the overall number of people seeking international protection is on the decline. At a time when we have enough accommodation to accommodate persons seeking international protection in this country, it is on the increase when it comes to unaccompanied minors. In the past year, there has been a 13.5% increase in the number of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection.

The truth is that we have a real challenge. We are looking after up to 600 unaccompanied minors, some of whom will have come from devastated parts of the world, and some of whom, no doubt, will have gone through traumatic journeys, where the risk of trafficking is significant. Now, added to that, we have the admitted concern that there are adults in the centres where

there are children. What needs to happen is an intervention whereby we can get clarity as to who is carrying out age verification and how it is going to be properly invested in and resourced.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. I thank Deputy Geoghegan for raising this important matter and providing the opportunity to give clarity. I hope the Deputy gets that clarity from the comments that the Minister has asked me to make on his behalf.

I am aware that this matter has been discussed by the Committee of Public Accounts and that the Department has responded in writing to a range of queries from the PAC. First, I would like to set out the legislative position regarding age verification. The International Protection Office, IPO, is responsible for determining the age of an applicant, and the Child and Family Agency - Tusla is responsible for determining if an individual is entitled to access its services, including the provision of accommodation. These issues are addressed under the International Protection Act 2015 and the Child Care Act 1991, respectively.

The International Protection Act states that where it appears to an immigration officer or an international protection officer that a person seeking international protection is under 18 and has not been accompanied by an adult, the child should be referred to Tusla. At that point, in accordance with the International Protection Act, it is assumed that the person is a minor and that the Child Care Acts and the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 apply.

The International Protection Act states that Tusla is responsible for making an application for international protection on behalf of the child. It also makes provision for the IPO to arrange an assessment to determine an applicant’s age, but this cannot happen without the consent of the person, or Tusla acting on the person’s behalf. Independent of this process, Tusla carries out an assessment to determine the eligibility of the person, who has been assumed to be a minor, to access its services. In practice, and for many years, it is this latter assessment that is taken as being determinative of age for the purposes of both eligibility for services and for the processing of an international protection application. In cases where Tusla decides that the person is not eligible because they are judged to be an adult, the applicant is referred back to the IPO, which will process their application as such.

While this has been the long-standing practical process around age verification, there is an acknowledgement that it needs to be adapted. The Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, intend to use the forthcoming International Protection Bill to amend the statutory mechanisms for age determination. The measures under the EU Migration and Asylum Pact set out safeguards and procedural guarantees for unaccompanied minors in the international protection process and will be given effect in the International Protection Bill. The Bill will also provide for appropriate alignment with the screening regulation. As required by the pact measures, the Bill will make provision for the appointment of representatives to assist and safeguard the interests of unaccompanied minors.

Additionally, the International Protection Bill 2026 will propose that the determining authority - the replacement for the IPO - will arrange and be responsible for age assessments. It will set out in far greater detail how age is assessed and provide for regulations governing the standards for that process and the qualifications needed for staff. I hope that clarifies the matter.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State for this very comprehensive reply given on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. The challenge, as we await new legislation and what seems to be a new announcement I had not seen before, is that age assessment will be governed by regulations pursuant to this new legislation, the International Protection Bill, but the number of unaccompanied minors does not appear to be on the decline. In fact, it seems to be the opposite. The risks will continue to rise and while I understand every effort has been made to initiate and get this Bill through - perhaps even in the first half of next year - as the Minister of State knows, it will take time to commence relevant provisions and for the determining authority to be established. It will take time to ensure the appropriate staff are resourced and, if there is a more prescriptive measure in terms of how age is to be assessed, to ensure training would accompany such regulations. All of that is welcome but will take a lot of time. It is important the Minister for justice indicates what will happen on an interim basis, pending the introduction of this new regime. It seems Tusla is very concerned about this issue and about its responsibilities in ensuring it is protecting every person who is presumed to be a child when he or she arrives to Tusla as an unaccompanied minor. Then, on the other side of the equation, there is the issue of where Tusla may have identified somebody as not being a child who enters into adult services but it is later proven that person is a child and remitted to child services. This is a very complex area and I think interim approaches are necessary.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy and fully agree it is a very complex area. We need to make sure we are getting this right. There is a long-standing process around age verification of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection in place. That process will continue to be the practice until the new International Protection Bill is enacted and all of the relevant measures behind it come into force.

On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I thank the Deputy for giving us the opportunity to have this discussion on the floor of the House and to put some of that new information on the record of the House. Also, I thank the Deputy's colleagues on the Committee of Public Accounts because I know they also had a number of queries. The Department has responded in writing to a range of queries on this issue following the recent appearance at a committee meeting the Deputy referenced. This has given us the opportunity to clarify and expand in more detail on the plans in this area. To be crystal clear, the Minister intends to use the forthcoming pact legislation as an opportunity to amend the statutory mechanism for age determination. Both the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, are absolutely committed to working closely with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality - my own Department - and Tusla on matters relating to unaccompanied minors in the international protection process. Their aim is to ensure our national legislation and our operational practices will accord with requirements under the pact and will ensure the appropriate care and protection of unaccompanied minors.

Water Services

Deputy Michael Collins: The people of west Cork are genuinely at the end of their tethers. Since July, they have had 14 water breakages. It has led to the local crèche and school having to close because if they do not have water they cannot remain open, use toilets or whatever else. I was at a public meeting the other night which was attended by other public

representatives. The local Airbnbs had to give money back to people because they could not shower in the morning. People who had coffee shops basically had to close their doors. These are small things that mean a lot to businesses. It was the same with animals who were stressed without water, which was a huge issue throughout the summer. I went through it myself 20 years ago in Schull.

A number of solutions were put forward during the public meeting. Some made sense and some did not but they need to be discussed. We need to sit down with Uisce Éireann and we need a pathway forward. I, and the public representatives who were there - and I have met them since in the corridor here - are worn out looking for Uisce Éireann to give a straight answer. Will the Minister meet the local community group, maybe three individuals, with the Oireachtas Members to talk about what Uisce Éireann's intentions are in laying down a new water pipe for the people of Adrigole so they can get a proper water supply and do not have to look over their shoulders and worry whether they will be closing their business or their school tomorrow morning? The water was out for a spell and somebody said to me recently that a newborn baby had to be taken to stay at someone else's house overnight. It is the basics.

The bottom line is that I genuinely cannot get an answer. What I hope I can get this evening is an answer because I have really pulled out all of the stops on this. I understand the stress people are going through because I went through it myself 20 years ago. At that time, it was the council. The councils were more or less in charge and that is the way it should have stayed because we had some accountability and councils were able to give answers. Councillor Danny Collins, who is my brother and an Independent Ireland councillor down there, has been dealing with this issue on a week-to-week basis. Apparently the council is now saying we can no longer bring Uisce Éireann up in a motion because it no longer has anything more to do with Uisce Éireann. That is outrageous because public representatives should be bringing up whatever issues they have and then it is up to the council. Obviously, the council cannot resolve the issue now; it is Uisce Éireann. The council should pass the issue on to Uisce Éireann and let it come back on it.

The bottom line is that in all of my weeks bringing this issue up, and previously as well, I cannot get an answer. The Minister of State from Cork South-West cannot get an answer nor can the Fine Gael Senator. I spoke to them and they told me so. We want Uisce Éireann to sit down and meet the local group, including ourselves, to tell us what it intends to do and what will happen. It might take two month or six months but, please God, it will happen. God almighty, it is a living terror to think all I am getting is a generic answer. All the Minister is getting is a generic answer. All everybody is getting, including the community group I set up to deal with this issue, is a generic answer.

There is a huge room full of people protesting because they want their common right; a clear water supply so they know they can turn their taps or shower on in the morning or get an animal a bit of water. It is very basic. That is being denied to the people of Adrigole right now. I ask the Minister whether we can have a meeting with Uisce Éireann and what the plan for Adrigole is. I pray to God the Minister of State here has an answer and that it is not the generic one we got because it was the most crazy answer. It was all about the dry summer and the floods and then Adrigole, was dropped in. It just alters the answer and throws in "Adrigole" because it has thrown in hundreds of other communities up to now. That will not work. It is like an AI-generated answer but it will not work. I sincerely hope the Minister of State has an answer for

me and that she gives me a good, clear answer in her four minutes, so I can go back to west Cork and say that things are going to be sorted and we are all working together on this issue.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy will be glad to know I will not say "dry summer" or "flooding".

Deputy Michael Collins: Thank you.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is obviously a really important issue for the people he represents and it must be very frustrating for them. The Deputy will appreciate the supply of public water and the provision of water services in general are, as the Deputy alluded to, matters for Uisce Éireann in the first instance. Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The Minister has no function regarding the specific Uisce Éireann's operations in Adrigole to which the Deputy referred.

To be helpful, the Department has made inquiries to Uisce Éireann on the Deputy's behalf and has been informed that there were 18 bursts recorded in Adrigole between May and 31 October of this year. For unforeseen unplanned outages, it is not possible to provide advance notice to customers. When these occur, Uisce Éireann immediately mobilises repair crews to investigate the source of the burst and works as a matter of priority to repair the water main and restore normal water supply to impacted homes and businesses as quickly as possible. Uisce Éireann does that for exactly the reasons the Deputy outlined because coffee shops, farmers, families and everybody relies on clean, accessible water.

When an unplanned outage occurs and repairs have been undertaken, typically, it takes three to four hours for normal supply to be restored to all customers affected. However, it may take longer for normal supply to be restored to customers at the end of the network or on higher ground as the system recharges. Uisce Éireann has informed the Department that the situation in Adrigole has stabilised since 31 October, and I hope that has been the Deputy's experience and the experience of his constituents. It said there has been a noticeable easing off in the frequency of bursts.

Uisce Éireann has given a commitment to continue to monitor the area, mobilise repair crews promptly and provide updates to elected representatives, including Councillor Danny Collins, and the community as more information becomes available. Similar to other townlands across the country facing comparable challenges due to weather-related pressures and ageing infrastructure, Uisce Éireann is working through these systematically. The frequency of bursts is taken into consideration when prioritising water main rehabilitation projects. However, they are limited in what can be rehabilitated each year.

A case for mains rehabilitation works for the Adrigole area is currently under consideration by Uisce Éireann. I presume this was one of the suggestions the Deputy mentioned came out of the public meeting he attended. As the process is only in the initial stages, it is too early to confirm a timeframe at this stage. Uisce Éireann has committed to me that it will share further updates with elected representatives and the community in this regard once available.

Our water and wastewater infrastructure requires substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring the systems up to the standards required of a modern service and to provide for population growth and to build resilience in the face of climate change. That is why this year the Government provided record funding to Uisce Éireann under the national development plan to ensure that we continue to prioritise these types of infrastructure upgrades and new developments.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will break the reply down to the basics. The Minister of State said, "A case for mains rehabilitation works for the Adrigole area is under consideration by Uisce Éireann. As the process is only in the initial stages, it is too early to confirm a timeframe at this stage." It has admitted there have been 18 bursts since last May. How can be "in the initial stages"? People have been without water 18 times since May. I hate making comparisons, because we must represent the people of Dublin, but that would not happen in Dublin. There would not be 18 disruptions without something being done immediately and without an answer being given. I would plead with the Minister of State if she has not got that answer. I need that answer immediately. For three or four weeks, I have been asking then those works are going to start.

There has been a temporary solution. There is talk about a temporary water pipe up on the ditch, as happened in other communities. It worked out. I have no issue with that but I would rather something more permanent. The community has come back to me recently with a more permanent solution. Councillor Danny Collins is working on that as well to make sure we maybe lay the pipe opposite to where the pipe is laid already. The bottom line is that works need to commence, we need a date for the works but that is not happening.

The Minister of State can only read out the reply she got. I respect her for that. The bottom line is I cannot go back to the community with that reply because it is going to go nowhere. That will not ease the worry of the crèche owner, the school owner or the Airbnbs. They know there will be a lot more breakages and I am going to be back in the Dáil in 12 months talking about it.

The Minister of State said, "The Minister has no function ...". Good God almighty, the Government is giving €13 billion of taxpayers' money to Uisce Éireann. Surely to God somebody has responsibility for it because it has given up being responsible. At one time, you could sit around the table but it was only a short amount of time. Now we cannot even sit around the table.

All I am asking the Minister of State is whether she can give me a date as to when it will meet or a date as to when works will start in Adrigole in west Cork.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I cannot because the process is only at the initial stages. A case for the mains rehabilitation works in the Adrigole area is currently under consideration by Uisce Éireann. It has not made a determination on that. Only when it makes a determination on that will it be possible to move forward with a timeframe. The frequency of bursts is taken into consideration when it prioritises water main rehabilitation projects. We have outlined that there have been 18 bursts in a short period of time. That will be taken into consideration.

It also needs to be taken into consideration that Uisce Éireann has said that this situation has stabilised since 31 October and there has been what it describes as "a noticeable easing off in the frequency of bursts."

From an initial perspective, we want to reduce and mitigate bursts and Uisce Éireann is working to do that. Taking a longer term approach, it wants to do rehabilitation works on that line. That is something it is now considering doing. When it has made a decision that, it will come back and let public representatives, including councillors, know it had made that decision. I am sure I will be in a position to update the Deputy on timeframes at that point.

The Deputy stated in his initial remarks that the county council has said that it is not possible to take motions that refer to Uisce Éireann and I am quite surprised by that. That is not the standard approach in local authorities up and down the country. I would certainly encourage the Deputy to speak to Councillor Collins and maybe suggest that he take that up with one of the representative bodies, Local Authorities Members Association, LAMA, or the Association of Irish Local Government, AILG, as that needs to be sorted as well.

Deputy Michael Collins: The pipe is in an awful way. It is creaking at the seams. We need a meeting and we need the new water works to be commenced there.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): The Deputy's time has passed.

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Louis O'Hara: In my constituency, we have a huge number of energy developments at various stages of planning and development, between wind energy, solar farms, gas plants, etc. These are causing a lot of concern. I have raised this previously. It is important for me to say at the outset that my constituents are not against renewable energy. They fully understand the importance of energy security but they want it to be done right.

Today I am glad to get the opportunity to focus on solar energy developments, including battery energy storage, in two projects, in particular, that have brought to my attention by my constituents. In Monivea and Abbeyknockmoy, the proposed Belleville solar project, led by Power Capital Renewable Energy, PCRE, is planned to cover approximately 1,000 acres within the community across multiple different sites. This is a small rural community that would be left totally unrecognisable should the development go ahead in its current form.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Where?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Belleville in Monivea and Abbeyknockmoy. In Grange and Gregmore, the Ballymoneen solar project, also led by PCRE, is currently under construction. I am from the local area. The construction has caused enormous disruption locally between damage to roads, road closures, noise and consistent breaches of planning conditions. Local residents have been informed in recent days that the developer now intends to expand the development and it has a number of new sites identified locally.

People have serious concerns around safety, health and well-being, the impact on their homes, property values, the quality of life, the local landscape and environment, whether their children will be able to build there in the future, what the future of farming will look like in the area - this is prime agricultural land that has been taken up - where all of this end, whether the developers will keep expanding and whether vast swathes of the countryside will ultimately covered in these farms. There has been no clarity provided to people on these issues.

There was no public consultation initially in terms of the Ballymoneen development. The consultation for the Belleville development was seriously lacking. Most people were uninformed. The reality is that the concerns being expressed by local people are not being taken into account and the questions they have are not being answered. The core of this problem is the legislative vacuum the Government continues to tolerate. Due to the lack of clear mandatory national guidelines on solar development, the system is rigged in favour of developers. Our countryside is like the wild west at present. It is open season for these developers to come in, to land these proposals right on top of homes and to change local communities beyond recognition with no real input from the people who live in those communities. These people are being treated with contempt and it is completely unacceptable.

I am fully committed to climate action. I recognise the importance of meeting our renewable energy targets but climate action cannot be delivered by corporate land grabs that destroy rural social fabric and undermine our food security. I am calling on Government to end the unacceptable delay in bringing forward specific planning guidelines on solar energy developments. We need guidelines that will protect communities, ensure appropriate land use, ensure safety, and ensure proper set-back distances and real community consultation. If the Government is serious about a just transition, it will introduce these protections immediately. If the Government fails to act, it is endorsing the industrialisation of rural Ireland one community at a time. The people I represent and people right across rural Ireland deserve better than to be sacrificed for corporate profit.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I welcome the Deputy's remarks at the start of his contribution that he is not against renewable energy measures. As he will be aware, the Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future has reaffirmed Ireland's targets of 80% of electricity demand to be met by renewables in the near term, with plans to move to net zero by 2050. The deployment of renewable electricity, including solar energy, is vital for Ireland to meet its ambitious domestic targets and international commitments.

Solar energy is already a growing source of electricity with approximately 2.1 GW of solar power capacity currently installed in Ireland. However, there is no doubt that further solar capacity is required for Ireland to meet its domestic and international targets.

5 o'clock

In this regard, the programme for Government reaffirms Ireland's ambitious targets of 8 GW of solar capacity connected to the grid by 2030. From a planning perspective, the programme for Government contains a commitment to introduce new planning guidelines for solar energy development, which the Deputy called for without delay.

An important development in this regards is that chapters 1 through 4 of Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act of 2024 came into effect on 2 October. As the Deputy may be aware, this provides the statutory basis for the national planning framework and the regional spatial and economic strategies, and introduces provisions for the new national planning statements that will replace section 28 planning guidelines. Therefore, the solar guidelines, once finalised, will issue as a national planning statement under the 2024 Act. This will ensure enhanced clarity and increased consistency across the planning systems at all tiers.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently undertaking a scoping exercise - it is at an early stage - to identify the component factors relevant to the preparation of this national planning statement, including any appropriate environmental reporting and public consultation requirements, which the Deputy called for. This includes our European obligations such as the renewable energy directive, battery storage facilities and the possible timeframe for publication of the national planning statement. In line with EU directive requirements, a strategic environmental assessment will be carried out on any draft national planning statement regarding solar energy development. The Department intends to undertake a public consultation on the draft statement before it is finalised to give the individuals, communities and organisations the Deputy referred to the opportunity to submit observations on this draft statement. Consequently, any draft national planning statement will be prepared following detailed analysis and consideration of the submissions received during the consultation phase. The finalised draft will be subject to Government approval. In the meantime, public participation remains a cornerstone of all substantial decision-making processes in planning legislation. It is of course open to any member of the public to make an observation or submission on a planning application including in relation to solar energy developments. The planning authority is statutorily obliged to consider such submissions before making a decision on the application.

The programme for Government also contains a commitment to a land use review to ensure that optimal land-use options inform all relevant Government decisions. The second phase of this review, which is under way, will seek to identify the key demands on land both public and private to inform policies for land use across key Government objectives, improving socioeconomic, climate, biodiversity, water and air quality outcomes. The conclusions of this review will be factored into any draft national planning statement on solar energy development. Until the finalisation of the national planning statement, it will remain the case that, as with the large majority of development types, there are currently no specific planning guidelines that deal with solar energy development.

The Deputy mentioned planning conditions not being adhered to. I highly recommend that he get in touch with planning enforcement in the relevant local authority. In the short to medium term, the planning system provides a sufficient, robust policy and legislative framework in this regard.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Minister of State said the scoping exercise for the guidelines and the land use review are under way. Can we get clarity on the timelines for the finalisation of those exercises? That was missing from the response. These applications are coming thick and fast across the State. We know these companies have their sights set on expanding their operations where it is profitable for them to do so and where they can get access to land. That is why it is important that the can is not continually kicked down the road. If possible, will the

Minister of State provide timelines for all of this? When it comes to large-scale developments, the social fabric of communities also needs to be considered, which I also ask the Minister of State to acknowledge.

These projects are proving very divisive in communities. Neighbours and families are falling out with one another over land and access. My fear is that this will end up like the wind energy guidelines saga whereby the Government put a commitment in place for guidelines but the matter drags on for years and the can keeps being kicked down the road. Ultimately, communities are left facing these developments with no protections in place whatsoever. The Government's performance when it comes to the wind energy guidelines certainly does not inspire confidence in how it will deal with this issue.

There is a similar issue around solar energy developments. It is my firm view that the Government is failing communities with the absence of a plan-led approach to such developments. Communities have genuine concerns. They are reasonable and just want clarity on the key questions they have. We all understand and support the development of renewable energy but the Government needs to get a grip on the situation. Protect communities and get guidelines in place as soon as possible.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I take this opportunity to reaffirm to the Deputy that the Government and, in particular, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are absolutely committed to working towards the publication of a national planning statement on solar energy development. That is in line with our programme for Government commitments. We are currently undertaking a scoping exercise in that regard. It is at an early stage, but work is under way. This work will include all the appropriate public consultations and the need to ensure the finalised national planning statement is fit for purpose, given the evolving and reforming planning policy context. I take on board the Deputy's point in relation to the social fabric, which is important. That is why public consultation will be at the heart of this too.

The forthcoming national planning statement will enhance existing policy and legislation around the governance of solar energy developments and provide additional measures and guidance for the ongoing development of solar energy while ensuring compliance with existing and future national, EU and international renewable energy policies and targets. In the interim, which I know the Deputy is concerned about, the existing planning system, supported by Government policy more generally, provides a sufficient, robust policy and legislative framework to facilitate the roll-out of solar energy developments in a sustainable manner and to assist with meeting our renewable electricity requirements. We need to balance the perspectives of local communities and our renewable electricity suppliers. That is what we are trying to do to allow for public and stakeholder engagement. It is a balance, but it is something the Government is committed to achieving.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.07 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.07 p.m. and resumed at 5.10 p.m.

Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2021: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I really welcome the opportunity to bring the Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2021 to Second Stage and have it debated here in the Chamber. As we move closer and closer to the 2030 and 2040 targets, as our world becomes more vulnerable and we can see much more clearly the impact of climate change and the need to change how we are operating, this Bill is becoming increasingly important.

This Bill provides for the establishment of a body to be known as An Coimisiún Náisiúnta um Thrasdul Cóir, or, in the English language, the National Just Transition Commission, to oversee the bringing together of workers, communities, employers and government in social dialogue to drive the plans, policies and investments needed for a fair transformation to a low-carbon economy; to require the preparation, by certain prescribed bodies, of just transition plans; to provide for the conferral of other functions on the said body; to amend the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, as amended; and to provide for related matters.

What do we mean when we talk about just transition? I do not particularly like the term "just transition". Many people do not understand it or know what it is about. It actually puts a lot of people off. What we really mean when we talk about it is ensuring that as we move to a more sustainable way of living, no one is left behind and we do not disadvantage anybody by the transformation. It is a really important principle of climate action and climate justice. The Paris Agreement recognised that workers are at the interface of the upheaval that climate change threatens to impose and that states need to adopt a just and fair transition to a zero-carbon economy.

It is a quite technical term and when you start trying to work out exactly who it should be for and what it should mean, you find it gets quite technical. Technically, it means that people, workers and communities who may face significant changes to their lives as a result of the need to move to a zero-carbon society are supported in making those changes. It means a fair deal for workers, farmers, fishers and communities and it means protecting their rights. We cannot have a successful transition without buy-in from all these workers, including those who produce our food, catch our fish and work and live in urban and rural communities. They must feel secure and supported as things around us change. The just transition needs to be across society.

To date, we have had work on a just transition but it has focused primarily on the midlands. It was important to ensure those who worked in Bord na Móna or on the bogs were supported in making the transition. However, what is entailed is so much broader than that area and that cohort of workers. We need to recognise that moving to a more future-proofed economic model will impact everybody in different ways and we have a responsibility to ensure that no one is left behind and that all members of society are in a position to grasp the opportunities a just transition will bring.

Our just transition needs to apply to our farmers as we move away from intensive practices. It needs to apply to our fishers as we implement marine protected areas and better stock management. It needs to apply to our industrial base and our businesses, including those of the mechanics. As we move to a position where we have more electric vehicles, the whole motor

industry needs to change, including in respect of workers such as mechanics. Just transition also needs to apply to people who are vulnerable or at risk of energy poverty.

At present, we are seeing huge problems and vulnerabilities when it comes to energy and pricing. We see many families struggling and energy prices going up exponentially. This is not going to go away as we move further into a situation in which we are trying to move away from fossil fuels. People are vulnerable but there is a genuine opportunity to make households more resilient and more self-sufficient when it comes to energy usage.

The Social Democrats have always been very strong proponents of solar power. Solar is one way we can assist in making homes more resilient. There are many changes we can make that would benefit people and our environment at the same time. People need assistance to make the changes and we want and need the Government to step up.

Part of the just transition is providing a mechanism for workers and their communities to hold to account the Government, including its Departments, State agencies and other bodies, in the development and implementation of climate action plans and mitigation and adaptation strategies that underpin our national response to climate change. At present, there is no legal mechanism for workers and their communities to hold just transition policies to account.

The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, is available to workers, as are the courts, but neither specifically deals with the disruption caused by the transition to a zero-carbon economy and the implications of this for workers' rights and employment issues. The programme for Government commits to establishing a just transition commissioner on a statutory basis; however, unfortunately this has not been carried out to date.

I welcome the fact that the Government set up a just transition commission. I was very pleased to see that and that its members are very good and strong in their expertise. While it is a very valuable commission, it is not on a statutory footing and so needs a legislative framework. This Bill could lay the foundation for that legal underpinning.

The just transition commission proposed in this Bill would be similar to the WRC. It would bring together workers, communities, employers and the Government into a social dialogue that would drive climate action plans, mitigation plans, adaptation plans, and the policies and investments needed for a quick, fair and just transition to a zero-carbon economy.

If we look to our neighbours across the channel in Scotland, we see a great example to follow. Scotland established its own just transition commission in 2018 with the intention of centring its just transition plans on partnership between those impacted most by the transition to net zero, with co-design and co-delivery at the core. At the start of each year, Scotland's minister for just transition writes to the commission to inform it of planned government work that can help inform the development of the commission's work plan. It publishes an annual report on Scotland's progress and is available to all Scottish ministers who seek its advice and support.

Legislating for the just transition commission in Ireland now would demonstrate a long-term, cross-Government commitment to fairness that survives political cycles and changing Ministers and their respective agendas. We have an opportunity to show that Ireland is serious about a fair transition, not just reacting to the pressures of 2025 but also building a durable structure for the future.

We all know we have significant changes to make, and we all know we have major targets to meet. There is a general acceptance that we will strive to do our best to meet those targets. However, the question of how we meet them is fundamental. We must meet them in a fair and just manner and this must be driven by the Government.

Crucially, this Bill also amends the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 to include, for the first time in Irish legislation, a definition of just transition and its principles. Unfortunately, this was left out of the legislation when we debated it and passed it in the last Dáil. It is a fundamental piece of the information that people need and it needs to be in the legislation to ensure a just transition.

This Bill's explanatory memorandum defines a just transition as "a transition that ensures the economic, environmental and social consequences of the ecological transformation of economies and societies are managed in ways that maximise opportunities of decent work for all, reduce inequalities, promote social justice, and support industries, workers and communities negatively affected, in accordance with nationally defined priorities, and based on effective social dialogue". It defines just transition principles as being the importance of taking action to reduce net Irish emissions of greenhouse gases in a way which supports environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, supports zero carbon investment in infrastructure, develops and maintains social consensus, creates decent, fair and high-value work in a way which does not negatively affect the current workforce, and contributes to resource-efficient and sustainable economic approaches which help to address inequality and poverty.

Centring climate action on a just transition approach is a unique opportunity to deliver climate solutions that not only cut emissions but also improve lives by creating better jobs, warmer homes, cleaner air and a more resilient and self-sufficient society. Ultimately, change is scary, and this is a change that is happening to us in Ireland and globally. People are afraid. When we talk about climate change, it is often framed in the negative. When we talk about climate action, people think it will be punitive, will cost them more and will be socially difficult. Ultimately, though, if we get our just transition right, it will lead to a much fairer society where people's homes are warm, there are buses they can take and they work in jobs where they also have a good work-life balance. This is about moving to a much better, much fairer way of living.

Without stronger commitment from Government and a clear strategy for just transition, the potential for an unjust transition in Ireland will continue to grow. Since 2021, just transition has become central to national and international climate governance. The case for embedding fairness into climate action has never been stronger. In the coming years, we will be asking a great deal of society in order to meet our climate targets and to respond to the realities of climate change. Public awareness of inequality and vulnerability linked to climate policy is at an all-time high, creating political and social momentum for action. With major climate policies, change is being rolled out across energy, transport, buildings and agriculture. This is our chance to ensure that fairness is built in from the get-go. Ireland has an opportunity to show that climate action can improve lives, strengthen communities and build a fair economy, rather than deepen inequality. As Ireland makes the shift from planning to implementation, it is crucial that we embed fairness into the foundation of Ireland's climate response and see

ambitious, science-based targets and social justice not as competing priorities but, rather, as two sides of the same coin.

There is no reason that the Government should oppose the progression of this Bill. I hope the Minister of State will be able to support it. I acknowledge the work of Sinéad Mercier, who worked with me on this Bill in the previous term. I know she worked with Eamon Ryan on this Bill. I acknowledge the unions, which contributed greatly when we first developed this Bill. This is important legislation and I hope the Minister of State gives it full consideration.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I congratulate Deputy Whitmore on bringing this Bill to the floor. It is well researched, well prepared legislation that allows for the establishment of what should be and must be a core part of the infrastructure that shapes Ireland's response to the climate crisis. As Deputy Whitmore described, we have two choices in how we face the climate crisis. We can see it in a way that allows us to flounder, to see the negatives and everything else, or we can see the opportunity that presents itself when we think about our response. For me, this Bill sets on a clear, statutory footing the important dialogue that needs to happen so that communities and workers are protected throughout the climate crisis.

I want to introduce a couple of ideas within this concept. I believe that another crisis we are facing is the automation crisis that is coming about through AI. Automation is something we have to grapple with as a society. AI is currently proving to be a catalyst for labour displacement across multiple sectors, so it really is going to be disruptive in a way that we have not thought about as a society and that we are certainly not facing up to as a society or dealing with in any helpful way. I believe the just transition needs to deal not only with the challenges that the climate crisis presents to us but also those that are presented by automation.

Another point I would add is that if we have learned anything from the Covid pandemic, it is that there is as much impact from a crisis that presents itself to society as there is from the State's response to it. We saw during Covid the way that certain cohorts of society were disproportionately impacted by the restrictions that were placed on society compared with the mainstream population. For example, we know that all children were affected by having to learn remotely, but those kids who were in care had a whole other suite of supports that were no longer available to them, including key workers, psychologists and so on. They had a very different experience of the effect of the Covid restrictions on them compared with the other children in society. It is important to recognise that Covid was a short, sharp crisis, compared with this, which is a much longer running crisis. We need to make sure, however, that the State's response to this crisis does not disproportionately punish any particular group in society. Well done to Deputy Whitmore and I welcome this Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I acknowledge the work of Deputy Whitmore in bringing forward this Private Members' Bill on the subject of just transition and her and her party's commitment to this topic. I also commend Sinéad Mercier and the unions, which I know worked with Deputy Whitmore on this. I thank Deputy Gibney for her intervention. This time three weeks ago, I was the Minister of State with responsibility for digitalisation, so I am particularly interested in what Deputy Gibney said about AI.

In line with the national climate objectives, the Government is fully committed to a just transition to a climate-neutral economy by no later than 2030. There have been significant developments relating to just transition since the Private Members' Bill was presented to the House in 2021. These include both policy and legislation changes, as well as the establishment of, as Deputy Whitmore said, the just transition commission of Ireland on an administrative basis last year. It is on the basis of these developments, which provide an established approach to just transition within climate policy, that the Government is opposing the Bill.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 provides for a just transition to a climate-neutral economy which endeavours, insofar as is practicable, to maximise employment opportunities and support persons and communities that may be negatively affected by the transition. To operationalise this provision, the Climate Action Plan 2021 introduced a just transition framework which guides the integration of just transition into climate policy. Just transition, as Deputy Whitmore said, probably is not the most obvious name, so let me outline for viewers watching at home what that framework looks like and means in practice. It consists of four principles focusing on the need for an evidence-based approach to plan our response to just transition requirements. It is about equipping people with the right skills to participate in the future economy. It is about ensuring that the costs are shared so that existing inequalities are not exacerbated, and it is about social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are consulted and empowered. All relevant Ministers are expected to formulate and implement their climate policies through the lens of this framework so that policies are informed by the need to ensure a just transition.

The just transition commission of Ireland, as the Deputies will be aware, was established last year as an independent advisory body. A key focus of the commission is to support the Government in its responsibility to provide that Ireland's transition to the national climate objective has regard to the requirement for a just transition to a climate-neutral economy. The mandate of the commission is to prepare and analyse strategic research in relation to a just transition; evaluate, advise and comment on sectoral climate policies; provide strategic advice and engagement on just transition; undertake proactive engagement with communities, sectors or regions facing challenges arising from the transition; and listen to and channel the public voice on just transition.

The Private Members' Bill before us today proposes the establishment of a just transition commission on the legislative basis with a focus on workers and communities. However, the existing commission's remit goes wider than this. While it accounts for the need to ensure a just transition workforce, its programme also includes the assessment of the implementation of the just transition framework into climate policy; strengthening engagement with vulnerable cohorts on climate matters; and recommending indicators to support the measurement of our progress as we continue to transition. The commission has made really significant progress in its work programme and it has already published its introductory report. This report provides some early reflections and recommendations on the implementation of just transition across climate policy.

The commission points to the need to develop a just transition strategy and the need for stronger governance, monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the just transition framework in climate policy. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment will develop a just transition strategy as a key deliverable under its 2025 to 2028 statement strategy.

The just transition strategy will set out a clear vision for a just transition to a competitive, affordable, secure and climate-neutral economy and society.

My colleague the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment has assured the commission of the Government's ongoing support for its work through his engagement with both the chair, Ms Ali Sheridan, and members. It was very heartening to hear Deputy Whitmore commend the talents of the people involved in the commission and the good work that they are doing on behalf of Ireland.

In conjunction with its introductory report, the commission has also explored two key sectoral areas, transport and agriculture, and the cross-cutting topic of finance. In conducting its review, the commission has engaged with over 60 representative groups, officials and academics. It has conducted engagements with farmers, agricultural students and representative groups in Glasnevin's Wayfinding Centre. The commission is now preparing a report to reflect and provide recommendations on the respective sectors. In addition, the commission continues to develop links with similar bodies such as the Climate Change Advisory Council.

As noted earlier, the current just transition commission was established on an administrative basis. This followed on from the work of the just transition task force, which was tasked with seeking consensus on a long-term structure for the just transition commission. The task force convened in 2023 and was chaired by Mr. Kieran Mulvey. It consisted of representatives from the five pillars of social dialogue and senior officials from the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the NESC. Their recommendations included that the commission should be established on an administrative basis to ensure timely establishment but that it would quickly move to a statutory basis. In approving the establishment of the commission, the Government noted that a review of the operation of the commission should be undertaken before moving it to a statutory basis. This will allow the commission to establish itself and for learnings on its current structure and remit to be reviewed and refined. That review is planned for the middle of next year.

In these circumstances the Government believes it would be premature to consider moving the commission to a statutory basis in advance of the review. It would also distract the commission from completing its work programme, which is the most important thing. We know that that transition will have different impacts on different people, communities and regions. The Government acknowledges this and has been investing significant resources into supporting the midlands, as the Deputy noted in her own contribution, because the midlands communities are most impacted by the transition away from peat.

One of the first measures that was introduced was the National Just Transition Fund 2000 to 2024, which provided over €16 million to the region. The EU just transition fund, which runs to 2027, remains active in the midlands, with up to €169 million available in the region. Since the launch of the programme in 2023, 15 calls for funds have been run and 172 projects under grant agreement have been approved in the sum of €121 million. The EU just transition fund is co-funded through the EU just transition mechanism and national co-financing.

As demonstrated, significant work is already under way to underpin the just transition through legislation, the implementation of the just transition framework, investment in the midlands and institutional arrangements. The commission and colleagues can be assured of the

Government's ongoing commitment to a just transition as we continue to embed it in our policymaking. On the basis of these significant developments the Government has decided to oppose the Bill.

I note the Deputy has not been given a copy of my speech, so I will provide her with this one. We might see if we can get it photocopied.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Is the Second Reading of the Bill being delayed or is it being ruled out?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Bill is being opposed.

Deputy Réada Cronin: That is a pity. Ba mhaith liom an Teachta Whitmore a mholadh as an mBille seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Molaim an Dr. Sinéad Mercier freisin. Is bean iontach í. It is essential that we talk about climate action and a just transition. When the climate committee was working on the climate Bill, we were desperately trying to get a proper definition in that. People did not feel that a just transition was in order or that it was actually about climate action through justice for people and workers.

The climate and biodiversity crisis that we face across this State and worldwide is existential. We need a radical change in how we do business if we are to reach any of our short- or long-term climate goals. It will require buy-in from everyone if we are to collectively reduce our emissions and convert to a greener, cleaner and more just future. To get that we really need universal buy-in and equality of outcome. Putting a just transition i lár gach aon rud is essential if we are to achieve this. People should not be punished for doing the right thing.

It is clear that there is an appetite for ambitious climate action in Ireland across different regions and life stages. That means that we have a unique opportunity to engage and empower communities to shape, lead and benefit from the transition. It should be seen not as a hindrance but as a golden opportunity. We can deliver climate solutions that not only cut emissions but also enhance people's lives, by creating better jobs, warmer homes, cleaner air and a more resilient society. We cannot wait until after communities or sectors are impacted to talk about fairness.

Engagement and planning must happen before the transformational changes arrive. Engagement here is key because we live in a different world from did five years ago. I was on the climate committee with Jennifer Whitmore in the last Dáil. We were never looking for Senators to come in to have a quorum. It was the one committee that worked really well across all the parties. It is completely different this time. It is not because there are fewer Green Party members on it, but because there is less interest.

While we want climate action, the world has not been so receptive because the world has changed. We only have to look at America. The President of America is anti-climate and anti-science. He has talked about climate change as a scam. These are really easy lies to peddle because people will always look for the easy option. It might be easier to just say it is not true, but we have to contradict that. The Government has to counteract that by including workers and communities in the green revolution now, not later. We know the climate transition will impact every community and every sector and each of our lives and livelihoods. We know it

will affect countries and cause increased migration, an issue that is very topical now. I believe that everybody loves their own homeland and would prefer to stay at home. We need to do what we can in the developed world to make sure people can stay in their own homes if that is what they want.

There is now a need for a national just transition strategy, a clear actionable plan that shows how climate will benefit every community and every worker, especially those at risk. If we can build a consensus and bring communities with us on this climate journey now and for generations to come, the world will be a better place. I believe this is the moment for Ireland to show it is serious about a just transition.

I disagree with the Government opposing the Bill. It is a good Bill that would show communities that climate action can make their lives better. It can result in cheaper electricity. It is a real pity the Government is opposing the Bill outright.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcome the reintroduction of this just transition Bill. I thank Deputy Whitmore for doing so. I thank her for recognising those who worked on this legislation, including my party colleague Eamon Ryan, Dr. Sinéad Mercier and the trade unionists who have been involved in the past. Since this Bill was first proposed by the Green Party in 2018, much has changed in the legislative agenda and the policy direction of this country and indeed in the world as a whole. The just transition has been recognised as absolutely essential. It is referenced in our own domestic institutions, it has been adopted within EU frameworks and it is included within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, commitments as well.

Deputy Whitmore made the point about the use of the technical terminology "just transition" sometimes hiding or disguising what is being attempted and how that lack of clarity sometimes contributes to lessening support for the steps we need to take. Let us just remind ourselves what the intended outcome is here. The just transition is about improving people's quality of life while tackling the greatest threat in our lifetime, namely, climate change. That is what it is in a nutshell. It is about recognising that the workers who are employed in the parts of our economy that create a large amount of carbon will need the greatest amount of support. Not only the individual workers, the individual business owners, the individual farmers who are in carbon-intensive industries, but also the wider communities that depend on these people for their living. The just transition sees that people who are already vulnerable in our society, who already face poverty or relative poverty, will need the greatest support. We should always keep in mind that the impacts of climate change are going to be felt the most by the least well-off in our society, be that globally or in Ireland. It is the poor who suffer the most if rains fail in Ethiopia or when hurricanes are more severe in the Caribbean because of climate change. It is the poor who suffer the most from the energy price spikes we have seen here in Ireland. They are the ones most at risk of energy poverty.

Over the summer, I met the minister for climate action from Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu. He was visiting Dublin. Vanuatu is a small Pacific island nation on a range of islands. It has a population of just over 300,000 people. It is hugely at risk to natural disasters. It is hugely at risk to sea-level rise. Its very physical existence as an independent nation that is present is put at risk by climate change and by sea-level rise. For me, hearing from him about what his

country is doing was a very real-world, tangible illustration of the existential threat that climate change represents for millions, and ultimately billions, of people living on our planet.

A number of Deputies referenced the 2025 report from our current Just Transition Commission of Ireland. I want to focus on three elements of that report. I note that, in this most recent report, the commission really focused on the fact that, to date, our approach to the just transition has been piecemeal. It has been too reactive and we have not adopted that all-of-society approach. It recognises that steps have been taken but it also strongly recognises that the communities I spoke of earlier that are most at risk of this transition feel left behind and that not enough has been done for them.

The second point it makes is that creating a better Ireland goes hand in hand with a just transition. Climate action at its core is not only about cutting the carbon emissions, but it is also about building a country where people can live secure, dignified and healthy lives. It is about improving things in all senses, for all people.

The final point I will raise about that report is the importance of faster climate action. At the Belém COP in recent weeks, we saw the huge preponderance of fossil fuel lobbyists who were there and who were able to influence the outcome of that COP to ensure the reference to the transition away from fossil fuels was not actually mentioned in the final text of the Belém declaration. The outcome of that in the medium-to-long-term is going to be more people in Ireland, more people across Europe and the world, having to experience the risk of energy poverty because of their dependence on fossil fuels.

I urge the Government to do more. As a country, we must choose courage over delay, we must choose fairness over fear and we must choose the opportunities that exist from this transition over obstruction. If we work and commit together to a just transition, that not only confronts climate change but ultimately builds a fairer and more just society for all of us in Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputies for their feedback. As set out in my opening statement, the reason the Government is opposing this Bill is due to the fact that we have already set up the commission on an administrative basis, and we want it to get on with the work we have tasked it with and we then want to review that to see whether it is working. At that point, once we have the review, we will be making a decision around a statutory footing. Also, the landscape in which we are making this decision has seen significant developments around the just transition policy since this Bill was tabled in 2021.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Climate Action Plan 2021 set the legislative and policy direction for just transition, with the just transition framework outlining the broad nature of a just and fair transition. The just transition framework recognises that people need the right skills to participate in a climate-neutral economy, but it also recognises the need for evidence-based climate policy, the need to ensure that costs are shared equitably and the need for social dialogue with impacted citizens and communities. The overarching nature of the framework is reflected in the existing Just Transition Commission's mandate and work programme. The Just Transition Commission will examine the workforce implications of the transition but also has the remit to evaluate sectoral

climate policy, proactively engage with impacted communities or sectors, and provide strategic advice and analysis in relation to a just transition.

The existing commission is providing impartial advice to the Government and is doing so to support a just transition to climate neutrality. While the commission was established on an administrative basis, the just transition task force recommended that the body be moved to a statutory basis. The Government is committed to reviewing the operation of the commission in a manner that allows the commission to establish itself and for learnings on its current structure and its remit to be reviewed and refined. Any decision on moving the commission to a legislative basis before this review would be premature.

As previously noted, under the commission's recommendation, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment will develop a just transition strategy, which will set out a clear vision for a just transition to a competitive, affordable, secure and climate-neutral economy and society. The commission's forthcoming report on agriculture, transport and finance will further its guidance and support to the Government and the respective Departments.

The Government feels that moving to establish the commission on a legislative basis at this point could distract the commission from its current work programme and hamper the momentum it is building as a new body.

Finally, I reiterate that the Government is committed to a just transition and a climate-neutral economy by no later than 2050. However, due to legislative, policy and institutional developments since 2021, the Government is opposing this Private Members' Bill on the basis of the progress since then.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank everybody for their contributions this evening. It is a very important issue and debate. I take the Minister of State's point in relation to the current commission and the work it is doing. I understand that the Government is afraid that legislating for this now may distract from its current work programme but I ask that the Minister of State or the Minister go and discuss this with the commission. When we look at its first report, it is very clear about what needs to be seen. This is a really positive message when it comes to just transition. According to the commission: "A just transition offers a powerful opportunity, not only to manage the risks of the climate transition but to reimagine and reshape Ireland's economy and society to be more inclusive, resilient and sustainable." That is from the Just Transition Commission's press release about its first report. It also says that Ireland must move much faster. So, the Government's fears about taking this too fast are misplaced. The commission says:

Ireland must now move much faster and with much more ambition if we are to keep the people and places we care about safe from the effects of climate change, and to seize the unprecedented opportunity that a just transition offers to build a fairer, more inclusive, and resilient society.

It also made the point that Ireland's approach since 2021 has been piecemeal and reactive, rather than a whole-of-society approach and that the just transition framework the Minister of State spoke about is in place but is not being utilised. It is very clear that just transition must be embedded structurally and that is what I am attempting to do with the Bill. The Bill would embed it in the legislative framework so that it is in place going forward and is not reliant on a

favourable Government or Minister. Rather, it would work for the people across the country. It would be consistent, clear and cannot be removed at the whim of any Minister or Government.

The first report rings an alarm bell. It states that the current approach leaves Ireland on a trajectory towards an unjust transition. While I can understand the rationale that the work is ongoing, and we do not want to slow that down or distract from it, what the commission has said is different. From what I have read in its report, its reaction is different. I ask that before we vote on the Bill the Minister of State discusses this with the commission. The just transition commission would appreciate having that legislative framework available to it.

The Government has put a 12-month timeframe on the latest few Bills that have gone through the Dáil. I would be okay with that. It would be a much better result than plainly saying "No" to the Bill. I ask the Government consider putting in place a 12-month timeline and using that 12-month period to work with the commission and ensure that the Bill or principle of just transition and the commission are put on a statutory basis. That is what we need to see.

The risk of not getting this transition right cannot be understated. Ireland is not immune to this. Many countries have been torn apart and societies and communities fight each other when it comes to the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss and the approach of Governments to managing it. It is important that we are very strategic and proactive in how we deal with this so that we provide supports before people are afraid and start thinking that they are being left behind. When people feel like they are being left behind, that is when the trouble will start.

I ask the Minister of State to speak to the Minister and ask him whether he would consider putting in place a 12-month timeframe. That would be a welcome result. I ask the Government to not say a blanket "No" to this; it is too important.

Question put.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Grace Boland): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.54 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 9 Nollaig 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.54 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 December 2025.