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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 14 Eanáir 2026

Wednesday, 14 January 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss the crisis of mental health and lack of services in Wexford.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss eligibility for the vacant property refurbishment grant.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the existing rights of victims of crime following the release of a perpetrator from prison or an institution.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the allocation of SET and SNA hours for primary schools.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss restoration of the rapid response vehicle on a 24-7 basis in County Roscommon.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the need for a lift upgrade and roof repairs at a school in Cork.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the plan for schools to be included in the DEIS plus scheme.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the shortfall of SEN primary school places in Shankill, County Dublin.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the development of equine therapy facilities at the Toghermore campus in Tuam, County Galway.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the shortage of transport services to adult disability day services in County Meath.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the north Kerry CAMHS review.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss funding for a "nurture room" at St. Brendan's College, Belmullet.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing use and misuse of e-scooter vehicles in urban areas.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss drug-related intimidation and associated violence.

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

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the new Kilkenny College of Further Education and Training campus.

Deputy Sean Fleming - To discuss the need for women's refuge accommodation in Portlaoise.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the need for a second autism class in Goatstown Educate Together National School.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett and Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss ongoing issues with bus reliability and the cancellations of buses across Dublin city and county.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the need for sufficient funding to support both new and existing bus services in 2026 in Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Claire Kerrane, Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin, Paul McAuliffe, Jen Cummins, and Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Ambulance Service

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this important issue. During the Christmas period, a young person in my constituency had an asthma attack. The rapid response vehicle, RRV, arrived and the advanced paramedic on the RRV saved his life, and of that there is no doubt. I say that because we have had a continuing issue in County Roscommon. I think this is my seventh time to raise it in the House. The rapid response vehicle promised to the people of Roscommon on the closure of the accident and emergency department back in 2011 and had been in place perfectly since then is being quietly downgraded. The RRV is now no longer available 24-7 as was promised. That is the first issue. It is being parked up on Mondays from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m. I presume this is saving the National Ambulance Service, NAS, a few euro every week. However, it is also putting the lives of people of County Roscommon in grave danger. I do not say that lightly.

There is a significant difference between what a paramedic can do in an emergency and what an advanced paramedic can do in an emergency. I will take an asthma attack as an example. The advanced paramedic can administer intravenous, IV, steroids, magnesium

sulfate, paracetamol and antibiotics. A paramedic cannot administer any of those intravenously. In a sepsis case, which are sadly increasing, the advanced paramedic can give the IV antibiotics and the IV fluids, whereas a paramedic cannot. Another example, which again, sadly, is common, is cardiac arrest. In such cases, the advanced paramedic can administer the drug that is needed quickly, insert the advanced airway incubation and administer IV fluids. A paramedic cannot do any of that. We have two issues in Roscommon. One is that the NAS is trying to save money by parking up the rapid response vehicle every Monday night. The family of the young man in question have told me that if he had had an asthma attack on a Monday night, he would not be alive today. That is not acceptable for my community and county in any way, shape or form.

The other issue we have, one I have raised with the Taoiseach and repeatedly with the director of the National Ambulance Service, is that a paramedic is being used on the rapid response vehicle far too often. Paramedics are filling the role of an advanced paramedic because the National Ambulance Service has failed to have a full roster of advanced paramedics. I do not believe the NAS has made enough effort to fill that line. For example, we have had cases of cardiac arrest and heart attack where a paramedic rather than an advanced paramedic is on the rapid response vehicle instead and cannot do what is needed to save the person's life. We recently had two cases involving a heart attack and cardiac arrest.

Frankly, I am getting sick and tired of raising this issue. I am not someone who comes into the Chamber and shouts and roars, but this issue is of the utmost importance. People's lives are being put at risk. I am really concerned that this continues. We need the rapid response vehicle on a 24-7 basis. I know the NAS issued an action card for the rapid response vehicle in Ennis and in Nenagh hospitals to ensure the vehicle is protected. That is not in place in Roscommon. I do not know why that is the case given that Roscommon hospital, like Ennis and Nenagh, lost its accident and emergency department. I want that same protection put in place for County Roscommon.

The other point to make is that we are training community paramedics who are finding themselves doing the role of advanced paramedics when they are not available. This is a waste of time. We need the rapid response vehicle on a 24-7 basis in County Roscommon to ensure we can keep people alive.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue in relation to having a rapid response vehicle on a 24-7 basis in County Roscommon. I acknowledge that the Deputy has been continuously raising this issue and advocating in relation to advanced paramedics.

By way of background, as the Deputy well knows, the National Ambulance Service serves County Roscommon out of three bases located in Roscommon, Boyle and Loughglinn, which all operate on a 24-7 basis. All three bases are staffed by a highly skilled workforce of pre-hospital emergency care practitioners, including paramedics, advanced paramedics and emergency medical technicians. In addition, the National Ambulance Service operates a modern fleet of emergency ambulances, intermediate care vehicles and rapid response vehicles from these bases.

Turning to the specific issue, I am aware that this topic has been raised by the Deputy, as I said, on a number of occasions. The National Ambulance Service operates two rosters at its

Roscommon ambulance bases, one for the operation of a rapid response vehicle and the other for emergency ambulances. The RRV roster has four paramedic posts and there have been two vacancies on this roster. The National Ambulance Service made repeated attempts to fill these vacancies in 2025 through its national transfer process. I am informed these attempts have been unsuccessful and the National Ambulance Service will continue efforts in 2026 to fill these vacancies. This is not about trying to save a few euro or trying to save money. The NAS is actively trying to recruit into this role and will continue to do so.

I am also informed by the National Ambulance Service that the rapid response vehicle in Roscommon is currently rostered on a 24-hour basis, six days per week and on a 12-hour basis on Thursday nights. I understand that the daytime shift on Thursday is covered by available emergency resources in the region and the rapid response vehicle from surrounding areas. Roscommon also benefits from the emergency aeromedical service operated by the National Ambulance Service in conjunction with the Irish Air Corps, as well as additional aeromedical support provided by the Irish Coast Guard in the region on an as available basis for its bases in Sligo and Shannon.

I can also update that the HSE is progressing plans to establish a new National Ambulance Service helicopter air ambulance service this year, which will predominantly serve the west and north west. This service will be particularly beneficial in providing additional emergency coverage to patients in County Roscommon. As well as front-line urgent and emergency care, the National Ambulance Service is a vital partner in the development and expansion of a range of clinically appropriate alternative care pathways to improve patient flow and reduce pressure on emergency departments. However, I take on board the point the Deputy made in sharing the story about a young man who had an asthma attack. I thank her for sharing that and his family for allowing her to do so. It points to the fact that if that service had not been available, the outcome may not have been what we would have wanted it to be.

I am taking this question on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, and I will certainly feed back to the Minister the Deputy's concerns, especially the point she made about paramedics filling in for advanced paramedics. For the record, I asked for a breakdown on NAS clinical staffing in County Roscommon. The total number of paramedics, including six advanced paramedics, is 21. There are two paramedic supervisors and six emergency medical technicians. That amounts to 29 staff currently in place. I will speak to the Minister about the 12-hour period and the issue of paramedics filling in for advanced paramedics.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I want to be clear on the issue of the rapid response vehicle being parked up. This was done on Thursdays but I now understand it is done on Monday nights for 12 hours. The RRV is not being parked up because efforts to get an advanced paramedic have not been successful, whatever those efforts may be. That is not the reason because a paramedic is provided on the RRV every other day and night of the week. I believe it is being parked up as a cost-saving measure. If not, I do not know what the reason is. It is not because an advanced paramedic is not available because every other day of the week the service provides a paramedic quite happily. This should not be happening.

In relation to the efforts being made to fill the four places on the advanced paramedic roster, which is the nub of the issue here, if an action card was issued - action cards are in place for Nenagh and Ennis hospitals - it would give a guarantee to anyone who is willing to go on the

roster as an advanced paramedic. The reason people are not willing to carry out that role is that they are afraid they are going to be pulled onto the air ambulance or moved elsewhere, as has happened. I do not know why County Roscommon does not have the action card to protect the rapid response vehicle. If we had an action card, it would give some comfort to an advanced paramedic to then decide to make the leap and take this role. I reinforce that point in relation to the action card. There is no reason the people of County Roscommon should not have the same protection as other places that are without an accident and emergency department. Of course, we are further from an accident and emergency department. That is why the rapid response vehicle is so important.

I reiterate that lives are being put at risk in cases of cardiac arrest, heart attack, asthma attack and sepsis. This is happening in Roscommon, as I know from the coalface. I cannot and will not stand over a situation where people in my home county of Roscommon have their lives put at risk. I want this issue dealt with once and for all. I want the action card issued, the rapid response vehicle protected and the advanced paramedic and RRV provided on a 24-7 basis, as Fine Gael, the Government and the HSE promised the people of Roscommon in 2011.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for articulating the current situation in County Roscommon. The Deputy referred to people being put at risk. When anybody makes a 999 call looking for an ambulance, the call is triaged in relation to how serious the situation is, for example, whether it is a cardiac case, stroke, a broken limb, a fall or whatever else. The first response from the National Ambulance Service is always to triage and respond to the most critical incident first. It is important that anybody tuning in to this debate hears that. The Deputy said lives are being put at risk because the service is not available for 12 hours during the week. It is important to say, however, that all calls are triaged appropriately.

Almost 30,000 patients were treated in the first six months of last year alone through a National Ambulance Service alternative care pathway, which is also important, with 40% of these patients not requiring subsequent conveyance. The Deputy is speaking about the emergencies that arise and the challenge that arises for patients and their families. I reiterate two points. In relation to the action card, which the Deputy said has been issued in two other counties but not in Roscommon, I will bring that point back. I reiterate also that I have been advised that the National Ambulance Service will continue efforts in 2026 to address the vacancies identified in Roscommon. I thank the Deputy again for raising this extremely important matter.

Mental Health Services

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: As the Minister of State knows well, County Wexford is experiencing a mental health crisis due to the lack of an acute mental health facility since the closure of St. Senan's psychiatric hospital in 2013. This facility served as the primary mental health institution in the region for over 150 years. There has been no replacement, meaning there is no acute mental health unit in Wexford. This is shocking in the context of the escalating mental health crisis we are witnessing nationwide. It is deeply troubling and leaves a significant gap in service provision in the south east.

I was alarmed by information I received. While I knew this already, I wanted to confirm the exact figures by means of a parliamentary question before Christmas. The response showed that over 1,000 people had presented to Wexford General Hospital's accident and emergency department in mental health crisis between January and October 2025. Over the past five years, Wexford's accident and emergency department has seen 5,105 patients presenting in mental health crisis. It is incredible that 877 of those who presented to the hospital in mental health crisis were children. What is truly terrifying is that these thousands of people had no dedicated mental health facility available locally. I live on the Wexford-Wicklow border. It is a long way from Waterford hospital. In my office, we received far too many reports of patients waiting and being referred to an antiquated psychiatric department in Waterford city, only to be discharged or often refused services within hours due to a lack of staff or lack of space. I am sure the Minister of State will agree it is completely unacceptable to have these circumstances in 2026 in a country that is awash with money. My background is primary teaching and I am involved in secondary schools. The Minister of State will accept that this antiquated psychiatric unit in Waterford hospital is a completely inappropriate setting for children in a mental health crisis to be sent to, especially if they are travelling long distances, for example, from anywhere in Wexford or even south Wicklow.

The Minister of State has responsibility for mental health. I ask that funding be allocated through the HSE capital programme for the development of a mental health unit attached to Wexford General Hospital. This issue is regularly brought up on South East Radio. All the Deputies present will agree with this proposal. All 34 councillors in County Wexford agree with it. It comes up at practically every meeting of the county council and there is cross-party support for it. We need to see movement on this unit in 2026. It is urgently needed to ensure that people in acute mental health crisis can access timely, appropriate and safe care close to their home. County Wexford has repeatedly been left behind in terms of mental health services. This is not only failing the people experiencing the crisis, but also their families. We need a whole family support and wraparound service. There are partners, parents and carers struggling to navigate a fragmented system while supporting loved ones in crisis. They require accessible counselling, education and practical supports to help them to understand and manage the challenges they face.

The Government has paid lip service to mental health provision and well-being. It has failed to deliver A Vision for Change and Sharing the Vision. The result is that many of facilities are in a state of emergency. Funding has stagnated and reform has stalled. What plans does the Minister of State and the Government have to address the mental health crisis in County Wexford? I know all about Waterford and the overall budget, but the money does not appear to be going to Wexford in any meaningful way. I would be grateful if the Minister of State could comment on that.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy very much for his question. I am quite disappointed at how the Deputy has presented the situation in Wexford. I think of all of those who are working in mental health services in Wexford today. They would be disappointed by the Deputy's statement that Wexford has been completely left behind in relation to mental health services.

I will approach this issue in three different ways. First, as the Deputy knows, we have six new regional health areas. Community healthcare organisations, CHO, 5 and 6 have been

amalgamated and broken down into three substructures. Waterford and Wexford are amalgamated under one integrated healthcare area, IHA, manager, Dr. Sinéad Reynolds, whose background is in mental health. She is a strong advocate for mental health. I will meet Dr. Reynolds in the next two weeks to discuss mental health services across Waterford and Wexford.

I take umbrage with how the Deputy portrayed the department of psychiatry led by the clinical director, Dr. Vwoke Akpubi, in University Hospital Waterford. On two occasions, the Deputy said it was an antiquated service. That is not true. Maybe the Deputy meant the building, but the service is not antiquated. St. Senan's closed in 2013 before the Deputy and I became involved politics at national level.

When St. Senan's was closed a decision was taken that all referrals would be made to University Hospital Waterford. There are 42 beds in the department of psychiatry at University Hospital Waterford. We also have a service-level agreement with St. Patrick's in Dublin. I know this inside out because I have lived it for the last five years as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health. We have a service-level agreement with St. Patrick's, a private hospital in Dublin, when we have issues with capacity. The Deputy has spoken about the number of presentations of children to emergency departments in Wexford. As he will know, when Wexford General Hospital had a fire a year and a half ago, University Hospital Waterford partnered very closely with it to take any of the overflow that could not be dealt with at that time. In response to the Deputy's comment that the unit is antiquated and not suitable for children, only two children were admitted to an adult department of psychiatry last year across the whole country, down from 100 when I took over in 2020. There were two cases last year, taken in real time when a clinician - a consultant psychiatrist - had to make a life or death decision on whether to admit that child or young person. In both cases, the patients were 17-plus and they were admitted with the approval of their parents. I cannot let that hang in the air.

Wexford is being very well served by community mental health teams. There are six adult community mental health teams, one in Maryville, New Ross, two in Carn House in Enniscorthy, one in Tara House, Gorey and two in Summerhill in Wexford town. There are also two CAMHS teams and there are plans to put a third team in place. That said, I do accept what the Deputy has said in relation to the fact that there are no adult psychiatric beds. That is the nub of the issue in Wexford in general. Indeed, this has been raised with me by the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, on several occasions and by other public representatives in Wexford. I want to give a shout out to Mental Health Ireland which is very strong in Wexford. Over the last five years I have launched many of its initiatives in relation to mental health, well-being, and emotional distress in the Wexford area and I want to applaud it for all the work it does on the ground. To go back to what the Deputy has said in relation to acute beds, I am aware that there are none in Wexford. I am also aware that there are none in Tipperary. We have done a capacity review of mental health beds and we will be having a look at this in the new year.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I acknowledge what the local teams are doing. They are doing brilliant work at Tara House, Arden House and lots of other places. I am glad to hear that the Minister of State accepts that there are no acute beds in County Wexford and that she will look at that this year. I am just reflecting what every politician in Wexford is saying and what the people coming to me are saying. They are saying that the facility in Waterford is not

appropriate. I am not disparaging the work that they are doing. They are doing brilliant work under very difficult circumstances. I know this from a local county councillor who was bringing his own son. He said that it was so difficult. It was not possible to bring him by car because he was likely to jump out so he had to be brought by ambulance to Wexford. This is a county councillor in Wexford who will not mind me saying this because he has raised it publicly himself. I am just saying that the setting is inappropriate. That is his view. He has been campaigning on mental health for many years and has said that it is completely inappropriate for children. I also believe it is inappropriate. It is not a proper setting for someone in crisis. When people in mental health crisis present at Wexford General Hospital, the staff there do not have the training, resources or expertise to be dealing with them.

I applaud the absolutely incredible work being done by groups like It's Good 2 Talk and Talk to Tom up in the north of the county. I have been dealing with Talk to Tom for years and have often referred children to it because it does brilliant work. However, Talk to Tom has not received one cent in statutory funding since it was set up. It organises local fundraisers. It is crazy that a local, voluntary group feels that it must step in to fill the gaps left by the State, a state that is awash with money. I was just looking at figures today showing that over €4 million was spent on security for a facility that was going to be used by IPAS across the border in County Wicklow. That is just one example but I could list hundreds of other examples of where money could be better spent. It is completely inappropriate to be wasting people's money.

Some people say that it is not practical to have an acute facility in County Wexford. I disagree with the Minister of State's previous statement that it is not practical to have a facility in every county. I would be grateful to hear more about what she could do in that regard.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am trying to count to five here because, as I reiterated, only two children across the whole country were admitted to adult wards last year. Two 17-year-olds were admitted, with the consent of their parents, for their own safety. There are no children being admitted to the department of psychiatry at University Hospital Waterford. That is the first thing I want to put on the record. Second, when we are finished here I suggest that the Deputy takes a look at the Mental Health Commission's report on foot of its visit to the department of psychiatry at University Hospital Waterford last year and the results therein. I am not going to leave it hanging in the air that there is a service in Waterford that is not fit for purpose because that is not the case. On three occasions, Deputy Ó Súilleabháin has disparaged that service. I know the teams that work there and I know the work they do.

As the Deputy knows, under the capital plan there will be a new-build unit in University Hospital Waterford. A new 50-bed department of psychiatry is in the capital plan and has been progressing, albeit slowly, over the last three years. It was meant to be adjacent to the hospital. The consultants there and the executive clinical director wanted it to be part of the hospital and that is exactly what is going to happen.

We must acknowledge the work being done by all six general adult teams in Wexford, the psychiatry of later life service in Wexford, and the two CAMHS teams in the county that I have visited. I also want to acknowledge the services that are available, including the liaison services through Wexford General Hospital. We cannot underestimate the services that are being provided. The issue the Deputy raises today relates to acute mental health beds in Wexford. There are none currently planned but we are certainly going to look at the issue, perhaps in the

context of a crisis house or a high-level hostel. It is on my radar. I will give the Deputy that but I want to acknowledge the good work that is done in the department of psychiatry in Waterford.

Sentencing Policy

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to raise the issue of a victim's rights when the perpetrator of a crime is leaving prison or other institution. Prior to being a TD I was not aware of the very significant rights that exist under the victim's charter, including the right to know where a person is imprisoned, changes to his or her custody or location, and so on. That applies to those in prison but also to those people who are in the forensic mental health services.

Difficult cases are described thus for a reason. A constituent of mine, Ms Fionnuala Bourke, has approached me because of what is a gap in the system. I have raised this matter with the Minister privately and would like to raise it publicly now. Fionnuala was stabbed nine times in a random attack by a stranger while she was on her way home from work. It was a brutal assault and she continues to live with the scars of it. This case was well raised and rehearsed in the media and in public. The perpetrator of that crime was convicted, despite lodging a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity. That was disregarded by the jury and the perpetrator was found guilty and sentenced. The judge in the case specifically mentioned the fact that while the jury had disregarded the plea of insanity, it was not the case that the person concerned may not have a mental illness. In the judgment she was very clear in acknowledging that while also acknowledging that the person was guilty and therefore deserved a custodial sentence. Unfortunately, the perpetrator of the crime against Fionnuala had also committed a similar attack two weeks earlier. In that case, there was a successful determination that she was not guilty by reason of insanity. Therefore, she was referred to the Central Mental Hospital and remains there.

The grave difficulty is that as far as Ms Bourke is concerned, there was no sentence for the crime that was committed. The person concerned served her time in a health institution, as may be appropriate, but no prison sentence was ever served. She also received other difficulties. For example, she was not the victim of the crime for which the person was detained in the forensic mental health services and as a result, she was entitled to no information about when that person might be released, periods of leave and so on.

I know this issue was raised by a number of people, including me, with the Minister's predecessor. That Minister committed to examining whether legislation or changes in practice might be required. At the heart of the issue is a feeling of injustice from the perspective of Ms Bourke. A very serious crime was committed against her. Somebody was found guilty in a courtroom and a significant sentence was issued. However, the person concerned has not served, and will not serve, any custodial sentence. Ms Bourke remains outside the loop of information with regard to the detention. I raise the issue with the Minister and hope he will be able to provide more information.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Before I call the Minister, I caution that, notwithstanding the sensitivities of the case, we should avoid naming people who are not in the House. I call the Minister.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. He is correct to say that he has raised this issue with me privately. It does not come as a surprise to me. He is correct in stating that the issues that have been identified have been raised in the media.

At the outset, I commend the Deputy. It is important that we take into account the position of victims in the criminal justice system. Historically, the criminal justice system is very much associated with determining the guilt or otherwise of the person who is accused of the offence and probably insufficient recognition was given to the very significant challenges that victims have to overcome in order to get justice. There is obviously the trauma of the offence itself and the Deputy has outlined that in the context of the person who has raised the issue with him. There is then having to make the complaint to An Garda Síochána. I must say that, in general, when I speak to victims they give me a very positive account of their engagement with An Garda Síochána. There is then the issue that the Garda must investigate a complaint, which necessarily takes time. The Garda puts together a file, which then goes to the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP. That can be a traumatic time for victims as the DPP determines whether there will be a prosecution or not. Of course, if the DPP does decide to prosecute, the really important part of the victim's function is that they have to give evidence in court. That can be a challenging experience. If there is a conviction, that is the stage when we say that the State has delivered justice for the individual concerned.

The Deputy is talking about circumstances that arise post conviction. In general, justice is delivered for serious crimes, such as the ones the Deputy has identified, when a person receives a sentence of incarceration. I fully recognise that prison is not the only solution to serious offences, but it is certainly part of the solution for the purposes of punishment and rehabilitation.

There is significant legislation in place in Ireland to protect and enhance victims' rights. The Deputy will be aware of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act, which does give rights to individuals. He will be aware of the Parole Act, which I was instrumental in getting enacted. It also gives rights to individuals in respect of victims seeking justice when it comes to perpetrators seeking parole.

The issue the Deputy has identified relates to issues around when concurrent, rather than consecutive, sentences are imposed. In the case he has outlined, perhaps the injustice that his constituent feels may have been resolved if the sentence imposed in her case was a sentence that would commence after the perpetrator was released in respect of the other offence for which she was found not guilty on the grounds of insanity.

People are detained in institutions such as the Central Mental Hospital. That hospital is a designated centre under the Criminal Law (Insanity) Act 2006. It is, as the Deputy knows, part of the National Forensic Mental Health Service and provides a range of forensic mental health services to its patients. People who are victims of offences perpetrated by individuals who are retained within, say, the Central Mental Hospital can register with the National Forensic Mental Health Service victim liaison officer. I am not disowning responsibility, but that responsibility does not come within my Department but lies elsewhere. The Department of justice has no involvement in that regard.

What is required in the future? The circumstances of the Deputy's constituent's case are very harrowing. They are also, I must say, unusual. That may be of cold comfort to her. We must, however, be careful about legislating for the exceptional case. The resolution is the ability that is there at present for a consecutive, as opposed to a concurrent, sentence to be imposed.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate that matters before the court are often in the control of the Judiciary. There is a clear separation of powers between what happens in this House and what happens and how decisions are made in a court. As Ms Bourke sat across from me at my clinic, and she was there for some time, I could only agree with her. She feels that a crime was committed and that while justice was administered and there was a process for dealing with all of that, the ultimate outcome of the sanction of a custodial sentence was never served. There is probably no way of releasing Ms Bourke from the view that the injustice stands. It is a reasonable thing for any victim to feel.

We cannot go back and the court case cannot be changed in any way. However, I think it is worth looking at. The Minister said, and I accept, that it is a unique case. It is a particular set of circumstances. As we go forward and examine the interaction between mental health and custodial sentences, this is a matter on which I would like the Minister to dwell. We must not forget the experience of Ms Fionnuala Bourke because she lives with it every single day. Where there is a concurrent sentence, there is a gap where access to information should be provided to the victim. I believe that in some ways, Ms Bourke has come to terms with that. It is a harrowing prospect that you do not know when somebody might be released and when you might meet that person again. That person may have made threats against you and you might encounter or interact with them again. We have the victims' charter to prevent that situation. In this case, there is no such process. It is an area we could consider, but I understand it is a difficult and tricky situation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I acknowledge what the Deputy has said and agree with him. What happened to Fionnuala Bourke was that a harrowing and desperately traumatic crime was perpetrated on her. The perpetrator received a sentence and justice was done. My understanding is that she did not commence that sentence because at the time, she was being detained within the Central Mental Hospital. What happened in this instance was that there was a detention but not a detention on the basis of the guilt of the perpetrator because of the crime she committed against Ms Bourke. That could have been resolved through consideration regarding the imposition of a concurrent sentence. I am not sure which of the offences was dealt with first. I will look at the situation within the Department. I do not want to mislead the Deputy or indicate to him, or, more importantly, to Ms Bourke, that there is a simple solution that can be put in place to resolve this issue. I do not think that is the case. Hers was a highly unusual case. However, as a victim, she is certainly entitled to be given information in respect of when her perpetrator is to be out in public again. That is something to which she is entitled. I hope there are mechanisms in place to ensure that can be achieved.

In many instances, it is very traumatic for individuals to find that the person responsible for the serious offence against them is back out in the community. I know one of the tools that the Prison Service, I and the courts have available is to provide exclusion zones or to grant release

on certain grounds and conditions. Those conditions, certainly in respect of very serious offences, can result in people being prevented from going into certain areas.

That is obviously an issue of some complexity and that measure has to be exercised sensitively but it recognises our deep concern about ensuring that victims are protected from the ongoing damage caused to them by such offences.

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Jen Cummins: I see that the Minister for education is not here. I believe she has an engagement this morning. It is very rare for me to get the opportunity to raise a Topical Issue so it is very difficult to not have the Minister here. I am not questioning the Minister of State's ability to answer the question. I am sure he is very well prepared. However, it is very difficult when you go to the bother and do a lot of research into an area only for the Minister not to be here. I find that a little bit frustrating.

Now that I have given out, I thank the Minister of State very much for being here to answer my question, which is about the plans for the inclusion of schools in the DEIS plus scheme. I am happy that the Department has answered calls for DEIS plus, which a number of school communities, particularly around this city but also throughout the country, have asked for. It addresses the fact that the original DEIS model has not been the panacea people thought it would be in addressing educational disadvantage. While it does have positives, there have been gaps in services and it has not achieved what it set out to in the depth that it was thought it would. It is really important that the new strategy being implemented is rigorous and methodical and that it is evaluated and monitored appropriately. The way in which it is evaluated must be much better than those for the previous schemes so that we can learn what is and is not working early on. I am a little bit worried that this strategy will only tickle the wicked problem of educational disadvantage and that it will not actually be able to address it fully.

From the answers I have received in writing about this and from watching other debates that happened in November 2025, I see that schools will not be required to apply. Schools were asked to apply the very first time DEIS was implemented. There were advantages to that because schools were able to say exactly what the issues were. The second time DEIS was looked at, schools did not have to apply because metrics were put in place. There were difficulties with that because you did not get the on-the-ground knowledge. You can get data from the census, the HP deprivation index and things like that but unless you know what is going on in schools, you do not know what is going on in schools. That is one of the difficulties. The reply to my question in November stated:

The DEIS Plus scheme will provide additional support to schools with the highest levels of need, in line with the Government's commitment.

I keep saying the word "schools" for a reason. We are trying to support children and young people. It is not about schools. Schools are the conduit but we need to use the terms "children" and "young people", which the reply does go on to do. The reply continued:

It will target a cohort of schools with high concentrations of children and young people experiencing intergenerational disadvantage where there is a significant gap in outcomes and there are barriers to those children and young people achieving their potential.

Intergenerational disadvantage needs to be taken together with intergenerational trauma. The reality on the ground in schools is that young people are not succeeding to the best of their ability because of intergenerational trauma and disadvantage. You cannot separate them out. You also cannot find that data on the HP deprivation index. That is one way of looking at it but you have to be able to see what is going on in a family. If they are living in private rented accommodation, that is not taken into consideration. If you are living in a fancy housing estate but are on the housing assistant payment, HAP, because you happened to get a landlord who would rent there, that is not counted. That is a big disadvantage when trying to identify those families who need additional support. DEIS needs to follow the child and not only the school.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): The Minister, Deputy Naughton, sends her apologies. For my part, I was a teacher for 17 years. I fully concur with many of the comments the Deputy has made. She is right that the importance of this issue is such that it requires a rigorous and methodical approach and evaluation by everybody. I have always been of the same view as the Deputy that it is about following the student. She is right about that and I agree with her. I thank her for raising this very important issue.

Educational disadvantage is a key priority for the Minister and the wider Government. The DEIS programme is a key policy initiative for addressing concentrated disadvantage at school level. Where I disagree with the Deputy is that I think it has worked quite well. The Deputy is right that it is not a panacea for everything but it has worked quite well. When schools did not attain DEIS status, they were completely discommoded. There was a disconnect. That was a mistake. Supplementing universal supports, the DEIS programme provides a fair and targeted way to address concentrated educational disadvantage that promotes equity and meets the needs of children and young people. The DEIS programme currently supports almost 1,200 primary and post-primary schools, reaching approximately 260,000 students with an annual investment of €180 million. This year's budget allocates an additional €16.5 million, which will rise to €48 million in next year's budget, to support the implementation of a new DEIS strategy and introduce the DEIS plus scheme, which will commence this year.

The new DEIS strategy, which will include the DEIS plus scheme, will be published in the first quarter of this year. At its core, this strategy will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of children at risk of educational disadvantage, developing more innovative approaches to tackling education disadvantage and working towards a more flexible system of supports to ensure that a school can receive the right support at the right time.

The Minister is committed to narrowing the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and introducing innovative solutions to address disadvantage. Recent research, including the OECD review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage in Ireland, has highlighted the role of the DEIS programme in providing an education system that consistently outperforms many other OECD countries but also exhibits relative socioeconomic fairness, making it one of the stronger performers globally. However, this research has also highlighted that important differences in outcomes persist for students who experience very high levels of deprivation. That is why it is important to note that the Government is committed

to introducing a DEIS plus scheme to provide additional supports to schools with the highest levels of students at most risk of educational disadvantage. I hope this will take on board the Deputy's point about following the student. It will also be a model that tackles disadvantage. At its core, it must be able to be assessed in the right way. As a teacher of many years, I agree with the Deputy on that. She made reference to the intergenerational piece. The new DEIS programme will target a cohort of schools with high concentrations of children and young people experiencing that intergenerational disadvantage, where there is a significant gap in outcomes and there are barriers to those children and young people achieving their potential. I see this in my own Department, where we invest millions of euro every year. We really need to have a serious conversation about that intergenerational piece.

A DEIS plus design advisory group was established by the Department to inform the development of the DEIS plus scheme. This group includes principals, home school community liaisons and school completion programme co-ordinators who work directly with children and young people experiencing high intergenerational disadvantage. In 2024 and 2025, the Department carried out consultation workshops. The work is focused on informing key policy development. I look forward to working with the Deputy on the matter. I will bring her remarks back to the Minister.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am glad to see that we are on the same page with regard to following the child. To clarify, I do think DEIS has been extremely positive. However, it is not as positive as people thought it was going to be. When DEIS was brought in, people thought that schools would automatically become able to answer all the questions over time. They cannot because, as the Minister of State has rightly said, his Department is also responsible for intergenerational disadvantage. We cannot just pigeonhole this in the Department of Education and Youth. It has to be seen throughout Departments because, to deal with intergenerational disadvantage, we need to deal with intergenerational trauma. That is a very large thing. We in this country are only starting to understand how much it affects young people.

I am glad that the Minister of State mentioned the school completion programme. As I have said several times in here, I was a school completion co-ordinator for 18 years before I became a TD. I am very proud of that role. I would not like to see it eroded. I look forward to the Department finalising the employment and governance structure of the school completion programme, but that is for a different day.

DEIS plus should not only be about the funding it will bring.

The funding is vitally important, but it is about the services that are provided to children. The pupil-teacher ratio being reduced in DEIS schools, particularly in DEIS plus schools, is really important, as are multidisciplinary teams, which are able to go in to address specifically, not generally, the needs of children and young people and see where they are at. I do not want to see professionals coming in to tell teachers how to do it. Teachers are teachers; they are not therapists. We need to make sure that professional therapists are in there who can support those children at the worst times of their lives, when they are dealing with things going on for them.

I will also say, and this is not talked about quite a lot, that I want to see an opportunity for the arts, as part of social inclusion, to be brought back into schools. This was removed a number of years ago, but it is so important. I know it is something that is being worked on by Professor Paul Downes and people in DCU. Professor Downes is part of that working strategy.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising many pertinent points, which I do not disagree with. She is right that it is not just about funding. During my own career, it was not just about funding. This is about that wraparound service and that engagement. It is not just about being able to measure but being able to have students reach their full potential. It is not just about literacy and numeracy. The Deputy mentioned the arts but it is also the socialisation piece and, for example, the hot school meals programme. She is right.

I will make the point that the Government is committed, in a cross-departmental way, to tackling child poverty. We see education as the enabler to achieve that. The development of the DEIS plus scheme will be a further positive step in our commitment to lifting more children out of poverty and giving them the future they deserve. I will take back the points the Deputy made. I genuinely share some of the views she has. We get that because we are on the ground. We are in the classroom and the school community. We are engaging with home school liaisons. I am a former director of adult education and taught the applied leaving certificate. There is also the issue of school completion. It is not just about the funding piece. We cannot say that we will allocate X amount of money and then just throw that at it. That does not always work, as we both know.

The new DEIS strategy to be published this year will set a future roadmap that will support children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. It is to be hoped it will empower them to reach their full potential. The strategy will focus on improving opportunity and achievement levels for children and young people, but it will also ensure that in the school community we can develop more innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage and tackle that intergenerational piece we have to keep working at. The point is, which maybe goes back to what the Deputy is trying to say, it should be a flexible system of supports to ensure the school can receive the right support at the right time for the student, person, pupil or child, whether they are a teenager or primary school student.

I look forward to working with the Deputy on this. The Government is committed to tackling educational disadvantage and reducing child poverty. I thank her for raising the matter.

Bus Services

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Late buses, ghost buses, cancelled buses, buses that go past you because they are packed at peak hours and areas that have been completely abandoned: BusConnects is a shambles. Drivers are stressed to bits with the present box system. They are being harassed and disciplined because they cannot meet ridiculous timetables, with unrealistic routes and timetable requirements. It is an absolute shambles for commuters trying to use the bus system to get to work, for older people, disabled people and students, and for bus drivers who are harassed to bits. All of that is compounded by the privatisation of the system and apps that tell different information. If you go on the Transport for Ireland app, it tells you one thing, *bustimes.org* tells you something else and reality tells you something else again. It is absolute chaos.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, explains ghost buses as being a result of longer routes and cross-city routes. We told it that when BusConnects was first designed. Some of the worst examples I am getting are in my own area. These are the east spine routes, which

used to be the 46A and other routes. My colleague, Councillor Conor Reddy from Finglas, says it is the same with the F spine, which affects Finglas, Tallaght and so on. In the first week of the F spine in his area, he got 350 emails with complaints about buses not turning up and so on.

The question is what we are going to do about it. I have not got time to go into it, but Go-Ahead is performing even worse than Dublin Bus. The whole thing is an absolute shambles. Does the Government recognise the problem? What is it going to do about it?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I feel that every couple of weeks for the last number of years, I have been getting up here giving out about ghost buses, buses that are put out of order or are packed and people cannot get on them, buses that are cancelled, people waiting forever and people not being able to rely on basic public transport services in this country. There is no recognition by the Government of the fundamental issues. There are staffing shortages, which is an underlying issue, but there are also other issues. It is very clear that privatisation is a disastrous experiment for which workers and commuters are paying the price, if we look at the figures for the lack of punctuality and fines for Go-Ahead. Go-Ahead has 22% of the fines for buses in Dublin but only provides 12% of the services. That is on the one hand. On the other hand are new spine routes that simply do not make sense.

I will give some anecdotes from Dublin South-West to go with that overall picture. Up until the F spine, the routes that we got most complaints about all the time were the S6 and the S8 and the lower frequency routes of the W6 and W2. What is the common feature of all of those? They are all Go-Ahead routes. The S6 has so many problems that it has its own Instagram account, *I hate the S6*, used by students who are going from Tallaght or Blackrock to UCD to highlight all the problems with it. I will give an example from the W6 from Tallaght to Maynooth where, last Thursday, a constituent and 15 other people, to be exact, were waiting at The Square bus terminus for over half an hour for the next bus, not leaving the stop in case it showed up, which it did not, in freezing cold 2°C weather. On the F spine, people are telling me again and again that their journeys into town have been increased by half an hour. We have this new high-frequency route, but because the route is going to places that do not make sense and are not made for a whole number of buses to be going to, the routes have slowed down significantly. That is the NTA's fault, not Dublin Bus's fault.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputies. I am taking the matter for the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who apologises that he cannot be here. As both of them know quite well, the Minister has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, but neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operations of the public transport service. That rests with the NTA, which both Deputies articulated. I will not insult them by telling them that. I appreciate and acknowledge the remarks they both made in the context of the experience of commuters and the travelling public. It highlights the importance of the need for BusConnects to be completed. I assure both of them that the Government is committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options. Public transport plays a key role in delivery of this goal.

As I said, it is unacceptable that members of the travelling public, as both Deputies articulated, have experienced no buses, ghost buses or late buses. The reply given to them outlines a variety of reasons for bus cancellations, which will be available on the record of the

House. The issue of staff availability is an issue that is ongoing. It is not just about Dublin; it is in Cork as well. The most frequent reason for bus cancellations on routes is related to traffic congestion and traffic delays. The key point I will make to all is that it is not about lack of investment by the Government. The Government is committed to public transport, which has been seen in the budgetary allocation.

I appreciate that this is discommoding for members of the travelling public. It is unacceptable that buses have to be cancelled. It has an impact on passengers. That is unacceptable. The frequent occurrence of this is in part because of the high volume of traffic. There are a variety of reasons, but it is important to recognise that the NTA has a responsibility in this matter. Phase 7 of BusConnects, the F spine, is a good example of the responsiveness of the NTA to the challenging environment in Dublin. The most extensive phase of BusConnects to date, phase 7, was launched on 19 October. While that involved the removal of some services, new services and changes have been introduced, including the 24-hour spines F1, F2, 80 and F3, which aim to enhance connectivity across the capital and support Dublin's growing night-time economy.

10 o'clock

New local and radial services, such as the 23, 24, 73, 82 and L89 services, now serve areas including Ballymun, Finglas, Charlestown, Walkinstown and Liffey Valley. Following feedback from passengers and local representatives, alignment changes were made to a number of these routes and the NTA is reviewing further amendments to the routes to tackle challenges to reliability. With regard to ghost buses, when a service is cancelled the operator is required to cancel the service on the system that monitors bus locations and feeds the real-time information system. While that generally does happen, there have been some occurrences where the relevant operator personnel did not input the cancellation in a timely manner. The NTA continues to monitor this issue and to stress to operators the need for timely inputs of cancellations where they occur.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about the issue of apps. Tomorrow, in Question Time in the Dáil, there will be a number of questions on the apps. It is unacceptable for people to have to rely on different forms of information where there is an app available that should have, in real time, the pertinent, relevant information. I will bring the Deputies' points about the S6 route back to the Department. I am not familiar with the route because it is not in my locality but I will certainly look at the Instagram account and feed it back to the NTA. It is unacceptable for someone to wait in subzero temperatures for half an hour for a bus to Maynooth and for it not to show up. I take the points the Deputies raised on behalf of people who want to use public transport. We must give them certainty and a guarantee that public transport will work for them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not even have time to go through the number of issues I have but I will try to get some of them out. With BusConnects, many areas were abandoned, particularly working-class areas with older populations. Finglas east no longer has any connection to the north inner city whatsoever. Ballinteer no longer has any connection to Dún Laoghaire. These are older populations. Why does the Minister of State think people then get into cars, which increases congestion? The 46A and the 145 services, which are now the E spine routes, going past UCD, no longer have any connection with Heuston Station, where

many of the students come to the universities from. It is crazy. We said this. Buses on many of the spines crossing the city are guaranteed to get caught up in congestion. We said in advance that these things would not work. Privatisation makes it all even worse because Go-Ahead does not give the same decent pay and conditions to people, so it cannot hold onto mechanics and bus drivers. As a result, it does not even have the people to operate buses on the route. It is a shambles and the Government has to do something about it, not just say it is terrible.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is Government policy to slice and dice and privatise our routes in Dublin. By every metric of reliability, punctuality and penalties incurred, Go-Ahead is much worse than Dublin Bus. Why then is the Government persisting with privatising routes and giving them to Go-Ahead? Why are they not returned to Dublin Bus? Will the Government call a halt to the plans to privatise even more routes to Go-Ahead, including routes 56A, 65 and 77A, in light of all of the evidence shown that Go-Ahead provides a much worse service? It is interesting that in the answer, the F spine is given as a good example. I got an email a few days ago that takes on board all the changes. It states that the F1 bus:

takes nearly 2 hours from O'Connell Street to the Square, and that journey was taken in Saturday afternoon traffic. The amalgamations made for this route were frankly ridiculous, and the bus travels through several small estates lacking in necessary traffic infrastructure to properly facilitate a bus route. These residents have lost their previously efficient 49, 54A and other routes and the new F1 is not a suitable replacement.

I could go on and on with similar stories.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Murphy might forward that to me because it is important that we bring feedback to the NTA. I assure the Deputies that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, and the Department, fully recognise that transport connectivity is hugely important for people who live, work and study. Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned the link to Heuston Station. It beggars belief that there is no link from Heuston Station to the colleges he referred to.

From a Government point of view, public transport connectivity is key to revitalising our villages, towns and urban centres. By expanding the public transport network and increasing service levels, as outlined in policies like Connecting Ireland and BusConnects, we are aiming to achieve more balanced regional development and greater connectivity for all public transport users. BusConnects has already achieved significant success in transforming Dublin's public transport network, notwithstanding the challenges the Deputies have articulated. Recently, research carried out for the NTA by Ipsos B&A showed that four in five customers have expressed satisfaction with the services of BusConnects and 45% believe the bus service has improved. I know we have a journey to travel. The NTA and Department will continue to collaborate with operators and customers to enhance the punctuality and reliability of services throughout the network redesign.

I thank the Deputies for raising these matters. I will be happy to take the points they have made. I have taken note of the issues they have raised because it is about the travelling public.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Can we send information on to the Minister of State?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Please do. I encourage the Deputy to do so. If we do not take the experiences of the travelling public on board, then we cannot learn. There are mistakes and gaps. I would be the first to say that. I see it in my city of Cork. I am not living in an ivory tower. I use the bus in Cork. I recognise this when I meet people. Going back to the Deputies' fundamental point, it is crazy, in a world with the technology we have, that an app cannot have correct real-time information for members of the travelling public. That drives people daft. It increases the volume of emails to the Deputies and the levels of anger and frustration. I will bring this back to the Department.

Uisce Éireann Infrastructure Delivery, Accountability and Repair Timelines: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Michael Collins: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges that:

- a significant proportion of the State's public drinking water and wastewater infrastructure remains leaking, overloaded, obsolete or non-compliant, resulting in boil water notices, service interruptions, supply restrictions and untreated or partially treated wastewater discharges;
- persistent delays in the delivery, repair and replacement of water and wastewater infrastructure have created direct blockages to housing delivery, public health protection, economic activity and environmental compliance;
- Uisce Éireann has repeatedly failed to meet expected performance standards in leakage reduction, network renewal, upgrade delivery and system resilience, while many communities continue to endure chronic outages, repeated pipe failures and wastewater incidents;
- existing statutory and regulatory frameworks do not impose clear and enforceable repair or replacement timelines on Uisce Éireann following the detection of leaks, bursts or wastewater failures;
- communities affected by repeated infrastructure failures currently have no guaranteed consultation process, no published delivery schedule and no certainty as to whether or when permanent solutions will be delivered; and
- the centralisation of water services has weakened local accountability, reduced responsiveness to community-level failures and contributed to slow and opaque decision-making on urgent infrastructure needs;

notes that:

- prolonged discharges of raw or partially treated wastewater into rivers, coastal waters and sensitive catchments represent an ongoing risk to public health and environmental quality and undermine confidence in national infrastructure governance;

- large volumes of treated drinking water continue to be lost through chronic leakage, placing avoidable pressure on treatment capacity and increasing operational costs;
- repeated short-term repairs without full pipe replacement have resulted in cycles of failure in many towns, villages and urban neighbourhoods, leaving residents without confidence in the reliability of public water supply;
- the absence of statutory repair deadlines has allowed wastewater leaks and discharges to persist for extended periods without guaranteed interim mitigation or permanent remediation;
- delays in water and wastewater capacity upgrades have directly impeded housing delivery, public services, tourism and enterprise development, despite lands being zoned and planning permission granted; and
- the current model provides no structured mechanism for early engagement with communities experiencing persistent failures, unlike the pre-planning consultation processes required for private development; and

calls on the Government to:

- legislate for mandatory statutory timelines, requiring Uisce Éireann to commence mitigation works for wastewater leaks or discharges within one month of detection and to complete permanent repairs or provide an approved interim solution within a defined and enforceable period thereafter;
- require Uisce Éireann to establish binding replacement timelines for water mains in communities experiencing repeated bursts or chronic leakage, including full pipe renewal rather than recurring temporary repairs;
- place a statutory obligation on Uisce Éireann to publish repair and replacement schedules for affected communities, including clear dates, scope of works and interim measures;
- require Uisce Éireann to introduce a formal community engagement process, comparable to pre-planning consultation, in areas experiencing persistent water or wastewater failures, ensuring residents and local authorities are informed in advance of proposed works, timelines and expected outcomes;
- require Uisce Éireann to operate a properly functioning communication line and escalation channel for public representatives, to allow timely resolution of issues, clear status updates and improved accountability;
- establish binding delivery schedules for wastewater treatment plants, network upgrades and strategic leakage-reduction programmes, with annual reporting to the Houses of the Oireachtas on progress, delays and compliance;
- reform regulatory oversight so that verified wastewater discharges and serious non-compliance events are reported publicly in a timely and transparent manner, with escalation mechanisms where failures persist;

- require Uisce Éireann to publish a national infrastructure capacity and delivery map identifying constraints, upgrade priorities and timelines to support housing activation and public infrastructure planning;
- allow a regulated alternative delivery route for essential water and wastewater projects where Uisce Éireann cannot provide capacity within a reasonable timeframe, using approved public/private or developer-led models, subject to domestic regulatory approval and public ownership or control of strategic water assets; and
- establish a performance-linked funding framework for Uisce Éireann and relevant agencies, tying elements of capital allocation to timely delivery, leakage reduction, repair compliance, infrastructure resilience and environmental performance.

Our motion speaks to a truth. Too many communities in Ireland already know that our public water and wastewater systems are not just creaking, but they are failing, and those failures are costing us homes, health, habitats and hope. A significant portion of our infrastructure is leaking, overloaded, obsolete or non-compliant. That reality shows up as boil water notices, service interruptions, supply restrictions and raw or partially treated sewage discharges into our rivers and coastal waters. It shows up as stalled housing schemes, planning refusals and shuttered community amenities. It shows up in the daily lives of families who cannot rely on a glass of safe water from the tap. It shows up in the starkest terms in west Cork, where communities have waited not for months, but for years, and decades in some cases, for basic, permanent fixes.

This is not a funding footnote or a scheduling slip. It is a systemic problem of delivery, accountability and transparency. Uisce Éireann has repeatedly failed to meet performance standards on leakage reduction, network renewal, upgrade delivery and system resilience, while too many communities face chronic outages, repeated bursts and wastewater incidents with no certainty as to when permanent solutions will be delivered.

Our motion is rooted in the lived experiences we have brought to the House again and again. Allow me to set out a few of the worst affected places in Cork South-West. This is a national picture but I will give it closer to home at the moment. Since last July, Adrigole in the Beara Peninsula has suffered up to 14 water outages, cutting off farms, schools and crèches for days at a time. One outage led to closures. Others forced families with small babies to move out temporarily. A critical asbestos pipe along the Healy Pass needs replacement, yet crews have been out again and again for short-term fixes, sometimes for two weeks at a time, rather than replacing the failing section. People there rightly ask why a Dublin burst is addressed in hours, while Adrigole waits and waits. That is the definition of unequal services. Over Christmas, they had yet another water outage, making it 15 since last July.

Shannonvale, near Clonakilty, has endured a 26-year saga of sewage flooding a village green, which was a community field, and contaminating a local playground. Despite community action and repeated representation, transparency and timelines have been elusive. In 2025, Uisce Éireann was prosecuted by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and fined in the District Court for breaches at Shannonvale Park, yet the core project still lacks a clear, funded and time-bound solution. Workshops are convened, cancelled and reconvened. Designs are approved and then sent back to the drawing board. It is a case study in institutional drift, with real environmental and public health consequences.

For a decade, untreated or poorly treated wastewater has repeatedly threatened Ballydehob Bay, part of the Roaringwater Bay and islands special area of conservation under the EU habitats directive.

I raised the case in this House. Community petitions have sought urgent action yet the upgrade remains stuck in a long queue while biodiversity and community development bear the cost. Across the towns of Goleen, Rosscarbery and Dunmanway, the theme is the same - no meaningful investment, rising environmental risk and growth stalled by infrastructure that is either at capacity or failing. In Dunmanway in particular, the wastewater treatment plant is operating at capacity and has overloaded imposing effective planning bans. That means young families cannot get permission to build homes in their own town. We are told proper relief may not come until 2032. A temporary job may be done just to seal up some modes but for a generation trying to put down roots, 2032 is not a plan; it is a lock on the door.

These are symptoms of a system that responds slowly, communicates poorly and plans without enforceable obligations to deliver. Our motion responds with the practical enforceable measures. We want statutory repair timelines. When a wastewater leak or discharge is detected, mitigation must begin within one month with a defined and enforceable timeframe to deliver permanent repair or an improved interim solution. Communities like Shannonvale cannot endure year after year of workshop purgatory. We want binding replacement schedules for chronic mains failures. Where bursts are repeated, their default must be full mains renewal and not another patch over of an asbestos or legacy pipe that is certain to fail again as Adrigole has shown. We want transparent public schedules. Uisce Éireann must publish repair and replacement schedules for affected areas with dates, scope and interim measures so people know what is coming and with no more opaque timelines and no more "we will revert".

We want formal community engagement for persistent failure. If private developers are obliged to consult in preplanning then a semi-State body should be obliged to engage with communities facing repeated failures before and not after the next outage. We want a functioning escalation channel for public representatives. When a school has to close, a plant overflows or a village green is flooded with sewage, there must be a live line and a mandated escalation path to a responsible decision-maker with authority to act.

We want binding delivery schedules and annual Oireachtas reporting. Wastewater plant network upgrades and strategic leakage reductions must be delivered to published timelines with transparent annual reporting to this House and progress delays and compliance. We want to reform regulatory oversight with timely public reporting. Verified discharges and serious non-compliance events should trigger prompt public reporting and escalation. Communities should not learn about failures from social media. We want national capacity and a delivery map. A live national map should be published identifying constraints, priorities and timelines. Housing cannot be planned on hope. Councils and communities need hard data to activate zoned lands. We want alternative regulated delivery routes. Where Uisce Éireann cannot provide capacity in a reasonable timeframe, we need a regulated path for public, private or developer-led delivery with domestic regulatory approval and public ownership or control of strategic assets. This is not ideology. It is urgency. We want performance linked to funding - the elements of capital allocation to timely delivery, leakage reduction, repair, compliance, resilience and environmental performance. We need to reward what works and stop paying indefinitely for what does not. We need deadlines. Focused delivery and transparency build

trust, engagement prevents conflict and performance links funding and aligns incentives with outcomes. If these principles are standards in transport, health capital and even private utility regulation, they must be standard in water and wastewater too.

Take the housing emergency. Dunmanway today is the sharp edge of a national problem. Wastewater plants are at over capacity and were leaking, blocking permissions in towns and villages across the country. In Dunmanway alone, we have seen developments cancelled and young couples told to wait nine, ten or 12 years before they can build near family, jobs and schools. Without a statutory timeline and alternative delivery routes, we consign entire communities to stagnation

Consider environmental protection. Ballydehob's proximity to a special area of conservation means that repeated discharges are not just local nuisances; they are threatening habitats and biodiversity protected under EU law. Delay multiplies risk. An enforceable timetable and transparent reporting would turn "we are working on it" into a clear milestone with consequences for slippage. Look at public confidence. Shannonvale has endured a 26-year ordeal culminating in a prosecution and a fine but fines without fixes do not restore a park, clean a river or reassure a parent. Only delivery does that.

Our motion turns accountability into action with deadlines, schedules, engagement, alternative routes and funding that follows performance. Centralisation was supposed to standardise excellence. Instead too often it has standardised silence. When the people of Adrigole or Goleen, who have been waiting 26 years with raw sewage going into the river, cannot get a straight answer or a firm date, it is astonishing. I am in the community voluntary group there. We did our best to bring people from all over the world to the council in 1999 to try to resolve the crisis and here we are 2026 in the same situation. Raw sewage is still pouring into the river but the EPA turns a blind eye because it is Uisce Éireann. If a farmer was pouring sewage into clean rivers, there would be a national crisis and he would be put out of business within a few weeks so there are double standards here. I would like to know why the EPA is aiding and abetting Uisce Éireann's shocking record by not going after it and making it accountable. There were three fines in 2024 - three fines in Ireland. There are six communities where raw sewage is going into clean waters in west Cork alone so what the name of God is the EPA doing? It is sound asleep at the wheel and is aiding and abetting this carry on. We cannot get a straight answer for a firm date from Uisce Éireann for Rosscarbery, where raw sewage is going into the water, or Dunmanway, where we see growth capped by capacity and spills. When Shannonvale sees another workshop instead of a works crew, that is a failure of accountability as much as it is a failure of engineering. Local government, public representatives and community groups need structured statutory roles in signalling affairs, setting priorities and monitoring delivery. If we treat community feedback as an obstacle rather than an early warning system, we will keep learning the same lessons at an ever greater cost.

There is a myth that delay is cheaper. It is not. Chronic leakage and waste-treated drinking water inflate operational costs. Repeated emergency calls burn resources that would be better spent on permanent renewal. Stalled housing imposes fiscal and social costs while pollution triggers remediation, institutional damage and legal liability.

The choice is not spend now or save later. The real choice is between planned investment with accountability and unplanned crisis spending without end. Communities in west Cork and Ireland are not asking for luxuries. They are asking for the basics - safe water, reliable

wastewater treatment plants, timely repairs and credible plans that they can see and trust. Adrigole should not be left counting its 14th outage, Shannonvale should not be left counting its 26-year problem, Ballydehob should not be left counting 17 years and Goleen should not be left counting 26 years. They should not be left counting the species at risk. Dunmanway should not be left counting the years to 2032 while a generation gives up on building homes.

This House has the power to change that. By supporting this motion, we move from promises to proof, from press releases to published schedules and from "we will revert" to "we will deliver". We will put timelines into law, transparency into operation and performance into funding. We will bring local voices into rooms and ensure that when things go wrong, there is a number to call and someone on the other end.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: One of the biggest problems of this Government over the past ten to 15 years has been its absolute inability to build infrastructure. Probably the biggest legacy element of the Government is that it cannot deliver necessary infrastructure and could not deliver it on time. Regardless of whether we are looking at housing, healthcare and hospitals, transport infrastructure like motorways, rail lines and roads or water infrastructure, it is a hallmark or fingerprint of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that they simply cannot deliver infrastructure. One of the reasons for that is the fact most of their Ministers are simply passengers on the bus. They are reading press statements delivered by the permanent government, they are not in charge of the direction of Departments and they are not driving the situation for people. This is having an enormous impact on people's lives. On a range of different issues now the fabric of society is being negatively affected by the Government's inability to build infrastructure.

For years I have noticed that when an election comes up the Government does not want to talk about the subject of infrastructure that affects people's lives. It is much happier to launch a tax cut at a certain rate to get on the front pages of the Sunday papers before an election. The Government has never taken infrastructure properly seriously over the past number of years.

A number of things are happening. After the crash, the Government for ten years had the lowest spend on infrastructure in the whole of the European Union bar Romania. Only Romania beat us to the bottom rung of that ladder for infrastructural spend. For more than a decade we did not even keep up with the depreciation of our capital infrastructure, never mind building the new infrastructure. The second thing is that there has been a massive increase in population. The infrastructural capital we have is coming under enormous pressure from the population increase. The third element is the lack of accountability in the system. Due to the lack of accountability in the system, there has not been the necessary pressure to make sure infrastructural development is happening. That is having a large effect on society.

In terms of housing, water infrastructure has an enormous impact. Uisce Éireann appeared at the infrastructure committee a couple of months ago. I asked its representatives how long it would take them to fill the gaps in water infrastructure that are currently blocking the building of homes in Ireland. They said, as if it were a positive, that by 2050 they will have those gaps filled. For at least another 25 years, we will have the absence of water infrastructure preventing the building of homes in Ireland. The housing crisis is going on so long that people have nearly become used to it. However, it is still shocking to think the housing crisis could be rolling on for another 25 years. Another element is the massive level of leakages that are happening. In

the Dublin area we know that 35% of water that is treated and pumped through the system is being lost through the haphazard infrastructure in the Dublin region. At the same time the Government is looking to take water from the acting chair's constituency in the Parteen basin and pump it to Dublin, a project that will cost billions of euro if it happens on time at all, rather than fixing the problem that exists. Most people's first instinct, where you are losing product and replacing it, is to fix where you are losing it, so you do not have the added cost of generating more of the product to fill what is being lost.

The first responsibility of a government is to keep the lights on and put water in the taps. Right now, this Government is famously failing to keep the lights on. There are many electricity outages throughout the country at the moment, which are hardly being reported. It also needs to put water in the taps. I will give an example from my constituency in County Meath. In the past two years there have been 125 water outages in the Trim area. That is incredible. That is Third World standard. It is developing country standard delivery of infrastructure. It is incredible. During Christmas gone by a whole swathe of Trim had no water for three days over Christmas. This is not a luxury product we are talking about. For people with disabilities, older people and people with young children, this is an absolute necessity and yet the Government has not been able to deliver that water into the infrastructure on time and when needed. It is not a once-off; it is 125 times. Water infrastructure in the whole of County Meath is massively underdelivered. That has had a negative effect on our ability to bring industry into the county and to create jobs and therefore business rates that go into the development of community facilities, including such things as playgrounds. Even in places like Enfield, Ballivor and Summerhill we have had tanks of water being driven into those towns to deliver water to individuals. We have had cafes, shops and restaurants closing for full days with the loss of that income because of the lack of water delivery. This has not been happening for a week, a month or a year. It is happening for well over a decade. It is astounding that Fianna Fáil cannot do infrastructure. It is a disaster when it comes to infrastructure. As a result, there is major suffering in society. It took two hours for people in Meath to get to work in Dublin today because of the lack of a rail line Noel Dempsey promised in 1996 that if we are lucky will be completed in 2036; 42 years from concept to completion. It was built in three years in 1896 with picks and shovels. That is the compare and contrast of this Government's inability to build infrastructure now compared with what it was in the past.

Sewage being deposited in rivers and in the sea in this country is an absolute disgrace. If it were farmers, business people or any other sector of society the State would be down on them like a ton of bricks. There would be massive fines and real pressure put on those individuals to make sure they are cleaning the water before it gets into the rivers. This Government through its public companies is delivering sewage wholesale into the water system, doing enormous damage to drinking water, bathing water and to the biodiversity that exists in many of the rivers in this country. Our water systems are sick because of this Government's lack of ability to build infrastructure. Contrast that with the billions of euro at its disposal. We have nothing to show for the billions of euro we have received over the past two decades, except incompetency.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

- the Government's vision for water services is set out in the Water Services Policy Statement 2024 to 2030 (February 2024), which sets out three main objectives; availability and reliability, safety and quality and sustainability, along with a series of related priorities for water services delivery in the period to 2030, and beyond;
- the Government's Water Sector Transformation Policy Paper (February 2021) further sets the vision for water services based on the full integration of water services provided by 31 local authorities into one national authority;
- the objective is to deliver a world-class public water services authority that meets customer needs, operates in line with best practice, represents value for money, and facilitates economic development in urban and rural locations;
- Uisce Éireann is the national utility for drinking water and wastewater services;
- Uisce Éireann manage and operate some 700 water treatment plants, 1,000 wastewater treatment plants and over 4,000 water and wastewater pumping stations;
- Uisce Éireann oversees over 65,000 kilometres (km) of water pipes and over 26,000 km of public sewers all processing roughly 3 billion litres of water and wastewater every day;
- all of these assets and all of this activity is dedicated to delivering vital services to almost two million homes and business premises;
- Uisce Éireann supplies drinking water to over 80 per cent of the population, 10 per cent of households get their drinking water from private wells while the remaining 6 per cent of households have their drinking water supplied by group schemes;
- in relation to wastewater, two thirds of households are connected to public wastewater services provided by Uisce Éireann, with virtually all of the remaining one third of households disposing of wastewater using septic tanks;
- Uisce Éireann's Board has responsibility for ensuring that the company delivers on its mandate and properly accounts for the financial resources made available to it;
- Uisce Éireann is subject to economic regulation by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, that provides a constraint over the funding while monitoring performance and providing a complaints resolution service to customers; and
- Uisce Éireann is subject to a dual audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and commercial auditors along with being accountable to the Oireachtas Public Accounts Committee;

further notes that:

- Uisce Éireann consistently meets high standards in the supply of drinking water, with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) noting in its most recent report in 2024, that 99.8 per cent of drinking water supplies meet all relevant standards, confirming that water provided by Uisce Éireann is safe to drink and that the EPA is providing robust regulatory oversight of Uisce Éireann when issues do arise;

- Uisce Éireann has completed new wastewater infrastructure for 135 towns and villages, including the elimination of raw sewage discharges from 15 towns and villages;
- urban wastewater is fourth in terms of sectoral pressure on water bodies behind agriculture, hydromorphology and forestry;
- in the past 11 years, Uisce Éireann has ramped up capital delivery for water services and infrastructure from €300 million in 2014 to roughly €1.3 billion in 2025;
- finding and fixing leaks is difficult and resource intensive work, but investment by Uisce Éireann of €2 billion over the last ten years has meant that Uisce Éireann has made significant progress and reduced leakage nationally from 48 per cent to 36 per cent; and
- Uisce Éireann has advanced major projects in water supply and wastewater treatment notably the Water Supply Project – Eastern and Midlands Region and the Greater Dublin Drainage Project that will be transformational and two of the biggest infrastructure projects in the history of the State; and

highlights that:

- the Government is delivering a sustainable funding path to further enhance the ongoing significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services;
- under the revised National Development Plan (NDP), the Government has scaled up support for the water sector with a record allocation of €12.2 billion in funding out to 2030;
- Uisce Éireann will be allocated 95 per cent or €11.7 billion of the NDP funding over the next five years to support the delivery of a wide range of projects in our cities and regions required for housing delivery, safeguarding public health and the environment;
- crucially, the delivery of the additional water services under the NDP will enable the capacity required for our new housing targets;
- Uisce Éireann will implement a large national growth programme along with an enhanced Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme, to support our housing delivery for our urban and rural communities; and
- only a national authority, backed by strong Government investment in water infrastructure, will deliver the standard of water and wastewater networks and environmental management systems required by Irish citizens and consumers in the 21st century."

I thank the Deputies for the opportunity to speak on this important matter. Our water infrastructure is vital to our health, our economy and our environment. Access to safe and clean drinking water for everyone is a top priority for the Government. The process of establishing Uisce Éireann as a stand-alone public utility continues to be a work in progress and it is only at the end of this year that the link with local authorities will finally be broken. The motivation for a stand-alone utility stems from the inherent inefficiencies of a fragmented network operated by 31 local authorities. It has also been stated and acknowledged many times in the House that a legacy of underinvestment in our water infrastructure by the local authorities means that there are many challenges Uisce Eireann is now seeking to address while also

providing for significantly increased capacity for future business and population growth. We all see the evidence of the challenges in our constituencies linked to creaking infrastructure or the demands of growth.

I am therefore working closely with Uisce Éireann to seek to ensure that the necessary resources are available to it and the challenges are tackled on a prioritised basis. There are record levels of funding being provided through the new national development plan. The scale of remedial work necessary in our water and wastewater systems will however take a number of years and investment cycles to resolve. Where new treatment plants or significant upgrades of existing plants are required, the design, planning procurement, construction and commissioning processes can take significant time. Through the national development plan, the Government is delivering a sustainable funding path to drive significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services. Since its inception as Ireland's single public water utility in 2014, Uisce Éireann has steadily grown its capital investment in our water infrastructure, from €300 million in 2014 to €1.4 billion in 2026. However, this is only the start. Under the revised national development plan, €11.7 billion is being invested in Uisce Éireann to secure our water infrastructure for the future. This investment covers every part of our water infrastructure and every community, from the smallest to the largest, both urban and rural.

In terms of environmental compliance, it is important to acknowledge that Uisce Éireann consistently meets high standards in the supply of drinking water as outlined in the motion, confirming that water provided by Uisce Éireann is safe to drink. The most recent EPA report on wastewater treatment covering 2024 noted that 92% of our large urban areas comply with EU standards for wastewater and 96% of our bathing waters are also compliant. When issues do arise and are identified by the EPA through its priority areas list, Uisce Éireann works actively to address these, with dedicated resources and specific plans.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, is the independent economic regulator of Uisce Éireann. The CRU provides a constraint over Uisce Éireann revenue, improving investment plans while monitoring performance and ensuring it runs efficiently. The CRU also has a role in protecting customers by setting service standards, handling complaints and providing dispute resolution for customer complaints that cannot be resolved with Uisce Éireann. Apart from being scrutinised by its statutory regulator, Uisce Éireann is also subject to rigorous financial scrutiny by way of dual audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General and commercial auditors, as well as being accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts and appearing before various other Oireachtas committees.

I am well aware that there are concerns about communications between Uisce Éireann and the public, including public representatives. I met last year the chairman of Uisce Éireann and raised this issue. I have received assurances that it is a priority for the company. Uisce Éireann has constant contact with a diverse and large group of customers, communities and stakeholders through multiple channels daily. The means include online, digital and social media channels, along with a free text alert service that provides water-supply updates and information to customers across 1.6 million households and businesses. Uisce Éireann also maintains a vulnerable customer register, where more or specialist support is offered, particularly in the case of an incident.

Uisce Éireann also provides a dedicated service for elected representatives. Over the past ten years, Uisce Éireann has responded to over 100,000 queries directly received from over 1,100 elected representatives. Uisce Éireann holds annual in-person councillor workshops for all 31 local authorities to provide an update on service delivery and current and future investment in each county. However, I accept that communications by Uisce Éireann need to be improved significantly.

Uisce Éireann is the national utility for drinking water and wastewater services, with the objective of providing a world-class public water service that meets customer needs, operates in line with best practice, represents value for money and facilitates economic development in urban and rural locations. The Government is committed to ensuring all areas of our water infrastructure are strengthened and that all our communities feel the benefits of this unprecedented investment in water services. Only a national water utility, backed by strong Government investment in water infrastructure, will deliver the standard of water and wastewater networks and environmental management systems required by our people for the 21st century. I will continue to work closely with Uisce Éireann and my colleagues across the Dáil and Seanad to ensure we remain firmly on the pathway to improved services delivery for all of our citizens.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Next is the Independent Technical Group, beginning with an Teachta Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have already spoken.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Tá go maith. I call Deputy Ken O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Chair. I will be taking the time of Deputy Gogarty as he is detained.

I thank the Minister for his speech. He mentioned a minute and a half into it that Uisce Éireann has a dedicated service not only for elected representatives but also for the most vulnerable. I have attended many of the meetings with Uisce Éireann. As Members may be aware, I have raised in this House the appalling water conditions on the northside of Cork city and the southside, in the Taoiseach's own constituency. Questions were put to Uisce Éireann on vulnerable people with brown water, lead in water and water that is undrinkable. We asked what happens if the person affected is visually impaired. The reply from the engineers of Uisce Éireann was that he or she should be asked to call a neighbour or ring a friend so they could possibly check the water for him or her or fill jugs of water the night before an issue arises. That is not a proper answer for somebody who is visually impaired. When Uisce Éireann gives the Minister some speaking notes for this House, I do not know if it is being 100% accurate.

I want to refer to my own constituency, Cork North-Central. We received a briefing not so long ago from Uisce Éireann telling us that replacing the lead pipes and broken pipes in the constituency would entail a €1 billion project. That is not frightening money when we realise the amount of infrastructure needed. We were told that if in a wonderful world the Department of Finance granted the €1 billion needed for the northside of the city, it would take, at the

current rate of delivery of Uisce Éireann across Cork, 96 years to replace every broken pipe that has been in place since Victorian times. That is what we are told in Cork.

I have brought the water into this House and showed it to the Taoiseach. I am sure he has been in houses on the southside of the city – around the Turners Cross area, where he is from originally – where the water is brown and murky even if left running for three to six hours. People cannot take showers, bathe children or put a load in the washing machine. There are people who have had to replace shower units three, four or five times in the past three years. People have had to replace washing machines and people have had expensive bedding destroyed because they did not know what was going to come out of the tap. People cannot fill a kettle any more. Pubs and cafes are running a risk. Most pubs on the northside of the city and in parts of the city centre have disconnected their ice machines. We do not know when we wake up in the morning whether we can actually go to the tap and have a glass of water, something you would think is a basic right.

Very often, we turn on our televisions and see appeals for villages in Africa or footage of water coming out of taps in African villages. That brown, dirty, murky water is exactly the same colour as the water coming out of the taps in Cork city. The Minister should reflect on that for a moment. That is what people on the northside, in my constituency, and parts of the southside of the city, in the Taoiseach's own constituency, must deal with daily. They have been doing so not for one, two or three months but for over five years. They have been putting up with it for over five years, only to be told a billion euro is needed and that they must wait 90 years. How can someone sell a home in Gurrabraher or Turners Cross if they cannot guarantee an engineer's report showing the water coming into that structure is safe and consumable?

We talk about water outages and burst pipes. We have had burst pipes. As public representatives, we are down on our knees, like we were over New Year's Eve, New Year's Day and the following days, begging for some water tankers for the Ballyvolane and Mayfield areas of Cork city, because people can be without water for up to six days at a time. That is what we are dealing with when dealing with Uisce Éireann.

The Minister mentioned the national representative line, which, as he has mentioned here, has received over 100,000 complaints. When you pick it up and state you are a TD, local councillor or local representative for a certain party, you are asked in the first instance, before the representation can be opened, for an eircode. This is despite the fact that you are talking about an entire community that has suffered from water damage, pipe breakage, unavailable water, or brown, dirty, filthy water coming through its pipes. The person asking for the eircode is just somebody assigned to the local area representatives' telephone line on the day rather than a provider of a dedicated service that understands the need of a community representative, local councillor or TD who is calling on behalf of a wider community.

The EPA has not been down to Cork. It has come and looked at the water and said there is a problem and that it will do this and that examination. I recognise that money has been spent in Cork city, but it has not been spent fast enough and has not been allocated in sufficient quantities, by any means. Considering that we have been told it will take 90 years to repair the problem, the Minister and I will not see the day when Cork has fresh water on the northside and when the pipes will run clear in all of the northside of the city. That is absolutely an atrocity

and a shame. My colleague in Aontú said earlier that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not do infrastructure well. They do not do infrastructure at all.

Let me give an example of something I have come across: a statement of design acceptance, SoDA, report. Recently, I was contacted by a developer who was ready to break ground. He was told before he applied for planning permission for 90 houses in the Ballyvolane area that he needed something called a SoDA report.

Honestly, I had never heard of it myself. I had to contact Uisce Éireann on 12 separate occasions by email and telephone, asking if I could get the SoDA report so this gentleman could go in and apply for planning. That was just to confirm that there was a water treatment facility. By the way, the water treatment facility was about 200 m from the site, but he could not go to Cork City Council and apply for planning. What happened then? It was delayed by nine months, and the price of houses is now up by almost €80,000 from what he intended to sell them for in the first place. That is what we are up against.

We have spoken about 35% leakage in Dublin. The leakage around the country is at an average of 40% and in some places, it is as high as 56%. We talk about infrastructure and what we can deliver around the country. I noticed that in Blarney in my own constituency, Cork City Council had to dezone hectares of land because Uisce Éireann came along and said it had no intention whatsoever of developing any water treatment in Blarney for the next 20 years. That will result in no houses being built in a satellite village outside Cork city centre. As the Minister may know, Blarney has been part of Cork city because it has been extended into the city in the last number of years. We are looking at a satellite village - my mother and father's parish of Blarney - where the people who want to stay in Blarney and invest in Blarney have no opportunity to buy a brand-new home in Blarney, and second-hand homes are just not coming up, full stop. That is what we are left with when it comes to the lack of infrastructure around my constituency in Cork.

I have looked at the Minister's response. I do not know if a civil servant wrote it for him. I do not know if Uisce Éireann gave him a press statement to read out. However, it seems that, far too often, Ministers in all the different Departments of this Government, who are operating as chairmen of their Departments, are handed scripts to read and told, "Here you go, there is the answer, do not worry about it, the best thing you can do is get out of this office and go down and cut a ribbon in Waterford, then head up to Donegal after that and unveil a plaque, here is a speech to read, turn a sod here and turn a sod there, off you go and stay out of our way because we are the permanent government." That seems to be the day-to-day business of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Administration because of poor decisions made at the top, putting people into jobs that, first, they are not interested in doing and, second, where they are looking for another gig somewhere else and their priorities are not fixing the problems that are there in front of them.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I listened very carefully to the Minister's contribution, and I have to say it was somewhat disappointing. There is no doubt that many aspects of our drinking water and wastewater systems work, and work well. I want to put on record that there have been improvements in recent years in parts of the country in the operation of the utility. However, as the Minister has heard from the Deputies proposing the motion, and as he will hear from my colleagues, there are many parts of this country where our water and wastewater treatment

services are not working adequately. While the focus of this debate is on Uisce Éireann, much of the responsibility for those failures lies in fact with the Government.

The Minister talked about significant increases in funding, but what he failed to mention, of course, was that Uisce Éireann came to the Government over two years ago seeking very significant increases in capital expenditure to meet the demand for increased water and wastewater treatment facilities in urban and rural Ireland. The Government delayed for over two years, but still today, despite the big announcement at the budget, it is unclear how much money is going to be available, when it is going to be available and for what projects.

When we were dealing with the Planning and Development Bill with the Minister's predecessor, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the utilities, including Uisce Éireann, made a very strong and compelling case to the committee that there needed to be a number of key reforms to the planning system to expedite those increased treatment facilities. We need to prioritise critical infrastructure. We need to have parallel consenting and planning approvals, and dramatic increases in staffing, both for the Planning and Environment Court and for our planning authorities. When we tabled amendments to that Bill, the Minister's party and his predecessor opposed them. Now, here we are, two years later, and the Minister is saying he is thinking about introducing the very same crucial planning reforms that we proposed over two years ago.

We also have significant EU infringement proceedings against the State for failures to transpose and, crucially, comply with both the urban wastewater treatment directive and the drinking water directive. In fact, the most recent of those infringement proceedings was initiated last year while Deputy Browne was the Minister in charge. While the number of wastewater treatment plants pouring raw sewage into our rivers, lakes and seas has reduced, it is still unacceptably high. The Minister's failure to provide sufficient capital funding and planning reforms is delaying the ability of the utility to address those.

There are also very significant legacy issues. We have already heard about the slow pace of addressing leakage, both in urban and rural Ireland, within the existing system. However, we also have over 400 housing estates that still have legacy issues arising from Celtic tiger era relating to developer-provided infrastructure, primarily in rural communities. The Government is not providing sufficient funding to the utility and local authorities to address all of those.

The Minister rightly mentioned that there were challenges and inadequacies in Uisce Éireann's communication with communities and elected representatives, particularly with local councillors, and especially in those areas, whether Cork, Donegal or elsewhere, where we are seeing some of the most significant challenges. There is a solution to that. We need to have a statutory requirement on the utility to engage in a structured manner with elected representatives and local authorities, as well as with these Houses. That is something the Minister could do as a matter of urgency.

There are many other issues that I will raise, but I will finish on this. Water is a fundamental human right. It is essential to the well-being of people, families and communities. It must be delivered by a public utility, free at the point of delivery, on the basis of need. We are not there yet. Sinn Féin will continue to make the case for those reforms. The Government is not doing enough, and it is a pity the Minister did not acknowledge that in his remarks.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This motion speaks of failings that are all too well known affecting communities in Donegal and other places. There has been a failure of the Government and Uisce Éireann to deliver basic infrastructure, including in parts of my own constituency in Donegal. In one community, 40 houses have no running water. There are people who rely on wells as a source of water this year. That is a disgrace in 2026, and a dereliction of duty by the Government.

Our island communities in Donegal are also well used to being treated as second-class citizens when it comes to water. On Arranmore and Tory Island, water quality is regularly extremely poor. On Gola Island, there is no running water at all. The pipeline was damaged back in July, and Uisce Éireann has still not provided a timeline for when running water will return to the island. I wrote to the Minister last year and wrote to the Minister with responsibility for the Gaeltacht, but they keep on telling me that it is not their responsibility. That is six months that the islanders have been waiting for answers from the Government, yet nothing is forthcoming, not even a plan, not even a date.

With regard to sewerage, in my own parish of Gaoth Dobhair, in the heart of the Gaeltacht, we have been waiting for a sewerage scheme for decades. In 2015, I submitted a complaint to the European Commission about the State's failure to deliver a sewerage scheme in Gaoth Dobhair. The Commission took infringement proceedings against the State in response and forced the delivery of a pilot scheme. In phase 1 of the scheme, 50 properties were connected. Over a decade later, we are still waiting for the other phase to commence, and Uisce Éireann tells us it will not happen for years.

Wastewater continues to be inadequately treated. There are repeated risks to coastal waters, fisheries, communities and the natural environment that this community depends on. As a consequence, what do we have? We have blocked development. Hotels, social housing and private housing cannot go ahead and local services cannot expand. My colleague talked about accountability for Uisce Éireann. It does not exist. TDs and councillors find it impossible to get answers from Uisce Éireann and to hold it accountable, or even speak to somebody who is dealing with any project. This has to change, and change quickly.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I do not think the model that we currently see with Uisce Éireann, previously Irish Water, is an accident. I think it is by design, given the way that public representatives are treated by that organisation, created by this Government. When I send the Government a parliamentary question, it is ruled out of order because it is a matter for Uisce Éireann. The way it treats public representatives is outrageous.

I will give the example of my home area of Buncrana in recent weeks. There was a water supply issue that knocked out the water connection for most of the town. I cannot get to speak to an actual human being to get an update. I have to send an email and wait days for a response. In recent days, there was a boil water notice for most of my town. There are clearly serious problems with the Uisce Éireann infrastructure in my area.

I cannot get speaking to a damn human being. I cannot get answers for my constituents nor can the local councillors. I have to send an email. This is outrageous. When something happened many years ago, I would lift the phone and talk to an employee of Donegal County Council. We would have a good conversation and I could get a proper update of where things

stood. The Minister has been a public representative for a long time. This has to stop. We need proper accountability and answers for our constituents about what is going on.

We have the Eddie Fullerton Dam. I am really proud of it. My predecessor Councillor Eddie Fullerton fought for it. It is a fantastic resource with water for our people. It passes through my town. The water is disconnected and there is a boil water notice when we could be using that water. I cannot get answers to all of these questions from Uisce Éireann. This organisation is not fit for purpose. I believe that is by design rather than by accident. It has to stop and the Minister needs to change it.

Deputy David Cullinane: I want to agree with Deputy Mac Lochlainn. We all have very similar problems with Uisce Éireann. We are on the front line of dealing with these issues. Communities come to us because they have no way themselves of getting through to Uisce Éireann. They expect that their democratically elected public representatives can get fast information for them. Through no fault of our own – because we try – we cannot. Deputy Mac Lochlainn is right. We send the emails, we get a reply and very often the reply is inadequate but it can take days to come.

I want to raise serious concerns regarding the continued failure of Uisce Éireann to address wastewater infrastructure deficits in small coastal rural communities, specifically the village of Bunmahon in County Waterford. Bunmahon is a growing coastal village, a vital local amenity and an important tourist destination yet its wastewater system is wholly inadequate. During winter months, the network regularly surcharges creating pollution risks, threatening public health and damaging the local environment. This is not a new issue. It is long standing, well documented and has been repeatedly raised by Councillor Catherine Burke, a Sinn Féin councillor, but also by Waterford City and County Council itself in email correspondence and letters to Uisce Éireann. Despite this, Bunmahon is again being excluded from Uisce Éireann's small towns and villages growth programme. That decision is deeply disappointing and unacceptable. The council has supplied extensive evidence to Uisce Éireann but gaps in monitoring – which, again, is no fault of the people who live in the village - and a lack of proactive assessment appear to be preventing Bunmahon from being fairly considered for investment. The reality is this: communities like Bunmahon are being held back not because there is no need but because there is no action. When there are deficits in water infrastructure, homes cannot be built, businesses cannot expand and environmental protections are compromised due to what is chronic under investment.

I am asking the Minister to examine this issue and, if he can, to come back to me in writing because I have to say any of the responses I have got from Uisce Éireann, as scant as they are, have been wholly inadequate.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: There are a number of issues relating to Uisce Éireann. They have been well documented here today. I want to talk about a number of issues in my home county of Galway in both the city and the county.

I am talking about certain pieces of infrastructure like wastewater infrastructure. That is basic infrastructure that any developed country should be able to provide for the people living in its cities or county areas. The lack of sufficient wastewater infrastructure is impacting on

the delivery of homes in Galway city and county. We also have a situation where sewage flows freely into the sea. That should not be happening in this day and age in Galway county.

We also have the issue mentioned earlier by Deputy Doherty. We need to have a plan for islands when it comes to water. There is a belief that our offshore islands will just not have access to water in certain periods of the year. We need a plan. The plan could take some time - I understand that - but if we as public representatives or the people themselves do not know what the long-term plan is, then this problem will continue. I am thinking of the likes of Inis Oírr. Every year, it has srianta uisce with the curtailment of water every single summer. We have had it in Inis Boffin where there was manganese in the water. We need a clear plan to be set out.

Finally, we need to ensure there are generators to make sure water is still pumped when we have a storm.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have two minutes, so I will make three quick points to the Minister but I want to make the general point that when we are talking about water, we should take stock of the picture internationally because there are so many examples of situations where privatisation has led to absolute chaos. We have seen this very clearly in relation to Thames Water. I know that privatisation is not on the agenda but people in Ireland had a lot of concern that the infrastructure for that was being created. We should continue to monitor situations internationally where privatised water systems fail people. We should continue to absorb that into the way we approach water policy.

First, on constraint and development. I hope Uisce Éireann officials are listening to this. There is increasingly an issue in Cork city where new developments could potentially come on stream but the inability for them to connect run-off or storm water to the foul drain is leading to potential refusals or refusals. That needs to be addressed because it is not sustainable and could hold back development.

Second, I want to flag how, where estates are being completed, there are too often deficits in local authority approaches in terms of ensuring compliance. I can give an example of Gleann Órga in Ballinhassig in Cork where there have been ongoing issues with wastewater management. This was due to somebody who was in the position not having completed the work adequately, leaving residents with the consequences and the local authority not dealing with it adequately. That also needs to be addressed at local authority level.

Finally, on the transfer to the new model, a lot of workers were very frustrated at how it was handled and felt the consultation was not adequate. However, even allowing for that, there was a missed opportunity in some local authorities. In Cork City Council, 70 water workers were being moved on. Only two of those went to housing in the middle of a housing crisis. That was not anywhere near good enough. It was a huge missed opportunity and a huge waste.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Along with Deputies Ó Broin, Guirke and Gould, Sinn Féin and I introduced the Water Services (Amendment) Bill last year with the specific aim of holding Uisce Éireann to account in cases of water outages and disruptions in supply. It is good legislation. The Government should enact it. It would mandate Uisce Éireann to have a dedicated response for vulnerable domestic and business customers, have a detailed

communication plan for all customers, public representatives and local authorities, including two-hourly updates, provide emergency replacement water within agreed timeframes, and have short-, medium- and long-term plans to address problems. In Meath East, we need urgent investment in wastewater infrastructure in Kells, we need urgent investment in mains water infrastructure in Duleek and we desperately need urgent investment in mains water in Dunboyne. Residents in whole swathes of Dunboyne were without water over Christmas and the new year – no toilets, no showers, no washing machines, no dishwaters, no nothing.

Communication with Uisce Éireann is disgraceful. It is completely unacceptable and the Minister needs to address it. The Sinn Féin legislation would help. When Uisce Éireann did answer in relation to Dunboyne, it said low pressure was due to increased demand. This screams about the need for critical infrastructure to be delivered with or before new housing development, of which there is a significant amount in Dunboyne, as the Minister knows. Uisce Éireann also said it has medium- and long-term fixes. That is welcome but it begs the question as to why these were not delivered before obvious problems arose. Uisce Éireann is infuriatingly casual and non-committal in relation to immediate fixes for Dunboyne. It has nothing to say in relation to interim supplies, additional pumping capacity or anything else. Like so much with Uisce Éireann, it is not good enough, it is unacceptable and it has to change. Sinn Féin and I will keep pushing until it does.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: The delivery of crucial water infrastructure by Uisce Éireann has been nothing short of a systematic and utter failure. How anyone in this Government can stand here and sing its praises is beyond comprehension. It is an absolute disgrace that, in 2026 in a supposedly First World European state, thousands of families across Carlow and Kilkenny are forced to endure Third World conditions. They pay their taxes in full yet are left with a water infrastructure that belongs in the past.

11 o'clock

How can the Minister stand over the cartel-like behaviour of Uisce Éireann's contractors? Just five years ago, installing two concrete rings cost between €5,000 and €7,000; today the same contractors charge nearly €40,000. A burst main used to cost €1,600; now it is between €9,000 and €10,000. If they lay one metre of concrete, they get paid for seven. They have vans driving around supposedly looking for leaks; in reality, it is a game of hide and seek for €1,600 per day. I am getting reports of contractors communicating with each other to drive up quotes as much as possible. As I said, it is cartel-like behaviour. The list goes on and on.

What is happening is nothing short of daylight robbery. It is theft of taxpayers' money. We must be clear in the Dáil today that what these contractors are getting away with is criminal. The conduct of and absence of accountability for Uisce Éireann and its handing out of contracts are a scandal waiting to break. As is typical of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael when it comes to public money, they squander and waste it, with little accountability until a scandal finally forces their hand. There needs to be a full review carried out into these contractors and the millions being squandered.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I will stick to two areas, namely, accountability and communication. On a rating from one to ten, both of them are one. There have been ten years of a boil water notice in Whitegate, east Cork, with diabolical communications, even with me as a public

representative. Some other speakers have mentioned that already. There is zero accountability and no information any time you can actually get an email to Uisce Éireann, even one offering suggestions. Imagine people being on a boil water notice for ten years, including people with medical conditions and complex needs, without an ounce of compensation. We tried to sue the company. I wrote to every constituent to say they could claim €30. We got zero accountability. Ten days would be the average waiting time for someone who reports a leak. That is if they can get through to Uisce Éireann.

The Acting Chairman, Deputy Aindrias Moynihan, was a county councillor at the time of one of the county development plans. Uisce Éireann, then Irish Water, told Cork County Council it would not develop Monard in Cork because it refused to put in water and sewage. That is going back a long time. It is a dictatorship. The company has rules of its own.

Terence Coskeran was a gentleman in Tipperary who came to the petitions committee in the last term after dealing for ten years with Uisce Éireann, which would not take over his estate of six houses. Tipperary County Council was absolutely amazing. The memorandum of understanding was signed but then Uisce Éireann came along and would not recognise it. It was the first time we had the power to call Uisce Éireann into the petitions committee. Within ten days, after nearly ten years of conflict, that gentleman's water solutions were sorted. It is the only way to bring these matters to justice.

Uisce Éireann is a money pit, is not fit for purpose and gives us no accountability, even in communications. It definitely needs to be pulled in and rigorously investigated. We need accountability on this.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Hear, hear.

Deputy George Lawlor: Uisce Éireann is out of control and appears to be answerable to nobody. If the public was made fully aware of the loss of water through leaks across the country, it would be astonished. As a councillor in the past and as a TD since I was elected to this august House, I have had to deal with Irish Water on a number of issues. One leak that comes to mind was where a pipe in Wexford town was losing 10,000 litres of water per hour. After years of contact with Uisce Éireann, it was resolved - but only after years. I dealt with another single pipe in Coolballow, Wexford town, that had 52 leaks in 18 months, with constant patching after patching. There were years of campaigning before the pipe was replaced.

Nothing has changed. Twenty-six years ago, the late councillor Paddy Nolan in Wexford town raised the issue of raw sewage leaking from a large pipe in his home area of Maudlintown. It is still leaking raw sewage today. It has never been touched and no attempt has been made to resolve it. These are just a couple of examples in a small area, so Deputies can imagine the scale of the problem out there.

Then we have the issue of hard water for consumers in Wexford town and areas south of it. People are being forced to pay huge sums to treat the water and to replace the appliances that are constantly being damaged, including kettles, showers, dishwashers and washing machines.

The whole area of connection charges is astounding. Some instances I have dealt with over the years border on criminal. Blackwater GAA club faced a demand for €46,000 to connect to a fire hydrant. Ballagh Boxing Club, with 25 members, was asked for €19,000 for a water

connection to its modular build unit. Community groups doing amazing work are getting pinned to the canvas by a State utility company. Only highlighting by myself and others got these issues somewhat resolved. However, when the owner of a new single house built in the heart of Wexford town was forced to pay €33,000 for a single connection for a single one-off house, Uisce Éireann stood firm in its ridiculous demands. Community groups and citizens are being screwed by Uisce Éireann because of the lack of investment by this and previous Governments.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I was sad to see the senior Minister leave but the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, knows full well what I will say. It is over for him and the senior Minister when it comes to providing housing and developing the level of housing required in this country. I refer to what I predicted on 27 April 2012 in this very House. I encourage the Minister of State to go back and look at the speech. It still stands. All the investment the Minister of State likes will not catch up. Going from €300 million to €1.4 billion or even now, as the senior Minister said, €11.7 billion will be great for a government in two terms' time but it is over for this Government because the lead time is five to seven years. If you do not have the infrastructure, you cannot build the houses. It is like someone trying to perform operations without oxygen or blood. It is impossible. This House, previous Governments, bad politics and short-termism have ensured we have the housing crisis we have today and that the young and not so young people of Ireland cannot afford housing. We cannot build it because politics has failed, this Chamber has failed, the Minister of State's Governments have failed and his party has failed. It is as simple as that. We have never put in the investment we require.

In my town of Nenagh, we have a project of 1,000 houses which I helped to be built. The project for wastewater has been pushed back for one year to 18 months to be profiled. Tipperary County Council was treated disgracefully by not being told this was being profiled and pushed back. The reason it was profiled and pushed back was there was not the investment to actually do it. Where we as a country require infrastructure for housing, we will develop that infrastructure but it will be too late for this Government because of the decisions made by past Governments not to invest in what was right. In this Chamber, politics has failed the people of Ireland. It has failed the young people of Ireland who needed that foresight and needed infrastructure to be put in place to provide the houses they require - social, affordable and private - which will not be in place because of bad decision-making and bad politics in this bloody Chamber.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this motion. It is an extremely important one. I will focus on the small towns and villages programme. On 6 November last, Uisce Éireann appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts and stated that, in revenue control 3, €98 million was allocated to that programme. This began 243 projects across the country, seven of them in Cork. Does the Minister of State know how many of these have been completed since 2022? Four have been completed. The fact it takes seven to ten years to deliver a wastewater treatment plant is staggering. I am no expert, but it is staggering. The local authorities were asked at that time to fill in a priority list for their own council.

Cork County Council has responsibility for a village in my constituency, Carrignavar, which is No. 13 on the list. To be fair to the local authority, it could choose village after village for

the programme. I was informed at the Committee of Public Accounts that the small towns and villages programme was predicated on growth. To me, that does not make sense and I will tell the House why. Growth in an area is based on the building of housing in line with infrastructure from Government. As my colleague said, if we do not have the infrastructure, we cannot build the houses. I met a group of residents in Carrignavar a number of months ago. It is a great village. It has a new primary school and it is to be hoped there will be an extension to the secondary school, along with a chosen location for a new special school. It has huge potential to grow, but it cannot. Growth is the underlying issue for Carrignavar. As I said, if we do not have the infrastructure, we cannot grow.

Housing, as the Minister of State knows, is the generational issue of our time. Housing cannot be built in Carrignavar because of the inability of Uisce Éireann to build infrastructure. Only four out of 243 projects have been completed through the small town and villages programme. It is a failed programme.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Deputy Collins for initiating this debate. He has pushed hard for it over the past number of weeks in the Business Committee.

A number of things about Uisce Éireann need to change and change utterly. One is the culture of the organisation, which has shifted hugely in the past four years, and I will outline two examples to illustrate that. One relates to my constituency and the Swords wastewater treatment plant. There have been a number of major issues which have affected many residents. In late 2024, I requested a site visit at the wastewater treatment plant with the management of the plant, local authority workers and key people from the community. I received a response three months later stating that Uisce Éireann does not do site visits. That is absolute nonsense. How do I know? I know because it carried out such visits with me in that wastewater treatment plan in previous years. What has changed?

In Knocksedan Demesne, an estate in Swords where a new phase is being built, we cannot get the houses connected. I contacted Uisce Éireann on 21 March 2025 and did not receive a full answer until 30 October 2025 to a question regarding new houses being connected, which is apparently a key priority of the Government. The issue has still not been resolved as of 14 January 2026. I received a response in October because there are good people in Uisce Éireann who are trying to work hard and resolve issues, but the culture has shifted to a point where it is not meeting the needs of the citizen.

Regarding culture, can we listen to local authority water services workers who have the expertise on the ground? Uisce Éireann is not doing that. I have a list of issues where local authorities have identified a problem and Uisce Éireann has said they are wrong and it is not that problem but instead another one which cannot be resolved. A large multinational stakeholder is saying something else. When we get to the root of the issue, and spend lots of time and waste lots of energy, it turns out the local authority worker with expertise has been right every single time. We need to listen to the council workers who have the expertise, change the culture in Uisce Éireann and make it accountable to the Irish citizen and taxpayer and this House.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward the motion. Tá a lán rudai sa tairiscint that I am go maith with and I think are good. It is important to highlight

the issues that have been raised. I am not in agreement with a number of points towards the end of the motion, but broadly it is important.

The fundamental questions we need to address are why Uisce Éireann is not working for people, why it is not providing the services and infrastructure that are needed to ensure housing is being delivered and, fundamentally, why it is not sufficiently addressing issues of leakage and poor water quality we know exist in respect of drinking water. People are still living with this issue across the country.

There is also the question of the quality of water in our rivers and seas in respect of wastewater. As someone who swims regularly in Dublin Bay, even at the moment when it is freezing, after it rains we can see it is covered in scum. We know there are issues with capacity in the Ringsend treatment plant. We have capacity problems across the country in terms of the delivery of water and wastewater services and, fundamentally, housing.

I do not believe that the Government fully takes on board the extent of the housing emergency we are in. I encourage the Minister of State to look at the website *onemillionhomes.ie*. I do not know whether he has come across it yet. Its information is based on CSO data. It states that there are 1.3 million people aged between 18 and 44 who are waiting to own their home but are instead stuck renting or living at home. The analysis on the website points out that people would be waiting a thousand years in Ballymun, in my constituency, to get keys to a home. In other places around the country, such as Ballyjamesduff in County Cavan, people will wait a hundred years to get the keys to their own home, as will people in Swinford, County Mayo. The website goes through town after town and place after place across the country where there is a generation aged between 18 and 44 who have no prospect of owning a home of their own, renting or living in a social home under the current housing delivery. The reality is that there have been eight months of consecutive decline in construction in the residential sector.

This does not involve just the Minister and Minister of State. They are the current Ministers, but the seeds of this problem were laid decades ago. Over the past 20 to 40 years, we have followed a housing policy, and a policy more generally, of privatisation, relying on the market and not delivering and developing public capacity. It is incredible that Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil say they are giving Uisce Éireann the funding it needs given that they denied it when it was actually needed and the work could have been done and investment provided. We are playing catch-up in terms of the infrastructure that is needed.

Last year, we said Uisce Éireann needed €2 billion to get going. The Minister, Deputy Harris, said the Government was not sure and needed agreements, and the decision was delayed. I read the infrastructure report. One of the things identified in it, in terms of delays in delivery, did not involve planning, judicial reviews or other issues but, rather, the Government and State and the way they operate. The barriers are a lack of dedicated funding, which is still insufficient, and the systems in place to approve projects. The Minister of State is shaking his head. I assume he has read the infrastructure report.

Deputy John Cummins: Of course I have read it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It states very clearly that some of the key structural barriers to delivering infrastructure are Government approval of projects, the time it takes and the funding allocated. It is very clear that the systems the Government has set up are not delivering infrastructure quickly enough. That is the responsibility of the Government. The Minister of State can shake his head, but it is the Government's responsibility. It is a system that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have set up for decades. In terms of Uisce Éireann, there is an issue that these parties broadly do not believe in public utilities. It is about the market. Therefore, Uisce Éireann is left as a kind of commercial body that should deliver key public infrastructure, but does not have sufficient funding, as identified in the motion, to deal with leaks, water being of sufficient quality and infrastructure not being delivered for housing. It is not doing that now and there is no prospect of it doing so sufficiently.

The frustrating aspect of this is that the Government has given billions away to developers, investor funds and fast food chains.

Yet, our public infrastructure, which needs investment, is not given sufficient investment to ensure it addresses these problems in a reasonable timeframe. The timeframes set out are not reasonable. That is why we need a step-change in how we invest in our public water and wastewater infrastructure.

I will raise a case related to infrastructure, specifically the fact that people who are trying to get services are not getting them. Niamh and her mother Petria have been without heating since before September 2025 and are waiting on repairs. Niamh first flagged this issue in my office in October of last year. Her mother is 84 years of age. They have been without heating and a functioning boiler. They were advised by workers who inspected the boiler that it needed to be replaced rather than repaired. I wrote to the SEAI, the Minister for Social Protection and Dublin City Council raising this issue. The SEAI provided some information about grants and warmer homes and warned about lengthy waiting times. However, it said it will take potentially 14 months from the date of application to the date of delivery. These kinds of waiting times for water and heat are not acceptable. It is a fundamental failure of our State that people are left freezing in their homes.

I raise this case because I would like the Minister of State to take it up and see what he can do about it. I wrote to the community welfare officer in Finglas to follow up on the case. Niamh and Petria are waiting for this and I am concerned for their welfare. This is just one of many examples where the Government talks about economic growth in this country and the Taoiseach gets up in the Dáil and says the Opposition never talks about all of the great things the Government is doing when that is not the reality for too many people in this country. I was just in the audiovisual room listening to people with disabilities who cannot afford to heat their homes. These issues are connected because we have not developed a State that has funded our public services, including Uisce Éireann, city councils and county councils. This issue is directly connected to the motion because we have a State that does not deliver our public-----

Deputy John Cummins: It is some stretch.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister of State can argue it is a stretch but-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): We are on Irish Water infrastructure, a Theachta.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Yes, we are on water infrastructure and this relates directly to it. Why do we not invest sufficiently in our water infrastructure and why do we have these problems? It is not because Uisce Éireann is not doing all that it can because it is doing some work. It is not about needing to get developers in to do the work. The problem is we have a State that does not believe in public services and public utilities and is actually privatising them. I spoke to Irish Water as well and it is still doing public private partnerships and outsourcing the delivery and management of wastewater infrastructure to the private sector. This relates directly to the motion because it is a question on what type of public utilities and public infrastructure we are developing. I believe, and the evidence shows, that we are still not fully developing a public water and wastewater infrastructure that meets the needs of the economy and society. This connects back to a Government and to political parties that are still broadly neoliberal and centre right. They have an attitude towards public services that, while they will invest in them, they will not invest sufficiently to ensure people's needs are met. They still believe the market and private sector should be in there making profit where they can.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Irish Water is not fit for purpose. It should never have been established and it should now be abolished. It is hiding from the public. It has no public offices. It refuses to meet elected representatives in open, democratic forums like county council meetings. Consumers cannot meet any Irish Water official face to face. Of course, they can report a problem to a call centre. They may get a report back in a week, a month or maybe not at all. Irish Water has contempt for consumers and councillors alike. It refuses to advise consumers of planned outages. The ESB can do it but Irish Water refuses to do it.

Boil water notices are almost endemic in the system. In the past 12 months, there have been continuous boil water notices across south Tipperary, right from the Limerick border to the Kilkenny border. These have affected the towns of Tipperary, Ardfinnan, Cahir, Cashel, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir, lasting for two, three and even six months at a time. This is due to Irish Water's failure to have full-time caretakers at treatment plants, the lack of maintenance at those plants and the failure to provide them with alarm systems. There are also huge delays in dealing with burst water mains, particularly at weekends when Irish Water is reluctant to call out staff. Customers are left without water for days on end. Irish Water should be abolished and water and wastewater services returned to county councils.

Irish Water proposes and is planning to bring hard water into the town of Clonmel. This has already caused huge problems and costs to families on the northern side of the town. Householders are forced to regularly replace all white goods, from washing machines and dishwashers to electric kettles and showers. They have had to install water softeners at significant installation and running costs. This is a huge issue for residents. Irish Water refuses to treat hard water at source.

Irish Water's proposal to bring water from the Parteen Basin on the Shannon to Dublin defies logic. It is a project which, from Irish Water's own projections, will cost between €4.5 billion and €6 billion. At least 33% of water in the Dublin area is lost through leaky pipes. The net effect of this proposal is that one third of the water coming to Dublin will be lost at a cost of between €1.5 billion and €2 billion annually.

When will we have the anti-privatisation water referendum? This was promised as far back as 2016 and we have not seen it yet. We need a date for that referendum.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this motion. We have a large number of issues in Donegal with water. It is probably the biggest issue outside of defective concrete. Many areas lack waterworks and engineers. They face significant issues, such as pipe bursts and lack of proper infrastructure. We have issues and outages reported throughout Inishowen, west Donegal, Bundoran, Stranorlar, Ballybofey, Fanad, Pettigo, Ballyshannon and Letterkenny. Nearly 100,000 people are affected by this. The Slavery water treatment plant in Buncrana has consistently experienced issues over the last year, with residents left without water for days at a time. In the past three months, they have lost water for nearly a week. Water tankers had to be dispersed onto the streets.

Before Christmas, a burst water main in north Inishowen and another burst water main in Dunfanaghy caused major disruption. People in the Milford-Ramelton area have been asked to conserve water for nearly two years. There is a total hosepipe in place for five months of the year. It is basically a drought. In a place where it is raining all the time, we are facing water shortages through lack of maintenance. Malin Head had water shortages lasting for days. Residents and business owners were forced to close their businesses because they could not provide running water. The long-term impact of this on tourism in Donegal has been absolutely catastrophic.

Despite ongoing issues, Uisce Éireann fails every time to communicate with public representatives. We have said this from day one. Like many other TDs, my experience of Uisce Éireann is that its communication skills are excruciatingly poor. The company cannot be contacted. People are left without water. Children are left without running water in their houses for days at a time. It is ridiculous.

There is also the issue of public water supply to the islands. I am from Arranmore Island where there are issues with water. A constituent of mine on Gola Island has not had a drop of water in her house since May and she depends on people bringing water to her. This is absolutely unacceptable.

Residents deserve basic services and they are not getting them. There is a total dereliction of duty, as far as I am concerned. There is no responsibility or accountability, and that is constant. The tourism season is destroyed in north Inishowen when the water is out. Nobody comes. Irish Water needs to inform residents of the current status of works and provide realistic timelines so that we know and can plan ahead.

There is a huge disconnect between Uisce Éireann and the communities it serves, and it needs to be addressed. Communities have serious concerns regarding Uisce Éireann's services. It is clear there is an over-reliance on private contractors. High costs include senior salaries. There are clearly insufficient resources. The reality is that we must retain the skillsets of the workers to keep on moving. We have skillsets and workers who are being abandoned by Uisce Éireann. They are county council workers, and they deserve all the help they can get to keep the water running in County Donegal.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this important motion on Irish Water. It has identified many of the problems, which I think we all agree on. I have to say, however, that I radically disagree with the conclusions it draws about what needs to be done. Ultimately, its motion ends up being a blueprint for the further privatisation of water services, which is the problem, not the solution.

On the things we do agree on, however, the lack of adequate infrastructure to build the houses we need is absolutely outrageous. We cannot address the housing crisis unless we provide the water infrastructure. In my area, we have been calling this out on big publicly-owned sites for years. Finally, they have started to get moving on them but there is a big delay with publicly-owned sites in areas like Rathmichael and the Old Conna Road - big publicly-owned sites for public housing with no water infrastructure put in. It takes years for that to happen.

In Dublin Bay, no swim notices regularly go up. Why? It is because of a decrepit Victorian infrastructure that was identified decades ago where surface water, when it rains heavily, mixes with sewage. The sewage goes straight into Dublin Bay, so people are swimming in Dublin Bay in raw sewage. Again, this has been identified for decades. It is still not dealt with in terms of the problems at Poolbeg, which is massively under capacity for a growing population in the urban centre. There is a lack of communication from Irish Water when problems arise with leaks and boil water notices. We could go through the list.

The playbook for the privatisation of water services, or any service, is to run it down so it does not work and prove that it does not work with lots of timelines. Where have we seen this before? We have seen it with special needs and so on, when people say we have to have a six-month timeline during which the resources are not provided and the teachers and workers are not provided. This is why I have the problem with the motion put forward by Independent Ireland. It does not mention extra money. We were against the setting up of Irish Water because we believed it was backdoor privatisation of local authorities that have the expertise and so on. It does not mention the extra money that is needed. Irish Water said it only has enough money to provide the infrastructure for 30,000 and not 60,000 houses. There is no extra money and the motion before us does not even mention extra money.

What the motion does say is that if Irish Water cannot deliver, we should bring in private developers to do it. No, we should not. Part of the problem with Irish Water is that it is already backdoor privatisation. If we look at half the work that Irish Water does, we will see it is private companies doing it - GMC and other contractors. The problem is we need a public system. We are losing the expertise we have in the local authorities, namely, the expertise of the local authority workers. What we need is more public investment to provide the infrastructure necessary for water, not the privatisation of blue gold, and water is the blue gold of the 21st century. There are people who are out to make profits from a resource where the infrastructure is not provided properly. That is what we actually need, not privatisation. Following water charges campaign, which was about defeating the plans for the privatisation of water, we got a commitment that there would be a referendum to keep the water infrastructure in public ownership. Where is that referendum?

Deputy Carol Nolan: The motion this morning from Independent Ireland raises valid concerns about Ireland's water and wastewater infrastructure, reflecting ongoing challenges in

a system that has historically suffered from underinvestment and ageing assets. Certainly, it is the case that persistent delays block housing, public health, economy and compliance, as the motion notes. I acknowledge also that the proposed measures that are put forward as solutions are quite positive and would certainly help the situation. Some of them may already be in place or under active implementation but it is vital that we do not continue with what is essentially an impractical regulatory and operational framework. The solutions are there. They just need to be acted upon. It is the action that is the problem and not the theoretical framework.

What I am concerned about, and want to raise it this morning, is that it has come to my attention that Irish Water has issued a directive to its staff telling them that they are no longer allowed to collaborate or work with local authorities. That concerns me greatly because we know how it works with different agencies when they are not all joined up or working together and there is no collaboration. Therefore, I want to call on Irish Water to have a look at that and make sure it does continue to collaborate as much as possible with local authorities when local issues arise because when local issues arise, we need local solutions and we need everyone working together, whether they are local authority or Irish Water.

I want to raise ongoing sewerage issues that have gone on for years in Harbour Road, Banagher, County Offaly. I do hope that Irish Water will address this urgently because it has gone on for years, and it is totally unacceptable.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Independent Ireland for bringing forward this very important motion today. I want to talk about Kenmare first of all. Two housing applications have been held up for the past number of months. They were asked to get a letter from Irish Water to say that it would have water to supply the 170 houses to be built. They cannot get the letter from Irish Water. The time is running out and they will have to pull their applications. This is for 170 houses. No house has been built in Kenmare since 2006 some 20 years ago. Kenmare is surrounded by mountains and lakes. It is surrounded by water. We have more water than any other part of Ireland and just cannot get it into a pump.

People are talking about taking water from the River Shannon and bringing it to Dublin. The way we are going in Kenmare anyway, it will take 250 years before the people in Dublin will see one drop of water out of the Shannon unless they drive down and take a bucket of water out of it themselves.

Kerry County Council has been trying for many years, unsuccessfully, to get water for Kenmare. We have spent €30 million on a treatment plant. We have a new water plant there and yet we have no water to put into the pipes in Kenmare. I am asking the Minister of State to look at this again. I have asked the Taoiseach about it in this Chamber before.

There is just one other thing. There are two housing estates in Aghadoe - Birch Hill and Old Killarney Village - looking down on the lakes of Killarney. They are waiting for their treatment plant to be replaced. It has been taken charge of by the council yet Irish Water and Kerry County Council will not or have not decided what they are doing with the €1 million they have got from the Department. Neither will not perform, or they will not perform together, to provide a new treatment plant for these two estates. This has been going on for six years.

Deputy Michael Cahill: We have been informed that Irish Water is to receive the biggest investment in public infrastructure in the history of the State. That is obviously very welcome. I have been calling for many years, as a councillor and since being elected as a TD for Kerry, for constructed wetlands to be built in our towns and villages. Over 40 of our villages in Kerry are unsewered. Many more are at capacity. Constructed wetlands are quick and efficient and are a much cheaper and easy way to install a system of treating wastewater without the prolonged time of planning and construction. I believe they are the way to go. In the more populated areas, we can put in two or three constructed wetlands. They are environmentally friendly and are one way of sorting our housing crisis in the medium term.

I mentioned there are 40 villages unsewered. In Beaufort, for example, there was €6 million announced for the Beaufort sewerage scheme over two years ago. That was increased recently to €7 million.

I have been informed by Irish Water that it will take another seven years before that is up and running. It is far too long. Constructed wetlands are the way to go. I mentioned that some of them are at capacity. My village, Glenbeigh, is at capacity. We recently opened the first completed section of the south Kerry greenway. Huge numbers are using it, which is great to see. Glenbeigh is not greenway-ready, however. I had two planning clients seeking to build hotels specifically for the greenway but they will not get planning permission because there is no treatment system there. There are many such villages across the county, such as Castlegregory, Portmagee, Scartaglen and Cromane. I could go on forever listing them. We need to start investing. Is it a matter for the local authority to apply to the Government or Uisce Éireann for funding for these constructed wetlands or will a specific scheme be announced by Irish Water and invitations then put out?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Labhair mé faoin ábhar seo sa Teach seo. I understand Uisce Éireann has a huge body of work but it is failing on infrastructure. We have reviewed the judicial review system which will make it much easier for people to have critical infrastructure. Currently, in Dublin, especially in my area of Dublin Bay North, there is a huge issue where we see drone footage of E. coli and human waste going into the bay. I have seen other people using methods to clean it. I would love that to be done in north Dublin.

Another thing I wish to ask about is why Irish Water will not allow its tanks to be used for a sprinkler system, particularly in student accommodation. It is a simple issue. It is a bureaucratic issue of legislation that Uisce Éireann is following but it is destroying the construction industry and delaying builds. In Dublin Bay, residents in Mask Avenue, Coolock, have contacted my office for weeks. I eventually got in contact with Uisce Éireann, which said its workers were out in that area. From speaking to residents, however, they were not. The accountability is not there. This system cannot cope. I thank Lauren in Uisce Éireann who has been very helpful on this issue, which is currently in the process of being resolved. Residents not having drinking water is not acceptable. The unaccountability of civil servants, State bodies or semi-State bodies needs to be reviewed.

There is also a serious issue with communication, which Members from all sides of the House have raised today. People are not being informed clearly or quickly when incidents occur.

We cannot continue to talk about delivering housing without facing the reality that housing and water infrastructure go hand in hand. I heard a lot of people talking about this today. If we do not invest urgently in the wastewater treatment plant in Dublin, network capacity and storm resilience, we are not going to meet our housing targets in the term of this Government. Uisce Éireann needs to be properly resourced. We are throwing money at it but there needs to be accountability for the money we are throwing at it.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: There are two issues I wish to raise with the Minister of State on Irish Water infrastructure delivery. The first issue relates to connection fees and the second relates to pollution in waterways. Irish Water has a fee structure for connections that fails to take into account that community groups have to fundraise and get grants from Government and various sources to build community services. They are still treated as commercial entities when it comes to making a connection to water and sewerage. In Rylane, for example, we are building a community centre. The community group has been very active in fundraising. I am pleased the State and the Department have been able to provide €1.8 million in grants for the project. Irish Water is charging over €30,000 to connect to drinking and wastewater. Surely, Irish Water should recognise that these are not commercial entities. They are providing public services to communities and that should be reflected in the connection fee.

Second, farmers are doing considerable work in improving water quality and putting in place infrastructure. They have on-site inspections from the council and various different authorities. It is right that there are inspections so that if there is a problem, it can be quickly dealt with. The same standards should be applied across the board to all polluters. If that polluter is Irish Water, it should be expected to deliver infrastructure just as quickly and prevent the pollution. For example, in Ballingarry, Irish Water is polluting the River Lee. Farther along, Irish Water is polluting the River Bandon at Dunmanway. All pollution should be treated equally. Uisce Éireann should be expected to deliver infrastructure as quickly as farmers are, for example.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): As it is my first time speaking after the Christmas break, I wish all Deputies a happy new year and a productive year. I thank everyone who has contributed today to what is a very important debate on water services. Our water infrastructure is part of our shared fabric as a society and it is rightly the subject of extensive democratic scrutiny both from the Oireachtas and our regulatory bodies.

Since the establishment of Uisce Éireann, significant improvements have been made in the delivery of water services. Hundreds of water and wastewater treatment plants have been upgraded along with the installation of thousands of kilometres of new or rehabilitated water mains. National leakage rates have been reduced and the overall quality of drinking water remains very high. There is, of course, more work to do and the sustained and increasing funding and support provided by the Government will enable Uisce Éireann to make continued progress in the time ahead.

To that end, the Government policy paper on water sector transformation sets the vision for water services based on the full integration of water services provided by 31 local authorities into one national authority. Moving the operation and control of public water services from local authorities to direct Uisce Éireann responsibility represents one of the largest public sector

reform programmes in recent years. It involves numerous facilities around the country and over 3,000 local authority workers, both full- and part-time workers. I wish to take this opportunity, as Minister of State, to acknowledge each and every one of those workers for the significant work they do every single day of the week. Significant progress has been made in transforming the water sector and this transformation is due to be completed at the end of this year.

The Government recognises that our water and wastewater networks require ongoing and sustained investment to bring these up to the required standard of treatment to deal with population growth and adapt to the impacts of climate change. We are dealing with a legacy of underinvestment in water services and infrastructure in Ireland. I think everyone in this Chamber - if they really want to know it - will acknowledge that there were huge discrepancies in the performance of local authorities in the area of water and wastewater when it came to investment. Therefore, significant remedial work is necessary that will take a number of years and investment cycles to fully resolve. The updated national development plan provides unprecedented investment of €12.2 billion to the water sector, €11.7 billion of which is earmarked to support Uisce Éireann to meet the ambitious targets in terms of compliance and ensuring the significant uplift in housing delivery our country requires.

Under the national development plan, Uisce Éireann has allocated €1.7 billion for a new additional growth programme that will support accelerated housing delivery. Uisce Éireann has identified 71 settlements across Ireland for additional investment where the existing capacity of treatment plants can support significant development in the short term. The selection of these 71 settlements took account of the national planning framework, the regional, spatial and economic strategies, county development plans and local area plans. In addition, Uisce Éireann consulted with the development community, the LDA, the LGMA housing unit and other housing bodies. The progression of these and other projects has to be delivered in a quicker and more efficient timeframe, as many Deputies have rightly pointed out here today.

In acknowledgement that Uisce Éireann cannot meet all the housing capacity requirements on its own, the Government has recently approved a new developer-led infrastructure initiative. This represents a significant and pragmatic step forward by ensuring that wastewater infrastructure does not become a barrier to delivering much-needed housing, particularly in small towns and villages in rural areas. This initiative introduces a clear partnership model that will allow developers to deliver wastewater infrastructure to Uisce Éireann standards. Uisce Éireann will then secure regulatory compliance by taking the assets into public ownership for long-term operation and maintenance. This initiative provides certainty for developers, protects environmental standards and avoids the legacy risks associated with earlier approaches to developer-led infrastructure. The developer-led infrastructure initiative will help unlock housing in areas previously constrained by wastewater capacity and support balanced regional development.

Finding and fixing leaks is difficult and resource-intensive work.

Investment of over €2 billion by Uisce Éireann over the past ten years has meant significant progress, with national leakage rates coming down from 48% in 2014 to 36% in 2024. Of course there is more work to be done in this area and Uisce Éireann has a plan to do it by focusing on the areas experiencing water shortages, and higher demand areas as a targeted focus.

The organisation is embarking on some of the largest infrastructure projects ever undertaken in Ireland to meet future growth and societal needs. Some Deputies have referenced some of those in their contributions. The water supply project eastern and midlands region is a generational project and will be one of the largest ever undertaken. It will deliver a safe, secure and sustainable source of water supply to the eastern and midlands region. It will achieve this by bringing treated water from the Parteen Basin in County Tipperary to Peamount in Dublin. The pipeline will have capacity for off-takes along the route in Tipperary, Offaly and Westmeath. It will also enable supplies serving Dublin to be redirected back locally in Carlow, Wicklow, Meath and Louth, bringing benefits to the Dublin region and the wider eastern and midlands regions. The delivery of this generational project is critical to sustainable economic growth, enabling housing delivery and attracting investment to support Ireland's growing population for the next 30 years and beyond.

In tandem with the water supply project, the greater Dublin drainage project, GDD, is critical to facilitate growth in the greater Dublin area. The new wastewater treatment plant will be situated in the southern fringes of Fingal, immediately outside the M50 motorway in Dublin, and will serve north Dublin and parts of the surrounding counties of Kildare and Meath. The GDD will provide the additional treatment and network capacity to support the long-term sustainable growth of the greater Dublin region and ensure that Ireland continues to meet our objectives under European law.

Beyond the statutory regulators, Uisce Éireann is also subject to rigorous financial scrutiny by way of a dual audit from the Controller and Auditor General and by commercial auditors, as well as being accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts. In terms of communication and public engagement, Uisce Éireann maintains contact with a diverse range of large groups of customers and community stakeholders through a range of channels on a daily basis. I accept that many of the comments of Members here today have focused on inadequate communications. Notwithstanding that Uisce Éireann has responded to more than 100,000 queries directly over the last ten years to 1,100 elected representatives, it is clear that the focus from Deputies here has been in relation to the timely response to those queries. That is something I will take up with Uisce Éireann management.

While the Government does have full confidence in Uisce Éireann to deliver improved and strengthened water infrastructure through the NDP and beyond, it is not without criticism, especially when it comes to timelines afforded to the development sector and when it comes to pre-connection and connection agreements. This is an area that I have repeatedly called out myself and it needs a significant additional focus and a determined effort by Uisce Éireann. I make that point again here on the floor of the Dáil. As a Minister of State representing the Government I am confident that with the strong backing we are providing the organisation it can deliver a stronger and more resilient water and wastewater service that meets the needs of our current and future customers in the years ahead.

Deputy Michael Collins: As the Minister of State heard from each and every person who made a contribution here, accountability and communication are a massive issue with Uisce Éireann. That is the message that must go back from here. I know that People Before Profit had issues, as expressed by Deputy Boyd Barrett, but I do not see any amendment from its Deputies to this motion. They could have put in amendments. Anyway, that is another story and that is their choice.

Looking at the Government's amendment, one would wonder whether we are even talking about the same issue. Our motion describes infrastructure failure. The amendment avoids that reality and instead lists the scale of operations. We say that delays block housing and economic activity while they claim investment will support housing delivery, as if no delays exist. We highlight repeated failures while they cite progress. We criticise centralisation while they defend it. We warn of environmental risk but they talk about future improvements. We call leakage a crisis and they say it is improving. Let us deal in facts. In November 2025 the Commission for Regulation of Utilities fined Uisce Éireann €20 million for failing to meet leakage reduction targets. It saved 90 million litres instead of the 176 million litres required. That is not progress. That is a failure with a penalty. Yet, in the same year the Exchequer allocated over €2.2 billion to Uisce Éireann.

Communities like Adrigole, Shannonvale, Ballydehob, Goleen, Rosscarbery and Dunmanway still face outages, sewage spills and planning bans. Funding without accountability is not delivery; it is drift. Our motion demands enforceable timelines, transparent schedules, community engagement, and performance-linked funding. The Government's amendment offers none of that. It offers words, not guarantees.

For far too long people have endured broken promises and short-term fixes. Today we can end that cycle. I ask the Minister of State to support this motion and stop putting in an amendment to try to mess it up and kick the can down the road. He should send a clear message that accountability in water services is not optional; it is essential. That is what I am asking in the motion and this is what Deputy O'Flynn has spoken about. From 2025 to 2029 it is expected that this Government will be giving at least €16.9 billion to Irish Water. Why in the name of God is there nothing built into that funding to make sure there is going to be accountability and communication?

I am going to another public meeting this weekend back down in Adrigole in west Cork. I went to one two months ago also. I am no further ahead today than I was two months ago. We have a Minister of State going to that meeting as well. He might have some progress for us. Certainly we were all to work together and yet we have got no further with the action group. We were without water over Christmas. The area was 15 times without water, including over Christmas. It is not a joke. It is being dealt with like a joke by Uisce Éireann. It gives us a generic reply but that is not accountability. That is not communication. It is a disgrace. That is what it is, pure and simple. Uisce Éireann will be funded with €16.9 billion and instead of supporting this motion and moving it in the right direction the Minister of State is putting in an amendment just to take it off the rails, but we will not accept that amendment as such.

I will name a few of the issues that we have down in my own constituency. How many more have spoken today about their own constituencies and the crises that they are in? Councillor Danny Collins represents the Bantry-Schull-Castletownbere electoral area. In the Beach Road area 1.5 km of pipe has needed to be replaced for the last number of years. There were 70 breaks in that local community. I mentioned Adrigole several times today. There were 15 breaks, with one over Christmas. Again, there was no accountability, no reply, no indication of when that is going to be resolved, with no date or anything given to the local community. There is nothing other than Uisce Éireann is sympathetic and there was a dry summer and there is wet weather and all this nonsensical rubbish that comes back to us.

In Castletownbere they are talking about bringing in water. I heard Deputy Healy-Rae talking about bringing water from Shannon to Kenmare a while ago. Talk about the nonsense that we have to listen to in this world. They are talking about bringing water to Castletownbere from Inniscarra. In the name of God almighty are they out of their minds? Are these people out of their minds? Is someone in China making these decisions? Certainly no one in Ireland could even come up with that. If a child came up with that, honest to God you would have to teach him a small bit of lessons. Until the issue is resolved in Castletownbere people cannot get planning permission. Young people who want to get off and get a start in their lives and in their communities are being ruined by Uisce Éireann. This is being aided and abetted by this Government. This is what it boils down to. If the Government is just going to stand by, what can Councillor Danny Collins tell the people in Kealkill who want to build in their community but cannot do so because the wastewater treatment plant there is at capacity? They cannot build. That is that for them. Park the business.

We move then to Councillor Daniel Sexton of Independent Ireland. What can he do for the people of Shannonvale and Ballinascarty who have no water? They have raw sewage bleeding out of the bloody tanks into a local community ground that was given to the community. This has been going on for 27 or 28 years. Uisce Éireann got fined last year because the EPA decided to wake up one year out of the 28. Imagine that they also were without water over Christmas. How many breaks in water supply have the people of Shannonvale and Ballinascarty had? All they are being fed is, "We will have a public meeting and we will talk about it." It sounds good and it is all pats on the back stuff, but it is all a whole load of nonsense.

12 o'clock

Councillor Daniel Sexton had a motion in December calling for the council to write to the Environmental Protection Agency to request it uses its full enforcement powers to compel Uisce Éireann to develop and implement an expedited action plan to end the sewage overflow and remediate the contamination of the park and the River Argideen. Imagine that leaking into the river water the people of Clonakilty are drinking, with the EPA fining Uisce Éireann on only 28 occasions. It is all a scam between the EPA and Uisce Éireann. It cannot be anything else. In 2024, it fined three communities: one in Clare, one in Macroom and the other in Shannonvale. That is three but there are five in west Cork pumping raw sewage into the clean waters that I know of. There could be ten more but I know of five, though the EPA could only find three throughout the country. That tells you the EPA is not fit for purpose. Uisce Éireann will not be fit for purpose until the Minister of State sits up and sees what can be done.

How can Councillor Daniel Sexton tell the people of Rosscarbery it will be fine and that when they are swimming again next summer they could be drinking a bit of raw sewage? That is what they were doing. That is an astonishing situation to find ourselves in year after year. The people of Rosscarbery hold meeting after meeting, and rightly so. They are rightly annoyed at public representatives and ask why this issue cannot be resolved. What is Councillor Daniel Sexton going to say to the people of Dunmanway? They have been promised a bit of an auld kiss the ass job now - excuse me, Ceann Comhairle, there are ladies present. We need proper infrastructure so people can build houses in Dunmanway, which they cannot currently. It is scandalous. The Minister of State is nodding but I have no problem in the wide earthly world, if he has time, to take him around to every one of those communities because I am not making it up.

In 1999 I worked with my local community in Goleen to put in a new sewerage system. It is pumping raw sewage into the clean water of Goleen still. If people want to build a few extra houses when the county development plan comes up the answer will be "No". This will be the greatest excuse to have no development anywhere. The wastewater tanks are full. They are at capacity so we cannot build and cannot do anything. What will I tell the people of Ballydehob? They have had raw sewage pumping into their waters for 17 years. This is a crisis we have from one town to another. I should not be using west Cork but it is a prime example for Ireland. We have seen one television programme after another explaining that to us.

We have seen fines for Uisce Éireann for €20 million because it cannot meet its leak targets. The EPA only fines it once a year. We do not want any fines. I am not encouraging the EPA. However, if the EPA knew there was a farmer breaking the rule for one week the business would be closed down, there would be massive fines and court appearances. That is the way it works in this country. We come down on the ordinary person but Uisce Éireann can break every rule and guideline throughout the country.

What about the people of Ballingeary? They are in the same situation. We have a representative there, Anna Marie O'Sullivan Cronin. Raw sewage is leaking into the clean waters there. It is a scandal beyond words and Uisce Éireann is let get away with it time and again.

The Minister of State's amendment is supporting that. It will make sure Uisce Éireann is protected and will not be held accountable. All we want is communication and accountability and I do not see either in the Minister of State's reply. It is a kick-the-can-down-the-road operation to protect Uisce Eireann. We will give it the billions it wants but it does not have to be accountable for one brown cent. It does not have to answer to a local council or the Deputy in that area. It is a case of Uisce Eireann doing what it wants and asking it how much it wants and then we pump that to it and walk away. Lord God, there is something wrong with the system across the line there.

The Government has to understand people are damn right to be frustrated. We are not here making up stories. Everyone here has a sad stories, and Government Deputies do too. They are in the same situation as me. They surely do not get the answers because we do not see the works being carried out. I am for accountability and communication at the very least.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to raise a very alarming and distressing case. It is the case of a woman from the west of Ireland left to wait six weeks to start her chemotherapy. At the end of November last, this mother of two young children received the devastating news that she had breast cancer, the same cancer her mother had died of in her 40s. To get a diagnosis of cancer is traumatic enough but to be told you have the same cancer that took the life of your mother is really terrifying. However, she did not give in to fear, she was up for the fight and

she expected the health system would have her back. She was referred to University Hospital Galway for chemotherapy and expected to commence her treatment with the urgency required. However, as she waited the days rolled into weeks. Christmas came and went and still no appointment. The stress and anxiety of having cancer, worrying about it growing and spreading but not being treated got worse for her day by day. Her husband says they began, to use his words, "begging for chemo". She even offered to travel to other hospitals but her wait continued.

By the second week of January this woman was still waiting for her chemotherapy appointment. Then she presented at the accident and emergency department in significant pain. She was left, by the way, to wait on a trolley. Only after being admitted to hospital did she begin her chemotherapy and it is very shocking that she started treatment only after she was admitted to hospital as otherwise she would have still been waiting.

No cancer patient and no family should ever have to go through what this woman and her family went through. We all know early treatment is vital when it comes to surviving cancer. The National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 states treatment should start within 15 days of diagnosis but patients are being left to wait way beyond that timeline. Last summer the Irish Cancer Society rang the alarm bell loudly. It raised the major regional disparities that exist in accessing cancer treatment, with patients in the west often waiting seven or even eight weeks for their chemotherapy. That is terrifying.

This is not the first time I have raised serious concerns about access to chemotherapy. The Taoiseach will recall the scandal of 800 children's chemotherapy appointments being cancelled in 2023. The National Cancer Strategy was designed to guarantee prompt diagnosis and treatment but while Ireland has come a long way experts Dr. Michael McCarthy have warned that it is getting tougher and tougher to deliver care on time. He says we are now behind the curve and we are slipping back. Advocates have repeatedly warned we do not have enough staff, space or equipment to cope and the human cost is being paid by patients and families. This has to change because lives are on the line. Níor chóir go bhfágfar aon duine a fhaigheann diagnóis aille le fanacht ar feadh seachtainí roimh ceimiteiripe a thosú. Caithfidh an Rialtas a chinntiú go bhfuil fáil ag othair ar chóir leighis chun a mbeatha a shábháil gan mhoill.

I want the Taoiseach to tell me how many other cancer patients are currently left waiting and waiting like this. I want him to tell us what action he is going to take in this regard to guarantee not a single patient is left to wait weeks and weeks to start their lifesaving chemotherapy.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which is an extremely important one. Obviously I am not familiar with the background of the specific case she has referenced just now. If she wishes to send me the details of the case, with the permission of the person concerned, I perhaps will be in a position to interrogate the issue more with the NCCP, which is the national cancer control programme, and indeed with the HSE and the hospital. We have invested very significantly in cancer care.

Cancer is a very traumatic diagnosis for any individual or family and, obviously, given the levels of investment in our services, we want the best possible outcomes. Thankfully, over the last number of decades, we have improved outcomes of cancer diagnoses significantly, particularly in terms of breast cancer. Breast cancer survivors are now the largest cancer

survivor group in Ireland, making up 22% of all cancer survivors. Almost 50,000 women have had a breast cancer diagnosis. That does not mitigate or take from the trauma that the individual person the Deputy referred to this morning has experienced.

As the Deputy knows, there have been a variety of new treatments, new drugs and so on for cancer. We have invested significantly in all of that. In the last three to four years, close to €650 million has been invested in new drug therapies for cancer alone and the radiation-oncology centres have been established and so forth.

On the waiting times, symptomatic breast disease clinics operate in approximately nine hospitals around the country - the eight cancer centres and a satellite clinic in Letterkenny. The HSE national cancer control programme, NCCP, has set a target of 95% of urgent referrals being seen within ten working days and 95% of non-urgent referrals to be seen within 12 weeks. To date, 62% of urgent referrals have met the timeframe of ten working days. That needs to improve. Of that, there is no doubt. In October, three cancer centres - St. James's Hospital, University Hospital Waterford and University Hospital Limerick - exceeded the 95% target for urgent referrals. An additional three centres - St. Vincent's, University Hospital Galway and the Mater - reported that they expected to meet the target by the end of the year. Galway, which I think is the hospital involved in this case, has said to the NCCP that it expects to meet the target by the end of 2025. Certainly, if the Deputy sends me on the details of the case, I will pursue that with the hospital and the NCCP because the NCCP is working with various hospitals in terms of restoring the service within the agreed timeframes. When there is a particular performance issue, the HSE works with the hospital on site-specific measures. That could mean funding additional clinics or additional medical cover, where necessary.

In terms of the variation across the country, the NCCP has introduced a range of guidelines aimed at ensuring standardised access to cancer services across the country leading to more appropriate referrals within cancer services. It is examining the national symptomatic breast disease pathway, including triage, review of key performance metrics and updating the national clinical guidelines.

We need to work out the specific issue here because University Hospital Galway, I have been informed, has indicated it would be on target by the end of last December-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----following recruitment and the running of additional clinics.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The issue is that it is not a specific or isolated incident. I would like to know the extent of this. I know about the case of this woman in particular. I have given the details of it. Dr. Michael McCarthy, who is president of the Irish Society of Medical Oncology, during the summer said:

The reality in Galway is that patients are now typically [and I emphasise "typically"] waiting seven to eight weeks for their first session. With every week that passes, the risk increases that their cancer will grow, or worse that it will spread to other parts of their body.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. I have set out the profound terror and distress this woman and her family experienced, but she is not on her own. I want to know more from the Taoiseach. We need numbers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----and to know exactly how widespread this experience is and, more important, what the Government will do to fix this urgently.

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, I would appreciate if the Deputy could give us the specifics of the individual case she has identified because then we could track that with the hospital. It is important to do that because Galway hospital said late last year that it would meet the NCCP targets by the end of December.

Deputy David Cullinane: That is a different target.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is for referrals.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but also in terms of treatment. We need to get-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No.

The Taoiseach: In any event, I think it would be useful if the Deputy could send us the details of the case-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I can certainly do that.

The Taoiseach: -----with the permission of the person, obviously. Confidentiality will apply, without question. There has been a lot of investment in cancer services, and quite rightly so. Symptomatic breast disease was one of the first areas that we identified a long time ago as requiring a specific allocation of resources and investment from cancer screening right through, and, from a national point of view, it has had very improved results in terms of outcomes, which is what we all want for cancer. It is important that, overall, survival rates have improved very significantly. That needs to be said as well-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----to ease any concerns that people who might have been recently diagnosed will understandably have.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Unfortunately, long waits for basic healthcare are now the norm. That should trouble the Taoiseach, especially as a former Minister for health. Waiting lists are no longer a backlog - they are the system. Ireland has become a country of waiting lists, a nation where a health challenge is all too often met with a letter and not with the necessary care. The

new figures from the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, are stark. We know from these that 900,000 people are waiting for outpatient care or an operation. This is a crisis unfolding on the Taoiseach's watch.

The Government's Waiting List Action Plan 2025 has patently not worked. The number of people waiting more than six months has increased by 12% in just one year. That is a stunning figure. Nearly one in six adults waiting for outpatient care has languished on a waiting list for more than a year. For children, it is even worse, with more than 17% waiting more than 12 months. It is not just outpatient care either. We learned this week that several children with mental health or developmental difficulties had been left waiting up to, or even in excess of, 11 years for a psychology assessment. As waits get longer, patients get sicker, our emergency departments get more and more crowded and our healthcare staff burn out. We all hear about it every day. Over the weekend, for example, we heard of a stroke victim in her 90s who spent hours on a trolley in the corridor of a Dublin hospital. Her family was unable to contact her or anyone who could reassure them or give an update. That is unacceptable. There is nothing normal about a modern hospital being unable to treat the sick because of capacity constraints, and capacity is at the heart of this crisis.

The problem is not a lack of money; it is a lack of urgency. There is not a lack of plans - we are seeing lots of plans - but a lack of delivery. The HSE national service plan for this year proposes just 134 additional hospital beds. That compares with the 297 beds committed to last year, a target that was missed. Two thirds of our hospitals are operating with unsafe bed occupancy levels and this lack of capacity has real consequences for real people, with overcrowded departments, cancelled procedures, exhausted staff and patients left waiting far too long for care they need.

This is not a surprise. Capacity constraints and chronic understaffing are well known. The public has gone past the point of shock when it comes to our shambolic health system. Ask anyone how they think the system is performing and they will say they have no faith in the plans coming out of the Department of Health. They will shake their heads and roll their eyes if asked. The problem is that when failure is normalised, accountability disappears. Therefore, I am asking the Taoiseach to take responsibility and answer some straightforward questions. Why has a €420 million waiting list action plan failed to deliver on its minimal targets? Why is the 2026 service plan retreating on bed capacity? What changes will we see to ensure improvement this year?

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire ní aontaím leis an Teachta go hiomlán mar ar an taobh eile den scéal tá dul chun cinn le feiscint i gcuid mhaith nithe sa córas sláinte agus caithfear é sin a adhmháil mar aon le gach scéal eile. The key issue with waiting lists is waiting times and that always has to be the target. The shorter the time someone has to wait for an operation or other intervention, the better the outcome, and that is always the priority in respect of capacity and waiting times.

Over the last while, we have had the biggest expansion of access to free GP care in the history of the State, so it is not a shambolic health service. We have had a 12% reduction in patients on waiting lists exceeding 12 months and a reduction in average times from 7.2 months to 6.5 months at the end of 2024. That is the average waiting time. That is against the backdrop of a 9% increase in outpatients and a 5% increase in inpatient and day case attendances. There is a

lot more to achieve and we have a lot more to do here. I acknowledge that. We want to get to the ten-to-12-week waiting time under Sláintecare objectives, and funding has been allocated, but I do think we need to see things in perspective. The Deputy describes it as "shambolic". It not shambolic.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: It is wrong to say that because when you look at our overall outcomes as a country, there is huge funding that has gone into health and I am sure the Deputy will acknowledge that. She has said it is not an issue of resources and significant funding has gone in, but in terms of key health outcomes over the past decade, there have been significant achievements. Ireland is now among a small group of only seven European Union countries where life expectancy is above 82 years. Our mortality rate fell by 11% over the decade 2014 to 2023. The mortality rate for all circulatory system diseases fell by 20% in that period, with heart disease and stroke falling by 28% and 37%, respectively. The Deputy had a cut at the stroke services and every individual case is terrible and traumatic when it happens, but surely she must acknowledge the progress that has been made on stroke and interventions over the last number of years with the new stroke centres and so on. It has been quite dramatic and transformative in the treatment of stroke in the country. The mortality rate for all cancers dropped by 15% in that period, with cancers of the trachea, bronchus and lung and breast cancer dropping by 21% and 22%, respectively. The mortality rate for all respiratory system diseases has fallen by 15%, with chronic lower respiratory diseases and pneumonia falling by 9% and 41%, respectively.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I do not say that to minimise any trauma any individual goes through but we need a balanced debate in perspective and to acknowledge the progress that has been made while resolving to do even better in respect of other issues.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Try as the Taoiseach may to dissemble them, the figures do not lie. They point to failure and are indefensible, and I stand over the comment of "shambolic". Anyone watching the news last night will have seen shambolic overcrowding and anyone watching or hearing of the experiences of the patient I referenced, or other patients whom we all know, will know that, while there is of course progress being made in some areas and that is great to see, it is still shambolic for all too many patients and they are still waiting too long.

The Taoiseach talked about waiting times. Of course, that is crucial and the Taoiseach's own plan set a relatively modest target, that 90% of outpatients would wait less than a year by the end of 2025, but that target was missed. Look at the number waiting more than 18 months for an inpatient appointment. That number rose by more than 25% last year. By any measure, the 2025 waiting list action plan failed. Meanwhile, we are hearing advertisements from private hospitals like Kingsbridge Private Hospital in Belfast. That is no way to run a healthcare service, to see private hospitals from other jurisdictions touting for business in this way.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Can we expect an improvement this year for those who are facing these long waiting lists?

Deputy Michael Collins: They are doing a good job.

The Taoiseach: Yes, we can. Indeed, over the last number of years, we have dramatically increased capacity. Deputy Bacik mentioned the beds but she forgot to mention that, by the end of 2024 alone, we had 1,300 additional beds in the system. As the Deputy will know, during the Covid period, we took the opportunity to dramatically increase bed capacity in our hospital system, particularly in the critical care area, where there was significant increase in the number of beds. We expanded our ICU capacity by about 28%, which is significant.

Obviously, health is a comprehensive area, so primary care is critical. We now have 180 primary care centres - that is 51 extra since 2020 - and we will continue to work on that. We are progressing the development of four elective hospitals, which I think will be very important in the context of waiting times, and the surgical hubs that the Minister has committed to. As the Deputy will know, the first surgical hub at Mount Carmel has opened and that has already had a very significant impact on waiting times in that area.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The Social Democrats are next, with Deputy O'Callaghan.

The Taoiseach: Four more are due to open in 2026.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I wish to begin by welcoming a number of representatives from different disability organisations who are in the Public Gallery with us today. I thank them for the strong and powerful contributions they just made in a briefing for all Oireachtas Members in the audiovisual room. They told us about the extreme hardship being faced by many disabled people. We heard about people who had had to stop getting their dialysis at home because they could no longer afford the electricity bills. This has a huge impact on their quality of life and well-being. We heard about people being forced to choose between heating their home and charging their electric wheelchairs and mobility aids, trapped now all winter because they cannot afford to charge their electric wheelchairs and being robbed of their independence.

The decision by the Taoiseach's Government, which slashed incomes for disabled people by up to €1,400, is cruel and regressive. This is what disabled people have had to say about these budget cuts. Saoirse said:

I am in pain constantly and I have to pay for physiotherapy because the community physiotherapy lists were too long. The physio appointments cost me €75 per session."

Gary said the only way he could feed himself was to buy food that was going out of date and reduced, cook it off and freeze it. He goes on to describe his choices as being between eating and being cold or being in the dark. Another disabled person told us that, after

Christmas, they were now faced with a €500 electricity bill and they did not know how they would pay it.

This is the reality for the tens of thousands of disabled people all over the country who feel targeted and attacked by the Taoiseach's Government. They are among the most vulnerable and most at risk of poverty in our society. They face enormous additional costs running into thousands of euro every year because they have disabilities. This Government, instead of supporting them, has cut their incomes. The only thing it has to offer are platitudes. We are told a cost of disability payment is now a priority for the forthcoming budget, but if the Government acknowledges the very real costs and the need for such a payment, why did it cut the incomes of disabled people so dramatically in the budget?

What does the Taoiseach expect disabled people to live on? Fresh air and broken promises? People with disabilities just want to live full and independent lives but Government decisions are pushing more and more people into poverty. The Government loudly claims that it wants to target resources to those who need it most while at the same time quietly cutting the incomes of the most vulnerable. It is wrong, it is reprehensible and it can and must be addressed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The ask is very simple; it is a modest ask. Will the Government introduce an emergency €400 winter payment to disabled people and will it introduce that now?

The Taoiseach: First of all, the Deputy has made an assertion and equated the ending of the one-off cost-of-living measures that were introduced during the height of the Ukraine energy crisis and so forth with cuts. That is wrong and he knows that. That is the first assertion, premised upon which his arguments are made, that is flawed. We must embed into the permanent social protection system, employment system, transport system, education system and health system supports that are permanent for people with a disability. That is what I intend to do and that is what this Government intends to do, through the Cabinet subcommittee on disability and through the new disability unit within my Department. We are prioritising the budgetary measures towards disability and will continue to do so. The ESRI's analysis in terms of the last budget bares that out.

I accept the one-off measures had an impact right across society but it simply was not fiscally sustainable to continue with one-off measures, bottom line. However, what is sustainable is, in terms of our various budgets through social protection, education and health, creating additional and permanent resources for people with disabilities. That is what we have been doing and will continue to do.

As regards the cost of disability issue, first of all, in the budget we delivered a record 20% increase in disability services funding through the Department for children and disability, increasing that to about €3.8 billion. That is to invest in services, which is needed by any yardstick.

We have to continue that and consistently increase it over time.

We have significantly prioritised education, particularly investment in special education and special classes right across the board, higher education and independent living, particularly in terms of participation in third level education and research for students with disabilities.

On the cost of disability support payment, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is leading this work in close partnership with disabled people, advocates and the organisations involved and will come to the Government with proposals in the first half of this year. Analysis by the ESRI and the Department of Finance confirms the impacts of the decisions we took in the budget in terms of the at risk of poverty rate across the population falling by 1.7% and the population affected by disability reducing by 3.8%. Older people felt the largest impact and then for people with disabilities, it fell by 3.8%. The measures we took in the budget had impact and they are permanent measures. That relates to social protection. There was the €20 increase in domiciliary care allowance and, as the Deputy knows, the earnings disregard for the carer's allowance for a single person and for a couple expanded.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The disregards will continue to expand in budgets to come.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Does the Taoiseach recognise that disabled people are €1,400 worse off as a result of the budget and the decisions the Government made? Can he imagine what it would be like not to be able to leave your home because you cannot afford to charge your electric wheelchair or mobility aid? There are people in that situation now because the Government took away income supports and did not replace them. Of course, income supports should be permanent, not once off - there is no disagreement on that - but to take €1,400 off disabled people, not replace it and just have promises of future actions does not work for people who are forced to stay at home now because they cannot get out of their homes as they cannot charge their mobility aids or electric wheelchairs. That is the result of decisions the Government has made. It is utterly unjustifiable at a time when there are billions of euro in budget surpluses. The Government could afford to do this. It would be fiscally sustainable. The Government's decision is cruel and regressive. I will ask the Taoiseach again. Will the Government now introduce an emergency payment for disabled people? They are asking the Government to do this. It needs to happen now. They cannot wait any longer.

The Taoiseach: We are not restoring once-off payments across the board. We are not going to do that but we are going to continue to support, right through every area of government, supports for people with disabilities. We are going to implement the new strategy, which was agreed with advocates and organisations that advocate for people with disabilities, in consultation with the various organisations, in particular, in the fields of employment. In the field of mobility and transport, the Minister for Transport will be coming to the Government shortly with a new scheme in respect of financial supports and adaptations that is much broader than earlier schemes have been. We are working in every Department to improve the situation for people with disabilities, particularly in the areas of education, employment and health. Measures already introduced in the budget facilitate that. Broadening the income disregards for carer's allowance was one of the most significant measures this year in the budget compared

to previous budgets. That will continue. We are going to do it in a sustained and consistent way that will be permanently embedded in the public expenditure system in this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Tóibín, representing the Independent Technical Group.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government is one of the most significant drivers of rip-off Ireland. Many of the costs affecting families currently are being driven up by the Government. To take electricity as an example, Ireland has one of the highest electricity costs in the whole of the European Union and the gap between retail price and electricity costs here is one of the largest in the world. The ESB is a semi-State company. It operates under Government policy. It is one of the biggest players in the market and is profiteering to the tune of €706 million in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. There are 300,000 people currently in energy arrears. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has said it dealt with a quarter of a million people on its helpline calls before Christmas.

This month, the Government increased the tax on petrol and diesel. It already increased the tax on petrol and diesel in the budget, only three months ago, and it increased the tax on heating oil and gas on families. In 2024, the Government took €4.1 billion in fuel taxes, the highest ever in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. The cost of filling a car is currently €19 more today than it was five years ago. That is not because of market issues or anything other than Government taxes. The Government is not finished with fuel taxes. Its aim is to increase carbon taxes for the next five years, irrespective of the economic circumstances of citizens at any given time. The Department of Transport has admitted in response to a freedom of information, FOI, request that there will be no new public transport capacity provided this year. The Government is using extra fuel costs and taxes as a stick to beat people out of their cars while refusing to provide a carrot of extra public transport capacity this year.

At the start of this month, the Government also increased tolls on the M50 and other motorways. Some 160,000 people use the M50 on a daily basis because they have to. It is the busiest road in the country. Last year, we paid €212 million on tolls on the M50, not to a public private partnership, PPP, but to the Government because we own those bridges. We have paid €2.2 billion in tolls already on those two bridges that cost £58 million to build. It is incredible. We have bought those M50 bridges 30 times over. The Government is using them as a cash cow and as a tax on commuters and workers. Increasingly, the squeezed middle is having Government costs on it increased. What will the Taoiseach do to make life affordable for these people?

The Taoiseach: More fundamentally, we acknowledge that there are very significant pressures on people in terms of costs and pricing and making ends meet. The most effective way to deal with that is how you manage the economy more broadly and how you get inflation down to very low levels and have average wage growth and real income growth that significantly helps people to deal with those pressures. If you look at nominal wage growth in the economy, it is at approximately 5.5% or 5%. Inflation is at 2%. In 2024, 2025 and 2026, we are, for the first time in a while, looking at real income growth, which will help workers. It does not deal with it in its entirety but it will help workers deal with the pressures of increased costs.

There were very significant increases in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the oil and energy crisis that arose from that. We decided in the budget to invest in services, which is important in terms of education, health and so forth, but also to invest in social protection to protect the lowest income groups, which we did fairly comprehensively in the last budget. The results are there from the ESRI analysis in terms of the lowest income deciles, which got the highest allocation of resources. I would like the Deputy to acknowledge that. Those are not my figures; they are ESRI figures in respect of that reality. We did it in terms of the fuel allowance. We increased it but we also increased the coverage of it, in other words, 26% of people will now avail of the fuel allowance, particularly those on the working family payment. This will help in that regard.

Our population has grown dramatically, which is really putting pressure on services. It is extraordinary that from 1995 to today, our population went up 52%. That has an enormous impact on services. In many ways, there is positivity in that in terms of the Irish economy growing. In the last number of years, that increase has continued.

Fundamentally, managing the economy means creating jobs. The most effective way to deal with cost-of-living and poverty pressures is to make sure there is employment available to people. At the moment, our unemployment rate is in or around 5%, if we take 15-year-olds and onwards. Those are the figures, but our rate of participation in employment is increasing all the time and average weekly earnings are up significantly as well. Through the broader management of the economy, investment in services, infrastructure, housing, education, health and childcare are the areas we decided to prioritise in the budget, along with social protection. In the social protection framework, we said we would look after those at risk of poverty as the key priority, and we did that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: First of all, real income fell in 2021, 2022 and 2023. We are talking about a marginal recovery on those particular years. The Taoiseach talks about fuel allowances. The Government is giving money with one hand but picking the pockets of people with the other. The Government is taking more in fuel taxes than it is giving back in allowances. What we are talking about here is the working poor.

In the budget for this year, the Government increased income taxes on the squeezed middle. Property taxes will increase for homeowners this year. An Post, for example, is increasing the cost of its stamps. Rents and house prices are increasing significantly, not just because the Government will not deliver supply into the market, but also because its own rent cap policies have increased rents in recent times to over €2,000 a month on average. That is really important.

Look at the My Future Fund auto-enrolment scheme. It will start to bite this month for people who cannot afford their present situation. In terms of rip-off Ireland, will the Government reduce taxes on fuel and the cost of tolls?

The Taoiseach: We reduced VAT on energy and we extended that reduction to 2030. We did that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We have the highest electricity costs.

The Taoiseach: There is an issue with electricity prices. There is no question about that. The Minister has set up an affordability group on energy to deal with that. There are regulatory issues and more pan-European issues. We are an island nation. There is wider distribution. We are investing hugely in the grid and choosing investment in infrastructure because we need to make sure the growing population has access to energy in the years to come. We are prioritising in a strategic way the allocation of resources for the benefit of all of our people into the future.

The Deputy referenced the carbon tax and so on. That is helping us to address fuel poverty, particularly for those on the lowest incomes. It is helping us to deal with the dramatic transformation of retrofitting investment, for example, which is a very effective way of reducing the cost of energy for many households. A huge number of households have benefited from that. Agriculture has also benefited from allocations from that source also.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Colm Burke: In the programme for Government, it was clearly set out that there would be a task force set up to look at the revitalisation of Cork city centre. The Taoiseach has his own problems with calling it a task force, but a group should be set up to look at the revitalisation of the city centre. On Monday of this week, the Taoiseach was in Cork for the turning of the sod on the foundations of a 25-storey building which will have 217 apartments. This will be a welcome residential development in the city.

My question is about the revitalisation of the city centre. It is not attractive for people to come into the city centre in real terms. We have already set up a task force for Dublin. It has given its report in which it set out a clear roadmap for delivery. When will this task force or group, which is in the programme for Government, going to be set up to look at the revitalisation of the city centre in Cork, to deal with the whole issue of vacant buildings and also to deal with derelict buildings? How can we work to develop those and to deliver new infrastructure as well?

There are a lot of good projects on the cards, such as light rail. For instance, one area of the city where there has been revitalisation is McCurtain Street. However, if you go to McCurtain Street, there are still six or seven vacant buildings there.

Likewise, another area to look at is Blackpool. It is part of the city where there has been very little real development in the sense of revitalisation. A task force or group would be important with regard to getting that up and running. Even if we set it up now, it will take six or months to produce a report and then there is the implementation and establishing a timescale for it. When is this group going to be set up? It will obviously be a joint approach between the city council, the Government, State agencies and the private sector. It is extremely important that we progress this project.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue in respect of establishing a group to identify issues relating to the future of Cork's city centre. We have not been waiting for the establishment of this group. There has been very significant investment in all the key areas in Cork. A €200 million investment for the airport was announced by the DAA last year and, of

course, because of the renewable energy agenda, the Port of Cork has successfully secured funding from Europe and Government backing through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, to enable development to facilitate renewables.

It was announced recently that the Crawford Gallery is to receive a €90 million investment, which really help the rejuvenation of the inner city. On Tuesday, the Government's decision to invest in the Tyndall National Institute was announced. It is a world-class research facility in terms of semi-conductors. The Government has allocated well over €100 million. I do not want to go too far any more because everyone is watching and listening, but there is a longer list of what I could identify, including the flood relief schemes. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, is prompting me on his activity levels.

The docklands has been particularly strong. I pay tribute to Cork City Council for its can-do attitude. I wish other local authorities would take on board Cork City Council's attitude on getting things done. We saw that with the 800 new social housing units announced this week, which includes a development in the city centre. For me, part of the issue with Cork's city centre, and with all cities, is that we need to reimagine our city centres and bring more residential units back into them. We saw that with the Railyard project, which will deliver 200-odd units in the heart of city and will, in due course, help the commerce of the city as well.

The living city initiative announced in the budget, which affects the existing cities but also adds five new centres, including Athlone, will unlock some of that dereliction and it is hoped will allow people to invest in above-the-shop projects because it has been much more liberalised in terms of the regulatory framework governing the application of the living city initiative.

We are going to establish a group. I expect it to come to Government shortly. There has been good work undertaken by the city council with a group at the university in trying to map the issues and in terms of envisaging the future of the city, particularly its central core and how that will work out in the future. We expect to come to Government with proposals in respect of that shortly.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I fully accept what the Taoiseach is saying with regard to the lots of progress that has been made. However, I dealt with the issue of a day centre for Cork when I was a Minister of State and it is only in the past four weeks that tenders have been invited for its creation. This centre will be extremely important for people who are homeless and have accommodation at night but have nowhere to go during the day. It is important that this project is progressed. There is a need for an overall plan in relation to the city centre. I accept that Cork City Council and its councillors and management are working very hard on various projects in the city centre. The Taoiseach identified the investment in the Crawford Gallery, which is an extremely important development, but we still have a lot of work to do. It is about a careful and co-ordinated plan being put in place and that is what a group can do. I ask that the group - I know the Taoiseach does not want to call it a task force - be set up at the earliest possible date.

The Taoiseach: It is the city council that does not want to call it a task force. When I met it some time back I was told that it has issues with that term because its view is that the city has made a lot of progress. The city council accepts that the future needs a certain vision and

approach. We will not get too exercised about terms. I have had consultations with the city council, as have others. We are close to putting flesh on the bones of this and bringing it to Government for a decision on the establishment of the group and for the group to then come back with recommendations after that.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: This is D-day for The Complex arts facility in Dublin's north inner city. At midnight, its lease expires and, as it stands, we risk losing what is a key project for our community. This issue has gone on and on for years and the project has been passed from Billy to Jack. Promises of intervention have been made and have amounted to nothing. Central government, Dublin City Council and the Arts Council all have a role play.

At this final hour, we need all concerned to get their act together and save this project. Passing the buck needs to stop. This complex has proven to be a valuable resource and its contribution has been widely recognised, including by the Government's Dublin city task force, which acknowledged the central role of The Complex in sustaining artistic and community life in the area. We are simply not prepared to lose it. The arts community and wider community have made their feelings very clear. The Complex must be saved.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. It is important. I will engage with the relevant Ministers. Dublin City Council has a role and the private sector is also involved. There is an issue to be resolved. From the perspective of the arts community and citizens generally, the role of the centre, which is of benefit to generations and is in the public interest, is one we would like to retain. I will get an update from the relevant Minister on this.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Could the Taoiseach communicate with me on that?

The Taoiseach: Yes.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I was deeply dismayed by the negative remarks about cyclists made by Judge James O'Donohoe. My colleague Deputy Ciarán Ahern has submitted a formal complaint to the Judicial Council and I note that many judges have expressed criticism. Some judges even cycle, as many of us in the Oireachtas do. Unfortunately, the comments generated a great deal of negativity. We have seen some scapegoating of cyclists in public discourse. It was appalling to see the Irish Road Haulage Association use the opportunity to punch down on cyclists this week. Fourteen cyclists were killed on our roads last year and 45 were killed in the past five years. Cyclists are vulnerable road users. We, as a country, should be encouraging more people to cycle and promoting cycling as a safe option. For all sorts of reasons, including climate action and public health reasons, this would be positive. It would also be positive in tackling traffic congestion and the proliferation of private vehicles on our streets.

During the term of the last Government, the Green Party made a commitment to ensure proper investment in cycling. Will the current Government tackle the negative narrative around cycling and invest in cycling infrastructure?

The Taoiseach: All parties in the last Government invested hugely in cycling. Successive Ministers for public expenditure, in particular, invested very significantly in active travel more generally, and that is to be seen across the country in the form of transformative projects. That is a good thing. I reject any stereotyping or categorisation of cyclists.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I do not want to breach any rule concerning the separation of powers but I am very clear that any general comment that impacts negatively on the perspective on cyclists is wrong. It should not be made. We should be very clear about the importance of cycling and about facilitating cyclists.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Also, we should be very careful regarding contested space on our roads to ensure that we protect cyclists.

About €1 billion been invested since 2021 in walking and cycling projects across the country. The active travel and sustainable transport programme of the National Transport Authority, NTA, continues to be very significant, with higher amounts being provided again this year.

Deputy Liam Quaide: When the staggering waiting lists for primary care services for young people were first raised by my party leader, Deputy Holly Cairns, in July 2024, the then Taoiseach, Deputy Simon Harris, suggested the crisis was confined to psychology and the Cork–Kerry area. I have looked into this in depth over the past year and it is clear that the crisis is across disciplines and affecting every health region. The longest waiting time for physiotherapy is in Laois–Offaly, at six and a half years. The longest for occupational therapy is in Louth–Meath, at nine years. The longest for psychology is in Dublin city and west, at an incredible 11 years. The longest for speech and language therapy is in Dublin north-west, at almost six years. These are not outliers because HSE senior management is actually removing outliers from parliamentary question responses. Despite the chronic under-resourcing of primary care services by successive Governments, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, states the solution is about a single point of access and not staffing thresholds. I support a single point of access but we have to staff services. Thousands of families are being failed. When are we going to establish staffing benchmarks for primary care services based on population size in each health region? When is the Government going to undertake the necessary recruitment?

The Taoiseach: We have been recruiting. We need to be a little more analytical on this as well. I take the Deputy's point in that the waiting times are not satisfactory whatsoever. The model needs to be examined. I do not believe it works at all in terms of the referral system and how we are utilising the disciplines. We are recruiting. There have been challenges with recruitment. CORU is improving its performance in respect of those who are qualified who wish to come from the United Kingdom, the EU or elsewhere. A lot of restrictive approaches

were being taken to the recruitment of people from overseas, particularly regarding the therapies.

More broadly, and standing back, are we deploying the resources we have adequately, effectively and optimally in respect of these issues? I am doubtful about it. I am doubtful about the model that exists within our health service in respect of therapies. We can keep recruiting but the recruits will not have an appreciable impact.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government regarding the occupied territories Bill. The Bill was published eight years ago. The International Court of Justice said the Government had an obligation to ban all trade in goods from occupied territories. The Taoiseach admits that in the programme for Government, which I read this morning. There are 160 legal settlements in the West Bank, 69 of which came into force since 2022. In recent weeks, the Israeli Government announced 19 new ones. Palestinian homes, farms and businesses have been bulldozed and destroyed. Some 700,000 Israelis live on illegal settlements, on stolen Palestinian land. Israeli settlers and Israel Defense Forces terrorists have murdered over 700 people in the West Bank in the past two years. When will the Government stop dancing around this and bring the occupied territories Bill through the Oireachtas? The relevant Minister, Deputy McEntee, speaking yesterday in Egypt, said she is not going to rush into something. For God's sake, we are still waiting for the legislation after eight years. This needs to be prioritised. People are being murdered in Palestine by terrorists. We need to help them.

The Taoiseach: It is not eight years. It is a little disingenuous to say it is but I understand where the Deputy is coming from. The Government did not introduce a Bill eight years ago. What has been put forward is wholly inadequate in terms of constitutionality, etc. We will not go back over all of that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We have done all of that, though.

The Taoiseach: What is going on with the settlements is wrong. It will render non-viable the prospect of a two-state solution, which in our view is the only sustainable way to have peace, including between Palestinians and Israelis, in the Middle East. I decry the continuing expansion of settlements in the West Bank. In our view, we need to move on to phase 2 of the peace process in Gaza, have a sustainable transitional force there, achieve decommissioning and have proper reconstruction of Gaza. We received a legal opinion from the Attorney General recently in respect of the occupied territories Bill. There are significant implementation issues. This will not stop anything in terms of the Israeli policy on the expansion of settlements. We just need to be clear about that as well.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It does not matter if it comes from Russia, though.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Donnelly. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the fact that the Irish Government has, on behalf of its people, voted against the Mercosur trade deal. This deal will open the floodgates to Brazilian

beef produced to standards far below what we demand here and contaminated with banned growth hormones and antibiotics, as exposed by the *Irish Farmers Journal*. Our farmers, who uphold the highest food safety and animal welfare standards, will face devastating losses in the beef and poultry sectors. Rural Ireland cannot be sacrificed for cheap imports that undermine public health and destroy livelihoods. The Government needs to keep sending a clear message that we stand with Irish farmers and for quality.

In the next few weeks, each MEP in Europe will have a vote for or against the Mercosur deal. Our Independent Ireland MEP, Ciaran Mullooly, has been in Brussels since Sunday lobbying fellow MEPs from Italy and other countries to vote "No". It is alarming that three MEPs out of 14 in Ireland are saying they are going to vote in favour of the Mercosur deal. Can the Taoiseach tell me today that the Government will apply the whip to MEPs Barry Andrews, Seán Kelly and Regina Doherty to have them vote against the Mercosur deal in the same way that it has?

The Taoiseach: The Government took its decision last week notwithstanding that significant improvements and safeguards were achieved. Quite a number of MEPs, including Barry Cowen, Billy Kelleher and Cynthia Ní Mhurchú, worked effectively and all tabled amendments that were accepted. That was important in making sure the strongest possible safeguards, including market safeguards, would be in place. Now the threshold has gone from 10% down to 5%, which is a pretty significant improvement regarding any disruption to the market here. Also, in terms of production standards, the EU sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, safeguards already in place are non-negotiable to protect human, animal and plant health.

1 o'clock

They are among the highest in the world, and they are non-negotiable. The Commission, as part of the safeguards, has already said it will include a 50% increase in the number of audits carried out on all non-EU countries over the next two years, a 33% increase in audits of the EU border control posts and closer monitoring of non-compliant commodities and countries.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Shane Moynihan.

Deputy Michael Collins: I asked about the whip on the three MEPs.

The Taoiseach: I did not have enough time to come back on that.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I noted the Taoiseach's recent comments on e-scooters. I have raised this with him on a number of occasions. I cycle to Leinster House when I can, and I am a big supporter of the active travel agenda. However, I think there is now an emergency with regard to e-scooters that we need to take a very clear view on. We have heard the comments from the national children's health authority and Dr. Irwin Gill about the prevalence of head injuries among those aged under 16 because of the lack of use of helmets on those vehicles. Research from Vienna shows us that head injury rates halve when helmets are made mandatory for users of e-scooters. There are still a number of minors using e-scooters on our roads and streets. That is why we have to go further than just helmet requirements, and also look at registration and insurance requirements. This is to make sure that, first, e-scooter users are

held accountable for their behaviour, but also that e-scooters are not being used for criminal purposes, as they are in many places around the country as drug gangs' supply lines. They are used by vulnerable minors to deliver illegal products for the gangs. This is not something new. It is done in Denmark, Germany and Italy. We need to get ahead of the curve and make sure the regulation matches the technology.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very important issue. I agree with the thrust of what he is saying. We have to grasp the nettle here. By the way, under the 2024 regulations, it is an offence for children under 16 to use e-scooters on public roads. That is an important road safety measure, enforcement of which, of course, is a matter for An Garda Síochána. The wearing of helmets is a no-brainer, given the damage to the head that can happen if you do not have a helmet, and also given the issue of registration and high-vis clothing. The Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney, is discussing this with his officials. I will come back to the Deputy with the concrete outcomes from those discussions.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The vacant properties refurbishment grant has been extremely successful since it was implemented by the Government, with nearly 15,000 applications up to the end of September. There were 200 in Longford and 300 in Westmeath, and over €200 million has been paid out under the scheme. However, I find that a significant number of individuals and couples are coming to my office who are struggling to secure finance to complete the works in order to create the drawdown. Could we consider stage payments within the grant scheme to allow young couples or individuals to use the scheme more effectively?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I will discuss it with the Minister, Deputy James Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, in respect of whether we can improve the cash flow dimension to this.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I suggested stage payments.

The Taoiseach: Stage payments would mean that people have to claim back afterwards, and so on. I will come back to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not need to remind the Taoiseach about the massive issues people are having with the platform X, formerly known as Twitter. It is an absolute cesspit. More and more people are leaving the platform. In fact, I would be inclined to leave the platform myself were it not for the fact that I am a commuter who regularly uses the northern commuter line. Irish Rail continues to give its updates only via X, not on its website or on any other platform. There is no dedicated WhatsApp channel or anything like that. As recently as yesterday evening, it confirmed that it has no plans to move off the platform X. I have been contacted by my constituents in quite large numbers to say that they want to leave X but cannot because they simply have to have it to be able to access real-time information about disruptions. There are often disruptions on the northern line. Will the Government offer an alternative to people, please?

The Taoiseach: The point that the Deputy has raised raises the issue more generally of how one responds to issues that emerged in respect of Grok, for example, and its use and application or manipulation. What is important is the laws we have in place and our enforcement regime. Child pornography is banned in Irish law under the 1998 Act. It is an important point to make. That is across-the-board, whether it is AI-created or in other forms. That is important. We need to focus on the laws we have in place to prevent the type of activity that people are understandably horrified by.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: People should have a choice.

The Taoiseach: We also have laws pertaining to adults. The Attorney General has already given me preliminary advice in relation to this. The issue is that what is a problem on one platform today can be a problem on another platform tomorrow, and on another platform the day after. We will look at it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Michael Murphy.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: A dedicated WhatsApp channel would work.

The Taoiseach: We will look at that.

Deputy Michael Murphy: One hundred and ninety precious lives were lost on Irish roads last year. We have a crisis when it comes to road safety. We also have a crisis when it comes to compliance with existing road traffic legislation. In December alone, there were 26,500 fines for speeding, thousands were fined for not wearing a seatbelt or for using a mobile phone, 765 were convicted of either drink or drug driving, and 3,000 vehicles were seized on the side of the road. That was in December alone. Driver behaviour matters. Enforcement shapes driver behaviour. Does the Taoiseach agree that the number one priority has to be strengthening the roads policing unit? It currently stands at fewer than 650, which is 400 fewer than 15 years ago.

The Taoiseach: First, I want to pay tribute to An Garda Síochána for the work it did over the Christmas period. It carried out a dedicated road traffic enforcement operation throughout that period, with 10,000 checkpoints, as the Deputy said, statutory and mandatory intoxicant testing and regular high-visibility policing checkpoints. It made 765 arrests, seized nearly 3,000 vehicles for different offences under the Road Traffic Act and detected nearly 26,000 speeding offences. At the moment, as the Deputy said, there are some 638 gardaí assigned to roads policing. Recruitment is continuing apace and is accelerating, so additional garda numbers will become available to be deployed to priority areas. My view is that, over time, we will be in a position to assign more gardaí to roads policing units. Twenty-nine gardaí were assigned to the DMR roads policing unit last year. Last June, 26 gardaí were assigned to roads policing units in the eastern and north-western regions. Diaidh ar ndiaidh, mar a deir muid, beidh na huimhreacha ag méadú. We will increase the numbers.

Deputy John McGuinness: From 1 January this year, the Department of Social Protection has been sharing information with Revenue in relation to those in receipt of carer's benefit and carer's allowance who are on the PAYE income list for last year - they may have been working a few hours per week - to inform them that they are now to be taxed. The tax will be deducted at source. It will apply not just from this year onwards, but retrospectively as well. In other words, Revenue can come back and ask for the arrears of taxation in relation to carer's benefit and carer's allowance. Does the Taoiseach think that is fair? Is it possible to exclude carer's benefit and carer's allowance as an income? Can we ensure that fair play is applied here? These are carers. They are not earning from it.

The Taoiseach: That is an issue I will check up on further. I will talk to the Minister for Finance and Revenue in respect of this. The taxation law and framework, as the Deputy knows, covers all income earners and, obviously, you are taxed if your income goes above a certain threshold. There has not been specific tax treatment, to my knowledge, in respect of this area. I will follow up and try to examine what exactly is afoot in respect of this.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I have been in touch with many sports clubs in Dublin 15. It is an area where the population of young people is exploding. There are groups like Corduff FC, Tyrrelstown GAA club, the football club, Plunkett's, the cricket club and the boxing clubs. I have met with the executives, coaches and mentors of all of these clubs over the last while. They spend countless hours providing facilities and training for young people every week. They all say one thing, which is that there is a lack of facilities, particularly winter training facilities.

There has been an explosion in the number of young girls engaging in sport but there is a lack of toilet facilities in parks and other facilities. With the billions of euro we now have in extra taxes, is there an opportunity to provide sports facilities for those young people, not only in Dublin 15 but right across the State? There is a huge issue.

The Taoiseach: But we are providing huge-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is not enough.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy will let me finish the point. We are providing huge facilities across the country. There is a problem in Dublin city. The relationship between clubs and Dublin City Council and the other councils, for example, is much different to the relationship between clubs and sporting organisations and other local authorities down the country. There is a huge gap. I have seen it when I have been out canvassing in Dublin. There are too many restrictions on the utilisation of playing facilities and a lack of access for clubs to such playing facilities.

There has been a record allocation of funding - there is no question about that - but there does need to be serious examination within Dublin collectively between clubs and councils in particular about freeing up land but also removing restrictions. We tend to do 100-year leases with clubs in Cork. We have done it for decades. That is almost unheard of, it seems to me, in Dublin. I was at clubs last year where they could not use facilities during the winter. It makes no sense to me, as someone who is involved.

Deputy Seamus Healy: As the Taoiseach knows, Clonmel is a significant economic, social and cultural hub with significant employment in industry and services. However, the town centre requires considerable refurbishment having been hit by changing retail trends and the resulting closure of businesses, including long-standing family businesses. Tipperary County Council has a significant town centre upgrading project ready for call 4 of the urban regeneration development fund. Approval for that project is vitally important for the consolidation and future development of the town, particularly as we missed out on the last round of funding. The Clonmel public realm regeneration project is a €21 million project. It is shovel-ready. The part 8 consultation has been completed and the town has an excellent record in the completion of similar-type projects in the past, like the Kickham Plaza and the sports hub, both of which came in on time and under budget. I am asking that capital funding be made available for this project in the call 4 funding.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I am very fond of Clonmel. It is a very vibrant town. Senator Goldsboro has been on to me about the same issue as well. I will talk to the Minister involved. It is James Browne in this case or it might be Dara Calleary. I think it is the urban renewal fund that the Deputy is looking at here. I will certainly pursue that in terms of the public realm application.

Deputy Gary Gannon: At yesterday's justice committee meeting the chief inspector of prisons, Mr. Mark Kelly, gave the most extraordinary testimony in relation to conditions in prisons in Ireland. He described them as an affront to dignity and later said what is happening in our prison system is almost tantamount to torture. I understand when we talk about improving prison conditions it is often not easy. Many people in prison may have done immense harms in communities. We also have recidivism rates in this country of seven out of ten. That is one of the highest in the EU. The Taoiseach might tell me we are going to build more prisons spaces but even if we included the other 940 prison spaces that are being spoken about, that still will not bring capacity below 100%. Has the Taoiseach a plan for improving prison conditions and outcomes? What we are doing at the moment is very clearly not working and, beyond that, it is cruel.

The Taoiseach: I mentioned earlier the growth in population in this country over the past two decades. It has been a quite dramatic exponential growth in population. I accept the comments by the inspector of prisons. It is a real issue. It has been growing over the past decade, consequential on the increased population and increased crime. We are now undertaking the fastest-ever expansion of prison capacity in Ireland. That has to happen and it is happening. The money has been allocated. However, I acknowledge that even with that there will still be challenges and pressures on capacity in our prison system. It is absolutely correct that we should have proper facilities and that we should expand capacity.

Deputy Mark Wall: I wish to raise again the carparks that many of our motorways have become as they approach Dublin. Specifically today, I raise the urgent need to provide park and ride and secure park-and-share facilities at strategic points along these motorways. On my way in to Dublin this morning I counted 15 cars parked at the hard shoulder at the Ballitore M9 junction. These motorists are car-pooling and reducing the number of cars on these motorways.

The same is happening at the Castledermot junction and, I am told, at other locations along the motorways.

What plans does the Government have to provide park-and-ride facilities along these motorways? These cars parking on the hard shoulders are subject to damage and they need secure parking. They are helping with a dire situation on our motorways by reducing the amount of traffic on those roads each day.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. TII and NTA are examining all these issues on an ongoing basis. Investment in public transport is happening apace. That will be key to reducing pressure on our roads. However, there is no easy solution in the short term. Park and ride does work. We will work and support the agencies and councils in respect of such facilities.

Deputy Emer Currie: The national vehicle and driver file is the State's database for driving licences, disqualifications and penalty points. It is relied on by An Garda Síochána and insurance companies yet in 2024 almost 8,000 penalty points were unmatched. That is mainly through the Courts Service. Following questions I raised last year, the Department reviewed the matching process for disqualifications and penalty points but these figures are not providing reassurance. The Department admitted that over 1,500 penalty point offences could have been matched if the system was more effective. Can the Taoiseach encourage clarity on how many disqualifications from drivers accumulating 12 penalty points or seven on a learner permit cannot be fully enforced on our roads because those penalty points are not being recorded on the national vehicle and driver file? Now is a time for difficult and forensic questions about our Vision Zero strategy.

The Taoiseach: There is a responsibility on the services concerned and on the agencies concerned to do this properly and effectively. The Government cannot run every agency. I will alert the Minister to the issues the Deputy raised here but there is an obligation on the services to do this and enforce and fulfil the law so that the penalties are applied and the consequences which flow from such penalties are given effect to.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I raise an issue which affects both the Taoiseach and me. It is Cork Educate Together Secondary School, which is currently located on Wellington Road in my constituency. When it was first founded in 2016 it was largely due to serve a catchment in the Taoiseach's constituency, largely in the Douglas area. Since 2016 the school has had a number of homes. It is currently located on Wellington Road, as I said, next to Griffith College. Its lease is due to expire in 2027. Griffith College has intimated to the school management that it will not extend the lease a third time. The school was initially told by the Department that it was due to get its new-build school by September 2027. It cannot get an update from the Department and the school does not know where it will be in 2027. It is due to go in by the Fingerpost roundabout in the Douglas area. Can the Taoiseach get an update from the Department to clarify the situation for the school?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this. It is a very pressing issue for Cork educate together. I will engage with the Minister for Education and the Department to get

urgently required clarity for the school and the school community and I will get back to the Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We are just about out of time but I will go ahead with Deputy Ó Súilleabháin.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: On a similar note, ba mhaith liom uasdátú ar Ghaelscoil an Inbhir Mhóir agus Gaelcholáiste na Mara. I would like an update on the commencement date for Gaelcholáiste na Mara and Ghaelscoil an Inbhir Mhóir. When will there be shovels in the ground for their new campus at Kilbride? I appreciate the Taoiseach might not have the answers now but I ask that he get them for me. Pupils in the schools have been 27 years in prefabs. I visited the school two years ago. I met sixth-year pupils who had been at the sod-turning ceremony when they were in junior infants. Tá sé sin scannalach agus is cúis náire amach is amach é. When will there be shovels in the ground and when will pupils actually start in their new facilities?

The Taoiseach: Déanfaidh mé teagmháil leis an Aire chun soiléiriú a fháil maidir leis na tograí sin sa Ghaelscoil agus sa Gaelcholáiste. Más féidir liom freagra a fháil, cuirfidh mé in iúl é.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to return to the issue of the €141 million paid by the public to the World Bank in advance of Paschal Donohoe taking up his new job. Yesterday the Taoiseach told me a formal business case was prepared by the Department of Finance and the low option was €141.4 million. I have read the business case. It lists a number of options. It lists option 3, which is the World Bank's envisaged level and what it was asking for - €131.4 million. It describes the €141.4 million as the higher level option, not the low option. Would the Taoiseach like to correct the record of the Dáil? Can he explain why we paid €10 million more than the World Bank asked for?

The Taoiseach: The figures I gave yesterday and the comments were from the Department of Finance presentation to me. I have asked that the business case be published. There was an FOI in relation to that. There was a suggested contribution from officials of €150 million, if there was a wish to go further. The Minister agreed on the €141 million. I will seek to reconcile the various notes the Deputy has with the notes I have, which I articulated yesterday in the Dáil. We are talking about the 75 poorest countries globally that are supported by this organisation. That was the context.

Post European Council Meeting: Statements

The Taoiseach: I attended a meeting of the European Council on 18 December in Brussels. Substantial items for discussion included Ukraine; the EU's next multi-annual financial framework, MFF; the situation in the Middle East; EU enlargement; and Europe's competitiveness in a changing global context. Other items on the agenda were European security and defence; migration; the fight against antisemitism, racism and xenophobia; the Pact for the Mediterranean; disinformation; and a proposal for a regional strategy for the

Atlantic. I will deal with Ukraine; the MFF; Middle East; enlargement; global competitiveness; and the fight against antisemitism, racism and xenophobia. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, will later speak to other issues.

Support for Ukraine in the face of Russia's ongoing illegal war of aggression was the main item in our discussions. After almost four years of brutal Russian aggression and as US-led peace efforts continue, it is more important than ever that the European Union continues and strengthens its support for Ukraine. President Zelenskyy briefed us on the current situation in Ukraine, both on the battlefield and in Russia's escalating strikes on civilians and civilian infrastructure. I joined my colleagues in reconfirming our commitment to providing comprehensive financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people. To this end, we discussed how the European Union will actively participate in peace efforts and our readiness to contribute to robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine as part of a peace agreement. These guarantees are being advanced through the coalition of the willing, of which Ireland is a member, and in co-operation with the United States. The coalition met on 11 December, when I attended, and on 6 January, when the Minister, Deputy McEntee, attended on my behalf. In the meantime, Russia's aggression against Ukraine continues to intensify, with large-scale drone and missile attacks on cities continuing to result in widespread destruction and the death of civilians, including children. This is not the behaviour of a country interested in peace.

To ensure Ukraine can meet its needs and remain strong in its negotiating position, at our meeting in October the European Council agreed to help Ukraine to meet its financing needs in 2026 and 2027. At our December meeting, we agreed a loan of €90 billion to ensure it has timely and predictable finance over the coming two years. This will be provided through enhanced co-operation, in which Ireland will participate. The money will be borrowed by the Commission, backed by the European Union budget.

European Union leaders were in agreement that Russia should be held accountable for its actions and should have to pay for the destruction it has caused. I welcome the unprecedented decision to ensure that Russia's sovereign assets should remain immobilised until it ceases its war and compensates Ukraine for the damage it has caused. Work will continue on the technical and legal dimensions of establishing a reparations loan based on the cash balances associated with Russia's immobilised assets. In line with our commitment to ensuring full accountability for Russia's war crimes, the European Council called for sustained efforts to operationalise the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine within the framework of the Council of Europe. Leaders agreed that it is important to maintain pressure on Russia to agree to a ceasefire and engage meaningfully in peace negotiations. Ireland has consistently supported robust targeted sanctions in response to Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. Following agreement at the end of October on a 19th package of sanctions, the European Council called for work to continue on a 20th package of sanctions, with the aim of adopting it as soon as possible after its presentation in early 2026. The European Council called for further action to counter Russia's shadow fleet, which will further squeeze Russian energy revenues and will address the other significant risks, including environmental, that the shadow fleet poses.

Ireland has always been a strong supporter of Ukraine's European Union perspective, and I continue to advocate at European level for accelerated progress on Ukraine's European Union

accession. Ukraine belongs in the European Union, and its membership will not only provide security for Ukraine but will also bolster Europe's security. I therefore welcome that the European Council reaffirmed its steadfast support for Ukraine's path towards European Union membership and welcomed the significant progress Ukraine has achieved so far under the most challenging circumstances.

The December European Council had a first exchange of views on the post-2027 multi-annual financial framework on foot of the proposals presented by the European Commission in July. Our discussion was informed by the draft negotiating box developed over recent months by the Danish Presidency of the Council, which sets out the core issues that will ultimately require political decisions. The proposals on the table involve major changes to the European Union budget in terms of structure, spending and revenue, and we are studying them in detail. There are likely to be difficult negotiations ahead given the competing demands and financing needs across a range of policy areas.

Ireland has been clear that strongly funded and ring-fenced common agricultural and fisheries policies remain a priority for us. The Government's priorities also include an ambitious Horizon Europe research programme that prioritises excellence, development of cross-border infrastructure, maintenance of humanitarian and development aid and continuation of the PEACEPLUS programme.

The Government considers that the new MFF must continue to promote and protect the values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity enshrined in the European Union treaties. We have made clear our view that contributions based on each member state's gross national income, GNI, remain the fairest and simplest way to provide the European Union with the resources it needs. Overall, we wish to ensure that the next MFF brings the EU added value. It is only by working together with our EU partners that we can make progress on the big issues. I have made clear to President Costa that I fully support his objective of reaching political agreement in the European Council by the end of this year during Ireland's Presidency.

The European Council assessed the situation in Gaza as implementation of the comprehensive plan continues. The ceasefire remains fragile and the humanitarian situation continues to be very difficult. We welcomed the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2803 on the establishment of the Board of Peace and of a temporary international stabilisation force. We called on all parties to implement the resolution in its entirety and in line with relevant international political and legal principles. The Council reiterated the European Union's commitment to contributing to this implementation, including through an enhanced mandate for the European Union border assistance mission for the Rafah crossing point and the European Union police mission for the Palestinian territories. We said we stand ready to support the establishment of the Board of Peace and will actively engage with partners on the next steps.

The Council reaffirmed the European Union's strong commitment to international law and to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-state solution. For my part, I stressed the need for the European Union to do all we can to alleviate the appalling humanitarian situation in Gaza. Despite commitments given in the comprehensive plan, the level of humanitarian assistance entering Gaza remains nowhere near enough and this is very worrying as people, particularly children, are still suffering enormously.

The Council condemned the massive increase in settler violence against Palestinian civilians and underlined the importance of de-escalation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

We emphasised the importance of stability in Lebanon and Syria to allow them to recover from conflict and highlighted the importance of UNIFIL to Lebanon. We insisted that all parties - Israel and Hezbollah - must abide by the terms of UN SCR 1701 and condemned attacks on UNIFIL peacekeepers. Having visited the Irish contingent in UNIFIL in December, I observed for myself the excellent job it is doing in very challenging circumstances.

Leaders also held a strategic discussion on the geo-economic situation and its implications for the European Union's competitiveness. Informed by the Letta and Draghi reports, the European Council set important orientations last year on re-establishing a much stronger political focus on economic competitiveness, dynamism and productivity growth. This included the immediate priorities of simplifying regulation, lowering energy costs and strengthening the link between private savings and investment. Unlocking the full potential of the Single Market is also vitally important.

Leaders will return to competitiveness issues at an informal meeting of the European Council dedicated to the topic in Belgium on 12 February. Our goal should be nothing less than making Europe the best place in the world to start and grow a business, including through a completely modernised digital environment and significantly strengthened research and innovation systems. This will be the foundation for future prosperity that must underpin our shared values and wider political objectives.

Prior to the December European Council, I joined fellow EU leaders and the leaders of five countries in the western Balkans for the European Union-Western Balkans Summit. This annual meeting is a welcome opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the countries of the western Balkans and investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity in our neighbourhood. At the European Council, leaders held a strategic discussion on how to advance enlargement, calling on candidate and potential candidate countries to continue implementing the necessary reforms to align with European Union law. The European Union of the future will be larger and, therefore, we also need to undertake internal reforms to ensure that we can remain effective as a union of more member states. The Commission has already undertaken considerable work in that regard and is expected to share its policy reviews with member states in the course of 2026.

Ireland has long been a strong advocate for enlargement and making progress will be a priority of our Presidency in the second half of this year. I believe we can close all negotiating chapters with Montenegro by the end of our Presidency and make significant progress in the accession negotiations with Albania, Ukraine and Moldova.

As the House is aware, antisemitism is a growing scourge around the world. It must be stamped out wherever it arises. The European Council reflected on the evil gun attack targeting Sydney's Jewish community gathered on Bondi Beach to celebrate the beginning of Hanukkah and we condemned all forms of antisemitism and hate, intolerance, racism and xenophobia. I look forward to the forthcoming European Union anti-racism strategy, due to be published shortly. Leaders will return to many of these issues to assess progress and discuss further actions at the next formal meeting of the European Council in March.

Before concluding, I am sure the House will join with me in expressing full support for Denmark and our solidarity with the people of Greenland. The future of Greenland is a matter to be determined by Denmark and by Greenlandic people in line with well-established democratic principles and international law. Ireland has consistently underlined that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is a fundamental principle of the United Nations Charter and must be respected in all circumstances.

The meeting of the European Council in December was another crucial one. I am sure that there are many more to come as we grapple with the challenges of a very uncertain world and seek to protect and advance our values, security and prosperity. I look forward to continuing our discussions in this House on this very important agenda for Ireland, especially as we take up the responsibility of the European Union Presidency on 1 July.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: These debates on the European Council are a useful opportunity to articulate many issues in the world. Unfortunately, ten minutes would hardly be enough now; 20 minutes would suffice.

I want to start by saying how disappointed I am that the European Council spent so little time discussing the biggest conflict in the world at this moment in time, namely, Sudan. It is a conflict that has seen perhaps hundreds of thousands of people killed and millions displaced. Europe and Ireland have close relationships with a country very much encouraging and potentially inflaming the conflict there. It is bitterly disappointing that the biggest conflict and most serious humanitarian situation in the world, a site of immense human suffering, received a fleeting reference in the Taoiseach's statement. At a European Council level, it received effectively no attention. Ireland should take it upon itself to ensure at subsequent European Council meetings that the conflict, tragedy and slaughter receives much greater attention than it is receiving at this point in time.

I will touch on a number of areas. Unfortunately, it is difficult to touch on all of them in the limited time afforded to me given the state of the world at this point in time. I want to take this opportunity to condemn the severe and desperate violence against protesters in Iran. The reports coming out of Iran are shocking. The latest reports indicate that perhaps more than 2,000 people have been killed in a wave of repression against protesters. This comes on top of Internet blackouts, thousands of arrests and many people injured. It is very clear that the protest in Isfahan, Tehran and many other cities are significant and represent deep dissatisfaction with the Iranian Government. People have a right to protest and demonstrate and this must be respected. There is no justification for the large-scale repression that is happening. No one should face death or injury for protesting. We express our condemnation of violence, whether against protesters or others, and call on the Iranian Government to respect the rights of protesters to demonstrate and speak out about their entirely legitimate grievances.

We are discussing this at a highly uncertain and volatile time. There is conflict in the Middle East, Ukraine, Sudan, Venezuela and many other places. We have an Administration in the United States that has totally departed from the norms of international politics and shaken up its relationship with its allies. It has caused allies to question whether they have allies. At times, that Administration has attacked the Ukrainian Government and backed a policy in Gaza that is totally unacceptable.

We still have the potential for escalating trade wars that could have major implications for Ireland and jobs across all economies. There is a crisis in international development as aid projects across the global south are threatened by massive cuts to aid and other countries have also reduced expenditure. There is the threat of global warming. Several countries have failed to meet their obligations under the Paris agreement. The most powerful economy in the world - the US - has withdrawn from the agreement altogether.

With regard to the US Administration, we have enormous concerns, as I hope the Government does, regarding the intensified threats made by US President Trump towards Greenland. It is illogical and without any sense or reference to any framework. There is a Danish Government and a Greenlandic Government that are entirely open to dialogue, yet the US Government and President Trump seem to have an obsession with and fixation on the US acquiring Greenland for national security priorities. It is seriously alarming and should be seen in the context of a flagrant disregard for international law and sovereignty.

That is very evident in the attack on Venezuela and the detention of President Maduro. These attacks were, in many respects, a naked power grab to gain control of commodities. The track record of the United States in attempting to force regime change by violence has been catastrophic for countries and entire regions. This latest intervention risks more death and suffering. It is not the place of western countries to force regime change and these attacks were quite clearly motivated by commodities. This is a naked power grab to gain control of Venezuelan oil. The US has, in effect, said as much. There are clearly many flaws in the Venezuelan Government, with Maduro and subsequently, and its respect for democracy. However, the democratic process needs to be respected by external actors, including the US, and the Venezuelan Government. Ultimately, the issue relates to sovereignty.

John McTernan was head of communications for Tony Blair in that British Government and I note his comments during the course of what has happened. I do not think one has to have a particularly radical opinion to be appalled by what happened to President Maduro. His comment was that, "Most sensible people are sceptical of kidnapping foreign politicians you disagree with", and I think that is entirely right.

A lot of this comes back to sovereignty. That is the concern that many countries around the world have at this moment in time. I know it is in the concern of the Mexican Government. I know it is the concern of the Danish Government. It is clearly the concern of the Colombian Government and Cuban Government also. Listening to some of the commentary, it was difficult to know what the Irish Government thought, to be truthful. It did not seem it particularly wanted to say what it thought. Ultimately, I encourage the Irish Government to speak out on behalf of sovereignty and that we have to respect the sovereignty of governments-

Deputy Thomas Byrne: As well as the people of Venezuela.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Absolutely, yes. I have acknowledged that and I agree with that but we also have to acknowledge that for other jurisdictions, including Ukraine, Greenland, Denmark and all those other countries I referenced, there has been a precedent set. Regardless of whether the Irish Government likes a particular government, it has to acknowledge that a precedent has been set. If it does not speak out in respect of international

law in one instance, it will be constrained from doing so in another instance. It clearly has implications for areas about which Ireland is concerned, such as Ukraine. It very obvious that the invader of Ukraine - the Russian Government of the Russian Federation - may seek to manipulate precedent such as this. It is important that the Irish Government stand on the side of international law in respect of that, as it has historically. That is crucial.

I want to take the opportunity to reiterate Sinn Féin's solidarity with the people of Ukraine in the face of Russia's brutal invasion of their country. Four nearly four years now, the courageous people of Ukraine have stood against a brutal Russian onslaught and invasion. We have consistently called for efforts to build a sustainable and just peace. It must be sustainable and just. To ensure that, the Ukrainian people clearly have to be at the table. For too long, efforts have been made to exclude the Ukrainian people from the table and talk over them. Nothing can be decided about Ukraine without Ukraine. Ireland should use its voice to the greatest extent possible to achieve and support an end to the conflict in Ukraine and support its people.

I will return briefly to the situation in Sudan, which is truly horrifying. I recognise the Irish Government is one of a number of governments and does not take sole responsibility for the lack of emphasis on a European level on the conflict in Sudan, but we are talking about slaughter on an incredible scale. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people. It is not even clear where tens of thousands of people even are. The numbers who have left Al Fashir and the numbers who are still in it do not correlate. Tens of thousands of people are potentially unaccounted for, with many likely slaughtered in what is ethnically motivated violence that is being fanned by external actors, including the United Arab Emirates in particular, with a flow of very sophisticated weaponry that is not of a small or limited scale, but of a large scale. Ireland and Europe have a strong relationship with that country. It has to begin to use its voice much more firmly, including at European level. This needs to get much closer to the top of the agenda at European level. Ireland must continue to consistently emphasis the need to maintain humanitarian access to alleviate widespread suffering of the civilian population and to provide humanitarian assistance to support communities in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries.

We heard from the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, that the occupied territories Bill would be limited to goods. At least, that is certainly how it was reported. To my mind, what the Government is proposing will create difficulties for it on all sides. If it is looking to address one concern, it is will create more on the other side. It comes back to that point of international law. We are talking about the two-state solution. If the two-state solution is the way forward - it is my view that it should be the way forward - the manner in which the Israeli Government is running away from that, by facilitating settler violence in the West Bank and the proposals it has for Gaza to effectively try to install some kind of viceroyship, is undermining that. The Irish Government has to find ways to exercise its influence. The occupied territories Bill is but one means of that but one crucial way and one in which it can lead the world. If it chooses not to do so, the Government will very much regret that in the years to come.

Deputy Duncan Smith: One of the areas we are quite concerned about is our reputation for being coherent and trusted within the European Union. To be clear, the Labour Party has been consistently opposed to the Mercosur deal on the basis of its impact on climate and the potential impact on workers' rights. The European Trade Union Confederation has been very strong on

this for a number of years. Unfortunately, our Government has been anything but coherent in terms of its own approach. The Taoiseach himself stated that progress was being made towards a deal. He was speaking in the context of the farming and agricultural element of it. It then all fell down, to a point where some commentators said Ireland had lost a good and valuable ear on the floor that matters in Brussels.

It is not so much the position but the incoherence. It is what we are saying privately versus what we are saying publicly. One of the Government's own MEPs is even backing the deal in direct opposition to his own Government. What does that say about the coherence of Irish policy when it comes to the European Council? How trusted will we be, especially as we are in the midst of an international security crisis?

On security, I need to touch on our own airspace and how it is being used by the United States. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, confirmed that the US Embassy was contacted after it emerged that two US aircraft had flown over Irish sovereign airspace while tracking a ship in the North Atlantic that had attempted to collect oil from Venezuela last month. I understand that the embassy insisted it had complied with the 1959 agreement, but we are not sure or do not have confirmation that it did. Indeed, the Minister has not said that our State granted permission for those flyovers, as per the agreement. As the Minister of State knows, we have been far behind the ball on our own security for far too long. Our radar capabilities are non-existent, although the Government is making moves on that. I do not dispute that in any way. However, we needed to put out a call for assistance from European allies for the visit of President Zelenskyy recently. There are significant questions still hanging over what happened in relation to the drones that hovered just over the Irish Sea upon President Zelenskyy's approach, which raises huge concerns.

I wanted to ask as well about our ability to track the Russian "sanction busting" shadow fleet. With the turmoil in Venezuela, what is happening in Iran, the threats President Trump is now making towards Cuba and what seems impending in relation to Greenland, the North Atlantic theatre in which Ireland is physically based is a centre of this instability. We need to be sure Ireland has the ability to monitor our own borders and our exclusive economic zone.

The invasion of Venezuela and capture of Maduro, as illegitimate a president as he was, has obviously further shaken the international order. What level of discussions are taking place with EU leaders on this situation? Is the Government frustrated by the EU's constant monitoring of situations with little or no actions to actually back them up? It seems we are still grappling with a world where a former ally to Europe, the United States, is now acting if not like an enemy, then as a country that cannot be considered a trusted ally any more. The EU cannot continue to stay silent, particularly as Greenland is next in President Trump's crosshairs. How much discussion has taken place about Greenland and what will happen with troops if the sovereign territory of Greenland is taken over by the United States? This is a key question for Ireland: are we prepared to abolish the 1959 agreement and ban US military planes once and for all from landing in Shannon Airport if the US takes Greenland by force or supplantation, which is of course EU territory in relation to Denmark?

On national security, would the Minister of State agree that the level of disinformation peddled through the algorithms on social media is a risk to our functioning democracy? I know we mentioned Russia and the threat of Russia in terms of cybersecurity. There is a huge and ongoing threat from Russia but there is a comparable threat from China. All we have to do is

get briefings from our own National Cyber Security Centre about that. I know the Government had a huge visit to China. That was lauded by the likes of Clare Daly, but China is a threat when it comes to cybersecurity. I want to know at what level are we, as a nation with our EU partners, tackling China in relation to their cybersecurity and other threats?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the statements following the meeting of the European Council in December. I thank the Taoiseach for outlining some of the matters that were discussed.

Ukraine, the Middle East and EU enlargement were referenced. It is only a matter weeks since the European Council meeting and yet the entire world has changed in those few weeks. I might touch on some of the international developments, but the issue in Greenland is one we have to approach with great consideration here in Ireland. In many ways, the way the European Union responded to the Russian invasion of Ukraine set a standard for our commitment to sovereignty, integrity and respect of borders and foreign countries. That happened because of agreement across Europe. That is also why it did not happen in relation to Gaza, as there was not agreement across Europe, although there was agreement in regard to those occupied territories in the West Bank and sanctions that were imposed there. That agreement across Europe is probably the point I am touching on and, in that respect, we need to consider the heightened rhetoric from the United States and how that is impacting the idea that it would take control of Greenland. We should be careful not to get sucked into a spiral of commentary around an issue or try to inflate it.

I hope the talks today between the Danish and Greenlandic foreign ministers will result in a de-escalation. In that context, the primary concerns I have heard in the media have been in regard to NATO and how that will impact NATO. From an Irish perspective as a non-NATO country, however, our concerns lie in the potential repercussions for Ireland and the wider EU. Ireland is a neutral country, and while we are aligned to Denmark through the EU - not in a military way but in terms of our economic ties - we do not have a role in the NATO question. However, another challenge will come before us both in Ireland and the EU, which is that if there was an infringement in Greenland of any size, Denmark would very likely and, I would say, correctly seek from its EU partners the same sanctions that were imposed on Russia. That is a big question - if we, alongside our other EU partners, would be ready to impose sanctions on the United States. We imposed those in regard to Russia and the question is what seismic impact sanctions on US individuals and US companies or the US Government itself might have. As I say, this is alarming territory to be in and I do not want to add hyperbole to it, but if Denmark proposes that at the table, two things could happen: our relationship with the United States could be incredibly damaged or our relationship with the European Union could be incredibly damaged. Ireland has to be very conscious of that. I urge the United States to de-escalate the harmful rhetoric that is taking place because it is destructive. I do not see what benefit it brings to the people on either side of the Atlantic. It will have an impact on the common person in terms of people's jobs, trade and so on.

It is hard for Irish people not to look at Greenland from the post-colonial position that we take. Greenland is obviously a self-governing entity within the Kingdom of Denmark. Interestingly, in reading up on it, I did not realise that it had actually left the European Communities. It was the first entity to leave the European Communities over fishing rights in 1985. Ultimately, it had a vote in 1982. In leaving the European community, it does not have

the same protections, but it operates within as an overseas territory. Even that phrase and regarding something as an overseas territory are uncomfortable for an Irish person. Ultimately, the people of Greenland have the right to dictate their future, but they should be able to rely on the support of the European Union. In many ways, it is a tiny entity and a tiny enclave, but it sits in a very important part of the world. We have to be very conscious of how a small number of fewer than 100,000 people might have a massive impact on trade and jobs for millions of people across Europe and the United States.

I have not had too many telephone calls to my constituency office about Venezuela or Greenland, but these are the topics that arise at an international level and when they start to have an impact, that is when the rubber hits the road. On Venezuela, there is no doubt that Venezuela lacked a democratically elected president under Maduro and it was an incredibly repressive regime. There is no doubt that there were huge constitutional tensions and elections and also that the Venezuelan-led transition from peace to democracy in the country has to be respected by whoever has control of Venezuela. That should be the Venezuelan people, I will say. The idea that Donald Trump can dictate that Marco Rubio or anybody else will run Venezuela is concerning, but it places on whoever is responsible for administering the country the responsibility to put in place a peaceful transition. Whether that is the remainder of the Maduro regime, some sort of United States influence or the opposition, we need a peaceful transition in that country. Maduro was a bad application of an important principle, and that important principle is that international law should exist. While it is uncomfortable to maybe lean on that principle in the defence of a man whom many of us disagreed with, and many of us disagreed with how he how he operated, the international principle remains.

I note Bulgaria's joining of the eurozone to become the 21st member state. It is incredibly important as we go forward with the eurozone that we continue to have the principal economic restrictions on membership and activity. I remember in first year in my economics course learning about asymmetric shocks in an optimum currency area and whether there was such a thing as an optimum currency area. We saw how Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain had a massive impact on the eurozone. As we continue to expand and if there are opportunities to expand, we also need to continue to monitor how additional countries joining the eurozone might have a larger impact in terms of the risk or the optimum currency area. However, it is a positive thing to see further European integration. While we look around the world at all of the different levels of chaos, I suppose there might be frustration in the European Union at the lack of decision-making and progress, but the stability it provides, including across the European Continent in different governments, is welcome in a time of incredible change.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The frustrating thing about this post-Council meeting discussion is that, first, there is not enough time to discuss a lot of the issues and, second, for it to work, we need to really get a sense of the Irish position in relation to what happened. The Taoiseach in his opening statement outlined what Ireland's position was on some of the issues. If we are to continue with these things, it would be really useful if we had that approach going forward. It gives us a better sense of what was actually discussed and what the Irish position is on any of these huge issues.

As the Taoiseach said, geo-economic issues were discussed at the European Council meetings. Food safety and security are clearly part of this. Mercosur was not a formal item, but I want to touch on that. My party, Sinn Féin, has been consistent for decades now that

Mercosur is a bad deal for Ireland. It threatens the viability of many family farms, undermines climate and food standards and opens the door to substandard imports that are negative for both Irish consumers and Irish producers. My concern also is that, in many cases, it is poor people who will be buying what I see as substandard food that is laced with all sorts of steroids, hormones and everything else.

2 o'clock

It is just not on.

Ireland's beef and dairy sectors are among the most export orientated in the EU but they also operate higher environmental, animal welfare and traceability standards. South American ranchers can buy all the steroids and antibiotics they want and pump them into their cattle. We had the Bolsonaro government cutting down the rainforest. We are saying we are concerned about the environment but this will wipe out huge parts of the Amazon rainforest. Many of the cattle from that area will come to Ireland.

The Government said it appreciates the concerns relating to Mercosur. While it voted against the trade deal, many believe this only came to pass because it was safe in the knowledge that the vote would pass as a result of Italy's decision to support it. The Government waited until the eleventh hour to make sure it would not make waves in Europe. Maybe I am just an old cynic but that is not leadership. It is cynical play-acting and most Irish people will not be fooled by it.

I am worried about the European Parliament's role in this regard. Disappointingly, Barry Andrews MEP has stated clearly that he is going to vote in favour of the deal. Seán Kelly MEP is not saying which way he means to vote. He is waiting to see what way the wind blows, presumably.

Importing 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU will have a catastrophic impact on Irish and EU farmers, depressing prices and destabilising rural livelihoods. I made the point that when it comes to the consumers, it is the poorer people who will be impacted most negatively.

Mercosur will only further incentivise deforestation, biodiversity loss and environmental destruction in Mercosur countries, particularly Brazil.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I start by expressing my solidarity with the protesters in Iran and condemning the brutal repression they are facing.

This week has brought into sharp focus how action or inaction at EU level has a real impact on our citizens. Commitment to the European project means being an active and critical participant in it, willing to push back and push hard on trade deals, laws and regulations that impact on all of our lives. Today I will talk about how our active and critical participation as a member state of the EU could impact on Mercosur, Palestine, Ukraine and the digital space.

Starting with Mercosur, with the threat of flip-flopping from the Government last week and the uncertainty about what way Ireland would vote on a trade deal that is deeply unpopular with the Irish people, I want to hear what this Government did in December, where it stood on Mercosur and how we have ended up in this situation where this deal may pass without the

protections we need for our climate and farmers. Tá téip iomlán déanta ag an Rialtas seasamh suas dár bhfeirmeoirí agus dár dtimpeallacht. No one in this Chamber has been quiet about our feelings on Mercosur. It is incredible to me that we are expected to believe that the Government did everything possible to ensure there were protections in this deal and avoid it being passed by the Council when there were questions last week as to which way Ireland was even going to vote.

Mercosur will be a disaster for our environment, farmers and consumers. Last November, during post-European Council statements, I raised my concerns about the Government's lack of willingness to stand up for the things which make us proud to be Europeans. I cited Mercosur as a key issue where we were not seeing enough action from the Government in defence of those core values. I am frustrated and disappointed to have been proven right with the result last week.

We are already seeing extreme weather events in this country. We are nearly one year on from Storm Éowyn. The impact of climate change is touching Irish people's lives and it is vital that we do everything in our power to stop it. When it comes to negotiating tables, budgets and policies at EU Council level and domestically, however, I am not seeing the commitment from this Government to make it a priority.

Gaza is still very much under siege. In the past two months, we have seen the ceasefire, which now seems to be an empty phrase, become deadlier and deadlier for Palestinians still in Gaza. In parallel with this, settler violence in the West Bank continues, resulting in killings, demolitions and the forceful expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and villages where they have been for generations. This is all on top of the day-to-day structural violence of the apartheid system and the illegality of the settlements. The EU has completely lost focus on the fact that the ruling of the International Court of Justice, ICJ, made clear that it is not just extremist settlers who are the problem. Rather, all Israeli settlements in the West Bank are illegal and we have a legal duty not to support or trade with them. It is the Israeli state that is perpetrating the system of human rights abuses and apartheid in the West Bank, Israel and Gaza. It is the Israeli state that is in breach of the human rights clause in the EU-Israel association agreement and yet, because of a ceasefire where children and innocent civilians continue to be bombed and shot, we are refusing to suspend the agreement and continue to let Israel benefit financially. We cannot allow human rights to be traded away. What action has the Irish Government taken to progress the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement and ensure full compliance with international law at EU level?

Similarly, Russia's brutal war of aggression continues in Ukraine and we continue to see loss of life and lives made unliveable for our European brothers and sisters.

In respect of the upcoming digital omnibus, I want to explore how European-level regulation of the online space is being handled within our membership of the EU. The last few weeks have proven that regulation of the digital space is more vital than ever. As a result of things going wrong and the public being angry and afraid, we have seen a rush to finally codify the AI Act into Irish law ahead of schedule. I am glad to see that but the elephant in the room is that there is no point bringing the AI Act into operation only to have it immediately gutted alongside GDPR as part of the digital omnibus.

We are the lead regulator for a slew of big tech companies headquartered in Dublin. We need to show that Ireland is up to the task and that the safety and protection of our citizens do not have a price tag and will not be traded away to big tech for corporation tax receipts. The simplification agenda has so far proven to not be about making rules simpler to comply with but, rather, removing them entirely for whole sectors. We have already seen proof of that with the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, CSDDD. Instead of supporting businesses in compliance, we are creating a more complex web of who these rules do and do not apply to. This is not based on the protections of our rights and preserving the integrity of what little protection people have but on how the rights of citizens are interfering with the bottom lines of businesses. We cannot put a price tag on the safety of people online or the protection of our children and communities but that is exactly what the digital omnibus, as proposed by the Commission, aims to do. I want to understand what Ireland is going to do to push back on that digital omnibus.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate following the European Council meeting in December. I will focus my remarks on Ireland's upcoming Presidency of the EU and the opportunity that this presents to reconnect European policymaking with people and communities on the ground across the country. Europe is not an abstract concept; Europe is present in every city, town and village across Ireland. It is present in our roads and public transport, water and housing infrastructure, community facilities, skills and training programmes and opportunities available to young people. That connection is not always visible and it cannot be taken for granted. Ireland has enjoyed strong and consistent public support for EU membership but positive sentiment must be nurtured. If people do not see or understand how European decisions affect their daily lives, that connection can weaken. That is why engagement at the local level is so important.

Local authorities are uniquely placed to play this role. They are closest to the citizens. They deliver on the ground and are often the first point of contact between citizens and public services. When local authorities are well equipped to engage with EU policy and funding, Europe becomes real and tangible for people rather than distant or abstract.

In that context, I highlight the strategic role of the Irish Regions European Office, IREO. It provides a shared service for the three regional assemblies and all 31 local authorities, supports the Irish delegation to the European Committee of the Regions and acts as a vital bridge between Brussels and local government in Ireland. I welcome the recent strengthening of the office with additional staff now in place in Brussels, bringing the total to four. However, as EU policy and funding programmes become more complex and competitive, a gap remains at the local level. A proposal has been developed to support local authorities through dedicated EU officers working in regional clusters. That proposal is not yet implemented but Ireland's upcoming EU Presidency presents the ideal opportunity to advance it. A Presidency naturally raises awareness of Europe, increases engagement with EU institutions and creates momentum across the public service.

It is precisely the right moment to ensure that local authorities have the tools, the expertise and the support to engage meaningfully, not just during the Presidency but long after it is concluded. If we want Europe to be visible and relevant in every community, we must empower those who work closest to the people on the ground.

Strengthening local authority engagement with Europe is not just about funding. It is about trust, understanding and democratic connection. As we prepare for Ireland's EU Presidency, I urge the Government to see this as an opportunity to leave a lasting legacy, one that deepens public engagement with Europe, strengthens our regions and ensures the benefits of EU membership continue to be felt, understood and valued in every part of the country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As I said to Ursula von der Leyen when she came to this Chamber in 2024, the inconsistency, hypocrisy and double standards of the European Union and, by and large, our own Government when it comes to foreign policy are stunning, shocking and unacceptable. The Government opens its statement, as is often the case - understandably - with reference to Ukraine. It rightly says that Putin is not interested in peace, he is an imperialist and it is a brutal, illegal and aggressive war. I have heard the Taoiseach describe Putin as imperialist, which is absolutely right. Putin believes he has the right to a sphere of influence around Russia, which he has no right to, and consequently denies the right to self-determination. When Donald Trump and his Administration produce a national security strategy that says they have the right to decide what happens in the whole of South America, Canada and Greenland, there is silence from the European Union. Whatever one may think about Maduro, and I do not think much of his authoritarian and corrupt regime, Donald Trump has no right to go in to Venezuela and militarily attack it, kidnap its President and his wife and kill hundreds of people in the process. Trump has no right whatsoever to Greenland or to threaten it and to talk about the easy way or the hard way. He has no right to threaten, as he has done, Cuba, Mexico and so on or to impose an American sphere of influence.

In a strategy document Trump explicitly reasserts that the Monroe Doctrine applies to the whole American Continent. There is silence from the same people who get up and describe as unacceptable what Putin is doing, which, by the way, it is. There is a failure to call out the continuing arming by Trump, America and leading EU states of the genocidal massacre that continues against the people of Gaza and Palestine. Just to rub salt into the horrific wounds, Donald Trump invites Netanyahu over for new year's celebrations in his mansion. This man is evil. Putin is evil and Trump is evil but do European governments apply the same principles and standards to these two people? Not at all. They continue to tolerate it, be quite about it or, worse, reinforce the hypocrisy. They fail to condemn the shocking fact that Germany, Britain and France continue to provide weapons and so on to the Israeli regime, which is guilty of genocide and continues to deny aid getting into Gaza. I will get on to Iran shortly but at the same time that this Government is calling for escalating sanctions against Iran, it is simultaneously saying it has to dilute the occupied territories Bill, it is not sure if the Bill should include services and it is not sure when it will pass. We are two years into a genocidal massacre, when the Israeli Government is in the dock for crimes against humanity and genocide, but still there are no sanctions. Worse still, the Government's partners in Europe continue to arm the regime that is committing this. Apparently, however, our Government is horrified by the actions of the Iranian Government.

I condemn absolutely the killings by the Iranian Government of protesters protesting about the cost of living, corruption and repression in Iran. The Government of Iran should be condemned and should stop killing protesters. It should engage with people fighting to reform that country and end the media and social media blackout, which is a disgrace. It is equally clear, however, that Trump has no role. Trump has threatened Iran militarily, while he is also

threatening Greenland, attacking Venezuela and arming the genocide in Gaza. He has no part to play in Iran. He is a hypocrite who is only interested in oil and influence. He is killing protesters in his own country, having defended the assassination of a mother of three who was driving away from an ICE officer, and there are paramilitaries running around arresting people in US cities. Trump is nearly provoking a civil war in his own country. He has no role to play in Iran. The people of Iran should decide their own future. I stand with the protesters there but the hypocrisy of the European Union and Trump is absolutely stunning. It is disgraceful that our Government continues to give cover to it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will continue with the theme of the hypocrisy and double standards of some European leaders and our own Government. I will touch on the issue of fisheries and what happened at the December Agriculture and Fisheries Council and Mercosur, in particular, the utter failure of Micheál Martin to stand up for Ireland's interests, speak truth to power and confront the hypocrisy at the heart of the European Commission.

Let us start with fisheries. Muireann Kavanagh, a 14-year-old girl based on Arranmore Island off the coast of Donegal, was stopped from fishing for pollock with a hook and line. That is the most low-impact fishing one can think of. It cannot possibly do any environmental damage but still it was illegal for her to do it. Whereas she was banned from doing that, super trawlers go up and down the coast of Ireland and Hoover up all sorts of fish, legal and illegal, perfectly within the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy. There are five corporations involved but one in particular, PVP, is based in Holland. These companies control one in six of all the fish caught in the European Union. They buy up quotas, legally, from a broken system across Europe and then they put it all into super trawlers. While they are at sea, they change licence to licence and Hoover up fish. This is not only occurring in European-controlled waters. These companies have invested heavily in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. They have recklessly and devastatingly overfished mackerel, pushing the Atlantic mackerel species to the edge of the precipice. It is utter environmental devastation, destruction and degradation.

Nobody in the Government has named these companies or spoken out about what they have done. Worse still, these companies actively lobbied European governments to block the only mechanism the Irish Government has, the Hague Preferences, which provided that our quota would not go below a certain level due to the amount of fish in our waters that we gave away. This mechanism has been in place for decades. It had never been blocked until December last. France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland rowed in behind these corporations and endorsed environmental destruction, environmental recklessness and utter greed. They endorsed it and sacrificed the Irish fishing communities. There was not a word about it from Micheál Martin. Did the Taoiseach get legal advice to block it? I do not know. I got some information from a freedom of information request in recent days but there is no evidence in the damn thing.

Is the way the Taoiseach handled Mercosur a shock? Again, this is about hypocrisy and double standards. The Government tells farmers in Ireland, rightly, that they must meet the highest animal health and environmental standards and that we are facing a climate challenge. They have been asked to meet those standards and have done so. That is why we have world-class beef standards. What does the European Commission do in order that it can have commerce with South America? It allows beef that has none of those standards to flood our markets.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is not true.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Where is climate change, climate justice, the green economy and all the other areas where we play by the rules? There are double standards when it comes to doing trade and commerce.

I endorse everything Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett said.

It is utter hypocrisy. The world rules of engagement, be they on human rights, basic decency or trade and commerce, mean nothing because the leadership of the European Commission is utterly incapable of doing what is right by people across Europe and the world.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It goes without saying we are in a world with absolute double standards at this point and it is not a case of what is good for the goose is good for the gander. With Iran, I think we are all in agreement that no one wants to see protesters who are out protesting against higher costs, and the other particular issues they have, die and nobody wants to see executions. None of this is good enough but we also have to call out all that is being done at the minute. I am not entirely sure what the western world even means any more but if we are talking about the European Commission and the moral high ground, it is very difficult to have that when it will call out one actor but not another. The actor we will not call out sufficiently at this time is Donald Trump given the fact that whatever leader he does not like, he is just going to take them out, kidnap them and do whatever. When I watched that press conference by him, Pete Hegseth, Maro Rubio and others it reminded me of myself at about 12 years of age after watching "The A-Team" or something because that is the level we are talking about. Only it is not funny because of what they are doing which is death and destruction and the international rulebook going out the window and being absolutely burnt.

Deputy Mac Lochlainn is right because I have spoken lately to those in Clogherhead in my constituency who talked about how difficult it was to be a fisherman and how difficult it was for the fishing industry but now they see absolutely no future whatsoever. I will be honest that I did not make it to Athlone to protest against the absolute disaster for Irish farming that Mercosur is. I did not make it there because a number of farmers contacted me as they were having their own protest in Dundalk. It was a very short one in support of Athlone because they wanted their voices recognised due to the fact the Government went against the deal at the last minute way. Farmers told me they could not see that as being anything other than disingenuous. What they need to see now from the Government, which I hope the Minister of State will give some information on, is a roadmap for taking action to oppose properly the current deal which is bad for people's health and bad for Irish farming. We are talking about almost 100,000 tonnes of beef coming from South America and 180,000 tonnes of poultry that could contain hormones, antibiotics and materials farmers across Europe cannot use. We are endangering people's health and for what? We all accept the need for commerce and free trade deals. However, we need to protect not only the environment but also the health of the people and the health of the sustainable farming industry.

We can talk about Sudan, Palestine and Greenland but we need to see less of the double standards and we need to see the Government standing up for a real deal in relation to what a just world is.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I wish to raise neutrality in the European context. Incredibly, there was an article published in *The Times* in the last few weeks that reported an allegation made by British intelligence that Wexford fishermen have been approached by the Russian army to pull cable-cutting tools behind their trawlers to cut Irish cables. It is an incredible allegation that besmirches and blackens the names of those fishermen. It basically states those fishermen in Kilmore Quay are in some way traitors and acting against the national interests of this country for money. I have spoken to our councillor there, Jim Codd, who knows these fishermen well and has been working with them through the times where they have their quotas cut and the Government has introduced laws that have reduced their ability to earn a living for their families. It is absolutely wrong that British intelligence would make these accusations and I would like the Government to investigate those allegations.

At the heart of this is black propaganda designed to create fear about Ireland's defence and to push Ireland into a situation where it is seeking to join a European army and a military alliance, which is obviously against the interests of this country, against neutrality and against our good name as peacekeepers in the international community. I ask the Minister of State to address this issue and to make sure he defends the name of Irish fisherman and stands up against British intelligence.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I want to disassociate myself from the remarks by some from Sinn Féin and other parties here on Venezuela. The Maduro and Chavez regimes were absolutely appalling. I know many people from Venezuela, many of whom who live here and many who are personal friends of mine living in Spain, who have gone through horrible times in their lives. Their families are still there and I have never heard the like of the things that have happened, the crimes against humanity and the living in fear day in, day out that occurred in Venezuela. People talk about Trump being after the oil but the oil was being sold to China, so I want to disassociate myself from people who associate themselves with support for China, Russia and Iran.

When it comes to Iran, we talk about people invading and I heard Deputy Boyd Barrett talking about it but this is not anything strange-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What was I talking about?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: There was-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What was I talking about?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Is it my turn or is it Foxes Before Babies?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett, will you allow him to speak?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He was making reference to me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow him to speak.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Is it my turn or is it Foxes Before Babies?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He was making reference to me.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I hope I will be given the time back.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You will.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I hear these comments about this being unusual and this being strange but we can look at record of this House from when Panama was invaded in 1989 and Noriega was removed. It was a very different story in this House, so we see precedent. I congratulate President Trump for what he is doing and send him my support because there are a lot of people who, because they do not like the individual, will jest and pick out and attack everything but we have to question who is paying other people in this House given what they are saying and where their support is coming from and what is behind it.

I move to the Mercosur deal, which is one of the most important things here. We talk about atrocities that are happening around the world but the European Union is committing an atrocity here. It is bringing in beef from a country we cannot trace it in. The Minister of State knows as well as I do we produce the best beef in the world in this country with 100% traceability. Why would we want to move away from that? Why would we want to have carcinogenic beef coming into this or other European countries at any time? That is poisoning our own citizens.

Deputy Michael Collins: I would like to be able to give my time to Mercosur but time is tight and another dirty deal has been done in Europe, at the expense of Irish fishermen. The mackerel quota and the whitefish haddock quota has been pretty much wiped out and it is an absolute disaster for Ireland's coastal communities. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea has recommended a cut to just 174,357 tonnes for 2026. That is a 70% drop from 576,958 tonnes last year. Despite that, Norway, the UK, the Faeroe Islands and Iceland have secured a combined total allowable catch of 299,000 tonnes, which is nearly double the scientific advice, while our fleet is being wiped out. While foreign supertrawlers come into Irish waters and take all our fish our lads are on the sidelines. Thanks to the failure to apply our Hague preferences Ireland's quota plummets from 39,914 tonnes to just 10,907 tonnes with an economic hit of about €48 million. With blue whiting, ICES is calling for a 41% cut yet we are watching others profit from our waters. Has the Minister of State proposed a meeting with President von der Leyen to address the failure of Hague preferences, the EU fisheries Commission and the protection of these stocks? They are systematic failures not minor errors. Ireland must fight back, launch a legal challenge and stand up for the big five corporations. Our fishermen deserve better.

I have another question on Mercosur that will take two seconds. Are MEPs Barry Andrews, Regina Doherty and Seán Kelly going to be whipped to vote no to Mercosur or are they backing the Ursula deal? The Minister of State needs to tell us that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to the question and answer session. There is a short period for this so I ask Deputy Crowe to keep his questions short.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Was the relative failure of the Cyprus-Gaza maritime aid corridor discussed? Was any alternative suggested to simply shipping aid to an Israeli port to join the other thousands of tonnes of aid that has not been allowed through to Palestinian people who are living in tents?

Were sanctions against Israel discussed owing to the massive increase in settler violence against Palestinian civilians, the spike in forced displacement and the annexation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: First, I have to correct the record. I said explicitly that I condemn the Putin regime. I will do the same about the Chinese regime by the way, which is an authoritarian, brutal regime. I also said the Maduro regime was authoritarian and undemocratic. Is that good enough for Deputy O'Flynn? He should not misrepresent me.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: You are well able to represent yourself.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Do not misrepresent me. I am telling you now.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, sorry. Deputies please.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Who is paying you?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we stick to questions, please.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Who is paying you?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Who is paying me? The Oireachtas is paying me, the same as it is paying you. The Irish public are paying me.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Let us not make allegations.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Who else is paying you?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Who is paying Deputy O'Flynn would be a better question. He says he supports Donald Trump.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: There are cheques-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He said he supports Donald Trump.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: There are cheques marked-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is what he said.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Ask your question, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He said he supports Donald Trump.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on. Does anyone else have a question?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes, I have a question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Well, ask the question.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Some of the hunger strikers in England, who are in prison and have been designated as terrorists by the British Government because they protested against British complicity with the genocidal massacre that Israel is conducting against the Palestinian people, have now been on hunger strike for more than 70 days - they are very near death - some for more than 66 days. Whatever the Minister of State thinks about their protest or about hunger strike as a tactic, these people were acting in good conscience against what they saw as crimes against humanity and they are facing death. Has the Irish Government made any representations whatsoever to the Starmer Government? The reason they are in prison is that he has designated people who did not hurt anyone as terrorists. Starmer is not representing the views of the vast majority of English people in doing that and now young people could die as a result. Does the Government have anything to say as these people face their possible death?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Minister of State raise the issue of the shocking allegations being made by British intelligence against fishermen in this country about the cutting of cables off the coast of Ireland? Will he demand the British ambassador and Keir Starmer's Government provide evidence and information about these allegations, desist from making them and withdraw them? Will he also call out the objective behind these allegations? It is in some way to push Ireland into a European defence union, a European army or NATO, three options which are extreme threats to our sovereignty and independence. These are not just on an individual basis a besmirching of the names of these fishermen but, on a national basis, they are ignorant allegations that should be stopped straight away.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Stick to questions, please. Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Can we take a few questions and I will respond and then take a few more?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I noticed yesterday an announcement by the Irish Government of additional funds being made available to the people of Palestine. There was an announcement before Christmas of €125 million made available to Ukraine. That is a total spend of €269 million. Can I get a clear run of that? How is it policed? When that money goes out of the State, how do we track where and how it goes and what groups are allocated those funds? How

do we track to make sure it does not fall into the wrong hands? As the Minister of State will be aware, €269 million is approximately 678 €370,000 houses.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Minister of State want to reply to those questions?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: If that is okay. I do not want to forget any question if I can avoid it.

On Gaza, significant aid was announced by the Minister this week. The European Council discussed the Middle East at some length during the meeting in December. The Irish Government is focused on support for the people there. That is important and the European Council supported the ceasefire, supports the commitment the EU has to a just and lasting peace based on a two-state solution in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions everyone is only too familiar with. They talk about implementation as well, how we achieve our objectives, stressing the need for rapid, safe and unimpeded delivery and sustained distribution of humanitarian aid at scale into Gaza, including via the Cyprus-Gaza maritime corridor Deputy Seán Crowe mentioned, to supplement land routes. In fairness to the European Council and certainly to the Taoiseach, the idea is to get as much aid as possible - a surge of aid - into Gaza. It is badly needed. The European Council called in particular for basic things like shelter, winter equipment and medical items to be allowed in. That is important.

We have robust checks on our overseas development aid. I say that to Deputy O'Flynn. It is a very important part of the work we do. Some of it goes to international bodies, some to state entities and some to religious bodies, including a lot of Catholic charities around the world, to make sure people who badly need it get the help and support they need. We are talking about, particularly in relation to Gaza, food and medical supplies, and covers for the winter for the bad weather conditions in Ukraine. There is an element of defence support there, but I can talk about one project I visited, which the Irish Government funded in association with Lithuania and the European Union. It was an underground school to allow children to continue their education during the war and also to give the local community somewhere to go when the bombs rain down on it, which unfortunately they continue to do.

Hunger strikers in the UK were not discussed at the European Council. Everyone will have huge empathy for anyone on hunger strike, but it is not a matter I have addressed as Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs and it was not a matter on the agenda of the European Council.

Regarding what Deputy Tóibín said, I certainly had no information about it until he mentioned it here. It took me quite a while to find it. I found the relevant article and paragraph and I would not pay too much heed to it, quite frankly. I have no information about it, but I can assure the Deputy that there are no proposals for a European defence pact - none whatsoever - and even if there were, Ireland could not support it without a referendum of the people. That is in the Constitution.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There is a vote coming up. A lot of people are dissatisfied and disappointed with the vote on Mercosur. People are worried about their health and so on. A vote is coming up in Europe where the MEPs will have a vote. We understand from assertions by certain MEPs from both parties that they intend to vote for the Mercosur agreement. What

control do the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parties have over these MEPs? Can they insist they vote against Mercosur for the good of our consumers and farmers?

I was in an establishment in Cork city yesterday evening and I met a man from Eyeries. I started asking him about lads I knew from along the Beara Peninsula and how they were getting on with the fishing. He frightened me when he told me the number of fellas who had got out and that more fellas were contemplating getting out of it. In light of the fact we have not seen a mackerel on our side of the country for three years, what is going on? What can the Government do and what will it do for the fishing industry? It is practically decimated. I hope it will do something for these good-living people who have to contend with everything, the dangers of the sea and the weather and everything else. Are we going to lose them altogether?

Deputy Michael Collins: I am going to be like a twin brother to Deputy Healy-Rae because I have very similar questions. The Minister will know, and I have said already, the International Council for Exploration of the Sea has just recommended a cut to the fishing quota, with 174,357 tonnes for 2026. That is a 70% drop from 576,958 tonnes last year. What we want to know is whether the Irish Government is taking a legal challenge. Is the Government going to stand up on behalf of the Irish fishermen and take a legal challenge? Has it met President Ursula von der Leyen to address the failure of the Hague preferences, and where is it at in this present time? A legal challenge is the only way and mechanism we have and the Hague preferences are there.

I have a question for the Minister of State regarding Mercosur. This will be the third time I ask it, between the Taoiseach and Ministers. Will Barry Andrews of Fianna Fáil, Regina Doherty of Fine Gael and Seán Kelly of Fine Gael vote for Mercosur? Is the Government going to apply the whip? In fairness, the Government came out last week with its position. There was a bit of a struggle but we got there. This is the third time I have asked this question and nobody on the other side of the House can answer it. Is the Government going to apply the whip? Are they backing Ursula or are they backing Ireland? That is what we are asking. It is a straight-up question and I want a straight-up answer. I would really appreciate an answer from the Minister of State. This is the third time I have asked.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: If we rewind back nine or ten months, an awful lot of people in Ireland, particularly those employed in multinational companies, were very concerned about the threat of tariffs. We have entered into a bit of a frozen situation in that regard. Some headway was made but I would not say the deal that was arrived at was necessarily perfect in every manner or means. The situation as is has already had an impact on certain agrifood sectors, particularly the whiskey industry. The Minister of State might give an update on whether there was any discussion at the Council meeting on whether there is likely to be any shift in the tariffs picture. We cannot take our eye off the ball on that and we also need to look at diversification domestically.

During my contribution at the outset I referenced the situation in Sudan. I am not putting all this on the Irish Government by any manner or means but at European level it is not getting the attention it deserves. I ask the Minister of State to comment on that. Literally hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in the past couple of years and there are millions of people displaced. It is going on and shows no sign of abating. I ask the Minister of State and the Irish

Government to use whatever influence they can at the next Council meeting to try to push it further up the agenda.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Following on from that, could we have some answers regarding where the Irish Government proposes to go as regards Mercosur and some element of push back? We obviously know there is to be a vote by MEPs. The question has been asked on what way Government MEPs will vote. Beyond that, what engagement will there be with the rest of the MEPs across Europe? We need to keep maximum pressure on, whether that is to achieve absolute success or even to ensure the deal is made better, even at this late stage. We know the huge dangers from a health point of view but also for Irish farming in particular.

I also wish to ask about where we stand now as regards Donald Trump and his threats in respect of Greenland. While we may have laughed this off at one stage, we cannot necessarily do that at this point. It absolutely puts a hand grenade among what anyone would have believed to be, for want of a better term, the rules of engagement.

We all know that Europe and the European Commission have done huge work to make sure the Internet is a safe place but further work needs to be done. We know the whole issue of Grok, which can be seen at the minute as nothing other than a child pornography factory. It is engagement at European level that we need, as well as action here in Ireland.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have two other questions and then we will finish. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: To frame what I said in the initial statements as a question to the Minister of State, and I would appreciate a response, this follows on from the last question about Trump. The Government has repeatedly and rightly condemned Putin for believing he has the right to decide what happens in states around Russia, including what he has done with the illegal occupation of Ukraine. The Government has condemned that and called it imperialism. Will the Government condemn Trump's threats against his neighbours and the national security strategy his Administration has published which states it has the right to decide what goes on in South America and Venezuela and to threaten to take the easy way or the hard way in respect of Greenland? Whatever one may think about the Venezuelan Government, Donald Trump does not have the right to decide it. Does the Minister of State agree that is imperialism and should be condemned, opposed and challenged every bit as much as the condemnation that has come freely about what Putin has done in Ukraine?

Deputy Seán Crowe: The Taoiseach referred to the Horizon Europe research programme, which includes the continuation of the PEACEPLUS programme. What was the reaction on that? If the Minister of State does not have time to reply, he might send us a note on it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Briefly, on that last point on Horizon Europe and PEACEPLUS, the discussion is currently under way on the multi-annual financial framework. That is discussed at my council every month and they are two of our most important objectives, along with of course, the Common Agricultural Policy. It is our number one objective to get a fully funded and separate Common Agricultural Policy. The European leaders had a brief discussion on the multi-annual financial framework and they will ultimately decide the budget. In the

meantime, we will continue the negotiations and that will climax during our Presidency. I can absolutely assure Deputies the Common Agricultural Policy, Horizon Europe and the PEACEPLUS programme, which benefits the North of Ireland and the Border counties, are very important.

Regarding Mercosur and our MEPs, we do not have a whip on our MEPs; our MEPs can make the decisions. Barry Cowen wrote a really good article where he said he was against it and was voting against it but, in fairness to him, he set out the pros and cons. If an MEP was to vote for Mercosur, they would take into account what the Deputies are saying about beef, I have no doubt, but they would also take into account what may be the most important pharmaceutical plant in the world at present, Eli Lilly in Kinsale, in the constituency of Deputy Michael Collins, which will have a big drop in tariffs as a result of this. They will probably think about Liebherr in Killarney. Again, if that company is exporting to Mercosur countries it will experience a huge drop in tariffs and that will create and sustain employment in the Deputies' constituencies and constituencies all over the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: Put all the companies ahead of the Irish farmer. You are dead right, boy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Sorry, farmers-----

Deputy Michael Collins: You are heading in the right direction.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is about safety as well, Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputies Collins and O'Flynn.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and the multinational companies in Little Island in Deputy O'Flynn's constituency. However, I have said all along, and the Government has said this consistently, that there is an issue with beef. Let us be clear what the issue is not, however. The issue is not standards within the European Union because the agreement specifically makes provision, and this continues no matter what way this goes at the end of the day, and it includes of beef that is already coming into the European market and that 99,000 tonnes which are already here. Tariffs are being reduced-----

Deputy Michael Collins: It will be in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: No, it is coming directly into the European Union. With tariffs----

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Deputy Michael Collins: On 12 December we learned about contaminated beef that came in.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is coming in directly at the moment.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: What about the contaminated beef that came in?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputies have had plenty of opportunity to ask questions.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: What about the ten tonnes of cocaine that came into Spain from Brazil, disguised as beef?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That was a long way from beef.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: To be absolutely clear, the rule is that animal, plant and food product placed on the European market has to comply with the EU sanitary and phytosanitary requirements.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Then why is it not complying? Why did it not comply previously? We have examples from December.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This is non-negotiable and applies regardless of the Mercosur trade agreement. In fact, they are specifically provided for in the Mercosur trade agreement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should show respect.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have great respect for the Chair but I do not like the answers I am getting. We are being misled in this House.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Countries and establishments that produce food which comes into the EU market have to comply with EU law. There is an issue. There is no question-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: But it is not coming in like that and you know that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----that there is an issue relating to beef farmers in the Mercosur agreement and I have said that all along. There is no question, particularly in relation to price, because that 99,000 tonnes already coming into the European Union will have a lower tariff. That is not in doubt. The Deputies are telling me we should be telling the European MEPs what to do, but what people like Barry Cowen have done, without being told to do it, is to work on safeguards for farmers, whether this comes into effect or not. He has been working diligently. Other MEPs can vote in whatever way they see fit on behalf of their constituents. The factors they will take into account will include places like Eli Lilly and Liebherr; there is no question about that. Eli Lilly is one of the most important pharmaceutical plants with huge potential all round the world.

Deputy Michael Collins: I did not say any different. They are doing great, thank God, but I am interested in looking after Irish beef and Irish poultry.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: This will open new opportunities for them and for machinery as well. All I am saying is-----

Deputy Michael Collins: They should not be sacrificed for it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are not sacrificing anybody-----

Deputy Michael Collins: You are.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: You are sacrificing the Irish farmer.

Deputy Michael Collins: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are a disgrace.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Government has voted against it.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: When the multinationals go, what happens then?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Minister of State move on to other questions?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will move on to fishing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Michael Collins: What is the Government going to do about the fishing? Will it shove them under the trawler as well?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister of State to move on to the other questions.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The fishing was not a good story. That was an outcome not of the European Council the Taoiseach attended but of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council and it will result in severely reduced fishing opportunities for Ireland this year.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: You failed the fishermen and now you are failing the farmers. That is what you have done.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I acknowledge that this has had a devastating impact on rural communities. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, worked very hard in relation to it, talking to other countries. He went around and visited them and lobbied them-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I had no idea.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and negotiated at the table, but those member states-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: He did not say it when he was here.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----and the member states were mentioned here, choose to block the invocation of the Hague preferences for this year. This is a protection measure for Ireland. A number of options have been outlined here in the Dáil. No doubt any option will be considered by the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, but what he is specifically doing is establishing a working group under Food Vision 2030 to develop a framework of support for the sector to address the challenges.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time allocated for questions has now expired.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have not answered most of them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not my fault.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is fine.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State has five minutes to wrap up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: He can answer them in the five minutes.

Deputy Michael Collins: Have you my answer?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In relation to Sudan, Sudan has been discussed at the European Council on many occasions, including comprehensive conclusions agreed at the October Council which the European Union is now following up on. Since then, it has been discussed at the Foreign Affairs Council. It is an issue that the Taoiseach raises on a regular basis.

We have been accused of double standards in relation to Venezuela but everybody now agrees that Maduro was illegitimately elected. Why then, under Mary Lou McDonald's leadership, were two Sinn Féin members sent, not only to the inauguration of Maduro but to monitor the elections that were described by everybody else as a sham election?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Not monitoring.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Two of Sinn Féin's elected representatives went in 2018 as election monitors, not as part of the OSCE or as part of the UN or the EU, but as guests of the Venezuelan Government, to monitor those elections, which were a sham. They then attended his inauguration and now Sinn Féin accuses us of double standards. We saw that Venezuelan people in Dublin certainly said what they thought of Sinn Féin. We support international law, we support the enforcement of international law and we continue to engage with the United States.

In relation to Greenland, I will have a call with my Danish counterpart tomorrow. That is an issue we will keep on the agenda. We are in full solidarity with the people of Greenland, in particular, and with the people of Denmark.

Other issues that the Taoiseach did not address today but which were discussed included European security and defence, migration, the Pact for the Mediterranean, disinformation and foreign information manipulation, and the macro-regional strategy for the Atlantic, which is a new strategy that should be developed between Ireland, France, Spain and Portugal.

On the defence issues, it is fairly clear Europe is not at war but we are not entirely at peace either. That is a fair comment that has been made. In December, the European Council condemned recent hybrid attacks against the EU and its member states. The European Council called for accelerated efforts to strengthen resilience, protect critical infrastructure, and to prevent, deter and respond to hybrid attacks in the EU. Even in the period since the last European Council meeting, we have seen further instances of damage or disruption to underseas cables in the Baltic Sea. Ireland is not immune from such threats and we take them extremely seriously. We have seen the increase in hybrid activity directed towards the EU - we have seen that in social media quite a lot - and we are actively and constructively engaging in the development of EU policies aimed at combating hybrid threats, in particular Russia's campaign of hybrid activity. This is a threat to social order and, indeed, to the economies in the European Union.

The sense of threat is felt keenly across the European Union. For many of our fellow member states, this threat is ever present. I saw this when I visited Latvia and Lithuania to meet with my EU affairs and defence counterparts. To meet their defence spending targets, some of our EU colleagues are, of their own volition, making drastic and difficult decisions to cut salaries and pensions. I want to be clear that, from my observations and discussions, they are not being driven by ideology. They are not being driven by the European Union. They are being driven by the reality that they, as individual countries, see and face themselves. Russian activity represents an attempt to divide EU member states and, in particular, to weaken our resolve on Ukraine. We fully support all the tools available to deal with these issues.

On migration, at the European Council the leaders agreed conclusions on migration. The conclusions took stock of progress in managing unplanned migration and called for intensified work to continue. Europe must address the shared challenge of unplanned migration. This can be done through collective effort by having a system of responsibility and solidarity regarding the reception and management of protection applicants. Ireland supports ongoing efforts to adopt the Pact on Migration and Asylum and we have opted in to some of the non-Schengen measures as well as the EU asylum agency. Some of the results of that can be seen in some of the announcements that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is making.

Together with Spain, France and Portugal, Ireland asked the Commission to develop an EU macro-regional strategy for the Atlantic by June of next year with the aim of addressing common challenges in the Atlantic region such as connectivity and economic growth. There is huge potential here. It is something that I have worked on with my colleagues, particularly those in the Spanish Government.

We live at a time of significant challenge but we should not forget our strength - our European Union. There will always be setbacks and there will always be things that we do not succeed on, but the EU remains the single greatest peace project in history and a source of economic prosperity to Irish people and European citizens. Ireland has a seat at the Council table and in the Parliament. In looking ahead to our EU Presidency this year, we will continue to use that seat in the interests of Ireland and Irish people. It has been shown over many decades

that Ireland working constructively in the European Union, protecting our vital national interests, is the way to economic success and progress in Ireland.

I have no doubt that the agendas of future meetings of the European Council will be substantial and of huge importance this year. I look forward to continuing engagement with Deputies in the months ahead.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.56 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.56 p.m. and resumed at 4.10 p.m.

Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 to the House. The Bill makes crucial amendments to the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to improve the safety of the operation, monitoring, maintenance and use of natural gas, NG, and liquefied petroleum gas, LPG, in Ireland. The regulation of natural gas markets and undertakings, gas installers and LPG undertakings serving domestic customers via piped distribution networks are responsibilities of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU. Undertakings are licensed by the CRU in accordance with the gas safety framework, a set of rules that is currently on a non-statutory basis. In 2016, the CRU was alerted to the existence of unlicensed LPG networks serving domestic customers. These networks fell outside of the existing definition of an LPG undertaking and thereby were not subject to the CRU's licensing regime. The CRU carried out inspections and inquiries and issued instructions requiring improvements to networks' safety practices. In its report on the issue, the CRU recommended legislative change to bring these networks under the licensing regime. This Bill addresses this by introducing a new LPG safety licence, a class 2 licence, for operators making LPG available through fewer than ten piped distribution networks for use by individual domestic customers. This new class of licence is suited to the needs of smaller operators. A lower application fee will be required, with holders of licences bound to adhere to safety requirements outlined by the CRU in the regulations. Smaller operators are not required to prepare a resource-intensive safety case but all operators of heretofore unregulated LPG networks are brought into the regulatory framework to ensure the safety of consumers and the general public.

I will run through the key measures included in this Bill. The gas safety framework is to be put on a statutory basis. This Bill will strengthen CRU's safety remit over domestic LPG and natural gas networks including through the introduction of an LPG safety licence, the class 2 licence I mentioned. Definitions of natural gas and LPG incidents are broadened to include near-miss or precursor events. The Bill strengthens the powers of the CRU to specify gas undertakings' emergency response requirements. The powers of gas safety officers, GSOs, and gas emergency officer, GEOs, are strengthened. This will include powers to obtain warrants for entry into land and dwellings and provisions for reimbursement for damage caused in the execution of their duties. Provisions for the transition to the new statutory safety regime are made. This includes grandfathering existing NG and LPG safety cases, provisions for the continuity of service of GEOs appointed by Gas Networks Ireland and for the termination of

appointments of GEOs appointed by LPG undertakings, and provisions for the continuity of service of GSOs and the continued validity of their inspections and investigations.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action issued its report on pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill in March 2024. In June and July 2025, my Department conducted a targeted consultation on the draft of this Bill. The legislation has benefited from the input of the CRU, Liquid Gas Ireland, Gas Networks Ireland, the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and the Health and Safety Authority. The Bill will result in no additional costs to the Exchequer. The Electricity Regulation Act 1999 enables the statutory functions of the CRU to be funded through a levy to be paid each year by industry.

I will now take Deputies through the Bill to outline the purpose of each of its 23 sections.

Section 1 identifies the principal Act, the Electricity Regulation Act 1999.

Section 2 amends the principal Act's definitions of "LPG incident", and inserts a definition of "natural gas incident", to include near-miss or precursor events. The definition of "LPG undertaking" is amended to capture previously unregulated third party LPG undertakings serving domestic customers. The definition of "LPG safety licence" is altered to include LPG safety licences issued heretofore as well as the new class 1 and class 2 safety licences provided for under section 9 of this Bill. This section also provides new definitions of terms giving effect to the transition to the new statutory safety regime.

Section 3 grants the CRU powers to specify requirements for an emergency response service to be provided by classes of LPG suppliers to class 2 licensed networks. It also updates CRU functions to take any necessary and reasonable action in the public interest in relation to gas safety.

Section 4 grants the CRU powers to make regulations relating to gas safety including requiring LPG undertakings to provide an emergency response service to LPG customers. Regulations will outline the obligations of smaller operators holding LPG safety licences, class 2 licences, to assist emergency responders and to develop and share emergency plans.

Section 5 provides rules concerning the appointment of gas emergency officers by the CRU or by a licensed gas transmission system operator and provides that GEOs are to be suitably qualified persons with the necessary expertise and experience. The conditions for the use of GEO powers are clarified and provision is made for the reimbursement of reasonable costs and expenses for damages that may be caused in the execution of their duties as well as for an arbitration in case of dispute. GEOs are obliged to issue reports on their entry onto land via their powers.

Section 6 provides rules concerning the appointment of GSOs who likewise must be suitably qualified persons with the necessary expertise and experience. The scope of a GSO's power to enter into land or dwellings to investigate alleged contraventions of the principal Act, natural gas incidents, LPG incidents or other occurrences involving natural gas or LPG is more explicitly defined. GSOs are empowered to obtain a court warrant to enter onto land and into dwellings if required. GSOs are required to provide notice of any materials removed from or modifications made to land in pursuance of their powers and provision is made for the issuance of such a warrant by a judge of the District Court. Section 6 also provides that the use of GSO powers to enter and inspect land requires the GSO to hold the opinion that there is or may be

an imminent risk of bodily harm, threat to life or damage to property. Provision is made for the reimbursement of reasonable costs for damages that may be caused by GSOs in the execution of their duties, as well as for arbitration in case of a dispute.

Section 7 amends the circumstances in which the CRU may require an undertaking to submit an improvement plan, making reference to a failure to comply with safety cases, conditions of safety permits or a prescribed duty, requirement or obligation.

Section 8 amends the circumstances in which the CRU may serve an undertaking with an improvement notice, making reference to failure to operate in accordance with the LPG or natural gas safety framework, safety cases, conditions of safety permits or a prescribed duty, requirement or obligation. The 21-day waiting period before the CRU may serve such a notice is removed.

Section 9 distinguishes between two classes of LPG safety licence.

An LPG safety licence, class 1, is required to make LPG available for ten or more piped distribution networks for use by individual domestic customers. An LPG safety licence, class 2, is required for fewer than ten such networks. Pre-existing LPG safety licences are deemed to be LPG safety licences, class 1. The section allows the CRU to require a person who has applied for a LPG safety licence, class 2, to apply for a class 1 LPG licence in the interest of safety on the basis of several technical grounds.

Section 10 provides for an appeals process for disputes arising from the CRU's decisions with respect to LPG safety licences, outlining the terms according to which the Minister may appoint an appeals officer.

Section 11 enables the CRU to make regulations, including in respect of certain events in the definitions of "natural gas incident" and "LPG incident", and to make regulations on their reporting and investigation. This enables the definition, and the CRU regulations, to include "near-miss" or "precursor" incidents. Contravention of penal regulations in regard to these is an offence.

Section 12 enables the Minister to designate activities to fall under the new statutory safety permit regime for natural gas undertakings and provides for a penalty for persons carrying out designated natural gas activities without a safety permit. It also requires the CRU to prepare guidelines for the preparation of safety cases, which natural gas undertakings are required to submit to receive a safety permit.

Safety cases have a maximum review period of five years, except in the case of certain activities that the CRU decides can have longer review periods, if appropriate. A duty is placed on undertakings to conform with their safety cases, and penalties for the failure to do so are provided for in the legislation.

The CRU will determine the form of a safety permit, may attach conditions to a safety permit and may refuse or revoke a safety permit subject to appeals procedures. Public access to accepted safety cases associated with safety permits is provided for. A transitional provision grandfathered safety cases for natural gas activities that currently exist under the administrative regime set out in the principal Act.

Section 13 introduces a duty on natural gas undertakings to ensure that natural gas activities, and the design, construction, installation, maintenance, modification, operation and decommissioning of natural gas infrastructure, are carried out in such a way as to reduce risk to a level that is as low as reasonably possible. Section 14 provides rule- and regulation-making powers for safety cases pertaining to LPG undertakings.

Section 15 concerns the obligations of holders of the new LPG safety licence, class 2. The CRU is given the power to make regulations prescribing duties, requirements or obligations with which the holders of such licences must comply. Contravention is a penal offence. The section also introduces a duty on LPG undertakings to ensure that LPG activity and the design, construction, installation, maintenance, modification, operation and decommissioning of LPG infrastructure are carried out in a way that reduces risk to a level that is as low as possible.

Section 16 removes the 21-day waiting period before the CRU may serve a safety improvement notice on petroleum undertakings in order to reflect the practice with respect to natural gas and LPG undertakings. Section 17 extends the power of the CRU to make levy orders on energy or petroleum undertakings or holders of LPG safety licences to meet expenses arising from compensation for damage caused by GEOs in the pursuance of their duties.

Sections 18 and 19 revoke regulations that will be made redundant by the passage of the Bill. Section 20 provides for the continuity of service of GEOs appointed by Gas Networks Ireland. Any existing GEOs appointed by LPG undertakings will have their appointments terminated to allow the CRU to now make these appointments. It provides for the continuity of service of GSOs appointed prior to the passage of the Bill.

Section 22 provides for the continued validity of ongoing inspections and investigations by GSOs under section 9J of the principal Act.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Niall Collins, has a group in from his constituency.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Excellent.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I welcome them all to the Public Gallery. They are here at the invitation of the Minister of State.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Excellent. They are very welcome.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I hope they enjoy their day here in Leinster House.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: They have come for the right debate.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ryan O'Meara has another group. It is important to acknowledge them all as they look in on our democratic process.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Absolutely. Deputy McGuinness is the Chair and can do as he wishes. They are all very welcome.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sorry for interrupting.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Not at all.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister need not start again.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is the Chair sure?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: He can just start from where he left off.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Section 23 provides for the Bill's Short Title. It allows for the collective citation and construction of the Electricity Regulation Acts 1999 to 2026 and enables the Minister to commence the Bill by order. I look forward to working with Deputies to progress the Bill, which is relatively technical. The changes it makes will make crucial improvements to the safety regulation of natural gas and LPG for operators, consumers and, importantly, the public. It will modernise our safety regime and bring currently unregulated operators into the fold of the regulatory system. I commend it to the House.

Deputy Pa Daly: I agree that this is largely technical. As the Minister said, it deals with issues such as the role and appointment of GEOs, their various powers to enter land, the 21-day waiting period, the determination of the form of a safety permit, and the transition or grandfathering provisions. I welcome the fact the Minister is committed to working with Deputies to progress the Bill because some more work will need to be done on it as it progresses through the Houses.

On the surface, the Bill does look technical, with the 23 sections and key provisions about introducing the licensing framework, new safety permits, etc., but if you scratch beneath the surface and dig a little deeper, you find it deals with something more fundamental, namely, safety, including safety in our homes and the safety of our businesses and communities. Natural gas and LPG are used in thousands of homes and businesses across the country. I understand 12,000 households are dependent on LNG for their heating and a staggering 600,000 use natural gas. For those who can neither afford nor access an alternative source to heat their homes, this is not just about fuel; rather, it is about their lifelines. If these systems are unsafe or fail, the consequences can be catastrophic and lives are put at risk, as we have seen on a number of occasions, particularly over the past ten years.

I agree that we need strong legislation and robust regulation but strong legislation is not just about rushing something through and hoping for the best, especially when it has been the subject of considerable criticism from within the industry. The industry feels the Government has failed to address this. Therefore, we need to get it right. The system must be workable, enforceable and resourced. Resourcing is crucial and safety must not be compromised. There is no dispute on any side, following the Oireachtas committee proceedings of 2024, but that reform is urgently needed. Serious concerns were identified by the regulator, the CRU, ten years ago. At the time, 70 unlicensed LPG networks were serving apartments. The complexes varied in size from three apartments to 60 apartments, and from three houses to 64 houses, with pipelines. They were all operating outside any regulatory framework. That is obviously

unacceptable given the safety concerns. Strengthening safety regulation is, of course, the correct thing to do.

The concern expressed to us, recognised by the CRU itself in 2020, was that to make its new system workable under a new class of LPG license, it would need to establish a new regulatory framework to govern the unlicensed LPG networks identified, including through requesting the Minister to amend primary legislation to bring all LPG distribution network operators within the definition of an LPG undertaking, as the Minister has addressed in his speech, and also through developing a new class of safety license and operator handbook to govern this new class of license. The CRU also recognised the importance of consultation with experts within the industry. There is concern, however, that these conditions have not been met. Some industry representatives say what is proposed is not fit for purpose and warn that if implemented in its current form, it could do the opposite of its stated intention by creating new safety risks rather than resolving the existing issues.

The gas safety supervisory body, GSSB, is responsible for ensuring all domestic gas installers meet safety standards through registration and supervision to protect the public. The CRU then appoints the organisations to this role through a tender for contract. Until 2022, as mentioned by the Minister, the gas safety supervisory body was managed by RGI-Safe Electric, a not-for-profit organisation which the industry said had the experience and credibility to fulfil this role. The contract was then awarded to Safe Energy Ireland, SEI, whose parent company is SPS Global. To ease that transition, it adopted the RGI logo, so it seemed there was not a huge change. However, some gas installers I spoke to said there was insufficient experience in gas or electrical supervision. As the gas safety supervisory body, its remit is also now expanded to cover natural gas and LPG. I am told that the first year under SEI management was highly problematic, with issues about ID cards, certificates, management processes, email systems and registrations. I have even heard of resignations by inspectors from SEI who joined to facilitate the introduction of non-domestic gas regulations, but felt they had to leave due to safety concerns.

For over a decade, the CRU has promised to introduce non-domestic gas regulation, but the deadlines have been missed. Now, with the Bill going through, there has been criticism. Inspectors say there are gaps in the legislation. The Installer Representative Panel is an organisation that advocates for the interests of registered gas installers. Its mandate is to engage with the CRU and the GSSB to drive change and resolve the challenges within the industry, including ensuring best practice safety standards. Significantly, the panel opposed the CRU's proposal on non-domestic gas installation in 2023-24 as it felt it was unworkable. The deadline was missed. Subsequently, the CRU revised the criteria document, sending it for public consultation, but it is said that key stakeholders, including the Irish Hotels Federation, the catering association and the restaurant industry, were not adequately informed about the impact of these changes. I understand the public consultation has not yet been published.

The CRU should have amended the criteria document to include changes to registration procedures and new entrant categories. A dedicated body was expected to manage these updates, but we await its establishment. Similarly, a modification secretary intended to oversee document revisions has not been appointed, I am told. The CRU has also attempted to introduce electronic gas certification, claiming it would be operational from January of this year, but that is still not in place.

When this was introduced for domestic installers last year, industry representatives claimed it did not work properly. Training for domestic and non-domestic gas is insufficient, particularly following the closure of the Cork training college, although I understand the College of Further Education and Training in Limerick still operates training. Efforts to promote an all-island training agenda, supported by training centres in the North, have not been accepted by the CRU. I ask it to reconsider and review that decision.

There are serious risks associated with this Bill. As the Minister said, he looks forward to working with the Opposition and other TDs on it. We are waiting for the dedicated body, for the modifications secretary to oversee the document revisions and for the training and inspection procedures, given there is no recognition of prior learning, RPL, in place. These are the backbone of a functioning safety regime. With them, we hope that international best practice can flow. Even if the Bill were perfect on paper, we need proper resourcing. The CRU has been handed responsibility after responsibility, but it is struggling to meet its existing obligations. Rules only matter if they can be enforced. Without that, regulation is nothing more than window dressing.

As I am sharing my time with other Sinn Féin TDs, I will have to conclude shortly. However, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to mention one issue that is as fundamental as safety, and that is energy affordability. As I have mentioned, there are 600,000 homes in the State that use natural gas and 12,000 use LNG. They are being ripped off and are paying much more than in other European states. Up to 200,000 households are in arrears on their gas bills, which is one household in every three. Even more, 300,000, are in arrears on their electricity bills. This is the highest figure the State has ever seen. Meanwhile, supports have been ripped away and carbon taxes have been increased. Some of those who were vociferously against carbon tax, including the Healy-Raes, are now in support of it. Therefore, people are paying much higher prices for heat and transport in a cost-of-living crisis. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Healy-Raes and the Regional Independents did this in the context of energy companies raising their prices despite the fact prices are falling in other European countries. What did the Government do? It did nothing. It failed to hold the energy companies to account by sitting on its hands and letting them off the hook. That is not fairness. That is failure. I once again call on the Government to do what is needed. It should introduce cost-of-living measures, withdraw the carbon tax increases and adopt Sinn Féin's proposals to address the fundamental flaws in our energy system so that household energy bills come down for good.

In conclusion, and to return to the issue at hand, we support strong safety regulation, and we support updating the law so that it is fit for purpose. I look forward to working with the Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy strayed a little from the Bill.

Deputy Pa Daly: Slightly.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this technical Bill. While my party and I recognise the importance of this Bill, there are still outstanding issues that Sinn Féin and others see with the legislation as it currently stands. It should be said that any Bill that intends to strengthen safety regulation for natural and liquified petroleum gas should be

welcomed. It is imperative that we keep with international best practice in relation to safety processes and procedures when it comes to natural and liquified petroleum gas sites. It is clear there is a need for regulatory reform. As it stands, however, this Bill needs more attention.

It is noteworthy that the Bill has been ten years in the making. It is disappointing that after all the time spent on the important reforms to the Electricity Regulation Act, industry representatives feel that engagement with them has been minimal. Concerns have been raised with the Minister on several occasions and have ultimately been ignored. Some of those concerns include the fact that there is no RPL board and no modification secretary, and that the registered gas installers are appointed as the inspection body when their inspectors are not even trained on non-domestic installation.

The latest consultation has not been published. There is no transparency. There is a feeling that this whole Bill is being rushed through without the proper safeguards in place. Sinn Féin is, therefore, calling on the Government to address the issues that we and industry experts have been highlighting. We cannot have a situation where the Government drafts a Bill that is intended to increase safety regulation for natural and liquified petroleum gas but ends up creating loopholes for non-domestic installers. These are the kinds of unintended consequences that we may see as a result of this insufficient Bill.

Another key issue concerns the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. The CRU has been under-resourced for many years in different areas. Specifically, on the question of natural and liquified petroleum gas, further expertise is required within the CRU to oversee this. That is critical for safety. However, it is also critical that natural and liquefied petroleum gas is more affordable. According to the 2022 census, over 600,000 Irish households use natural gas as their fuel for central heating, up from 550,000 in 2011 – I am one of those users. Yet, last summer, the Government increased the carbon tax again, placing a further burden on thousands of households already struggling with a cost-of-living crisis. Irish households are currently paying €360 a year more than our European counterparts. It is no wonder there are more than 300,000 people in energy arrears.

By September 2025, electricity prices were over four times higher than in January 1996. It is scandalous. The people are being totally fleeced by profit-hungry energy companies. Meanwhile, they are faced with a Government that has no desire to stop it and a regulator that has been rendered powerless to do anything about it. While it is important that we are weaning people off fossil fuels, it beggars belief that the Government would increase carbon taxes when it is doing very little to switch us to renewable energy, and making that the acceptable and easy choice for households.

Households are already on the brink. Over the Christmas period, I had many visitors to my constituency office who could not afford their ever-increasing energy bills.

We have heard these stories repeatedly with people choosing between eating and heating and not knowing whether they can afford to throw another log onto the fire during the cold winter and wearing multiple layers. What kind of a society do we live in where we cannot even keep our people warm?

I remember when I was growing up you would hear about old age pensioners getting on the bus to keep warm. Are we really going to be getting back to that? The elderly, children and people with disabilities have repeatedly called on the Government to implement an emergency

winter payment to offset the effects of the austerity budget of last year. It is time for the Government and the regulator to tackle this issue head on. The Government should adopt the Sinn Féin proposals and enact our legislation to hold energy companies to account, to reinstate energy credits, to decouple the link between gas and electricity prices and to work towards Irish independence through the roll-out of renewables. This crisis is not inevitable. Solving it is a matter of will and political choice which this Government seems unwilling to make.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The safe distribution and operation of fuels such as natural gas and LPG is of significant importance. Tens of thousands of households across the State rely on natural gas and LPG as their main source of heating and it is important that the networks which they use on a daily basis are up to standard and appropriately regulated for safety. I welcome the intention and progression of this technical update but, as my party colleagues have outlined, there are serious flaws in this legislation, and it does come ten years after the initial concerns were discovered.

While the distribution of home heating fuels must be safe, it is also important that it is affordable. The Government has failed to protect households from rising costs through its withdrawal of the energy credits and its inability to hold energy companies to account for this rip-off. As a consequence, we have over 300,000 households in energy arrears as of last October - households who have been left to fend for themselves as costs continue to soar. This is a choice by the Government. It could stand up to these companies, empower the regulator and reform the pricing structures, but it has consistently refused to do so. It has done nothing.

When it comes to the carbon tax, the Government has deliberately made the cost of home heating, petrol and diesel more expensive for households. We know the carbon tax is a regressive, deeply unfair tax and has a massive impact on people in rural communities and the west of Ireland, in particular, where in many areas the alternatives simply do not exist. However, the Government is going to continue hiking these taxes until 2030 at least. The reality is that the effects of recent carbon tax increases and the increases planned over the years to come will have the most severe impact on the most vulnerable households.

This comes with the support of Regional Independent Group TDs who spent many years speaking out against carbon tax increases yet when a Government job came into sight, they became silent. When he was in opposition, the Minister of State, Deputy Seán Canney said that rural Ireland was not being treated fairly when it comes to the carbon tax. He said that rural Ireland does not have the benefit of public transport and the Government was adding insult to injury by increasing the cost of running a car. I wonder whether the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, held the same view when he voted to increase the same carbon tax in the latest budget or if a ministerial job changed his mind.

Time after time the Government has defended carbon tax increases by saying that the funding is essential for the delivery of climate action programmes. We know from the public accounts committee that this is not true. The fact of the matter is that carbon tax funds are not ring-fenced for such measures but are treated the same as any other general taxation. The Government has little idea at all where the carbon tax people pay is actually spent.

It is time for the Government to recognise the reality for households across the State and give them a break. Working people and families are in desperate need of support to pay their energy bills. They need the Minister to reverse his cruel decision to scrap energy credits. They

need him to scrap the carbon tax increases and end the energy rip-off by standing up to the big energy companies.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I wish the Minister a happy new year. What a glamorous topic we have to kick off the new year here. We have lost our audience in the Gallery already. We might forgive our friends on the Sinn Féin benches for veering off topic slightly. This is a very technical Bill but we are talking about safety and this legislation deserves careful consideration and examination by all of us in the House.

The changes contained in this Bill are important. The Labour Party is broadly supportive of them. The vital work of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities often goes under the radar - perhaps thankfully since its work is often invisible, stepping in before problems arise. However, we do not need to be reminded of the seriousness of what we are talking about here. The regulation of our gas, electricity and water networks keeps us all safe. We are sadly too familiar with the deadly consequences that can occur when something goes wrong. It is crucial that those who are doing the work of keeping citizens safe from those risks have the proper legislative backing they need. They need to be able to put the proper systems in place to effectively regulate and enforce safety measures.

As the CRU has made clear, it is important to note that this legislation is not a reaction to any specific gas or LPG safety incident that has occurred. This is, therefore, the fruit of good pre-emptive work, identifying potential problems before they arise and stepping in to take the action needed. However, while this Bill comes to us as the result of years of good work by the CRU and others, that in itself poses a question as to why it took so long to get here.

The genesis of this legislation goes back to 2016 when the CRU was alerted to the existence of approximately 70 unlicensed LPG networks serving domestic customers. That is a decade ago. This was an issue that posed real safety risks to the public. As the CRU said, there were significant safety concerns for a number of these sites. The work of the CRU mitigated those risks in the immediate term, with interventions carried out on 16% of the sites to make them safe. In other cases, a gas safety officer issued instructions to the network operators with required actions to ensure the networks conformed with the relevant safety standards within a timescale. The fact remains that the existence of unregulated gas networks in Ireland poses a real safety risk, and that is why we are debating this legislation at all.

The Government itself acknowledged this, telling us that given the imperative of public safety, this Bill is being treated as priority. Of course, the development and drafting of any legislation is complex and time-consuming. That is particularly true of a technical Bill like this one. The CRU consulted on the new regulatory regime to come into force and the Government engaged with external expertise on how to proceed. There was a pandemic and two general elections in the meantime. Even with all that in mind, what does it say about how we do legislation in this place that an important technical but nonetheless relatively narrow change to the law takes the best part of a decade to achieve? Where public safety is concerned, it is just not good enough that necessary changes like this take this long.

This issue was raised at pre-legislative scrutiny when the committee's report "expressed concern regarding the relatively long period of time it has taken to propose this legislation, given that the issue it seeks to remedy was first identified in 2016". I would welcome the

Minister's view on this, and would like to hear the Government's view on how we can ensure that crucial legislation dealing with public safety cannot be held up by delays.

There are, of course, other elements of this Bill that are not directly concerned with the issue of non-regulated LPG networks. It introduces a penal offence for natural gas and LPG undertakings for failure to conform with a safety case, puts in place a requirement for gas undertakings to hold a safety permit and safety case for any given activity they carry out and puts the gas safety framework on a statutory basis. Importantly, the Bill strengthens the powers of the CRU in a number of areas, including on the appointment of gas safety officers and gas emergency officers and on the designation of natural gas and LPG activities under the new statutory regulatory regime.

It seems certain that taken in the round, this Bill will place an additional administrative burden on the work of the CRU. The CRU, of course, has consulted and taken a key role in the drafting of this legislation but we need to be sure that the additional responsibilities being given to the organisation will be achievable and will not be to the detriment of other vital work that the CRU is carrying out. Can the Minister assure us that the CRU will be on equipped or resourced to carry out these additional responsibilities? Will the CRU resourcing to fulfill its duties?

The CRU is funded through an industry levy on regulated entities under the Electricity Regulation Act 1999. I understand that the intention of the CRU, following consultation, is that the new small LPG reworks brought into the scope of licensing by this Bill will not be subject to that levy but will pay a €200 application fee. Is the Minister confident that any additional staffing or resourcing requirement borne by the CRU as a result of the measures in this Bill will be able to be covered by that funding arrangement?

With any expansion of powers, we should always be certain that the requisite safeguards and checks and balances are in place. Robust and enforceable powers in the area of gas safety are necessary and important. There are significant expansions of power here that merit examination. For example, section 6 clarifies how and when a gas safety officer has the power to enter onto private land or premises, the way in which they can carry out their role, and their powers to preserve the scene of an incident for investigation. During pre-legislative scrutiny, the Department told the committee that "these provisions seek to strike a balance between the additional powers granted to GSOs and constitutional rights."

The section provides that for a GSO to enter and inspect land, the GSO must be of the opinion that there "is or may be an imminent risk of bodily injury, threat to life or damage to property." It is reasonable and necessary that GSOs have these powers - being able to inspect before potential emergencies develop is crucial - but it will be important that clear policies and procedures, alongside safeguards and a dispute resolution process, are put in place with regard to their operation.

Another area where powers will be strengthened through the Bill is in the removal of the 21-day waiting period before the CRU can issue an improvement notice to a gas undertaking. That period had allowed an undertaking to make representations to the CRU and engage with it before an improvement notice was issued. The argument, as I understand it, from the Government and the CRU is that this waiting period is inefficient and incompatible with safety when combined with the High Court appeals process. Will this change, however, mean that a

High Court appeal is the only option available to an undertaking which feels it has been incorrectly served an improvement notice? Given the state of play in our courts system, we should try to ensure that other options for engagement and mediation are open in all our systems. Is the Minister satisfied that removing the 21-day representation period, rather than reducing or otherwise qualifying it, is the best path forward?

I also have a broader question. What kind of role does the Government see for LPG networks in Ireland in the future? By legislating for a new class of LPG licence for smaller networks, is the Government taking a step towards encouraging the development of such networks? I would like some clarity from Government on its intentions. We have seen from previous experience that an expansion of smaller LPG networks could pose issues with ensuring effective regulation and safety. How it would intersect with our climate targets at a time when we want to wean ourselves off our reliance on fossil fuels is another question to be considered.

My understanding is that the majority of the unregulated networks discovered by the CRU in its investigations from 2016 were in small or medium apartment blocks or housing estates. Housing developers may remain keen to put in place LPG networks if given the chance. Given the well-documented shortage of serviced land that we face, and how that hurts our chances of meeting housing delivery targets, does the Government see a role for local LPG networks in the future of housing delivery? I certainly hope not, given our continued failure to get anywhere near our climate targets, but it would be useful to understand that medium-term intention when considering this Bill.

Has the Government considered any lessons for its impending private wires policy? It has made clear its intention to allow private wires to be built and operated in certain circumstances. We have heard of the safety risks that emerged over several years when private LPG networks were allowed to develop in an unregulated, unmonitored fashion. There are, of course, important differences between these two situations but the fundamentals are the same: local private energy networks. If the Government is to move forward with its private wires initiative, it would be worthwhile to look closely at this case and to ensure that full and effective regulation and safety measures are in place from the off. Has the Department shared learnings across these two processes?

This legislation is an important strengthening of the regulatory landscape for natural gas and LPG. Proper regulation of utilities, particularly gas, keeps us all safe. It is vital that the CRU has the powers it needs to do that work. While I question why it took so long to bring this legislation forward and will push the Government to ensure the necessary checks and safeguards are in place on new powers, we in the Labour Party will support this Bill.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on Second Stage of the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026, which I support. While essentially a technical bill, it is important. At its core are public safety, consumer protection and ensuring confidence in our energy system. When it comes to gas, we only notice the rules when they are missing. This Bill matters because it strengthens and modernises the legal framework for both natural gas and liquefied petroleum gas, and does so in a practical way. It amends the Electricity Regulation Act 1999, and it gives the Commission for Regulation of Utilities the powers it needs to enforce compliance with the gas safety framework.

The Bill addresses an important gap by providing for safety licensing of previously unregulated third-party domestic LPG networks. In plain English: if households are being supplied through an LPG distribution network, we need clear rules, clear responsibility and effective oversight, regardless of who owns the network.

There are several provisions worth highlighting. First, the Bill transitions the existing gas safety framework from a non-statutory, administrative basis to a statutory footing. Importantly, it also grandfathers in existing safety cases, and provides that the Minister and CRU can gradually designate activities into the new regime, in consultation with stakeholders, so that the transition is orderly and workable.

Second, it provides a clearer structure for LPG by distinguishing different licence classes: class 1 for undertakings operating ten or more LPG distribution networks and class 2 for those operating fewer than ten. That tiering is sensible because it allows regulation to be proportionate while still being robust.

Third, and crucially, the Bill introduces a real compliance backbone - a penal offence for failure to conform with a safety case or obligation. The penalties set out are significant: up to a class A fine on summary conviction and up to €3 million on conviction on indictment. If we want compliance, there has to be a credible deterrent for reckless or negligent behaviour.

Fourth, the Bill introduces the requirement for natural gas and LPG undertakings to hold a safety permit and an associated safety case for any activity they carry out. This is a practical improvement because it creates a direct link between the activity, the safety case and enforcement, and it provides for additional transparency around active safety cases in the public interest. The Bill notes that it aligns gas safety more closely with the existing framework for petroleum safety, which is a useful and familiar model.

Fifth, the Bill strengthens the toolkit available to the regulator and officers on the ground. It strengthens the CRU's powers in relation to gas safety officers and gas emergency officers, including making provision for a court warrant to enter land and dwellings if required, and it clarifies duties and protections around the exercise of those powers. It also provides for reimbursement of reasonable costs where damage occurs during the execution of those duties. These are important checks and balances. They are strong powers, clearly defined, with safeguards.

Sixth, there are practical operational changes that improve responsiveness. The Bill removes the 21-day waiting period before the CRU may serve a safety improvement notice on NG, LPG or petroleum undertakings. Safety regulation has to be able to move at the pace of risk, not at the pace of paperwork.

Finally, I welcome the inclusion of provisions allowing CRU to prescribe near-miss or precursor events that materially increase the risk of a gas incident occurring. Waiting for the big incident before we learn lessons is a very expensive way to run a safety system. A modern regulator needs visibility on the warning lights, not just the crash. For all those reasons, I support the Bill. It is measured, it is practical and it closes real gaps.

I also want to use this debate to make a wider point about energy policy and delivery, which, the Minister will be aware, I have spoken of several times in this House. We can and must do two things at once. We must keep people safe in the energy system we have today while we

accelerate the transition to the system we need tomorrow. Gas safety is part of today's system but tomorrow's system must be built at speed, especially on renewables. Ireland has ambitious targets for offshore wind, and Government has repeatedly stated the aim of having 5 GW of offshore wind in development by 2030, with longer range targets beyond that. Industry, meanwhile, has warned that Ireland is at risk of missing the 2030 target and has called for accelerated delivery and clearer timelines. We need to be candid. The west coast is a huge part of our long-term opportunity. The Atlantic resource is extraordinary but it is not straightforward. It requires planning, ports, grid and consenting systems; critically, it requires progress on floating offshore wind because much of the west coast is in deeper waters.

The world is not waiting for Ireland. This week, reporting highlighted the commissioning and installation of 20 MW offshore wind turbines in China. Twenty megawatts per turbine is not a rounding error. It is a clear signal of where the technology and supply chains are going. When other countries are installing facilities that would have looked like science fiction a few years ago, we cannot be stuck in permanent process. That is why, alongside supporting this Bill, I call for a renewed focus on delivery across renewables, particularly wind and solar, and specifically a step-change in momentum on offshore wind off the west coast. The last Minister for energy spent too much time tinkering around the edges and not enough time delivering solutions we need.

5 o'clock

If we get this right, it is not just about meeting targets. It is about energy security, reducing long-term costs, resilience and jobs, including in coastal communities which can benefit from ports, fabrication and maintenance capacity.

I welcome the Bill. I commend the strengthening of the statutory safety regime and CRU enforcement tools. I urge that the same seriousness and urgency we apply to safety and regulation is applied to the delivery of the renewable infrastructure that Ireland needs.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome the opportunity to have this debate. As others have said, this is a technical Bill, one that has been in the pipeline, to excuse the pun, for quite a while. When I did research on this, I looked at the Oireachtas page where Bills are listed. I was aware I was familiar with the Bill but I could not remember seeing any previous debates. It is not listed on the website. There are no debates, but I know we had pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill in 2024. It is something the Department may be able to look at. I am not sure why-

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It was not debated before.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Even the pre-legislative scrutiny has not been mentioned. I read the pre-legislative scrutiny.

The Bill is quite important. It is limited in scope but important in terms of what it does. When we carried out pre-legislative scrutiny on the Bill, the CRU and Jim Gannon came to discuss it with us. At the time, he made the point that about 100 LPG distribution networks were currently being operated by unlicensed parties. I understand about 1,000 residential

properties were impacted by that. It is not a large number but from a safety aspect it is important that the Bill is passed.

I found how long this Bill has taken interesting. It was first identified in 2016 and there was pre-legislative scrutiny in February 2024. The CRU has done a lot of work on this and managed to bring these premises and any risk potential under its umbrella, even though the Bill has not been in place. There was consultation in 2019, 2021 and 2022. This has been an incredibly long process. When we talk about safety, I am quite worried about the length of time it has taken to get here. As I said, the CRU has a list of inspections based on this to try to mitigate any risks. It is important that we move on the Bill and it should have been prioritised prior to this.

The question is whether the CRU has capacity to deal with any additional responsibilities coming out of the Bill. It has requested additional resources. I understand in December last year, Jim Gannon told the infrastructure committee that the regulator was under capacity to serve the policy needs of the coming years and would need to double the number of staff. I do not know whether there has been any progress on that but the CRU will have additional responsibilities and new remits it will need to cover.

The programme for Government has committed to prioritising a review and reform of the legislation underpinning the CRU. I would appreciate if there was an update on that. The reason I am raising capacity issues in respect of our energy regulator is because the question is whether the regulator has enough staff to do its job or whether the legislation is there to enable them to do the job. I raise this in the context of the ability of the regulator to focus on the important issues that impact people on a daily basis, including energy affordability. The Minister has spoken to the regulator and directed it to carry out an investigation into price gouging, which is really welcome. The regulator has had the powers to look at that. It is already in legislation.

The affordability task force identified that as a key piece of work it should be doing. The question for me is why the regulator has not examined that. Why has it not examined the disparity between wholesale and retail prices? Irish consumers pay three times more at a retail point than the wholesale price. In winter, many people struggle with costs. I heard from a family member of a woman in a wheelchair who had to make a decision not to power her wheelchair because the family needed to use the money to heat the home. I am more than happy to speak to the Minister about that. This relates to emergency payments for people with disabilities. I was shocked by that story. The woman has sat in her wheelchair for a number of months and cannot get out of her house.

There is a question about the CRU. It has a large remit. We need to know why it is not exercising its remit on those very important issues and whether that is a capacity issue. If it is, that is something that can be solved. If it feels it should not have been doing that work without direction, that is a problem. It has a responsibility to focus on individuals and customers and ensure that we avoid energy poverty.

As I said, I read the discussion on pre-legislative scrutiny in the previous Dáil. It was a good resource to use to identify previous discussions on this issue. It provided an important opportunity for the previous climate committee to bring the regulator in to discuss the Bill and have discussions be transparent and publicly available. Sometimes the Government has not

given the pre-legislative scrutiny piece enough value. I am concerned because I have received emails from environmental organisations which are worried about the potential of pre-legislative scrutiny being waived in respect of LNG legislation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Sorry, this is the-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: This related to the LNG facility. It is more about the importance of pre-legislative scrutiny, in particular when we are discussing energy. In that instance, I would be very concerned and would not agree with waiving any pre-legislative scrutiny for any aspect of LNG legislation. There is such concern about this publicly that the process needs to be transparent and there needs to be a debate in the Dáil. As legislators, we need to be given the opportunity to do our job in that regard. I wanted to mention that to the Minister.

The Social Democrats will support the Bill. It is important and I ask that things are sped up. We have been waiting for this for quite a while. The Bill is important. It is also very important that the CRU has the resources necessary for it to do its job.

Deputy John McGuinness: I welcome the Bill and commend the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on his work in this area and that he has brought the Bill to Second Stage in the House for debate. I am sure it will be passed. The Bill is necessary but it is unbelievable that it has taken so long, albeit not under the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to bring such a Bill to the House. It is a Bill that is fundamental in terms of development, safety, infrastructure, regulation, policing and so on. We need to examine how legislation is prepared and brought before the House and the greater efficiencies we can put in place to ensure that we can have a debate, tease out the amendments, if necessary, and deal efficiently with the business that needs to be concluded.

The CRU does a lot of work and we are now asking it to do further policing of licences and all of the rest associated with the Bill.

I wonder about the staff levels there and how they will be addressed to ensure that, in the context of what will be expected of them, they will have the appropriate number of staff who are the professionals needed to deal with all of these issues. As we put laws in place, there is no point in them being there if we will not ensure they are implemented and those who have applied for licences or engaged in this area will respond to the standards we are asking them to achieve.

When the Minister says it will not cost more, we have to be realistic about this. There is no doubt it will cost more and the levies and moneys collected will not be sufficient to cover all of those costs. The cost of such an agency and the cost of implementing all of the legislation the agency will be required to do should be worked out. There is nothing like being prepared for the increases that may arise.

Having said all of that and realising the importance of the work, I wonder about all of these quangos that are being set up. I understand the need for this and I am all for safety and development in this area but it really concerns me that we have so many quangos now that are outside of the reach of this House. When you ask a parliamentary question as to the status of one issue or another, the status of a company or the status of an application for a licence, you

are told it is not within the remit of the Minister. That really has to stop. We are elected by the people. We are a Parliament with powers. We are introducing legislation through the Minister and we should take ownership of the legislation. There should be a way for a Member of this Parliament to intervene and ask a question in order to address an issue he or she might have. We have serious problems in relation to all of the other utilities and companies because they rarely engage in a really efficient and productive way to solve a problem or an issue. I will give the example of Irish Water. I will not go into detail but there is a difficulty in dealing with it. I could give the example of local government. It is impossible to hold it to account. In the introduction of this legislation, I would like to see more done in that area to ensure we can do our work when the difficulties start to fall out over the years.

I also suggest that all these utility companies, particularly those that are providing energy to households where there is an elderly individual or couple or where there is a family that is marginalised, be asked to do more to address the issues that we bring to their attention. There is a cost of living issue. There is a cost of energy issue. There are issues for households that we need to address. While I might be straying a bit from the Bill, it is all about cost. It is all about how the companies will push their cost onto the consumer. The consumer has rights but I am afraid that in the guarding of those rights we fall short as a Parliament and as Members because we cannot directly hold them to account on individual cases. That is simply not at all satisfactory. It is not at all what the State should stand over. As a Republic, we should ensure the rights of our citizens. We should ensure the rights of our parliamentarians who engage on their behalf. Legislation almost prevents us from doing that. In terms of the cost, the price gouging and all of that, we need an immediate response to issues like that. Legislation like this should really be looking to the problems that may arise and that are there by way of example and ensure there is a way to address them.

We are looking at energy and gas with this. There is also the issue of nuclear power, which was suggested here. The Minister should look at that. We need to have options. While we are talking about regulation, I wonder about the regulations we have been promised for wind farms. We have not received them yet. If we go back to 2013, they were debated in this House but we still have not received them. Why does it take so long to bring forward regulation or legislation that will govern development like this, not to stop or hold them up but to regulate them and acknowledge the rights of the communities they are affecting? In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny and the neighbouring constituency of Laois, huge wind farms are being constructed. I visited a number of these recently and I have to say a lot of them, in their numbers, are a blight on the landscape. Yet, we have no input. We want the regulation to make a level field for those who are applying for the wind farms and those who want to protect their homes, lives and communities from the negative side of the turbines. We talk about it here and, quite frankly, the Government has been very slow in acknowledging the difficulties communities have all over the country. The lack of regulation is actually driving a wedge in local communities between those who own land and want to develop it for wind farms and those who simply want no wind farms or want an input into where they are going. It is fair to ask that. You are not stopping it but, rather, asking for the regulation which has been promised since 2013 to be dealt with it.

This brings us again to the parliamentary questions we ask here, whether they are about this piece of legislation or that regulation. You just get the same tripe set out in replies to parliamentary questions. The same bluff is expressed but the real issue is not dealt with. It

creates a deal of anger and frustration for Members not to be able to have those issues addressed.

While the legislation is needed, I ask the Minister about those safeguards. I ask him to look at the cost of that agency. I ask him, in his position as Minister, to take on board the views of this House, expressed by some, in relation to nuclear power, wind energy and the difficulties for the communities and applications that are there. I ask that these matters be addressed as soon as possible and for some sort of balance to be brought to how we do our business.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I think I would be safe in saying that all of us in this House are supportive of strengthening safety regulations. Sinn Féin certainly supports updating the legislation. However, what we have here is a Bill that is emblematic of this Government. We see rushed legislation, despite the Government passing legislation at a slower rate than any other for a century. In the case of this Bill, serious concerns remain. Representative organisations have expressed concerns as to whether the legislation is fit for purpose. We have heard that, if introduced as it stands, it could pose serious safety risks and that there are too many legal ends and loopholes for non-domestic installers. We need to ensure that smaller operators are supported to avoid cliff edges.

We debate these serious issues today against a backdrop where, according to the CRU, this system has to come into effect on 1 January. Yet, this Bill was only published last Friday. It seems this Government lacks the ability to translate announcements, press releases, action plans and a whole thesaurus of other media opportunities into actual, operational policy.

At budget time, we saw the Government justify the withdrawal of energy credits for struggling families and workers with a reference to inflation being expected to run to 2% for the year. In the end, it amounted to 2.7% and 4% in the case of food. The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General utterly rubbished claims by the Government that we are using the carbon tax to support farmers for climate action. Of the €1.5 billion farmers were promised up to 2030, more than halfway through the decade the Government has delivered not even 10% of that.

Speaking of carbon tax, through a baseless increase on 1 January, the Government put upwards of 6 cent per litre on the cost of motoring; a supposed behavioural tax that cannot drive people to make use of services that do not exist. Other methods of transport lack the needed infrastructure in some communities, such as those I represent in counties Cavan and Monaghan. It is grossly apparent that the Government is struggling to translate ideas or sound bites into reality. Safety is not an area where we can afford to play fast and loose with rushing legislation.

I appeal to the Minister of State to take on board the concerns raised by representative organisations. I also appeal to him to ensure that the CRU is adequately resourced because if it lacks the capacity to ensure new regulations, then what should be important regulatory changes to improve safety will effectively amount to naught. Only a year into this Government, there have already been too many areas where that has not been the case.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the opportunity to contribute this evening. I am going to concentrate on the Bill itself and its substance. It is by any measure a technical Bill - a little

bit technical, perhaps unexciting, but very important because it deals with something incredibly important, that is, the safety of our citizens in their own homes. When gas safety regulations are not upheld, the consequences are severe, immediate and catastrophic in some cases. That reality should highlight just how necessary it is for the powers of the CRU to be expanded under this legislation to further protect customers. From my reading of the Bill, it is clear that there is a notable gap in the current legislation. That gap was exposed nearly a decade ago when the regulator became aware of unlicensed LPG networks serving housing developments and apartment complexes. Subsequent inspections showed that a fair number of these sites required immediate intervention to address pretty fundamental safety concerns. This Bill responds in a measured way to this by introducing a more comprehensive regime that would bring these operators under the gas safety regulatory framework. Under these changes, a two-class system for LPG safety licences will be established, replacing the existing LPG safety licences. Additionally, there is also a requirement now for LPG and natural gas undertakings to prepare their own safety cases for submission to the CRU and for consideration by it.

Ultimately, it is vitally important that all operators of piped LPG distribution networks are regulated with respect to safety so that the general public - the punters - and, in particular, end customers - our families, friends and neighbours - are protected. As a colleague rightly pointed out in this Chamber earlier, regulation without enforcement is not regulation at all. I believe this legislation is a fundamental step in achieving this goal, and I look forward to engaging constructively with the Minister of State over the coming months as it makes its way through this House.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not think anybody doubts the absolute necessity of ensuring that we have the proper level of regulation, particularly when we are talking about natural gas and liquified petroleum gas. We all know the issues that can exist. We all know the dangers that exist. In fairness, my colleagues, Deputies Pa Daly and Bennett recently stated, like many others have done, that there are issues those who have worked in the sector have brought up and we all welcome that. Many times, we have come in here and looked for greater powers in relation to the CRU, but it is making sure then that it has the capacity to be able to deliver upon them. There are very particular issues that exist in relation to the RGIs, registered gas installers. They are being appointed as the gas supervisory and safety body, as in the inspection body, but their inspectors are not trained on non-domestic installation. That is the piece. We have heard many speak about rushed legislation, but the fact is that there have been issues that we have known have existed for ten years and more if the truth be told. It is a matter of us actually dealing with these issues from the point of view that we have a framework that works in relation to those who are involved in the delivery of these particular systems and gas systems.

I think everyone will be aware of the absolute necessity in this State in relation to home heating, domestic heating, non-domestic and industrial heating, particularly in the last period we have gone through, and the absolute necessity the State has with regard to energy and the issues we have sometimes had in ensuring we have a decent energy supply. While there has been much talk in the last while, and necessary talk, in relation to ensuring there are no bureaucratic or administrative hold-ups in the delivery of huge necessary projects, we have also seen, whether we are talking about mica or 101 other issues, that we did not have a sufficient amount of regulation and oversight and we did not have the systems in place. Due to that, we are dealing with it from that point on at a huge cost to the State and, obviously, if I

am talking specifically about mica, at a huge cost to those affected, particularly in Donegal, Mayo, Sligo and the Minister of State's own county. We have a number of those particular issues in my own country. The Louth local authority is at this point dealing with the Department and ensuring that we can be added to the scheme with the issues that exist. I digress but my point is that we need to ensure that safety is in and we need to ensure that the regulation is correct. We need to absolutely ensure that those who are given the job in relation to both commissioning and decommissioning have the skill set that is necessary. We may then need to make sure we can operate this as seamlessly as possible.

It is fair enough for anyone else who has brought up the issue in relation to the cost-of-living crisis and the fact that there are people out there who are really suffering because they do not have the finances. It is a case sometimes of whether people eat or heat their homes. I do not think it is good enough that the Government has completely given up in relation to those supports that are needed, particularly as regards energy credits. We all heard earlier about the cost of disability and the fact there is no cost of disability payment. We are going to wait another year for people who are really suffering at this point, and people spoke about the particular issue they have in relation to heating. I ask that the Minister of State bring back to Government that this is an issue that needs to be resolved.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the Bill and the emphasis it places on safety and prevention. This legislation is incredibly important. As we know, there have been many very serious and tragic explosions here and, indeed, internationally. Some of these explosions have resulted in the loss of life, such as the Creeslough tragedy in County Donegal. My thoughts and prayers are with the families affected in relation to it. This would obviously provide a statutory duty to ensure gas infrastructure is designed, built and maintained in a way that reduces the risk leading to fires and explosions. We in Aontú will certainly be supporting this legislation.

I also have concerns in relation to gas being used for the generation of electricity. What appears to be happening in some parts of the country is that energy infrastructure is being developed in order to supply the shortage of energy in other parts of the country.

Data centres along the east coast, for example, are putting enormous pressure on the grid. As a result, we are seeing a rapid and intense number of planning applications for gas-powered electricity generators, solar farms and wind turbines. Why should the west be sacrificed for this? Our infrastructure and beauty are being sacrificed without any proper planning regulation or oversight.

I wish to highlight a serious issue in the Dáil. My colleague in Aontú, Luke Silke from Tuam, County Galway, has been working diligently on this issue. He has outlined serious concerns. What appears to be happening is that we have a bizarre situation where two people employed in a company called MKO, which was in charge of submitting planning applications on behalf of wind farm companies to Galway County Council and An Coimisiún Pleanála, have now left that company and have begun work in An Coimisiún Pleanála and Galway County Council's planning department. It is most extraordinary and incredibly serious. I raise the matter to seek assurances. Two former employees of the firm MKO are now working as planners in Galway County Council and An Coimisiún Pleanála, respectively.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy should be careful.

Deputy Paul Lawless: MKO is the consultant representing four companies seeking to construct wind farms in Belclare, Cooloo, Clonberne and Killimordaly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should not be making statements that may identify individuals who are not here to defend themselves.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We can see from the documents on the website of An Coimisiún Pleanála that, on 19 November 2020 during the pre-application consultation phase of one of the proposed development sites in Galway, a meeting took place between the prospective applicant, the design team and Galway County Council. A certain individual is listed as present at that meeting representing the wind farm company. Luke Silke has declared and shown me documents that this individual is now working for An Coimisiún Pleanála. Is there not a huge conflict of interest in this regard? In further documents, we can see that a separate individual was working for MKO-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless is really treading on unsafe territory. He cannot be drawing conclusions like he is doing-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: The point I am making-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----regarding people who hold positions and might be identified by his remarks. I ask the Deputy to refrain from giving the type of detail that might lead to that position.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Okay. I am happy to share this with the Minister of State after my contribution. The point I am making is that there are individuals who, on the one hand, worked for the consultancy aspect or, essentially, the wind farm companies and have now gone on to work in local authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála. In this instance, the same individual who worked on a planning application is now working within the local authority and adjudicating on that same wind farm application. There is a huge conflict of interest here. I am raising it to highlight this issue and seek assurances that it should not be allowed to happen. I am seeking that the Government puts these applications in County Galway on hold until we ensure that due process is adhered to and there is no conflict of interest in relation to these wind farms.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: This is a Second Stage debate on the general issue of gas safety. That is why I, like others, are raising issues that are related to but outside the scope of this Bill, although I will come to the specifics of the Bill as well.

I have been raising issues of gas safety over multiple Dáil terms. It does not appear that the issues have been addressed. We have had complaints sent into multiple agencies. We have had protected disclosures about issues relating to gas safety and enforcement. We seem to have a serious problem. For example, when it comes to Gas Networks Ireland, it has been brought to my attention that there is an issue with gas meters being installed under stairways and inside

front door areas that are designated escape routes, a practice that is not compliant with safety regulations. There is also a failure to address clear safety issues during meter installations.

With regard to Bord Gáis, I have received complaints that the servicing of gas boilers is an issue and some should not have been commissioned in the first place due to safety defects. Other significant safety concerns are overlooked during routine servicing.

In respect of the RGII, there have been allegations that large numbers of hazard certificates have been sent but they are not being acted on.

With regard to the SEAI, homes have been surveyed and heating systems upgraded that are allegedly not fit for purpose. Documented safety issues during upgrade works are also being ignored by installers.

I have a list of examples of common safety defects that I will go through. The first example is one over which I remember getting ejected from this Chamber because I refused to sit down when I raised it. I remember holding up a piece of pipe in the Chamber. The defect is gas pipes not being sleeved when entering homes. Back in the day, I mentioned there was a risk to tens of thousands of households throughout the country from gas pipes that were not installed to the original IS 813:2002 Irish quality standard. They were, therefore, liable to corrosion. There is a risk that the eventual corrosion of the pipes will lead to gas leaks and, in some cases, a risk of potentially fatal explosions. This issue was never fully addressed like it should have been.

I wish to go through a few other issues that have been mentioned including: no earth bonding; exposed gas pipes on external walls without protection; gas pipes routed through apartment stairways between floors; gas pipes in voids with no external ventilation; gas pipes in lift shafts alongside electrical controls with mechanical joints and no fire stopping between floors; gas meters being used to support two-inch gun barrel pipework; no gas shut-off valves where gas pipes enter apartments; gas pipes buried in sand and cement without proper shielding, as I have mentioned; insufficient gas pressure to safely operate boilers, cookers and fires; poor-quality soldering on fittings; lack of required ventilation for gas cookers and fires; boiler flue terminals located too close to air vents; and cold water supply for heating systems connected directly to the mains. Whistleblowers have contacted me to say that they have substantial evidence to support all the issues that I have outlined and they have made submissions in this regard. I would love to see whether this is going to be investigated properly.

In respect of the Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 and how it brings previously unlicensed rural LPG networks into a formal safety regime, it is welcome. It will hopefully address the immediate risk of gas leaks and non-compliance with safety standards. In the context of what I just mentioned previously, it all depends on the actual enforcement rather than just having the regulations.

The CRU, in theory, can issue safety improvement notices immediately, reducing or removing the previous 21-day waiting period. On paper, this will make enforcement more implementable and effective. When it comes to costings, I note that the CRU introduced a simplified class 2 licence with a lower one-off application fee of €200 for smaller networks. However, there is still the risk that there will be increased costs for small businesses in that the requirements, such as preparing safety cases and annual levies, could place a disproportionate financial burden on the smaller LPG operators.

Of course, the Bill does nothing to address the high energy prices and the price gouging of energy companies on hard-pressed residents. That is a separate issue but I wish to put that on the record. I also point out that whatever about the gas safety requirements, we are not doing enough in terms of the overall energy supply to progress renewables as fast as we should.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on this Bill today.

Let me state from the outset that safety must always come first. Every family, every worker and every pensioner has a right to know that the fuel heating their homes and cooking their dinners is safe, properly regulated and overseen by a system that is fit for purpose. Safety cannot, however, become a convenient excuse for forgetting rural Ireland or for piling more paperwork, fees and levies onto small operators and local communities who already struggle to stay afloat.

This Bill deals with both natural gas and LPG. In urban areas, the gas grid is taken for granted but in much of rural Ireland, there is no gas grid, there are no pipelines and there are no grand plans. What is there instead is reliance, in places, on LPG, on bottled gas, on bulk tanks and on small networks serving estates and apartment blocks that were built outside the reach of the great Dublin-centric energy map.

We learned from an investigation by the CRU that dozens of small LPG networks were operating without any proper regulatory cover, not out of neglect or intent, but because the law simply did not recognise them. Developers, management companies and volunteers found themselves supplying gas without a licensing system designed for their scale. That was a gap in the law and a safety risk, and it needed to be addressed. In that respect, bringing these networks into a proper licensing and safety structure makes sense. Families deserve peace of mind. They deserve clarity on who is responsible when something goes wrong.

The Bill seeks to introduce two classes of LPG licence and replace the informal safety case system with a statutory safety permit system. It gives the CRU more tools with which to investigate incidents and to intervene when it must. Those elements are reasonable, and Independent Ireland supports the principle of regulating for safety.

There are some very real concerns, however, and I want to speak plainly about them. First is the cost. We are told again that there will be no cost to the Exchequer. What we are not told is who will actually pay. Every time the CRU gets a new function, and every time there is a new permit, a new levy, a new licence or a new compliance burden, it eventually lands on the bill of the ordinary customer, it lands on the pensioner filling their bulk tank, it lands on the working family paying for LPG cylinders, and it lands on the landlord in rural Cork trying to keep an old apartment block heated. If we are not honest about that in this House, then we are doing a disservice to those people.

The second concern is fairness. A class 2 LPG operator running a handful of residential connections in a rural estate is not the same as a national gas transmission operator. We cannot and should not regulate them as if they were. We need clear guarantees that the regulatory burden will not choke small operators or force estates to abandon LPG networks entirely. When that happens, homes go cold and rents go up, and nobody in the Government will take responsibility for that outcome.

The third concern is energy security. Safety is crucial but supply matters, too. Ireland has backed itself into a corner by shutting down options before alternatives exist. We are now talking about regulating LPG at the same time as we refuse to talk honestly about where that gas will come from in ten or 20 years' time. We cannot keep pretending that interconnectors from Britain are a long-term energy strategy. They are not. They are a gamble, one that leaves our homes, our hospitals and our businesses exposed. This touches directly on the issue of LNG, and in particular Shannon LNG. I have said it before and I will say it again: rejecting LNG on ideological grounds while importing gas through longer and less secure routes makes no sense. Other small countries have diversified supply, built resilience and protected their people. Ireland instead congratulates itself on shutting doors and hoping for the best. This is not climate leadership. It is wishful thinking dressed up as strategy. Let us be realistic. We cannot electrify everything overnight. We cannot heat every rural home with heat pumps that families cannot afford and that do not work properly in older, poorly insulated buildings. Until genuine alternatives exist and are accessible, LPG and natural gas will remain essential and policy must reflect that reality instead of pretending it away.

I want to talk about respect for local communities. Too often, decisions are made in Dublin and imposed on rural areas with no engagement, no listening and no understanding. If we are going to regulate local LPG networks, then we need to work with the people who actually run them. We need simple compliance, clear communication and fair timelines, not a box-ticking exercise designed for consultants in office blocks. Independent Ireland asks the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to consider bringing forward amendments on Committee Stage to ensure there is: no increase in domestic heating costs as a result of this Bill; a fair and proportionate regulatory system for class 2 LPG operators; transparency from the CRU on levies, costs and compliance impacts; a national energy security plan that includes LNG as an option; and rural-proofing of all energy legislation placed before this House.

Safety is essential but so is common sense. Regulation must protect people, not punish them. If we want to genuinely secure Ireland's energy future, we must stop closing doors and start planning for the needs of every community, urban and rural, and not just the few within the M50.

I want to talk about safety, including in my own constituency. We saw what happened in Creeslough with the ten people who were tragically killed there. I sympathise with all their families. We also have to look at Whiddy Island. In 1979, there were 51 people killed there and the State has never apologised. We really cannot get to the bottom of what did happen on that fatal night. It is a shocking indictment. Several times, I have called on this and previous Governments for a proper investigation and for an apology to the families of the 51 people who perished that night, including relations of my own. They were good, hard-working men who went out to work and never came home. It was a terrible tragedy in 1979 and it will never be forgotten. Here we are 47 years later and people might think we have forgotten in Bantry but we have not. We will always respect those people for the remainder of our lives. Surely be to God respect should be shown in here too so that families can have some kind of closure. It is something that I have called for. Michael Kingston, the head of the relatives and friends' organisation down there, has fought gallantly but has literally been ignored. He is not going to give up the fight, and I give him great credit for that.

I also commend the local fire brigades in Kinsale and Carrigaline. There was a gas leak two weeks ago and most of Kinsale town had to be evacuated because of it, but thankfully it was all dealt with professionally by our professionals out there. I pay tribute to each one of them, as well as the gardaí and the head of the fire station in Kinsale. They are tremendous people down there and I know them well. I often meet them and talk to them. They certainly had very difficult circumstances on their hands less than two weeks ago. Thankfully, there was no fatality and nobody was hurt. It was dealt with professionally but lots of people had to be evacuated because of the dangers of the type of gas that people are dealing with. It was with gas being delivered where there was a leak. As I said, these things happen.

We will give 100% support to anything that brings in safety but we have to make sure that the costs are not passed on to the customer. Customers were looking for some energy relief this year but, unfortunately, they were not given it. I know it is not an election year, so maybe if there is an election coming soon, they might get that energy relief again. That is of huge importance, but safety and common sense are things we will always support inside here. I would ask that the Government give the time to sit down as a Cabinet to look at the situation that happened at Whiddy Island and to think of those 51 people who perished 47 years ago and to this day have not got justice. While there is a breath in my body inside in this Parliament, I must stand for those people, and I will continue to stand and support those people until we get justice for the Whiddy Island disaster.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Going through the Bill, we cannot argue. Improving safety is something that we really do need, especially in the operation and maintenance of our gas networks. I have heard other Deputies mention it. The improvements are important. Protecting our citizens is one of the main things that we in this Chamber do. As Deputy Gogarty has said, however, the measures are not grappling with the elephant in the room, namely, soaring energy prices and the burden on Irish households. If any other country had the potential that Ireland has, be it offshore or onshore and the amount of sea and seabed that we have, they would seize it.

We are currently bringing in other countries' national installers to do it because we do not have the capability. I understand that back in the early 2000s we had plans to develop our offshore renewable energy at a faster rate but unfortunately due to the financial crash and everything we did not and we are now years behind our EU counterparts and everyone else. The potential Ireland has needs to be seized. When it comes to the price, something we are constantly asking in the climate and energy committee is what is the delay and what is holding up this clear option for Ireland to be more energy independent. Not only could we be energy independent, but with the kind of tailwind we will be getting from offshore renewable energy we could use electrolysis to create green hydrogen. We could be supplying green hydrogen for high-energy industry. We could be supplying the growing green hydrogen market there is going to be in the EU. I am sure the Minister of State knows the UK is using a mix of green hydrogen and natural gas. It is something Ireland has huge potential in and it needs to be looked into more. I did not see much mention of it in the Bill.

Energy prices have been going through the roof in the last few years and the inflation is leaving people struggling. I have hundreds of people contacting my office who are struggling with bills and the cost of living. Something we could do to help them, which I have mentioned multiple times, is to decentralise our grid, bring in private wires and bring in long duration

energy storage. This would allow us to regulate our current grid like the Danish or Germans do. Something I spoke about recently, which is not mentioned in this Bill, is that those living in apartment buildings cannot use plug-in solar. The Germans have done it and it really helps struggling people. It is very simple. People can put it on the outside of their balconies and plug it directly in. The current regulations and the systems do not allow people to do that. It would really help people and it is a very cheap system.

We want clean energy in Ireland - something we can be proud of that is secure, affordable, decarbonised and future-proofed, but we need to accelerate renewables. The private wires legislation is due to come to the House this year and I am looking forward to going through that Bill and working with colleagues across the House, but if we are going to reach the 80% renewable share by 2030 we need to have a Covid-level response to this. Delivery is lagging and everyone knows it. One of our greatest untapped assets, as I have already mentioned, is our offshore renewable energy resource and the planned targets of 5 GW by 2030 and 20 GW by 2040 need to be reached. The critical infrastructure Bill will, I hope, help with that but it needs to be done quickly. We do not have a national policy for it but for foreign direct investment to see we are a country to be taken seriously we need to show it this can be done and give it a good blueprint. We need to show investors we are going to take planning actions quickly. The delays are not acceptable and the gaps and grid constraints are not either. I recently visited a solar farm where the operators are turning off power due to the grid not being able to take it but we are still importing power from the UK. It makes no sense that we have solar farms turning off their power as the sun is beaming on them while we are still buying power from the UK. We have so much potential with battery storage and gravity pumps. The technology is out there but there is no urgency, there is no oomph. It is my generation who are going to be paying for this. The Minister of State knows that when you reduce energy costs that effect trickles through the entire economy, into transport and everything, and thereby brings down the cost of living. Our future energy systems cannot be tethered to the volatile gas markets and for that to be done we need to increase our offshore and onshore renewable energy. We need to get rid of the NIMBYism I see across this House and the electoral cycle thinking. These are things that are constantly said but they are true. That is why I am calling for reforms to the Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You need to conclude, Deputy.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I still have time, do I not?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, it was five minutes and Deputy Healy-Rae is there behind you.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: He should keep going, he is doing well. He is on a roll.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Will I keep going?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have not started yet.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Green hydrogen is a direct form and we need frameworks that unlock investment to electrolysis facilities, as I have already mentioned. There are great academics across the country's universities but we need to be listening to them. Irish people should be proud of the country we have, proud of the grid and proud of the energy we are producing cleanly. Safety is critical and this Bill improves safety.

It is a moment to rethink. Obviously I have only been in this House for the last 13 months and a lot of this stuff was done before I was a Member, but we need to rethink and challenge the interests, put Irish citizens first, bring in easier measures for people to use plug-in solar, bring in private wire systems and allow eco-villages to supply themselves off-grid to remove themselves from dependency and accelerate Ireland's energy transition in a way that is globally competitive so we can be making money for Irish citizens and not depending on other states.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: How much time have I?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There are 13 minutes left in the slot.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I could have kept going.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae need not take it all.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad this gas safety framework is to be put on a statutory basis. It is only right that people who are trained and qualified are installing and maintaining equipment. They know what they are doing for unsuspecting people who have a problem or are having something new driven by gas installed in their homes. People are depending on those who are trained and qualified and this is an explosive product that could leave many people hurt, injured or worse if it is not put together right. This Bill took a long time to come before us and we are all going to vote for it.

What we look forward to is Shannon LNG, which has been on the back-burner since long before I came up here in 2016. There have been too many delays. We need to ensure this is made available to the people. We cannot be beholden to one supply from the east all the time because we need gas to keep the country going and keep electricity flowing. It has been suggested to me many times that we should be using the old Kinsale Head gas field to store gas. We should buy it when it is cheaper rather than waiting until it gets expensive and we have to buy it. Often we are paying the highest prices for the sources we are using. We should ensure we are not paying the maximum price for it all the time.

The other problem is the regulator. Is she there at all, or who is she or who is he? We do not seem to see any action or any come hither put on the electricity companies that have varied so much in their price increases in the last 12 months. We need to do something about that because many people feel that since the day we closed Bord na Móna in 2020 the cost of electricity has gone up every other day. That is so wrong and we do not hear our energy regulator or regulators, or whoever they are, saying anything and it falls on poor people. The cost of living has gone through the roof in the last six months and it is exploding as we are talking. There is no end to the increase in the price of things. When energy costs so much, the cost of everything else goes up. We have seen the prices at the pumps have gone mad again in

recent times. There is the odd one that nearly maintains the same price all the time. We cannot understand it. There must be a regulator that ensures fair play is given to the consumer but I do not think he is acting or that he is there at all. The blame goes back to the Government.

6 o'clock

The Government is in charge of the regulator or he is supposed to be answerable to it, but I cannot see any answer. I do not see him doing any work at all on behalf of the people we were elected to represent here. I appeal again to see whether something can be done because the cost of living is tied to that and the cost of energy and heating. Without thinking of poor people, I come across people on a daily basis who believe they cannot buy a bag of turf now or get a bag of turf or that they should not have a fire. They feel guilty about it. These are elderly people who think they are doing harm and they are frozen in their homes. They cannot afford anything. We hear about underfloor heating and all these systems, like air to water heat pumps. They know they are in their elder years and that they do not have much time. They do not have the money to invest in these systems and they feel it is not worth their while. Normally, they would have turf, timber and so on. They are afraid to use those because of all the talk of the last Government which was driven by the Green Party. It did more harm than will ever be repaired. It will take too long to repair it for these elderly people. The facts are that since Bord na Móna closed down, the cost of electricity has gone up day by day. We must do something to ensure the regulator steps in and ensures fair play is had by the people.

There are others here who want to talk. I will finish.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate. The Government welcomes the considerations and contributions on this Stage. I look forward to what I think, based on what I heard, will be the Deputies' support in progressing the Bill through the House. The Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026 will make crucial and long-sought changes to our regulatory regime for natural gas and liquified petroleum gas, protecting operators, customers and the public, which I think we all accept is paramount.

I will try to respond to some of the issues I heard raised. I noticed an issue was raised throughout the debate that was identified back in 2016. The pre-legislative scrutiny was concluded in July 2024. I take on board, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and I are concerned, that it took a long time. It is not acceptable and I certainly accept the points made. An issue of such importance should have progressed more quickly. That is why the Minister is adamant that the Bill will now get a fair hearing and move quickly through the Houses. A Deputy identified that it was published just last Friday. It is legislation of significant importance.

Some peripheral issues were raised that are not directly related to the Bill. I am sure there will be other opportunities for Deputies to raise them again. I will concentrate on the important aspects. I accept, as I said, the concerns. There were issues with the costs. The reality is that when any new regulatory regime is brought in, there will be costs. However, the costs will not be borne by the State, but by the industry. That is the appropriate approach. Others have said, regardless of whether it is through levies or State funding, it is funded by taxpayer contributions, whether they are corporate or individual. However, in this case it is not an issue.

The delays were not related to the CRU's lack of resources because the costs will be covered through levies on the industry.

Deputy Heneghan talked at length about the broader issue of looking at the Government's commitment to become less dependent on gas. With our climate commitments, we are going through a transition phase where we need to move to electrification and the development of a biogas regime, and we are doing so at pace. While it has been slow in the early stages, the Government is progressing now. In early December last year, an auction took place for a 900 MW wind farm off the south-east coast. The previous Government moved away from a speculative approach to identifying sites offshore and into a plan-led phase. We did a designated marine area plan, DMAP, off the south-east coast, which has designated four sites, one of which has gone to auction with three will follow. I have responsibility for the next phase of that DMAP, which will identify suitable sites around the entire coast of Ireland that will get us to 20 GW by 2040. We are on target to deliver that designation by 2027 and we are committed to making sure it happens.

I take on board the concerns of some about the cost of electricity. It is a marketplace and there is competitive tension. The regulator has a role. Deputy Healy-Rae said the Government should intervene with the regulator. The regulator is independent and answerable to the Oireachtas committee. This is one of only a few regulatory regimes where parliament has oversight, as opposed to the Government.

I will go back to something Deputy Lawless said. It is important and I do not want to oversimplify it. However, it is the case that professionals move from one side of the fence to the other. We have to be careful not to ascribe to that professional movement from consultant to regulatory environment a conflict of interest. There is always potential for a conflict of interest and it is the responsibility of the chief executive of the local authority or of An Coimisiún Pleanála to assure themselves in that regard. I suggest that if the individuals have concerns, they address them to the chief executives of those authorities. For the Government to intervene, as Deputy Lawless suggested, would be an abuse and unlawful. The planning legislation is distinct. It is rigorous in this regard. It is regularly reviewed through judicial reviews in the courts and I do not believe there is a role for the Government in this. However, if the Deputy has concerns about the bona fides, he should share them with the authorities I mentioned. In saying that, it is important to note that Members of this House who hold Government positions now or who held them previously will go on to work in industry. There is a cooling-off period, and rightly so, but we have to be careful because such allegations have the capacity to malign or undermine the professionalism of individuals involved.

As has already been outlined, the Bill provides a legislative response to a public policy problem posing safety risks to the public, namely, unlicensed LPG networks whose operators have fallen outside the regulatory regime to date. While the CRU has done important work to date in inspecting these undertakings and issuing improvement notices, this Bill brings such undertakings firmly into the licensing system. As Deputies have heard, the Bill accomplishes this through establishing a new LPG safety licence class 2, for operators making LPG available to fewer than ten piped distribution networks, for use by individual domestic customers.

The new licence class is suited to the needs of smaller operators and applicants will face much lower application fees. Rather than preparing resource-intensive safety cases, class 2 licence-holders will be bound to adhere to safety requirements outlined by the CRU through

regulation. This approach was arrived at following consultation with industry stakeholders as the fairest and most effective means of bringing hitherto unregulated operators into the licensing system.

This speaks directly to Deputy Collins, for whom I have great regard and respect. Every time the Deputy contributes he seems to latch on to rural Ireland, which is part of his party's name. This is a recognition that not every regular scale operator in a rural area is of the same scale and complexity as one might be in a large area network in a more urban environment. The Government is taking cognisance of the needs of rural Ireland and, in this Bill, it is taking cognisance of the appropriate response, one that is proportionate to the risk that has been identified. It seeks to put in place a regulatory framework that gives protection to the greatest extent possible without creating an enormous regulatory burden that would make it exceedingly difficult or extraordinarily expensive if we just had a one-size-fits-all approach.

By taking this proactive approach, it is a recognition of the needs of rural Ireland and not wanting to create a greater cost burden on those operators, most of which are highly trained and professional people. Of course, like any of us, there is a standard we have to adhere to. When it is there and it is monitored, operators tend to adhere to it.

The Bill makes several important changes to the gas safety regime, which I will quickly reiterate. The gas safety framework, by which undertakings are licensed, is placed on a statutory footing, the CRU safety remit is strengthened through the introduction of a new class of LPG safety licences, and the definitions of natural gas and LPG incidents are broadened to include precursors to near-miss incidents or events. The CRU also acquires stronger powers to specify what is required of undertakings with regard to emergency responses.

As Deputy Healy-Rae and others said, there is a recognition that we cannot be overly dependent on gas from the east. That is why the Government recently announced the positioning of a floating facility for LNG in the Shannon Estuary. It so happens to be in Cahiracón, which is in west Clare. It is a recognition that gas is a transition fuel and that we cannot move to electricity in one bang. That is going to take a protracted period. There will always be a need for gas or biogas. We must have a safety net and a backup to protect our hospitals, schools and industrial base. We cannot leave ourselves open to the risk of any disruption to the two existing interconnectors. We are already doing that-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State should conclude.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----and that is something that will come on board through Gas Networks Ireland. I am pleased we are making significant progress in that area.

I am sorry I did not get to answer my good friend, Deputy Heneghan, but he and I will have a conversation again about the whole offshore piece in another forum I am sure.

Question put and agreed to.

Gas Safety (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 6.14 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 7 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 6.14 p.m. and resumed at 7 p.m.

Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá an chéad dá leasú as ord. Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Amendments Nos. 3 and 15 are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 13, between lines 23 and 24, to insert the following:

"(4) The Minister shall cause a copy of any order made under subsection (1) to be laid before each House of the Oireachtas as soon as may be after it is made, and the order shall lapse 6 months after the date it is made unless earlier revoked or expressly continued by a resolution of both Houses."

Mar gheall ar leasú a 3, this proposes to amend the Environmental Protection Agency Act in order to guarantee Oireachtas oversight. It will require that any order made for a licence in emergency circumstances be laid before both the Dáil and Seanad and will include a clause for review every six months. The intention behind is to facilitate scrutiny by public representatives and to intervene if circumstances have changed from when the emergency licence was initially granted, that is, if it is no longer necessary.

Amendment No. 15 will amend the Waste Management Act in the same way.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na leasaithe.

We had good discussion on these on Committee Stage. The proposals mirror each other regarding the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, Act 1992 and the Waste Management Act 1996. They both concern the laying of orders made by the Minister under both Houses, setting timelines of six months on such orders, as the Deputy outlined. Section 7 of the Act of 1992 and the new section 44C of the Waste Management Act of 1996 already provide for the laying of such orders before each House of the Oireachtas.

With regard to the proposal to place a time limit of six months on the orders, we genuinely do not believe that would be appropriate. The new section 88C transposes Article 1(3) of the environmental impact assessment, EIA, directive into the 1992 Act and reflects a similar-type provision under section 228 of the Planning and Development Act 2024.

Where the activity is for the sole purpose of the defence of the State - we had a good debate on this at committee - or, indeed, responding to a civil emergency, it is considered that the appropriate place for a time limit of such an order, if required, would be within the order itself to which the emergency relates rather than in the specific Act.

A section 44C order made under the Waste Management Act 1996 simply removes the proposed determination stage of the licensing process and could only be applied in limited circumstances. I assure the Deputy that where an accident or emergency is associated with the licence application, a time limit on that type of order is not required. Therefore, as I set out at the committee, and I say this respectfully, I do not propose to accept either amendment.

Deputy Pa Daly: Will orders, if any orders are proposed, include it?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Yes. The proposal is to put any timeline on that as opposed to in the Act itself. This should be a very rarely used provision.

Deputy Pa Daly: On that basis, I will not press the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá leasaithe Uimh. 4 and 11 gaolta agus beidh siad á phlé le chéile.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 14, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

"(d) publish a notice of the request for an exemption, accompanied by the information provided under subsection (1), on a website maintained by it or on its behalf and in a national newspaper, inviting submissions from the public within a period of not less than 30 days;

(e) consider all submissions or observations received under paragraph (d) and publish a reasoned report addressing the material issues raised."

Mar gheall ar leasaithe a 4 agus a 11, they provide, on page 14, between lines 18 and 19, that a notice would be published about the exemption. Amendment No. 4 will amend the EPA Act and the Waste Management Act to increase transparency so that the public can access the information regarding the granting of exemptions from an environmental impact assessment.

The purpose and the thinking behind it is to facilitate public consultation and mandate the publication of a report to address the issues raised as part of the consultation so that all submissions or observations, which were received under paragraph (d), would be considered and a reasoned report addressing the material issues would be raised.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Labhróidh mé ar leasaithe a 4 agus a 11. I will address both amendments together.

These proposals mirror each other with regard to the EPA Act 1992 and the Waste Management Act 1996. They would go beyond the obligations set out under Article 2(4) of the EIA directive and may not meet the objectives or purpose for which the emergency provision is required.

I assure the Deputy that new sections 88D and 44B were drafted following detailed and considered deliberation with the Office of the Attorney General to ensure that they are absolutely fully compliant with the requirements of the EIA directive and they reflect a similar-type of provision under section 227 of the Planning and Development Act 2024. All applications for a licence or review of a licence or, indeed, a revised licence are currently placed on the website of the EPA for the public to make submissions within a period of 30 days to the agency. This process will continue and the provisions of the new sections 88D and 44B will not change that. I am more than content that the intent of the Deputy's amendment is dealt within the Bill itself and, indeed, referencing back, to ensure that it is reflective of the provisions in the Planning and Development Act 2024.

As I set out in a bit more detail at committee, on that basis, while fully understanding the intent, I do not propose to accept those amendments.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá leasaithe Uimh. 5 and 12 gaolta agus beidh siad á phlé le chéile.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 14, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

“(4A) In this section, ‘exceptional circumstances’ means circumstances that—

- (a) arise from a unique and unforeseeable event, or a specific and demonstrable public necessity,
- (b) cannot reasonably be addressed by compliance with the requirements of the EIA Directive within the timeframe necessary to avert serious risk to human health, safety, the environment or essential public services, and
- (c) are strictly limited in scope, duration and geographic extent.

(4B) The Agency shall not grant an exemption unless, having regard to subsection (4A), it is satisfied on the basis of clear and convincing evidence that—

- (a) the exemption is proportionate to the risk or necessity identified, and
- (b) no reasonable alternative exists that would allow compliance with the EIA Directive.

(4C) An exemption granted under this section shall specify:

- (a) the reasons and evidence relied upon;

- (b) the alternative assessment method and minimum content requirements;
- (c) a maximum duration;
- (d) any conditions, monitoring and reporting obligations necessary to avoid, prevent, reduce or offset significant adverse effects.

(4D) An exemption which has expired under paragraph (c) of subsection (4C) may may be renewed."

Níl mé ag brú na leasaithe sin. I am withdrawing those two.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Leasaithe Uimh. 6 and 13 gaolta le chéile agus beidh siad á phlé le chéile.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 14, to delete lines 31 to 34 and substitute the following:

"(b) publish, prior to deciding the application to which the exemption relates, a notice of the exemption, any requirements referred to in paragraph (a), a summary of public and authority submissions, and the Agency's reasoned conclusions on the main issues raised—

(i) on a website maintained by it or on its behalf, and

(ii) in a national newspaper,".

Mar gheall ar leasaithe a 6, it is to delete lines 31 to 34 and substitute that it would publish, prior to deciding the application to which the exemption relates, a notice of the exemption, any requirements referred to in the paragraph, a summary of public and authority submissions, and the agency's reasoned conclusions on the main issues raised, on a website or in a national newspaper. This is to increase public participation and transparency, to amend the EPA Act and the Waste Management Act to ensure that views of the public are taken into account, and to help with public buy-in and reduce the likelihood of objections.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Tá an freagra chéanna agam arís faoin na leasaithe sin, leasaithe a 6 agus a 13. Ní aontaíom leis na leasaithe sin agus nílim ábalta aontú leo mar gheall ar an freagra chéanna ar leasaithe a 4 agus a 11. They are already linked. These amendments are linked to the previous ones that we discussed, amendments Nos. 4 and 11. I refer to those new sections 88D and 44B of the Bill. It is the same answer that I gave previously. The proposed amendments would go beyond the obligations that are already set out under the EIA directive and might not meet the objectives or the purpose to which the emergency provision is required. I am more than satisfied - táim lán-sásta faoi sin - that the provisions already within the Act, and in section 88D of section 15 of this Bill and section 44B of section 26, are appropriate as they stand. Therefore, I am not in a position to accept the amendments.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Bogfaidh muid ar aghaidh anois go dtí leasú Uimh. 7. Tá leasuithe Uimh. 7 agus 14 gaolta le chéile. Tagann siad as plé sa choiste agus pléifear iad le chéile.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 15, between lines 4 and 5, to insert the following:

“(d) ensure that information published under this section is accessible, written in plain language, and includes non-technical summaries of likely significant effects and mitigation measures.”.

Mar gheall ar leasú Uimh. 7 agus 14, ar leathanach 15, idir líne 4 agus 5, molaim go gcuirfí isteach “to ensure that information published under this section is accessible, written in plain language, and includes non-technical summaries of likely significant effects and mitigation measures.”. This is designed to amend the EPA Act and the Waste Management Act, both of which deal with the fact that many decisions are communicated in a way that is extremely technical due to the complexity of the issues being addressed. By being so technical in nature, these decisions are inaccessible to many members of the general public. Our amendments mandate that the information that will be published in line with the provisions of this section will be accessible, written in plain language and include non-technical summaries of likely significant effects and mitigation measures. By increasing transparency, public participation and oversight, we will increase public buy-in and reduce the likelihood of objections.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Labhróidh mé ar leasuithe Uimh. 7 agus 14. Mar a dúirt mé cheana, níl mé in ann glacadh leis na leasuithe seo. Is é an freagra céanna atá agam arís. I reiterate that I more than happy that the new sections 88D and 44B, as drafted, are fully compliant with the directive and san Acht forbartha freisin in 2024. Therefore, as set out on Committee Stage, bhí plé fada againn faoi na leasuithe sin sa choiste. We debated this matter at some length at the select committee. I am satisfied that the provisions contained in these new sections are appropriate. I cannot accept the amendments.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Bogfaidh muid ar aghaidh go dtí leasú Uimh. 8. Tá leasuithe Uimh. 8 agus 16 gaolta le chéile agus pléifear iad le chéile. Tagann siad as plé a bhí againn sa choiste.

Deputy Pa Daly: Mar gheall ar na leasuithe sin, tá muid á dtarraingt. I will not be moving those amendments.

Amendment No. 8 not moved.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá leasú Uimh. 9 geallta le leasú Uimh. 17. Pléifear iad le chéile. Tagann siad as plé a bhí sa choiste.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 19, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

“(4) The Minister may by regulations prescribe periods under subsection (2), having consulted the Agency, and may prescribe different periods for different classes of activity.

(5) The Agency shall include in its annual report under section 51(3) the number of cases in which the period under this section was exceeded, the reasons, and corrective actions taken.”.”.

Mar gheall ar na leasuithe sin, ar leathanach 19, idir líne 15 agus 16, molaim go gcuirfi isteach “The Minister may by regulations prescribe periods under subsection (2), having consulted the Agency, and may prescribe different periods for different classes of activity.” and that “The Agency shall include in its annual report under section 51(3)”. These amendments are designed to amend the EPA Act and Waste Management Act by mandating that the EPA should include details of missed deadlines in its annual report.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na leasuithe seo. Labhróidh mé faoi leasuithe Uimh. 9 agus 17 le chéile.

These amendments again relate to the EPA Act 1992 and the Waste Management Act 1996. They propose that ministerial regulations be prescribed in the context of timeframes for decision-making and the reporting obligations of the agency. Regarding the proposed new subsection(4), provision to prescribe such regulations is already provided for in the new section 90B(2)(c) of the EPA Act and the new section 46B(2)(c) of the Waste Management Act.

On the proposed new subsection(5), in its annual report, the agency already reports on the number of applications, decisions and proposed determinations made in a given year. The amendment to section 51 would oblige the agency to provide details of the number of proposed determinations made within the prescribed period. Therefore, there should be no need to detail the number of determinations made outside that period because that will be evident. This does not preclude a request by the Minister to the agency to provide such information. That would have been very useful. Perhaps if we had got the amendment a little sooner - that is not a criticism - we could have taken action because this is something that needs to be monitored. As stated, however, the Minister is not precluded from making a request to the agency to provide the necessary information. There is also no preclusion on it being provided by means of replies to parliamentary questions.

On this basis, I am genuinely satisfied that the provisions in this regard are appropriate. Therefore, as set out on Committee Stage, I do not propose to accept these amendments.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Amendment No. 10 has been ruled out of order because it is in conflict with the principle of the Bill.

Amendment No. 10 not moved.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 11:

In page 23, between lines 19 and 20, to insert the following:

“(d) publish a notice of the request for an exemption, accompanied by the information provided under subsection (1), on a website maintained by it or on its behalf and in a national newspaper, inviting submissions from the public within a period of not less than 30 days, and

(e) consider all submissions or observations received under paragraph (d) and publish a reasoned report addressing the material issues raised.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 12:

In page 23, between lines 31 and 32, to insert the following:

“(4A) In this section, ‘exceptional circumstances’ means circumstances that—

(a) arise from a unique and unforeseeable event, or a specific and demonstrable public necessity,

(b) cannot reasonably be addressed by compliance with the requirements of the EIA Directive within the timeframe necessary to avert serious risk to human health, safety, the environment or essential public services, and

(c) are strictly limited in scope, duration and geographic extent.

(4B) The Agency shall not grant an exemption unless, having regard to subsection (4A), it is satisfied on the basis of clear and convincing evidence that—

(a) the exemption is proportionate to the risk or necessity identified,

(b) no reasonable alternative exists that would allow compliance with the EIA Directive.

(4C) An exemption granted under this section shall specify:

(a) the reasons and evidence relied upon;

(b) the alternative assessment method and minimum content requirements;

(c) a maximum duration;

(d) any conditions, monitoring and reporting obligations necessary to avoid, prevent, reduce or offset significant adverse effects.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 13:

In page 24, to delete lines 4 to 7 and substitute the following:

“(b) publish, prior to deciding the application to which the exemption relates, a notice of the exemption, any requirements referred to in paragraph (a), a summary

of public and authority submissions, and the Agency’s reasoned conclusions on the main issues raised—

- (i) on a website maintained by it or on its behalf, and
- (ii) in a national newspaper,”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 14:

In page 24, between lines 16 and 17, to insert the following:

“(d) ensure that information published under this section is accessible, written in plain language, and includes non-technical summaries of likely significant effects and mitigation measures.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Amendment Nos. 15 to 17, inclusive, not moved.

Bill received for final consideration and passed.

Mercosur Trade Agreement: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Martin Kenny on Tuesday, 13 January 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

condemns:

— in the strongest possible terms, the catastrophic failure of the Irish Government to prevent the advancement of the European Union (EU)-Mercosur Trade Agreement, despite many years of warnings, repeated opportunities to build a blocking minority, and repeated appeals from Irish farming organisations, environmental experts and Sinn Féin; and

— the role of the Taoiseach, who not only failed to challenge the Mercosur process, but who previously led the charge in misleading the public on the Lisbon Treaty, dismissing concerns at the time about weakened democratic processes, control over EU trade policy, reduced veto powers and diminishing national leverage;

recognises that:

— the Government's job was to stop the Mercosur Trade Agreement, and that they have failed utterly in this task;

— the Irish Government failed to stand firm, refused to engage seriously with like-minded EU member states, and refused to use Ireland's leverage when it actually mattered;

— at the eleventh hour they have cynically announced, in an act of political cowardice, they will vote against the Mercosur Trade Agreement, only after the deal is effectively locked in at EU level;

— this failure reflects a broader pattern of passivity, complacency and unwillingness to challenge the European Commission on behalf of Irish farmers, Irish environmental obligations, and Ireland's strategic interests; and

— the Irish Government was wrong to dismiss public concerns about the Lisbon Treaty, and that warnings at the time about weakened democratic controls over EU trade policy and reduced national veto power have proven correct in the context of Mercosur;

notes with concern:

— the catastrophic impact that importing 99,000 tonnes of beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry into the EU would have on Irish and EU farmers, depressing prices and destabilising rural livelihoods;

— that the Mercosur Trade Agreement runs entirely counter to EU and Irish climate legislation and would incentivise further deforestation, biodiversity loss and environmental destruction in Mercosur countries, particularly Brazil; and

— that agricultural products imported under this agreement are frequently produced using toxic chemicals banned in the EU for decades, and the 2024 EU audit confirmed Brazil cannot reliably trace or guarantee hormone-free beef, yet the Mercosur Trade Agreement would allow exporters to self-certify compliance with EU standards;

further recognises:

— the grave and immediate threat posed to Irish agriculture, the environment, food safety standards and fundamental human rights by the proposed Mercosur Trade Agreement;

— the enormous benefit that Irish agriculture provides to the Irish economy and its essential role in sustaining rural communities, family farms and local industries across the State;

— that Irish farmers are custodians of the land, actively promoting biodiversity, protecting soil and water quality, and working to improve environmental sustainability;

— that Irish agricultural produce is respected worldwide for its high quality, traceability and the rigorous standards to which it is produced;

— the exceptionally high environmental, labour, animal welfare and food safety requirements placed on Irish and EU producers, that imported agri-food products must also meet if there is to be any fairness in international trade;

— the need for sustainable, equitable and enforceable international trade agreements that support, rather than undermine, Irish and EU agricultural sectors and rural economies;

— that tariff reductions can benefit consumers only when they are implemented in a fair, transparent and sustainable manner, and not when they create a race to the bottom on standards;

- the absolute necessity that all imported products meet the same environmental, traceability and animal welfare standards as those required of producers in Ireland and across the EU; and

- the various agreements, declarations and frameworks to which the Irish State is a signatory, including the Rome Declaration on World Food Security, the Paris Agreement, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework; and

calls on the Government to:

- immediately publish a full and detailed account of all legal, political and diplomatic actions it has taken, or intends to take, to oppose the ratification of the Mercosur Trade Agreement, and to outline definitive steps to ensure that Mercosur beef cannot enter the Irish food chain under any circumstances;

- actively and publicly support the legal action taken by members of the European Parliament against the ratification of the Mercosur Trade Agreement;

- mandate all their party Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to vote against the Mercosur Trade Agreement, and launch an urgent diplomatic initiative to build a blocking minority among like-minded EU member states; and

- engage immediately and directly with other MEPs across the political spectrum to urge them to reject the agreement, and to work with civil society, farming organisations and environmental groups to build a broad coalition of opposition at EU level.

The following amendment to the motion was moved by the Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Neale Richmond:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes the vote of the European Union (EU) member states on 9th January, which accepted by a qualified majority the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement; and

recognises that:

- every effort was undertaken by the Government to work with like-minded EU member states who shared concerns with the Mercosur agreement to stand up for Irish farmers and defend our interests in opposing the Mercosur Trade Agreement; and

- Government Ministers, including the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and the Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence have worked extensively with fellow EU ministers to make changes to the Mercosur Trade Agreement, but the improvements made unfortunately were not acceptable to the Government;

further recognises that:

- following the initial Mercosur Trade Agreement, which was agreed in 2019, the then Government and other EU governments expressed strong objections to the agreement, and required the EU and Mercosur to return to the negotiation table;

- in 2024, the EU and Mercosur agreed an additional legal instrument on trade and sustainability commitments;

- in October 2025, the European Commission (EC) responded to the demands of Ireland and other concerned member states by presenting a number of flanking measures to address the concerns of the agriculture sector;

- these additional measures included:

- a 'safeguards' measure to protect against a surge in import volumes, or price falls in the EU;

- a financial safety net for farmers;

- strengthened sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) controls along with a 50 per cent increase in audits and checks; and

- commitments on the alignment of production and SPS standards, notably on pesticides and animal welfare;

- the EC has also proposed additional flexibility in the EU budget and to enhance the availability of Common Agricultural Policy funding for farmers and rural communities; and

notes that while the additional commitments are welcome, on balance, the Government considered they are not sufficient to satisfy the concerns of Irish farmers and citizens; and

welcomes, in line with the firm commitment in the Programme for Government that the Government voted against the adoption of the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "qualified majority the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement; and" and substitute the following:

"calls on the Government to:

- undertake a diplomatic campaign to lobby and campaign a majority of Members of the European Parliament in Europe to oppose the Mercosur Trade Agreement;

- take a case to the Court of Justice of the European Union to test whether or not the Mercosur Trade Agreement conflicts with existing EU Treaties; and

- ensure that the Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade seek in-person meetings with the leaders of all political groupings within the European Parliament in advance of any vote taking place on the matter in the EU Parliament, and to ask them to reject the Mercosur Trade Agreement; and

calls on:

- the EU Commission not to implement the Mercosur Trade Agreement before the European Parliament has a chance to vote on the matter; and

— to oppose any importation of beef or poultry products produced at lower regulatory standards than exist in Ireland."

(Deputy Paul Lawless)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to a motion on the Mercosur trade agreement, taken on Tuesday, 13 January 2026. On the question, "That the amendment to the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment to amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 85; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butterly, Paula.	
Crowe, Seán.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	
Daly, Pa.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Calleary, Dara.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gannon, Gary.	Clendennen, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Connolly, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Graves, Ann.	Cummins, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Currie, Emer.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Daly, Martin.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hearne, Rory.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawless, Paul.	Fleming, Sean.	

Lawlor, George.	Foley, Norma.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Nash, Ged.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heydon, Martin.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Keogh, Keira.	
Nolan, Carol.	Lawless, James.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Martin, Micheál.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGuinness, John.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Neville, Joe.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Ward, Charles.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	

	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Peadar Tóibín and Paul Lawless; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment to amendment declared lost.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	

Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lawless, James.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Ward, Barry.		
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Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	

Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mitchell, Denise.	
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Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lawless, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Neville, Joe.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
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Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Uisce Éireann Infrastructure Delivery, Accountability and Repair Timelines: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Michael Collins on Wednesday, 14 January 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

acknowledges that:

- a significant proportion of the State's public drinking water and wastewater infrastructure remains leaking, overloaded, obsolete or non-compliant, resulting in boil water notices, service interruptions, supply restrictions and untreated or partially treated wastewater discharges;
- persistent delays in the delivery, repair and replacement of water and wastewater infrastructure have created direct blockages to housing delivery, public health protection, economic activity and environmental compliance;
- Uisce Éireann has repeatedly failed to meet expected performance standards in leakage reduction, network renewal, upgrade delivery and system resilience, while many communities continue to endure chronic outages, repeated pipe failures and wastewater incidents;
- existing statutory and regulatory frameworks do not impose clear and enforceable repair or replacement timelines on Uisce Éireann following the detection of leaks, bursts or wastewater failures;
- communities affected by repeated infrastructure failures currently have no guaranteed consultation process, no published delivery schedule and no certainty as to whether or when permanent solutions will be delivered; and
- the centralisation of water services has weakened local accountability, reduced responsiveness to community-level failures and contributed to slow and opaque decision-making on urgent infrastructure needs;

notes that:

- prolonged discharges of raw or partially treated wastewater into rivers, coastal waters and sensitive catchments represent an ongoing risk to public health and environmental quality and undermine confidence in national infrastructure governance;
- large volumes of treated drinking water continue to be lost through chronic leakage, placing avoidable pressure on treatment capacity and increasing operational costs;
- repeated short-term repairs without full pipe replacement have resulted in cycles of failure in many towns, villages and urban neighbourhoods, leaving residents without confidence in the reliability of public water supply;

- the absence of statutory repair deadlines has allowed wastewater leaks and discharges to persist for extended periods without guaranteed interim mitigation or permanent remediation;
- delays in water and wastewater capacity upgrades have directly impeded housing delivery, public services, tourism and enterprise development, despite lands being zoned and planning permission granted; and
- the current model provides no structured mechanism for early engagement with communities experiencing persistent failures, unlike the pre-planning consultation processes required for private development; and

calls on the Government to:

- legislate for mandatory statutory timelines, requiring Uisce Éireann to commence mitigation works for wastewater leaks or discharges within one month of detection and to complete permanent repairs or provide an approved interim solution within a defined and enforceable period thereafter;
- require Uisce Éireann to establish binding replacement timelines for water mains in communities experiencing repeated bursts or chronic leakage, including full pipe renewal rather than recurring temporary repairs;
- place a statutory obligation on Uisce Éireann to publish repair and replacement schedules for affected communities, including clear dates, scope of works and interim measures;
- require Uisce Éireann to introduce a formal community engagement process, comparable to pre-planning consultation, in areas experiencing persistent water or wastewater failures, ensuring residents and local authorities are informed in advance of proposed works, timelines and expected outcomes;
- require Uisce Éireann to operate a properly functioning communication line and escalation channel for public representatives, to allow timely resolution of issues, clear status updates and improved accountability;
- establish binding delivery schedules for wastewater treatment plants, network upgrades and strategic leakage-reduction programmes, with annual reporting to the Houses of the Oireachtas on progress, delays and compliance;
- reform regulatory oversight so that verified wastewater discharges and serious non-compliance events are reported publicly in a timely and transparent manner, with escalation mechanisms where failures persist;
- require Uisce Éireann to publish a national infrastructure capacity and delivery map identifying constraints, upgrade priorities and timelines to support housing activation and public infrastructure planning;
- allow a regulated alternative delivery route for essential water and wastewater projects where Uisce Éireann cannot provide capacity within a reasonable timeframe, using approved public/private or developer-led models, subject to domestic regulatory approval and public ownership or control of strategic water assets; and

— establish a performance-linked funding framework for Uisce Éireann and relevant agencies, tying elements of capital allocation to timely delivery, leakage reduction, repair compliance, infrastructure resilience and environmental performance.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Government's vision for water services is set out in the Water Services Policy Statement 2024 to 2030 (February 2024), which sets out three main objectives; availability and reliability, safety and quality and sustainability, along with a series of related priorities for water services delivery in the period to 2030, and beyond;

— the Government's Water Sector Transformation Policy Paper (February 2021) further sets the vision for water services based on the full integration of water services provided by 31 local authorities into one national authority;

— the objective is to deliver a world-class public water services authority that meets customer needs, operates in line with best practice, represents value for money, and facilitates economic development in urban and rural locations;

— Uisce Éireann is the national utility for drinking water and wastewater services;

— Uisce Éireann manage and operate some 700 water treatment plants, 1,000 wastewater treatment plants and over 4,000 water and wastewater pumping stations;

— Uisce Éireann oversees over 65,000 kilometres (km) of water pipes and over 26,000 km of public sewers all processing roughly 3 billion litres of water and wastewater every day;

— all of these assets and all of this activity is dedicated to delivering vital services to almost two million homes and business premises;

— Uisce Éireann supplies drinking water to over 80 per cent of the population, 10 per cent of households get their drinking water from private wells while the remaining 6 per cent of households have their drinking water supplied by group schemes;

— in relation to wastewater, two thirds of households are connected to public wastewater services provided by Uisce Éireann, with virtually all of the remaining one third of households disposing of wastewater using septic tanks;

— Uisce Éireann's Board has responsibility for ensuring that the company delivers on its mandate and properly accounts for the financial resources made available to it;

— Uisce Éireann is subject to economic regulation by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, that provides a constraint over the funding while monitoring performance and providing a complaints resolution service to customers; and

— Uisce Éireann is subject to a dual audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and commercial auditors along with being accountable to the Oireachtas Public Accounts Committee;

further notes that:

- Uisce Éireann consistently meets high standards in the supply of drinking water, with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) noting in its most recent report in 2024, that 99.8 per cent of drinking water supplies meet all relevant standards, confirming that water provided by Uisce Éireann is safe to drink and that the EPA is providing robust regulatory oversight of Uisce Éireann when issues do arise;
- Uisce Éireann has completed new wastewater infrastructure for 135 towns and villages, including the elimination of raw sewage discharges from 15 towns and villages;
- urban wastewater is fourth in terms of sectoral pressure on water bodies behind agriculture, hydromorphology and forestry;
- in the past 11 years, Uisce Éireann has ramped up capital delivery for water services and infrastructure from €300 million in 2014 to roughly €1.3 billion in 2025;
- finding and fixing leaks is difficult and resource intensive work, but investment by Uisce Éireann of €2 billion over the last ten years has meant that Uisce Éireann has made significant progress and reduced leakage nationally from 48 per cent to 36 per cent; and
- Uisce Éireann has advanced major projects in water supply and wastewater treatment notably the Water Supply Project – Eastern and Midlands Region and the Greater Dublin Drainage Project that will be transformational and two of the biggest infrastructure projects in the history of the State; and

highlights that:

- the Government is delivering a sustainable funding path to further enhance the ongoing significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services;
- under the revised National Development Plan (NDP), the Government has scaled up support for the water sector with a record allocation of €12.2 billion in funding out to 2030;
- Uisce Éireann will be allocated 95 per cent or €11.7 billion of the NDP funding over the next five years to support the delivery of a wide range of projects in our cities and regions required for housing delivery, safeguarding public health and the environment;
- crucially, the delivery of the additional water services under the NDP will enable the capacity required for our new housing targets;
- Uisce Éireann will implement a large national growth programme along with an enhanced Small Towns and Villages Growth Programme, to support our housing delivery for our urban and rural communities; and
- only a national authority, backed by strong Government investment in water infrastructure, will deliver the standard of water and wastewater networks and environmental management systems required by Irish citizens and consumers in the 21st century."

(Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding Uisce Éireann infrastructure delivery, accountability and repair timelines. On Wednesday, 14 January 2026, on the question "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	

Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nash, Ged.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lawless, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Neville, Joe.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Ken O'Flynn.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to.

The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	
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Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	

Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
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Keogh, Keira.	Nash, Ged.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lawless, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
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Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
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Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
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Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
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Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Ken O'Flynn.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.05 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 15 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.05 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 15 January 2026.