



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 20 Eanáir 2026

Tuesday, 20 January 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to tell the Taoiseach about the final hours of Stephen Lavelle's life, a man from Erris in north Mayo. On the night of Saturday, 10 January, he became gravely ill shortly after arriving at the pub in Binghamstown. An ambulance was called at 10.25 p.m. but despite several follow-up calls, no ambulance arrived. A doctor was called and by the time they arrived, Stephen's family were growing more and more distressed. The doctor told Stephen's son Anthony, "This is a category one emergency. You need to get him to hospital right now", but there was still no sign of the ambulance. In desperation, the family carried Stephen to a car to drive the 56-mile journey to Mayo University Hospital. His wife Martina, his son Anthony and his daughter-in-law Rebecca all accompanied him. As they drove, Stephen's condition deteriorated. He was screaming in pain. They kept getting disconnected from the ambulance service because of the bad mobile phone coverage. Stephen's head began to droop. His eyes were wide in his head. Rebecca started CPR in the car. They finally did meet the ambulance but that was when they were only three minutes away from the hospital. When they arrived, nobody was waiting for them at the hospital. Anthony ran in and got help. It was now well after midnight. Stephen's pulse came back after eight minutes of CPR. He was ventilated and brought to the ICU. Sadly, Stephen passed away the following morning. He was 68 years old. My heart goes out to Stephen's heartbroken wife and family.

There are no words to adequately describe the horror faced by Stephen and his family. It highlights in a most harrowing way the severe crisis in our ambulance service. There are stories from all across the country of ambulances taking far too long to arrive. It is especially dangerous in rural areas where hospitals can be an hour or more away. We have outstanding paramedics but we do not have nearly enough of them. Four years ago, the Government was told that the service required an additional 2,000 staff by 2026 but not even a quarter of that number has been recruited. The service is badly understaffed and paramedics operate under incredible pressure. Because of a chronic lack of beds in our hospitals, ambulances often arrive at emergency departments to find that there is literally nowhere for the patient to go, so the

paramedics cannot hand over care. The ambulance effectively becomes a bed outside the hospital and sometimes they are stuck there for hours, parked up rather than on the road responding to emergencies. The ambulance service is stretched to breaking point and the Government has known all of this literally for years, yet the recruitment of paramedics has not even scratched the surface of what is needed.

The Government has stood by and allowed all of this to happen, and it is people at their most desperate and vulnerable moments who pay the price. Tá ár seirbhísí otharlainne i ndeireadh na feide agus ag cur saolta i mbaoil. Caithfidh an Rialtas scála na géarchéime seo a aithint agus gníomhú go práinneach.

Does the Taoiseach accept the scale of this crisis? Does he accept that ambulance delays put lives at risk? What will the Government do to make sure that no one ever has to go through what Stephen Lavelle and his family went through on that awful night?

The Taoiseach: Déanaim comhbhrón le clann Stephen Lavelle as ucht an méid a tharla. Is olc an scéal é gan dabht. Mar a dúirt an Teachta, ní féidir le héinne nó aon fhocail sásamh nó aon rud a chur in iúl don chlann. Is drochscéal ar fad é mar atá á léiriú ag an Teachta inniu. No words can console the family of Stephen Lavelle in terms of what happened and the loss of life in the circumstances the Deputy described. I am not aware of the case specifically, but I take on board what she said about the delay in getting Stephen to the hospital. I do not have the full details of the case or the background to it. It is a devastating loss to the family.

It is important to say, although this is of no consolation to the family, there has been very significant investment in the ambulance service over many years. There has been significant investment in the first responder approach and the whole professionalisation of the paramedical area, the principle being that the more first responders we can get to the scene of an accident or to somebody becoming very acutely ill is the most effective way of preventing loss of life and dealing with patients in very difficult and life-threatening situations. That has happened over a period.

The National Ambulance Service, NAS, devised a national framework for ambulance coverage. There has been criticism of that framework in terms of how it operates. NAS defends the framework, which replaced a locally *in situ*-based ambulance service, as one that is nationally governed and nationally organised into the future. That drew on a lot of expertise at the time. Additional posts have been allocated to the service. This year alone, we are looking at another €8 million for 180 additional posts and the development of NAS specialist services. About 81 of those have been recruited to date, with the remainder at various stages of recruitment. At the moment, investment by Government had seen the total NAS staff rise to 2,430 as of August 2025. That is a rise of 25%, or 502 staff, since 2020, with 85% of the National Ambulance Service staff working in direct patient-facing roles. It deals with about 430,000 urgent and emergency calls - that was as far back as 2024 - which is up 32,000 calls on the previous year. The demand is increasing and continues to rise. The focus is on improving and increasing the performance of NAS, particularly in terms of life-threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest. It is improving but we will not be happy unless it is 100%. That is where we want this to be.

Again, anything I have said is of no consolation to the family concerned. I will refer the case to NAS and to the HSE for further examination of what happened here and what the correct response and specific conditions should or could have been.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I have given the Taoiseach the circumstances surrounding Stephen's death.

My colleague Deputy Conway-Walsh has written to the Minister for Health setting it out. I cannot imagine the fear that must have been felt in that car that night. Imagine, on dark country roads, your father crying out in pain, your husband fighting for his life and knowing still how far away you are from the hospital. That is the cost of the failure of this service. An emergency like Stephen's should be responded to within 19 minutes. That is the rule. That is the standard. That did not happen in his case. As a matter of fact, in more than half of such emergencies the 19-minute threshold is not met. The paramedics themselves are crying out for more resources. The Government has failed to recruit and failed to resource and as a consequence, lives are at risk, and sadly and tragically, in this case Stephen's life was lost. I want to hear what the Taoiseach will do to make sure that this simply does not happen again.

The Taoiseach: There has been recruitment. An 25% increase in staff is a significant increase by any yardstick. The National Ambulance Service is also saying that it is developing alternative care pathways, which are important. It is in the process of reforming and expanding such pathways, which would include clinical capacity in terms of community paramedics deployed nationwide, clinical hubs and so forth. That would mean more appropriate treatment at the right level. That is something that clearly has to be worked on and further reforms need to be looked at with regard to the extent and nature of the coverage because the increase in urgent cases that the ambulance service is dealing with on an annual basis is quite significant. It will increase annually by a significant amount, so therefore resources have to be allocated.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: A man died.

The Taoiseach: Let me make the point. I fully accept that anything I have said is not a consolation to the Lavelle family. However, without question the reform has to be far greater deployment and upskilling of first responders, and the primary and community care-based approach.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last Tuesday, I raised with the Taoiseach the serious threat posed by US President Trump to Europe and to international law with his proposed annexation of Greenland. Over the weekend we have seen the threats from Trump become ever more serious. He has ratcheted up his language. He is essentially looking to blackmail his European allies with yet more tariffs. With these latest Oval Office outbursts, we are seeing dysfunction in D.C. wreaking havoc across the world. This is cause for huge concern. Not content with tanking his own country's economy, Trump's actions seem set on everyone else's too. Following his perceived Nobel Peace Prize snub, he has publicly acknowledged that his sights are set on imperialist action. We know the enormous threat to Europe posed from the east by Putin's barbaric authoritarian regime in Russia, but now we are seeing a threat of annexation of European territory from the west, from our so-called ally in the US. Trump is ripping up the

rulebook when it comes to international diplomacy. After just a year in office, the uncertainty he is causing is doing enormous damage with his territory grabs, his tariffs and now the real likelihood of a Trump slump.

Today I ask the Taoiseach about the potential impact of such a slump on Ireland and what we can do about it. Economic shocks do not just impact spreadsheets nationally. They hit kitchen cupboards, homes and communities across the country. When governments fail to prepare, ordinary people pay the price for failure. We all know how exposed our public finances are due to our disproportionate over-reliance on corporation tax from a small number of large US multinationals. Behind every export figure are workers, families, mortgages, rents and household bills that have to be paid. A great many people and households across the country are already living payslip to payslip in a cost-of-living crisis. The question we are hearing from people is: what happens if the work dries up? The uncomfortable truth is that this vulnerability to a global slump is no accident. It reflects choices made by the Government parties over many years. First is its failure to diversify our economic base, as the unions have pointed out. Second is its failure to use a historic boom to build resilience. Irish society is generally cash rich but asset poor with weak infrastructure, unaffordable housing, overstretched public transport and creaking healthcare.

When the shock hits, these failures become dangerous. That is why the risk of a global Trump slump matters so much here at home. Fear alone is already destabilising investment decisions across Ireland and Europe. We know the EU must respond robustly and strategically to Trump's threats, but we must also work here at home to control the controllables and protect people.

Labour has argued for a State-backed short-time working scheme to protect families and households against this potential shock. Will the Taoiseach consider this now and will he respond to Trump's tantrums with real action and a robust responses?

The Taoiseach: Aontaím leis an Teachta go bhfuil cúrsaí an tsaoil an-dainséarach, deacair faoi láthair agus go bhfuil dúshlán an-mhóra amach romhainn agus roimh mhuintir na hEorpa i gcoitinne. Is maith an rud é go ndearnamar an-chuid ó thaobh cúrsaí eacnamaíochta de agus ó thaobh an gheilleagair. Tá an geilleagar i bhfad níos láidre anois ná mar a bhí.

We are in very uncharted territory and the situation is serious and potentially very grave for the European and Irish economies and, indeed, for the United States economy, if a trade war is break out and if we have a series of tariffs and counter-tariffs. In the latest iteration of this in the aftermath of the so-called Liberation Day last year, Europe prepared different scenarios in terms of tariffs. Those scenarios are still in place and can be deployed, if necessary.

We are very conscious of this and the Deputy was correct that this affects people's jobs and their capacity to look after themselves and their families. That has always been my number one interest because in the conduct of foreign policy, we have national interests and the protection of livelihoods and workers is a key national interest in terms of how we contribute to these issues and how we help to try and resolve these issues. It is good that we are members of the European Union, by the way. At moments like this, the value of being a Single Market and being in a European Union should not be underestimated. Others are not and find it more difficult and more challenging as a result.

The first principle that we adhere to is European Union solidarity in terms of fellow member states. Second, I recall that in the context of the budget, we focused on infrastructure. We said we wanted to deliver more and we allocated money through the national development plan to water, public transport and the electricity grid with potentially up to €18 billion to be invested. We got criticised because we did not do the once-off packages, which could have been €2 billion or €3 billion and which Labour wanted us to do. Now it is criticising us for not being budgetarily or fiscally prepared. It is a bit rich, to be frank. I argue that we are better-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We were against narrowing the tax base.

The Taoiseach: We are probably in a better position, although you could never be in a good position because of this. Tariffs are bad, but fiscally we are probably in a better position than we would have been if we had taken Labour's advice in terms of the expenditure side because we concentrated on looking after those on the lowest incomes and we concentrated on infrastructure to really make sure we can invest in the productive capacity of our economy, which is something we control and we can govern in the time ahead. It is very important that we protect that.

We also put aside the future Ireland fund, which, again, Members of the Opposition criticised.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We supported it.

The Taoiseach: I did not say Labour. I said other Members opposed it. We also created the climate infrastructure and nature fund, which I think are important buffers, as well as having significant cash balances to hopefully help us deal with any potential negativity that could arise from this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I do not appreciate taking lectures on the budget from the party that brought in the tax break for the burger barons and big builders. The Labour Party stood against the narrowing of the tax base. I do agree with the Taoiseach on European solidarity, absolutely. Between them, Putin and Trump have made the unthinkable normal now. They are normalising this hideous threat of annexation and the hideous threat of trade wars that are going to damage us all. As my colleague Deputy Lawlor pointed out, there are huge implications for Ireland, by the way, if Trump is threatening military action in Europe and using Shannon Airport for US planes. That is a huge question for us.

We absolutely need European solidarity. We need to stand together on this and the European Union must use every lever at its disposal. We must see a robust response to Trump to stand up to what is really a creeping fascism. We are seeing in his own country armed militias seizing people and shooting people and we are now also seeing the threat of annexation and the seizure of a leader in Venezuela against international law.

This is appalling to see. I want to make one specific, practical ask. Last year, on so-called "liberation day" the Taoiseach and Tánaiste very helpfully provided briefings to Opposition leaders on the Trump threat.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy, it is not part of the question. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I ask the Taoiseach to do the same now.

The Taoiseach: Yes, we have no difficulty in organising briefings of leaders of the Opposition. We need to be careful and look at things in perspective. The greatest threat on the European continent is Russia. It is not just a threat; it is happening and has been happening for four years. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, soldiers on both sides, all because of the decision by President Putin to illegally invade Ukraine, to bomb its civilian infrastructure to bits and to try to destroy its energy infrastructure. Nothing comparable to that has happened yet. Let us not try to equate the two. Let us not lose sight of the fact that Russia represents the greatest threat to other European Union member states on the Baltic and in Poland. We all talk to them regularly and they articulate that real sense of an existential fear, so we should not lose sight of that. This is why Europe has been endeavouring to work with the United States to get the fairest and most balanced outcome for Ukraine that creates sustainability for Ukraine into the future. That is very important. I will arrange a briefing for the leaders of the Opposition.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Today marks the one-year anniversary of Donald Trump's inauguration, so we have three years left to go. The question for EU leaders is whether can they spend all of that time trying to keep Donald Trump happy, because all the evidence shows that this strategy is not working. For 12 months, leaders in Europe have fawned over Trump. No matter what outrage, insult or international incident he has provoked, the response from Europe has been the same: to avoid direct criticism, and even to heap praise and flattery on him to try to keep him on side. Now we see where it has gotten us. Trump is demanding that the United States acquires Greenland and is refusing to rule out using military force to do so.

It is clear we are through the looking glass when it comes to the Trump Administration. A long-standing trading partner is increasingly an aggressor. Trump says the United States needs Greenland because it is critical to US security, but Greenland is not mentioned once in his national security strategy published less than two months ago. What has changed since that strategy was issued is Trump's invasion of Venezuela and the kidnapping of Maduro. European leaders' lack of criticism of that flagrant breach of international law has clearly emboldened Trump. If he can invade one country and suffer no consequences, why not another?

I listened to the Taoiseach's interview on RTE on Sunday in which he said that the trade deal between the EU and the United States should be ratified. I do not know how that is a credible position when Trump is telling everyone he wants to rip up that deal and go even further by attacking the sovereignty of Greenland and Denmark. How can the EU ratify the deal in these circumstances? I agree with the Government that any escalating trade war would be hugely damaging, and it is clearly something we want to avoid, but we will not do that by bowing to Trump's bully tactics. What is needed now is for the EU to stand firm and, instead of rolling over for Trump, to adopt a strong united response that makes it clear that all options, including the use of retaliatory tariffs and the anti-coercion instrument, are on the table. At the moment, Trump is openly mocking the EU. He does not take it seriously. Last night he said that European leaders would not "push back too much" on his attempts to annex Greenland. He

published a picture depicting Canada and Greenland as United States territory. None of this is normal, and it is time the response from the EU reflected that. Does the Taoiseach agree that the strategy of flattering Trump has backfired? Does he agree that the EU needs to stand strong in a unified response and that all options must be on the table?

The Taoiseach: First of all, the European Union will adopt and is adopting a principled, firm and robust stance in relation to the territorial integrity of Greenland, the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark and adherence to the international rule of law and to the United Nations charter. There are very clear positions from the European Union.

Also, having already prepared various scenarios in respect of potential responses to any additional tariffs, we - Europe - have prepared significant packages, the clearest being the €93 billion of packages. There is no issue there other than that I think it would be better if this were resolved by dialogue. If the US wants to arbitrarily tear up an agreement or undermine an agreement it entered into, that is a matter for the US. Europe, however, should be very clear. We entered into an agreement. We want to honour agreements we have entered into. We are very conscious that a trade war between the US and Europe, being one of the largest trading relationships in the world, would have very damaging consequences for the US, Europe and the world, not just in terms of job losses, which would be significant, or decline in exports but also in terms of a read-across to the financial markets and the potential creation of real damage on that front, which would have a ripple effect on economy, society and jobs.

Language is cheap here. We have to be very clear-eyed about what is at stake, and it is very serious. It is a grave moment for the transatlantic relationship. Europe will be strong and unified, and the principle of European Union solidarity is absolutely key here. We have been working. Canada has been pivoting more to Europe in terms of trade and other areas, as others have. Diversification has been happening in respect of trade, hence my visits and those of other Ministers to Japan, China and other areas to make sure we diversify trade and we are not focused on just one given area. Let us be honest, however, that the US-Ireland economic relationship is critical. It is a very important relationship. There is no point in saying it is not; it is. We have to do everything we possibly can to protect it and the jobs that depend on it without compromising basic principles in terms of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of EU member states. That remains our position.

I do not accept the analysis that has been given in terms of Europe being just all about flattery. It has not been all about flattery. A year ago the situation pertaining to Ukraine was very dangerous. I would argue that European leaders successfully created a scenario where additional supports were maintained for Ukraine over what has been a very difficult year. These are very serious issues for people, not just for ourselves but for other countries like Ukraine as well.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am in complete agreement that any trade war would be hugely damaging. We do not want one; the EU does not want one. It is Trump who is weaponising tariffs, threatening to renege on a trade deal that was agreed only a few months ago and refusing to rule out using force to annex Greenland. These are threats that nobody could have imagined until recently but they are now a grim reality. I recognise how difficult the situation is, but the strategy of EU leaders appeasing Trump has not worked. His belligerence and erratic behaviour are escalating. He has invited Putin, an indicted war criminal, to sit on the Board of Peace,

which was supposed to be set up to oversee Gaza but now seems intended to undermine the UN. Then, last night, Trump posted a picture of Canada depicted as American territory. What are we supposed to take from that? Will Canada be next? Nobody really knows the answer to that question. That is the level of dangerous absurdity we are dealing with from the chaos merchant in the Oval Office. If this aggressive behaviour is not a red line for the EU, what will be?

The Taoiseach: As I said, the leaders of the European Union member states will convene next Thursday to consider the position we are now in. It is uncharted territory; there is no question about that. No one ever contemplated that Greenland would be under threat or that the friction between the US and Canada would be at this level, although when the leaders meet a different sort of vibe emanates from meetings between different leaders, including those of Canada and the US. There are profound shifts happening. From our perspective, the clear principles are solidarity with our fellow EU member states and a principled approach to international relations. Yes, we are committed to peace, but we are also committed to the United Nations, the United Nations Charter and international rules of engagement and to supporting Denmark and our colleagues across the EU in respect of any attempt to levy tariffs indiscriminately.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach and his European colleagues stop soft-peddalling or, worse, bending the knee before Donald Trump, and finally admit what everybody can see and what some of us have been saying for some time, which is that Trump is a bully, an imperialist, and a threat to the world and to humanity? Will they admit that it is time to stand up to this bully and call him out for what he is? His list of crimes, threats and bullying is too long to enumerate but let us give some of the highlights. He armed a genocide. He gave billions to Israel to carry out a genocide over two years, then invited Netanyahu, an indicted war criminal, to a New Year's Eve party in his mansion in Mar-a-Lago. The Taoiseach mentioned Putin and what a threat he is.

Trump has now put Putin, an indicted war criminal, on the board of peace for Gaza, along with Blair, one of the major architects of the Iraq War, which claimed the lives of 1 million people, and, of course, Netanyahu and Israel, the people who perpetrated the genocide, will be on the board of peace as well. He has attacked Venezuela and kidnapped the president and his wife. Whatever the Taoiseach thinks about that regime, and I do not think much of it, he has no right to attack that regime. Trump has defended the execution of a 36-year-old mother and writer, Renee Good, by ICE agents, and has sent paramilitary forces into the cities of America to attack people of colour and immigrants. He has threatened Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, Canada and Iran. He pretended he was interested in Ukraine because of the warmongering of Putin, which clearly is not true but actually exposed that what he wanted was the rare earth minerals from Ukraine.

He is threatening an economic war and trade war that is driving up the cost of living for working class people in America and threatens to do the same to hard-pressed working class people across the world. To add to it all, his pal is Elon Musk, who profits from selling child abuse material and misogynistic material on the Internet. The disgusting list goes on.

He admits that his strategy is imperialist in the national security strategy, which states that the US "will assert political, economic and military power over the Western Hemisphere." He

quotes the Monroe Doctrine, which was used to justify interventions in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Panama, Ecuador, and in Iran and Iraq in the 1950s. The Taoiseach can go through the list. Will the Taoiseach stand up to the bully? He is not seriously going to go to the White House with shamrock this year and celebrate our national day with them. Surely he is going to tell US troops to get out of Shannon Airport and he is not going to go along with the militarisation agenda that Trump is urging on Europe?

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, we are in a very serious situation. Our national interest, quite frankly, is to protect Irish workers. We will behave accordingly to do that and to achieve that, and to make sure that we can get a reasonable international legal framework through the UN to get countries to adhere to the international rule of law. The world is in a very bad place. Thousands and thousands of people are losing their lives all over the world. I have referred to Ukraine, for example. Europe worked with the US. Why? Deputy Boyd Barrett condemns Russia, correctly so, but what has stopped Russia from taking over Ukraine in its entirety? Let us be honest. What has stopped it? The Deputy might not like to admit it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Not Trump.

The Taoiseach: US firepower and US intelligence have, along with others in the European Union and the United Kingdom. That is the reality. If the Deputy wants to abandon all of that, that is fine. I agree with the Deputy in the sense that I do not agree with spheres of influence. I do not agree with the Monroe Doctrine but the Deputy is suggesting that we open up to that. I do not think he means it but those are the implications. Russia takes Ukraine and Moldova. Is that what we want? Iran does what it does.

I mean, when we discuss the Middle East in this House, I never hear criticism of Iran - never.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Check the record.

The Taoiseach: No, no. In terms of the malign influence Iran has had in the Middle East, with Hezbollah, Hamas and - you name it - the Houthis in terms of trade routes and the economy, we never hear it really to any great extent or to any consistent extent. We are now hearing from Iran, potentially, that 4,000 citizens have been murdered, and up to 12,000 could have been murdered, because we do not know with the Internet blackout and so on like that. It is very difficult for citizens in Iran who want to adhere to the principles of freedom of association and freedom of speech. In Sudan, thousands and thousands have lost their lives in horrendous situations, with other external powers also being influential and negatively impactful on the lives of ordinary people in Sudan. We can go elsewhere in terms of violations of international law and so forth.

Our guiding light is and has to be adherence to the international rule of law and to the United Nations, as imperfect as it is. I agree with António Guterres that the Security Council is long outdated, with the post-Second World War scenario there in terms of the powers that are on the Security Council.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

The Taoiseach: This is a broader issue that affects the entire globe and many malign actors are involved.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Deputy Boyd Barrett to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have condemned, I do condemn and I will again condemn the Iranian regime for the violent repression of protesters, for shutting off the Internet and for the censorship of what is going on, as I condemn and have condemned Putin for the illegal invasion of Ukraine. The Taoiseach would not be presenting them with shamrock, would he? He is going to go over and present shamrock to Trump, even now. It has taken a threat to Greenland, because it impinges on the interests of the EU. Is it not the truth that this is the consequence of the Taoiseach and the EU remaining silent, or, even worse, echoing and reinforcing what Trump has done or at least being silent in the face of the genocide in Gaza, the actions in Venezuela, the threats against Canada and all the threats elsewhere and the silence of the world? It has now come back to bite Europe. What is the Taoiseach going to do about it? Surely, he is not going to go over the White House, celebrate our national day and hand him shamrock.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Taoiseach tell the US troops to get out of Shannon when they are threatening the world in the way they are?

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will he not dance to the tune of Trump who is saying we should spend more on militarisation-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The time is up. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----so we do not go down the road of militarisation and warmongering, which he represents?

The Taoiseach: Ireland has not been silent on the Middle East. Ireland has not been silent on Gaza. This is recognised around the world, no matter who it annoyed or may annoy. We have stood firm on a whole range of issues in the context of the Middle East, and we will remain so. In the context of the US, up to 40 million people in America claim Irish descent. We have always had a very strong relationship with the US, irrespective of who the President happens to be or who is in power on the Hill at any given time. That has underpinned a very significant economic relationship that puts bread on the tables of Irish workers. That is the reality. It is easy for me to make grand statements and for the Deputy and everybody else. Grand statements do not put bread on the table. It is easy to do but it does not put bread on the table. We need cool heads.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Trump is the one threatening-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

The Taoiseach: We need to be calm about this. We need to be firm on principle. We need to be showing solidarity with our European Union member states and I have no issue with doing that. I think that is the right thing to do, and that has to be our approach.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Appointment of Chairperson of Standards in Public Office Commission (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Seventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025 (Referral to Committee) (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes, if not previously concluded)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on International Developments (to conclude within 2 hours and 25 minutes)
- Statements on Water (to conclude within 3 hours and 32 minutes)
- Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) (to commence no earlier than 7 p.m. and to conclude within 1 hour)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Flexible Work and Commuter Delays, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes, if not previously concluded)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the River Boyne Task Force Bill 2023, sponsored by Deputy Ged Nash.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the Referral to Select Committee of the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025 shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate;

(b) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.; and

(c) private members' business shall be taken following the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Appointment of Chairperson of Standards in Public Office Commission shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Seventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

4. the proceedings on the Referral to Select Committee of the Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025 pursuant to Standing Order 188, shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

5. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

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

6. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) in the event the Statements on Water conclude before 7 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 7 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025; and

(c) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the weekly division time;

2. the Statements on International Developments shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time;

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

3. the Statements on Water shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

Min	35	25	15	15	5
Min	15	15	5	12	15
Min	5	12	15	5	8

4. the proceedings on the Report and Final Stages of the Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be taken no earlier than 7 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m., with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the River Boyne Task Force Bill 2023, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

Min	20	20	12	12	4
Min	20	12	4	20	12
Min	4	20	12	4	20

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements agreed to? They are not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Thousands of carers have received letters from Revenue saying they owe tax. They are not tax dodgers; they are people who save this State a fortune of money, literally billions of euro each year. We need the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to come into the Dáil this week. We need statements. We need to deal with this issue. We need the Government to present how it is going to resolve this issue. To be clear, again, these carers are not tax dodgers.

They give a huge service to the State. It needs to be sorted out.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Last week was a dark week for road safety in this country. A judge made derogatory comments about cyclists. A Government TD was convicted of speeding, going 190 km/h to a constituency event.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Give it up.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: What does this say about this Government's attitude and our country's attitude to road safety? I am calling urgently for a debate on road safety in this House.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The handling by An Garda Síochána of a domestic violence complaint against Garda Trevor Bolger is hugely concerning. His ex-wife and victim, Margaret Loftus, had to compile her own case file and fight for the case to be taken seriously. Furthermore, it has now been revealed that a Garda investigation was launched into journalists reporting on the case. Having dragged its heels investigating Bolger, no such hesitation was shown in investigating journalists. This is disturbing. The Minister for justice should make a statement in the Dáil on this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: As if the monthly increase in the number of people in emergency accommodation is not bad enough, the Simon Community produced a report stating that there is a major problem now with older people facing the possibility of homelessness. One woman attended my clinic who is 86 years old and is facing homelessness and possibly emergency accommodation because of this crisis. I have asked at the Business Committee that there would be debate on homelessness in the next short while. Will the Chief Whip commit publicly to having that?

Deputy Michael Collins: I am back speaking about the Mercosur deal again. It is of huge importance this week in Strasbourg. We have asked the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to attend the meeting in Strasbourg this week to let them know the importance of the situation we find ourselves in. Independent Ireland has written in Spanish and Italian-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: And in Russian - let us face it.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----to each MEP there to make sure they are on our side of the border.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: And the Russians as well.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need to make sure we are fighting that as well. I am talking to the Taoiseach, not to the Ministers of State.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Can you imagine if another leader came over to tell us what to do?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Chief Whip to respond, please.

Deputy Mary Butler: I note all the various requests from the various Whips. There have been many requests in the past weeks here and before Christmas in relation to statements on water and on international developments. They are all being facilitated tomorrow. We have important legislation this week including the home support providers Bill, the Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill and the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. We have a very busy schedule in place. It was discussed last Thursday and it will stand.

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

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 67; 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.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	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.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Martin.	

Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harris, Simon.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Higgins, Emer.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Quaide, Liam.	
Neville, Joe.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connor, James.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
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.		

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: May I just say that, if Members cannot make their points within their 60 seconds, then they have asked their questions in the wrong forum?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want to return to the issue of carers, thousands of whom have received letters telling them that they may owe tax. This is a mess of the Government's making. Carers are not tax dodgers. They are people who care for others and who save the State a fortune. Some of them may work part-time just to make sure they can make ends meet because carers experience the cost-of-living crisis just like everyone else. Now, out of the blue, they get this letter from Revenue stating they may in fact have a tax liability and a bill. It is not lost on any of us that this happens at the same time that we discovered that ten of the Taoiseach's own Ministers who had been overpaid had failed to make arrangements to pay back the money they owed.

Carers are in shock. Some of them are very distressed and this matter needs to be cleared up now compassionately, giving carers the respect they are entitled to.

The Taoiseach: First of all, nothing has changed. Nothing has changed at all in respect of the tax situation governing carers. I think we need to keep everything in perspective and not create unjustified fears because I have checked this with both the Department of Finance and the Department of Social Protection. No new tax has been introduced, but what has happened on a forward-looking basis is the Department of Social Protection is providing Revenue with details of taxable carers' income in real time. About 90% of all carers are either registered already or are not liable for tax. We will obviously do everything we can because the Government, as Deputy McDonald knows, has dramatically increased the threshold for the means test income disregard. We have increased the carers' allowance by over €50.

3 o'clock

When you compare that to Northern Ireland-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: But they are after getting a letter telling them they have a tax bill. The Taoiseach should sort that out.

The Taoiseach: -----where it is £83, our level of increase is very significant.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy and call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: We will be talking.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Tomorrow morning, Labour will bring forward a motion in the Dáil on flexible and remote work: a practical response to the daily pressures working people face. We are asking the Government to support this motion and enable it to be passed tomorrow. We need to see practical steps taken to support workers' rights. Unfortunately, what we have seen from the Government has been a general approach of words not deeds. We have seen sympathy but no delivery. We have heard sympathetic words in response to our Bill on leave for women who endure miscarriage or early pregnancy loss, on protections for SNAs who are injured in schools, and on rights for gig economy drivers.

The Taoiseach: Is it not a motion?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We have a motion tomorrow and I ask the Government not to oppose it and to enable it to be passed. It seeks a real right to flexible and remote work for workers. It looks for the public sector to lead by example and to ensure that people are not forced back unnecessarily into the office where they can work productively from home.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There are huge public benefits on climate and so much more.

The Taoiseach: We have quite a flexible labour market in this country already. The previous Government introduced a right to request remote working. There is a significant degree of remote working happening within the economy. As Deputy Bacik knows, by definition, it is not applicable to every workplace. The Government is not disposed to support the Labour Party's motion tomorrow evening. That said, we have a healthy labour market in Ireland. Our objective is to try to maintain that for SMEs, major Irish indigenous companies and multinational companies. We want to make sure that we have an environment that continues to facilitate the generation of new jobs. In some areas it is much easier to organise flexible and remote working and in other areas it is less so. One can be overly prescriptive too-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Hearne.

The Taoiseach: -----with unintended consequences.

Deputy Rory Hearne: This week a Simon Communities of Ireland report reveals a national scandal of elderly people being made homeless in Ireland. It is heartbreaking and a stain on this country that the number of elderly people over 65 in homelessness has increased by 165% in Dublin and 500% in the west since 2017. Pensioners in their 70s and 80s are being evicted from their homes by landlords. Vulnerable elderly people who have worked all their lives for this country are being made homeless right now because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will not stand up to the landlords and investor funds. Will the Taoiseach take responsibility for this homelessness catastrophe? Will he apologise to these elderly people that he has failed? Will he stop shamefully blaming immigration for homelessness and focus on the real cause - evictions by landlords and the lack of social housing for the elderly?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Why will the Taoiseach not put in place a ban on evictions into homelessness-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I call on the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----to ensure that no more elderly pensioners are made homeless this year?

The Taoiseach: The most effective way to prevent elderly people becoming homeless is through social housing. Some 52,000 social homes have been added to the social housing stock between 2020 and now. In addition to that, about 14,000 voids were brought back into use - these are houses in the social housing stock that were empty.

In quarter 3 of last year alone, 1,600 new social homes were delivered, including 1,330 new-build homes. We can and will work to prevent elderly homelessness through the increased building of social homes, acquisitions, the tenant in situ scheme, and other mechanisms that would prevent elderly people from becoming homeless.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is not enough. Why does the Government not ban evictions?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Joan is 86 and she is facing homelessness and emergency accommodation because her landlord is selling up. Joe is 78 and sleeping on his sister's couch for over a year. Meanwhile, as I highlighted yesterday, there is an apartment block nearby in Cherrywood with 30 two-bedroom and one-bedroom apartments lying empty for 18 months. They are supposed to be for social housing to house people like Joe and Joan. Since I highlighted that yesterday, I have heard there are two more apartment blocks in south Dublin also sitting empty, which are also designated for social housing. I also note that the *Irish Independent* highlighted at the weekend another apartment block in the Phoenix Park, which is designated for social housing but is sitting empty for months and months.

This is systemic. This is property developers sitting on empty property that was supposed to be used for social housing and the Taoiseach is letting it happen. What is he going to do about it?

The Taoiseach: It is not that we are letting it happen. Come on.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is happening.

The Taoiseach: What is the Deputy saying? It is wrong that it is happening but the developer and the approved housing body have contractual disagreements. Is the Deputy saying the Government should just ignore that and take a side?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Will the Government sit back and do nothing?

The Taoiseach: You do not sit back either but you get the thing resolved in the best interests of the taxpayer-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Eighteen months later.

The Taoiseach: -----and those seeking housing. There are reasons particular cases like this happen. They are disgraceful but they happen. We will work hard to resolve this in the best interests of the taxpayer and those seeking housing.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: My Aontú colleagues, Deputy Paul Lawless and Melissa Byrne, are in Strasbourg today lobbying MEPs to vote to send the Mercosur deal to the European Court of Justice. Our team has spoken to dozens of MEPs. A referral to the ECJ would legally freeze the agreement and allow for proper scrutiny of its environmental, competition and legal implications. While the Taoiseach's Government says that it is opposed to the deal, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil MEPs will nonetheless support the deal and hammer Irish farmers. Barry Andrews and Regina Doherty need to be reined in. Is the Taoiseach going to speak to them? This vote could be tight so why is it that only Opposition parties like Aontú and organisations such as the IFA are doing the heavy lifting on this in advance of tomorrow's vote? Where is the Government in lobbying these MEPs? Will the Government tell Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael MEPs to vote to send this deal to the ECJ? Does the Taoiseach have any control over them at all?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy failed to mention the fact that Billy Kelleher, Barry Cowen and Cynthia Ní Mhurchú will be voting against Mercosur in the Parliament. I am intrigued by his language. I know he is a former member of Sinn Féin. He spoke about reining in these MEPs and controlling them.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You would not get that in Fianna Fáil.

The Taoiseach: We have a somewhat different ethos to the Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have one voice.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is outrageous. My question was not answered at all. The reason the Taoiseach is not answering it-----

The Taoiseach: I have answered it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You did not.

The Taoiseach: I have.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You said you-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is why Deputy Tóibín left Sinn Féin.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have silence. I call on Deputy Ó Cearúil.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I assume I will have my full time. Last Wednesday, the Minister for education visited St. Patrick's Primary School in Celbridge, Kildare North, which the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, also visited last May. The school in question has been in temporary accommodation for 19 years, since its foundation. The floor is collapsing and the ceiling is falling down. I have asked the Minister to ensure temporary accommodation is in put in place as soon as possible. The school cannot keep going on in this way.

On the same theme of education, Stepping Stones Special School in Maynooth is experiencing severe issues with funding. The capitation afforded to the school is not significant enough. It is fundraising to pay for heating and devices for the school and for the children. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the Department and the Minister about these two specific schools, St. Patrick's Primary School in Celbridge and Stepping Stones Special School in Maynooth.

The Taoiseach: I accept that 19 years is far too long to spend in temporary accommodation. I am not aware of the specific background but I will talk to the Minister to see what can be done to improve the situation. In relation to Stepping Stones Special School, there has been a significant uplift in capitation for special schools arising out of the last budget. I presume that will take effect some time this year. I will ask the Department to look at the financial situation in respect of Stepping Stones to see if any once-off help can be delivered while that uplift is awaited. That uplift in capitation is significant and has long been sought by those involved in special education.

Deputy John Clendennen: Birr Men Together is a men's shed established in recent years. It is trying to find a permanent home. We made inquiries to the Department about an old weather station. We were told it is currently under consideration by a State body and is therefore not available for community use. The problem I see here is that this property has been lying idle since 2009. It has been idle and decaying. Now, when a community group takes an interest in it, that group is told that it is under consideration. Such situations are replicated across the country. Is there any way the Taoiseach can intervene to expedite this matter and to make such facilities available where communities can benefit from them to such a degree?

The Taoiseach: Again, these issues are optimally resolved locally. All idle property that is not earmarked should be used. There should be more proactivity among State agencies, the OPW and local authorities in utilising existing buildings.

A good local authority will do that and will proactively seek to get buildings utilised, particularly for an organisation like Men's Sheds, which has been very impactful in terms of

men's health and well-being. I do not know whether the HSE has any temporary premises. The Deputy has identified one and we will pursue it and see what we can do.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Budget 2026 outlined that a new DEIS plan would be published in late 2025. A key action in the plan will be the creation of a DEIS+ scheme, providing additional targeted resources to schools or students most at risk of educational disadvantage. I recently met with a principal of a DEIS school in Drogheda which is providing an incredibly supportive environment for local children to thrive in, despite the ongoing social and economic challenges in the area. For decades, St. Paul's National School has been at the heart of a community that has been forgotten by successive Governments. They have been watching and waiting for the Government to provide information on the long-awaited DEIS+ scheme and it was very disheartening for the school to tell me it is really worried about being forgotten once more. We have been told an extensive stakeholder engagement has taken place. We have had an OECD review. We have been told that implementing DEIS+ is a stated goal of this Government and that €48 million will be allocated next year. When will the DEIS+ scheme details be finalised? When will they be published? When will schools like St. Paul's and others, for which the evidence supports their inclusion, be offered the assurances they are long overdue?

The Taoiseach: Is St. Paul's a DEIS school at the moment?

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It is.

The Taoiseach: It has not been ignored, so.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I said that the community has been ignored.

The Taoiseach: DEIS status affords very significant opportunities to schools in terms of pupil-teacher ratios and additional supports. The Deputy has outlined the position with DEIS+. The budget has approved it and allocation of resources has happened. Obviously, a scheme has to be developed. It is going to be a very targeted programme for those most in need in education. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy. The Deputy has outlined the details in terms of where we are with stakeholder consultation and so on. Hopefully by the next school year, we will have this in place.

Deputy Peter Roche: Last Saturday I and other public representatives attended a public rally in Dunmore town in east Galway. The campaign was orchestrated by Dunmore tidy towns and the Dunmore business people association because of dereliction on both sides of the street, where most properties are privately owned. They are dogged with tiles and slates falling off the roofs onto main street, where children and indeed their parents and teachers gave testimonials. It is a horror story in terms of the length of time it is going on. It is years and years. I am asking that we have some framework to expedite regeneration and to deal with people who are willingly sitting on private properties and allowing them to go into such disrepair.

The Taoiseach: There is a responsibility on the local authority. The derelict sites levy is there. We are changing that as a result of the budget, as the Deputy knows. The Government has decided that the responsibility for dereliction and derelict buildings will transfer to Revenue. Work is under way between the Department of Finance and local authorities to get the proper maps for local authority areas that will fall under the remit of Revenue to determine dereliction and to apply the appropriate levies to get activity going.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to raise the issue of rural transport, in particular the car parking situation at Bagenalstown train station. The train service there is excellent but the car park is consistently full, leaving commuters having to park in the town, clogging up much-needed space for local businesses and shoppers. I also firmly believe that the car parking charges at the train station should be abolished. The Government is doing its best in trying to encourage people to use public transport but these charges are a deterrent as they are an additional cost. Carlow-Kilkenny is now part of the commuter belt. I ask the Taoiseach to discuss the issue with the necessary bodies to make sure funding is made available for additional car parking facilities and to abolish car parking charges for Bagenalstown train station and indeed all rural train stations. We have to be encouraging people to use public transport, incentivising them rather than punishing them and making it unattractive. We have to ensure the public infrastructure is there. People in Carlow-Kilkenny should not be punished with additional costs and lack of facilities just because we live outside the M50.

The Taoiseach: Public transport is the way forward. Rail is particularly important. The more people we can encourage and incentivise towards using rail, the better, particularly in areas like Kilkenny and Carlow which are very close to the Dublin area where people would commute for work and so forth. Sustainability in terms of financial sustainability is potentially an issue. Sometimes charges are made because if they did not have charges, the car park would be filled by others who might not even be using the facility. I will reflect on what the Deputy is saying and will engage with Iarnród Éireann on the points he has made, particularly in terms of Bagenalstown and whether further capacity is needed there and the impact of the charges. It is costly enough to get the train. I take the Deputy's point.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to remember Mickey Brady, who was a real people's MP and a former MLA, a seriously sound gentleman, a proud Newry man. He has recently been lost to all of us. I would like to pass on my condolences to his wife Caroline, and his children Saoirse, Michael, Seán, Niall and Lewis. Mickey was somebody you could always rely upon and engage with. He was really helpful to me. His work and involvement goes back to the civil rights movement and right through to the fear of the imposition of a hard Border. What I remember about Mickey as well is that he was a welfare adviser. If I could just read out a particular-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Ten seconds, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is the issue my leader, Mary Lou McDonald, brought up. It is somebody who has been sent one of these letters, who is absolutely frightened and who talks about the great work she does as a carer. We need to answer those people and to look after them, along with the need for an emergency cost-of-disability payment.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy taking the opportunity to express sympathies on the death of his late colleague, Mickey Brady. I join in the sympathies to his wife Caroline and his family more generally. On the carers situation, I answered the Deputy's party leader earlier in respect of that. Nothing has changed. There is no additional taxation. Rather, the Government has significantly increased the income disregard to record levels for couples and for single people, which is quite dramatic in its impact. We have also increased the value of the carer's allowance by €10 this year but by €50-odd over the past number of years. Other measures are also committed to in the programme for Government. We will continue to work on this over the coming months.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The long waiting times being experienced by people waiting to see someone in the pain management clinic in the Mater hospital in Dublin are very concerning. I am dealing with quite a number of people currently who are waiting for an appointment. They informed me that it will be about ten or 12 months before they are seen at the Mater hospital. This is impacting on their health, well-being and quality of life. What actions will Government take to intervene and tackle the unacceptably long waiting times that people have to wait, particularly when it concerns pain management?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for the question. I would be obliged if she might share the details with me so that I can follow up directly to see what the specific circumstances are in the Mater, and specifically whether it relates to a particular condition or to broad access to the pain management clinic. If I could follow up with the Deputy directly, I will see what is going on.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The potential for Maynooth education campus is being greatly limited by a lack of investment. On site we have three phenomenal schools, Gaelscoil Ruairí, Maynooth Community College and Maynooth Post Primary School. Maynooth is one of the very few towns in Ireland where a student could attend primary, post-primary and third level education entirely as Gaeilge. According to my friend, Councillor Peter Melrose in Maynooth, the Gaelscoil has been in temporary buildings since 2019, despite plans being ready to execute for some time. The Taoiseach has heard from other Members here that capital investment in schools in Kildare really is at desperate levels at this point. Can he outline to us when the Department expects to publish its plans under the NDP for capital investment and can he ensure that Kildare will get its fair share of that investment?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. As he said, other Members have also raised this issue. I did a tour of Maynooth with Deputy Ó Cearúil. It is a classic education town. It is a beautiful town with tremendous potential at all levels of education. Is féidir leat do thuras oideachasúil idir bhunscoil, an dara leibhéal agus an tríú leibhéal a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge. Is áit speisialta é.

We are very committed to expanding investment in schools in Maynooth and across Kildare more generally.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is quite obvious to me that as a country we need to go ahead and deal with the issues relating to AI, Grok and X. The Taoiseach had a high-level meeting last night with various Ministers. I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, on her work to date.

I will ask the Taoiseach two questions that are outside of political rivalry in here or anything like that. Will he help me as Chair of the media committee by asking X representatives to turn up at our meeting next Wednesday? Google, Meta and TikTok representatives are turning up. Will he contact X representatives to ask them to turn up and say that it is imperative that they does so to be answerable to the people of Ireland? Will the Government bring in emergency legislation in relation to the issue of the sharing of AI-generated images of adults, which is obviously a gap in the legislation?

The Taoiseach: I will help in that I will communicate with X and ask that they turn up. There is not that the gap in the legislation. The 2020 Act does cover-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Not for sharing images.

The Taoiseach: It does cover the sharing, dissemination and distribution of intimate adult images.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Is the Taoiseach absolutely certain?

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no back and forth.

The Taoiseach: We can arrange legal advice for the Deputy in that regard.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Perfect.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Oxfam wealth report published yesterday exposed the stark class divide that exists in society between billionaires, the wealthy and everyone else. Ireland's 11 billionaires have the same wealth as 3.5 million Irish adults combined. It takes them just seven hours to rack up the annual income of an average worker. Oxfam shows how a tax on the top 1% of the wealthiest people in the country could yield €1 billion a year. It is a no-brainer. Why not take from the super-rich, who can well afford it, to address the cost-of-living crisis for ordinary families? The Government refused to do it in the past but wealth inequality is still rising. Vital cost-of-living payments were cut in the budget, including the shameful cuts for disabled people. A sum of €1 billion would go a long way towards that. Will the Government stop dancing to the tune of billionaires, put ordinary people first and introduce a wealth tax?

The Taoiseach: We always put the worker first. I question much of the basis of the Oxfam report, as I have in the past, as the Deputy knows. Economists are dubious about some of the basis and premise upon which the research is based and its application to Ireland, in particular. Certainly, there is no €1 billion waiting out there in terms of a wealth tax.

Agri-Food Regulator (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for enhanced powers for the Agri-food Regulator to access data from businesses within the agricultural and food supply chain, including prices, margins, and related financial information, in order to promote transparency and protect consumer interests; and to provide for related matters.

I welcome the opportunity to introduce this Bill. It will provide for enhanced powers for the Agri-Food Regulator to access data from businesses within the agricultural and food supply chain, including prices, margins and related financial information, in order to promote transparency and protect consumer interests.

The reason the Bill is necessary is twofold. The first reason it is necessary is it is so difficult at the moment for families to keep food on their tables. It is so expensive. Month after month, we have seen grocery prices going up and families struggling to feed their children. Barnardos cost-of-living report last year found some stark stats when it did its analysis. A total of 19% of families cut back or went without food in a six-month period; 40% of parents skipped meals or reduced portion size so that their children had enough to eat; 28% of parents reported sometimes not having enough food to feed their children; and 12% of families rely on food banks. We are very wealthy country but that wealth is not being seen in so many households and families. Those people are finding it very difficult just to keep their head above water.

The establishment of the Agri-Food Regulator was a very welcome initiative by the Government. Unfortunately, when it was established, the Agri-Food Regulator was not given sufficient powers to do its job properly. Essentially, it was to look at every point along the food chain, identify what the costs and margins were and bring some transparency as to who was making money along the food chain. One issue we are all aware of is that farmers at the farm gate are not making the money but someone is making a lot of money when it comes to food prices at the moment. Unfortunately, when the Government brought the powers to the regulator, it did not give it sufficient teeth.

In September 2024, the regulator wrote to the Minister asking for additional powers. It wants to be able to compel businesses to provide this information. Currently, it can only ask for or request that information, which has stymied some of its analysis to date. It was to do an analysis on the production and cost of eggs but was unable to do that because businesses were not giving them enough information. The regulator sought to fix that problem and asked the Government to provide those powers to it. Nothing came forward from the Government and in March 2025, the regulator repeated the call that it be given the power of compellability.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister, Deputy Heydon, late last year that those powers were to be given, but I was surprised and shocked when I realised the statutory regulation he signed would only bring those powers in at the end of 2026. Families are going to have to wait another year before there is sufficient transparency in the pricing of our food, and before the Government has sufficient information to do something about these high grocery prices. That delay is unacceptable. We have been waiting. It is nearly a year and a half since the food regulator first asked for that, so it will be two and a half years before it is actually given those

powers. Considering the day-to-day lives, the impact and the pressures on families, that delay is not acceptable.

I want the Government to speed this up. My Bill will do that. It is a very simple Bill. It essentially changes the premise that the regulator can ask for this information to ensuring it can compel this information from the big retailers. It is very simple. It is something that has been on the agenda of the regulator for over a year and a half. This should be easy to do. I ask that the Government supports this Bill and moves forward quickly with this because families around the country need the price of their food to come down. We need transparency across that food supply chain.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Seventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 21st January, 2026, approves the Seventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 16th January, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Public Health (Single-Use Vapes) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee

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

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Health pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Appointment of Chairperson of Standards in Public Office Commission: Motion

The Taoiseach: I move:

That, pursuant to subsection (2A) (inserted by section 2 of the Standards in Public Office Act 2001 (No. 31 of 2001)), of section 21 of the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 (No. 22 of 1995), Dáil Éireann recommends the appointment of Ms. Justice Elizabeth Dunne,

currently a Judge of the Supreme Court, by the President on the advice of the Government to be the Chairperson of the Standards in Public Office Commission.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Urban Development

1. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [64215/25]

2. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [64217/25]

3. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [67575/25]

4. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [67576/25]

5. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [67577/25]

6. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [68413/25]

7. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [70179/25]

8. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [72004/25]

9. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [74324/25]

10. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [1832/26]

11. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [3471/26]

12. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach the position regarding the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [3645/26]

13. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [3649/26]

14. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Taoiseach when the Cork city task force will be established. [3797/26]

15. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [3829/26]

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [3920/26]

17. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [3923/26]

18. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the implementation of the Dublin city task force report. [4022/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 18, inclusive, together.

In May 2024, the Government appointed a task force to take a holistic view of the measures required to rejuvenate Dublin city centre, north and south, to make Dublin city centre a more thriving, attractive, and safe cityscape and a desirable location to live, work, do business and visit. Following the task force report and recommendations, as agreed by the Government, the Department of the Taoiseach convened an interdepartmental group to examine the recommendations made by the Dublin city task force. The group, chaired by my Department, submitted a report to the Government with a ten-year roadmap for delivery setting out a comprehensive implementation path for the task force report. Through this roadmap for delivery, we will see implementation of the task force report across three phases, over ten years, at the heart of Dublin city. Central to this will be a special purpose vehicle to drive delivery and to support the specific capital developments relevant to the project. The council is currently working on the establishment of this new legal entity. A ten-year integrated area strategy for Dublin city centre will optimise funding and investment and tackle vacancy and dereliction. There will be accelerated delivery of landmark capital projects in the city centre through additional funding in the URDF under the NDP review. Redevelopment of the GPO complex as an ambitious and historic flagship project will be managed by the Office of Public Works.

In addition, the roadmap creates an enabling environment designed to build confidence with business, landholders and investors to get involved in achieving a new vision for Dublin city centre and to drive private sector investment. An oversight board comprising all of the relevant Departments and agencies has been established to oversee and provide strategic direction for delivery of the roadmap. It is chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach. The board has been meeting regularly since its establishment in July. In line with the roadmap, Dublin City Council is currently recruiting staff with the required technical skills for an interim programme management unit, which will drive delivery while work is advancing to set up a special purpose

vehicle. Changes to the living city initiative announced as part of budget 2026 will also support regeneration and efforts to tackle vacancy and dereliction in the city.

The programme for Government commits to applying the Dublin city task force model to other cities, towns and regions in need of revitalisation, starting with Cork city. Recognising Cork city's unique character and potential as our second city, implementation of this model will demand a tailored response in line with the specificity of Cork city and with stakeholders in Cork. We have met with the council, universities and others. Following meetings between my officials and Cork City Council, draft terms of reference for Cork city are at an advanced stage. A follow-up meeting with the council's chief executive has been scheduled for next week, and I expect the terms of reference to be finalised and submitted to the Government in the near future. There will be regular reports to the Government on developments in both Dublin and Cork cities from then on.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I know the Taoiseach is familiar with the Cork city issue. His Department and the Government have had significant contact with Cork City Council and others in relation to the establishment of this group. I understand it may not be called a task force and that is fine. What we want is a group of organisations and individuals in Cork with the sole purpose of trying to improve Cork as a place to live, work, do business and visit. There are critical themes. We need to invest in our public spaces and streetscape in the city, address issues with vacancy, and continue to ensure we have a proper transportation system which can focus on issues such as BusConnects, Cork Luas and improving connectivity to our airport, which is an ongoing issue. There has been a recent increase in Garda visibility in Cork and that is welcome. This would also be a key focus. I welcome the Taoiseach's update and ask him to give us an indication of when he hopes this group will be formally established.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I broadly support what Deputy McGrath has said. We are in and out of here for the best part of 12 months talking about this issue. Everybody is talking about getting the task force together expeditiously. I think the Taoiseach said in an *Irish Examiner* article before Christmas that he hoped to come to a decision about the formulation of it by the end of January. I know we still have a week or so left for that timeline to transpire. People just want certainty for the reasons Deputy McGrath has outlined. To be fair, the Cork Business Association and Cork Chamber have done good work over the past few years, particularly in rolling out those patrols the Cork Business Association was involved with. Going forward, that model could be replicated in other areas and cities across the country. Most importantly it is about tackling dereliction, particularly in the North Main Street and South Main Street area. It is about time we give people that certainty and get on with the work of the task force.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: The Dublin city task force produced a comprehensive report with clear recommendations to improve safety, footfall and confidence in Dublin city. However, many residents, retailers and workers across Dublin South-Central, including the Liberties, the Coombe, Inchicore and the wider south-west inner city area, are still not seeing the tangible impacts on the ground. Antisocial behaviour in particular and persistent petty theft continue to place real pressures on small shops, supermarkets and small retailers. Crucially, this behaviour puts people off visiting local streets and neighbourhood centres, reduces footfall

and undermines community confidence and some local businesses. People want to feel safe when they are walking, jogging, shopping and using public transport. Increased visible policing, including transport police on the Luas and bus networks alongside stronger Garda visibility, is essential to restore that confidence. Ultimately, will the Taoiseach provide a clear update on where implementation of the task force stands, including governance, timelines and, more importantly, funding?

Deputy Tom Brabazon: As the Taoiseach is aware, the task force recommended ten big moves for regeneration, which focused on renewing O'Connell Street and the surrounding areas, dealing with dereliction and increasing security in the city. The increased presence of gardaí in the city is welcome and has improved matters but it has not fully solved them. The issue of dereliction in the city persists. Will the Taoiseach update the House on the actions being taken to address dereliction and vacancy in the city?

In my constituency of Dublin Bay North there are similar issues of crime and antisocial behaviour to those we see in the city. Ironically, the additional Garda presence in the city centre has displaced some of that antisocial behaviour towards the northside. The programme for Government commits to using the task force model in other parts of the country. Will the Taoiseach advise if a similar approach will be taken to the suburbs of north Dublin, which also require renewal and regeneration with an improved policing presence?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: To be clear, I support better public transport, but in the task force we speak about the changes. Everyone in this House will have heard hundreds of people speaking about ghost buses. The NTA now wants to merge and extend routes in north Dublin. The NTA has said that ghost buses are due to longer routes and cross-city routes. The 130 route has been told it will be changed, but there was not enough consultation with the people of north Dublin. At the same time the 123 service has been changed. It no longer finishes at O'Connell Street. Now, elderly people, those with disabilities and those who are vulnerable are asked to walk hundreds of metres to an area they are not familiar with. People have contacted my office. They have learned the route. They are not used to changes in their routine. It made a huge difference to those people who were not consulted. I would love the Taoiseach to examine this. They deserve reliable buses before redesigned routes. I acknowledge the work of Independent Councillor Breen on Dublin City Council on this.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I put to the Taoiseach that the actions on the ground in the inner city in particular starkly contradict the aspirations of the task force plan. I will give two examples. The task force has an aspiration to expand artistic spaces and develop new cultural hubs, yet in Smithfield in the north-west inner city, The Complex, a critical hub and piece of community and artistic infrastructure, has been shut down. Will he explain that contradiction? The task force lauds the importance of community facilities for children's sports to foster a healthy and well community. Therefore, all plans must include well-designed public spaces, green spaces, playgrounds and recreational areas. However, at this moment the community at Portland Row in the north inner city faces the imminent closure of a playing pitch, one of the few community facilities available in the entirety of the inner city and the only one available to this community. How can that stack up? How can that be right? The community has to be heard. The Taoiseach has to be as good as his word if he is going to produce these reports.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Regardless of whether we are talking about the Dublin city task force, there is not much point having a report unleashed unless we see implementation. We know that across this State there is a huge issue with drug debt, intimidation and violence.

We saw the absolutely brutal killing of Tadhg Farrell and Mary Holt in Edenderry. We all remember the brutal killing of Keane Mulready-Woods. We have heard from the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau that there are 169 organised crime groups operating in Ireland, with 65% of them involved in drug trafficking. Many of us have seen the work that youth diversion programmes have done. I have seen it in Cox's Demesne and those operating out of The House and the TEAM project. I have seen the early intervention and the piece of work it has done. We have seen projects, such as Greentown, that have intervened with young people who have fallen into criminality. We need to see a lot more of that. It is about having a real conversation about all of the interventions that are necessary and also about the police acting so that we do not allow drug dealers to operate for years upon years.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Tánaiste said in 2024 that within 100 days of Government formation, Cork city would have a task force. It is 362 days later and there is still no sign of the task force, but what we have are broken promises and all the talk out of the Tánaiste. This Government made promises to the people of Cork, but does the Taoiseach know what it is like? It is like the promises made about the events centre, which still has not been delivered. Some €2.2 million has been spent and a contractor has not even been appointed. I love being from Cork. As the Taoiseach knows, people from Cork love where we are from. Does the Taoiseach know what we do not love? It is this Government not investing in Cork. There is a shortage of gardaí, a bus service that does not work and gridlock around the city. When will this task force be delivered for Cork? Will the funding and the resources be there to deliver for Cork?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Let us be honest: many parts of this great capital are now in decline. Moore Street, one of the most important battlefield sites in the country, the headquarters of the 1916 Rising and the ground zero of the independence struggle, was supposed to be redeveloped ten years ago in time for the 1916 centenary commemorations. Maybe the bicentenary will be a better timescale for the Taoiseach's Government to do anything in relation to Moore Street. Instead of being a cultural or historic quarter, Moore Street is now a location for drinking, drugs, defecation and urination. Many parts of O'Connell Street, our main street, are in serious decay. It is the location for crime and antisocial behaviour, with many people now uncomfortable being on O'Connell Street at night. Dereliction is rife in many parts of the city. Heavy-handed transport policies have significantly reduced footfall because of the lack of public transport. When will the Government invest in Dublin? When will it make parts of Dublin, especially the central core, safe again for people?

Deputy Mark Ward: I want to bring up again the privatisation of waste management in Dublin. The Dublin city task force and Dublin City Council recommend that a single waste management company should provide bin collection services, with a further recommendation that, in the long term, it should be taken under the control of Dublin City Council. The privatisation of the bins has failed. The environmental impact of multiple trucks going down the same road at multiple times during the day is having a detrimental impact on our communities. It is a wild west situation. Bin companies are operating like a cartel and bringing

up their prices in unison and in a co-ordinated approach, and the consumer is paying the price. Will the Government's task force for Dublin tackle the privatisation of waste management and bring back the bins to public ownership?

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am stepping in for my colleagues, Deputies Liam Quaide and Pádraig Rice, who are both asking about the task force for Cork. I caution my colleagues and the other Deputies around the Chamber who are asking similar questions. We have the report from the Dublin task force, which was released in October 2024 - a full year after it was announced by the then Taoiseach, Deputy Simon Harris, to great fanfare - and there still has not been a button given over from this Government to those plans. Dublin City Council is doing the work. It has a special purpose vehicle. My colleagues, Councillors Cian Farrell and Daniel Ennis, are on the working group, but all it is missing is the €140 million that was promised by the Taoiseach's Government last year. My simple question is this: when will that €140 million be given to the Dublin city task force because everyone else has fulfilled their roles?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is an incredible disconnect between the supposed aspirations of the Dublin task force and the actuality. As has already been mentioned, it is absolutely shocking that The Complex, a vibrant space across all the arts disciplines which provided direct employment for about 30 or 40 people and had about 250 artists operating out of it, is gone for the lack of €6 million from the Government. That is all it asked for. I note that seven of our leading actors have written a letter to *The Irish Times* in the past week saying that the lack of core and multi-annual funding for theatre companies has had a devastating effect on the ability of actors to produce good theatre. A central part of Dublin's identity and reputation is being decimated essentially because of a neoliberal funding model for theatre. What is the Taoiseach going to do about these things?

Deputy Paul Murphy: This morning, a powerful piece on "Morning Ireland" about drug-related intimidation described how families are confronted by drug dealers who say that their child owes them a certain amount of money and the family now owes this money and they will terrorise the family until it gives them the money. One woman said that 50% of the time, she feels a knot in her stomach as a result of stress. Another woman said that every time a car comes down into her cul-de-sac at night-time, she thinks: "Are they coming for me?". In another case, these gangsters turned up at a person's door with crowbars and tried to break in when she was there alone. This is a thing that is happening across the city. The report highlighted the work of the Whitechurch addiction support project, which is supported through the Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement, DRIVE, initiative. It has done excellent work supporting 75 families in the past year. However, the kicker came at the end of the report when we heard that the funding for this DRIVE project is now over and this work will end in the next month. It seems incredible that at a time when the Government is promoting this project nationally, funding is being taken away from local projects to assist families in dealing with this intimidation.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I listened carefully to what the Taoiseach said at the start. He spoke about what Dublin City Council and the OPW are doing with regard to the Dublin task force, but we heard little or nothing about what the Government itself is doing. We still have

no legal implementation body. We still have no budget funding, which was called for by the chair of the task force. There is a bitter irony here because others have spoken about The Complex. The task force report talks about the need to create a cultural hub. The Complex was actually pictured in the report, which was launched back in October 2024, yet the Government could not stump up a small few million euros. The Government is talking about supporting Dublin city, but is it really strangling the recommendations of the task force and the miserly implementation plan devised by the interdepartmental working group, which is only seven months old? We are not seeing any action on the ground by the Government.

Deputy James Geoghegan: There were over 99 people arrested and over 82 have been prosecuted in relation to the Dublin riots, a dark day that was the pretext for the creation of the Dublin city task force. It has resulted in a more visible police presence in our city to deliver a safer city. The way in which waste is presented by commercial operators in parts of our city has changed to deliver a clean city. We are trying to get more people living in our city. As part of the task force there is a project under way, in combination with the measures we have introduced in terms of the living city initiative, to get people living above shops in places like Middle Abbey Street and North Frederick Street. My question relates to ensuring that central government holds a grip over the measures that lots of Members acknowledge are being delivered by Dublin City Council. We have to ensure that it continues to be supported and equally that the level of transparency that was demanded from the task force continues under the stewardship of the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Séamus McGrath raised the issue of a task force for Cork city, as did Deputies Pádraig O'Sullivan and Thomas Gould. First of all, we have not been awaiting the establishment of the task force in respect of investment in Cork city. The most significant investment recently was the up to €90 million announced for the Crawford Gallery, which is a national institution. It is very substantial and will transform that aspect of the city centre. The refurbishment of the Shandon area, for example, has received very significant multi-million funding. Most recently, it was announced that the Tyndall national research institute, which is vital for inward investment, has been allocated well over €100 million by the Government. This is really setting the future solid for the Cork area and region and, indeed, nationally in respect of the area of semi-conductor research, photonics and other vital areas, such as frontier technologies, which will bring in further investment.

Of course there is also the investment in the universities, MTU and UCC. Above and beyond anything else, Cork city is an education city and continued investment in education will be there. As I said, there is a meeting this week with the CEO. I hope we conclude that work and, in the next two to three weeks, we go to the Government and we establish the group, which will focus on the city centre.

The visibility of the gardaí has improved very significantly with the recent out-take from Templemore which saw up to 30 gardaí appointed. We saw over Christmas, just as we saw in Dublin city, the impact of greater visibility of gardaí on the street in terms of confidence in security in the city centres. Many traders and citizens have articulated the psychological impact alone of that visibility. That presence, both in Dublin city and in Cork city, cannot be overstated.

Regarding the events centre, Cork corporation is overseeing the tender processes for that and is making progress. Because of the way that had escalated, it needed to go out to tender in a proper, formal way that is legally watertight and so on. That simply had to happen.

Deputies Séamus McGrath and Pádraig O'Sullivan were focusing on the city centre itself. We have to look at residential and we have to look at commercial. It is a different type of city into the future. The living cities initiative applies to Dublin, Cork, Galway and others. The Revenue Commissioners will be engaging with the councils to make sure they can get the proper maps. We have dramatically changed the impact of that initiative now. The older one was very limited and restrictive to pre-1915 buildings. Good sizeable grants are available for development over shops, and there is no date in terms of the building. Likewise for residential, we are looking at up to 1975 now, so there are opportunities in terms of some of the buildings in the cities and the extended areas that were captured and outlined in the budget.

The Railyard project will be the tallest building in the country, with social housing and cost rental. It is a significant development in the core of the city but also pointing to the docklands. The investment in the docklands has been very significant so far. In the areas north and south of the River Lee, the LDA is doing good work with the city council. This is a good example of how State agencies working together can deliver a lot. Iarnród Éireann has also been very facilitative. I remind Deputy Gould that the Kent Station transformation reflects very significant investment in infrastructure in the region. The key thing with the light rail project is to get the route selection finalised and then to get it started.

Deputy Ardagh raised the south-west inner-city area of Dublin - the Liberties and so on - in terms of security, policing, community confidence and transport policing, which I accept is a significant issue. I believe that a greater investment in amenities, such as playing facilities, is an absolute imperative in those parts of Dublin. Dublin City Council needs to really work hard at that. Other councils across Dublin need to work particularly hard - and, I would argue, more effectively - to provide facilities for clubs and communities in the sporting area. When we compare Dublin to other parts of the country, we see different models outside of Dublin which are far more widespread and more effective in terms of councils leasing land to clubs and so on. It is something that has struck me in terms of how Dublin is organised for playing amenities and playing facilities more generally. Policing will improve as we continue to have more recruits coming out of Templemore, which is producing a significant number of graduates on a very regular basis.

I hear what Deputy Brabazon said about Dublin regarding policing and the improved presence of gardaí. Clearly, that is something we are working on in dealing with antisocial behaviour. I hear what he has said about the north Dublin suburbs. For the moment we have to work on the city task force and its implementation.

Deputy Heneghan raised the issue of the NTA and BusConnects. We cannot get into the specifics of every route here, but nonetheless there is an obligation on the NTA to work with public representatives and the communities to make sure that the service is people-centric and that those who are infirm or senior, in particular, are looked after in respect of bus routes.

Deputy McDonald spoke about facilities on the ground, be they arts facilities or playing facilities.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The lost facilities.

The Taoiseach: Again, the city council has a key role to play here, particularly as I said earlier in terms of playing facilities. That applies in terms of arts facilities and cultural facilities as well. Many facilities have been provided, but it is very disappointing in terms of The Complex.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is not a good enough answer.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, I am speaking now. What is important is that for those areas and premises that we can control, the local authorities should identify and prioritise those for community and artistic engagement. In terms of the recommendations, the establishment of a special purpose vehicle, SPV, under section 66 of the Local Government Act 2001-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I raised Portland Row as well.

The Taoiseach: -----is a matter for the elected members of Dublin City Council. The council is taking the required steps to set up the legal entity. The SPV is key. We have seen in the past that when SPVs get established, they can get things done in respect of buildings and having control and agency in a lot of areas. It is expected that the legal entity will be established by the end of quarter 2 of 2026.

The OPW is leading on the redevelopment of the GPO in a manner that will be consistent with the historic nature of the building and its national significance. It will work with Dublin City Council and other key stakeholders in that regard. The OPW has established a steering group to manage this flagship project, which will consider all related property matters and potential interim uses. It will carry out a non-statutory consultation and engagement process with the general public, which is expected to commence this year. This will be carried out over a period of nine months and will reach local, regional, national and international audiences. There is an oversight board, as Members know, on the roadmap for delivery of the Dublin city task force to which the OPW will be reporting. We have an oversight board, which is chaired by my Department. A number of meetings have taken place since its establishment in July. Subgroups have been established to examine issues including services, locations for vulnerable groups, financial resources and communications. As part of the development of an integrated area strategy for the city, the council is holding workshops with key stakeholders to ensure an aligned approach to managing the rejuvenation of the city's main street, in addition to the co-ordination work being carried out by the council's rejuvenation action group. The process of transferring the ownership of the GPO to the OPW has commenced. As I said, the OPW is preparing a nationwide public consultation process. A lot is happening but we really have to get the SPV established.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What about Moore Street?

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, work is under way on Moore Street under the aegis of the OPW. I have been there. This will also form part of the overall rejuvenation of O'Connell Street, respecting the ethos and the historic nature of Moore Street, in particular. A previous

Government designated it as a national monument. We are very clear about its importance historically. We will preserve and make available that heritage for future generations to see at first hand.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised the issue of drug trafficking and intimidation. Deputy Murphy raised a similar issue. I heard the piece this morning on "Morning Ireland" about the intimidatory tactics deployed by criminal gangs against young people in particular, and how young people can get caught up, for small amounts of money, in situations that can have appalling impacts on their lives. Without question, An Garda Síochána is working hard and effectively on this. I will check up on the programme Deputy Ó Murchú identified. There may be the potential to extend or expand it.

4 o'clock

Projects like that on the ground have an impact and can give great solace and support to people when they most need it such that they do not fall prey to the intimidatory nature of these gangs and have their lives destroyed. It is important to try to get their lives back on track.

Deputy Tóibín raised Moore Street, which I have discussed, and the drugs issue in the city centre.

Deputy Ward, I think, raised the privatisation of waste. Again, Dublin City Council has a key role in respect of that. I may ask for a report in terms of its perspective on it because there are different perspectives on it. I think Deputy Geoghegan felt it was working. One has to tread carefully such that we do not create further difficulties and further challenges.

Deputy Gannon raised the SPV issue and the working group. I think I have dealt with that comprehensively. It will be established by the end of quarter 2.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The money.

The Taoiseach: The funding will be allocated as required. You do not just send a dollop straight up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett referred to The Complex also and the core and multi-annual funding for theatre. He described the model as a neoliberal model. I think we have a thriving arts and cultural situation in Ireland. The Arts Council is important in that regard. The arts departments of city councils are very important in supporting theatre companies and, in particular, production companies.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Did the Taoiseach read the letter from the actors?

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not back and forth.

The Taoiseach: I will. I did not catch it but I will now that the Deputy has drawn my attention to it. I will have a look at that. I am always very open to supporting production, drama and so on. The question is what the most effective way of doing it is. It is a core part of any city in terms of quality of life, which is important. We do not just live in an economy; we live in a society. We have strengths in that regard.

In response to Deputy Sherlock, the implementation bodies, as I said, are key. I have given her a timeline as to when that will be established. As regards my previous experience of SPVs, Temple Bar in its day was very effective in pulling the property together and getting things developed. SPVs can work.

Deputy Geoghegan referred to the living city initiative. We have transformed that programme, that tax facility or, more accurately, that urban regeneration facility, which can be facilitated by tax and grants and supports. We need to keep an eye on that to make sure we deliver it and drive it. I know Revenue will be waiting for the city council to come with maps and so on, but I think that should be okay for Dublin. I would have thought the maps were in. Department of Finance officials are saying this could take time. In my view, it should not take time in Dublin and it should not take time in Cork because the areas are already well known. The newer areas might take a bit of time, but in Cork and Dublin we should now really drive the application of the living city initiative and the changes we have brought in in the budget, which I think will have a significant impact.

Departmental Reports

19. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [65889/25]

20. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [71903/25]

21. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [1829/26]

22. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3647/26]

23. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3650/26]

24. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3743/26]

25. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3744/26]

26. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3746/26]

27. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3921/26]

28. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of his Department's annual report for 2024. [3924/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 to 28, inclusive, together.

The Department of the Taoiseach's annual report for 2024 was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas in October of last year. I hope everybody has read it. The report sets out the work of the Department in 2024 to achieve the strategic priorities identified in its statement of strategy and to support the implementation of the programme for Government, including: delivering the executive functions of the Taoiseach and the Government; supporting the Taoiseach in carrying out his duties as Head of Government, including in relation to the Oireachtas, constitutional issues, protocol and civic policy, the European Council, the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council; working with the Office of the President and with the Oireachtas; engaging with the formulation and implementation of Government policy, mainly through the system of Cabinet committees, senior officials groups and the parliamentary liaison unit; supporting the offices of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Government Chief Whip and the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs; providing the Government secretariat; providing the Government Information Service; providing briefing and advice for the Taoiseach and the Government on the full range of domestic policy issues and on European Union and international affairs; and co-ordination roles in various cross-government initiatives, including Housing for All, climate action, child poverty and well-being, migration, the national digital strategy, the national risk assessment, the well-being framework, policing reform and community safety, the National Security Analysis Centre and the Dublin north east inner city initiative.

In terms of metrics illustrating its outputs during 2024, the Department supported 46 meetings of Government, which dealt with 1,130 memorandums to Government; supported 52 meetings of Cabinet committees, generally chaired by me, as well as meetings of associated senior officials groups; supported attendance by the Taoiseach at eight meetings of the European Council and attendance by the Minister of State with responsibility for European Union affairs at nine meetings of the General Affairs Council; and supported five visits by my good self to Northern Ireland. Through the work of the shared island unit within the Department of An Taoiseach, the Government committed to building consensus around a shared future. For example, six shared island dialogue events were held in 2024, while the Government announced the largest ever single package of island-wide investment commitments, of more than €800 million, including €600 million towards the A5 road upgrade for the north west, as well as funding for the iconic Narrow Water Bridge at Carlingford Lough. We laid the groundwork for a major overhaul of children's services, through the Cabinet committee on children and education and disability, and began the development of the new national disability strategy. My Department also supported an extensive round of engagements at EU and international levels that focused on issues of significance for Ireland, including climate and energy. I have since then established an offshore wind energy clearing house group, which brings together key players from the public and private sectors to tackle issues that are causing delays to the delivery of offshore energy infrastructure. We have delivered a number of important State ceremonial events, including the Stardust commemoration, the 1916 Easter Rising commemoration and the national day of commemoration. We have transferred 583 files to the National Archives; facilitated and managed 150 media events; issued 243 press

releases; responded to numerous media queries and updated *gov.ie* on an ongoing basis; prepared responses to 801 parliamentary questions; drafted 199 speeches; dealt with more than 140,000 items of correspondence; and processed 275 freedom of information requests.

The Department's 2024 annual report is published, in English and in Irish, on *gov.ie*.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Martin Daly): We have ten speakers and we are tight on time. I ask people to make their points in maybe 30 seconds, starting with Deputy Séamus McGrath.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is ridiculous. Thirty seconds. This is happening every second slot. We warned about this when the Government cut Taoiseach's questions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Martin Daly): I take your point. I have just come into the Chair. We could start with-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is happening every week.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Martin Daly): -----Deputy Ryan O'Meara.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Twenty-five seconds.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The Department of the Taoiseach's 2024 annual report states that 7,126 affordable homes were built, but none of those affordable homes was built in my constituency of north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny. I will give some examples of areas where we need housing. Towns like Nenagh, Thurles, Roscrea, Borrisokane, Ballina and Newport, Templemore, Borrisoleigh, Urlingford, Freshford, Toomyvara, CloghJordan and Cappagh White are just examples of towns and villages across north Tipperary, mid-Tipperary, west Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny where young people and families need an affordable home and a start in life, those abroad want to come home, those living at home want a place of their own, and those with unsustainable rents want to afford to live. I want my constituency of north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny to get real affordable housing schemes in our towns and our villages. I gave just some examples; I could give many more. What will the Government do to deliver affordable homes for north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to talk about the section of the report on building consensus on a shared island. The Taoiseach will be aware that, last week, there was the launch in Belfast of the public media Ireland report. This is the first time I have seen a report in preparation for the media around this subject. Academics from DCU and Ulster University considered what would happen to the public service media in a reunified Ireland. The report rightly highlights the important role the public sector and broadcasting will have in the reunification process of our island.

It makes 13 recommendations. What will the Taoiseach's Department do to advance the research of projects like this from DCU and Ulster University on an all-island public service media and begin Government preparations for Irish unity? Can we have a debate in the

Chamber about the recommendations made in this report, so everybody will have their say and we can make this really valuable work count as a first step?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We want to see delivery in relation to special education and autism classes. Two schools that have delivered as necessary are Monksland National School in Cooley and Ardee Educate Together. I have brought up these issues before. A TD in the Taoiseach's own party brought up Monksland National School. She could not have been happy with the answer given. I certainly was not happy with it. Monksland National School was given two prefabs. It got permanent plans for a general purpose room and for a canteen. People are eating in their cars or in a shipping container at the minute, which is hardly acceptable. There were plans for special education teaching, SET, rooms and autism spectrum disorder, ASD, rooms. It is asking for contact from the Department. I request that an official from the Department contact me. We could resolve this issue. There is an even simpler issue with Ardee Educate Together. It is about parking spaces and delivering before further works are done. We are getting down to the wire on the timeline. I need somebody from the Department of education to make contact so we can resolve this. Louth County Council is the project manager but there is a serious requirement for action.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Department of the Taoiseach's annual report talks about values of treating the public fairly and promptly. I question whether the Government has treated the survivors of industrial and reformatory schools who were on hunger strike outside the gates of Leinster House fairly and indeed promptly because they are very angry at the lack of progress on the commitments the Government entered into over two months ago when they came off their hunger strike. They tell me that they have no communication from the Department of education. They say that no services are in place and they are still suffering physically and psychologically, with no access to services. They say there is still no State apology. There is a commitment that a State apology be given. It was supposed to be given promptly. We are now told that it will be given before the end of January. The end of January is next week. Will the Taoiseach confirm to them at the very least that there will be a State apology next week on this? When will the other commitments that the Government entered into over two months ago be fulfilled for these vulnerable and determined individuals?

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I read the Taoiseach's 2024 report, although it is 2026 now. I specifically read the social policy and equality section. Within that is a broader discussion about disability inclusion in a wider context. Under that, the Taoiseach set up the Cabinet subcommittee on disability, which he has referred to here on numerous occasions here and in his dealings with me. I bring to the Taoiseach's attention that if people are looking for residential care or an independent living environment for their son or daughter in Cork, which is the only place I can speak to, they have virtually no chance of securing that right for them. It could be an adult with an intellectual disability or whatever the case may be. It is so difficult to get that type of service delivered in our CHO at the moment. I am saying that in the context of meeting a group called the before we die group. I know they will be contacting all TDs in our area over the coming months. They have a group in Dublin too. I am asking the Taoiseach to meet them because that group needs to be heard about the day-to-day travails that they have to go through to secure services for their children, specifically residential care for their children.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: On the theme of sustaining the economy, I raise the need for an updated support strategy for retailers across this country on our main streets, high streets and towns and villages. We want our towns, villages and cities to be vibrant, busy and attractive places but many retailers are under severe pressure, whether it is due to the increased cost of doing business, the ongoing challenge of online shopping, or, of course, changing consumer habits. They need support and while the Government has invested in things like town and village renewal, the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, and so on, a specific, focused strategy needs to be put in place to support our retailers, or I fear that many of our towns and villages will be hollowed out and will become places with increased vacancy, dereliction and so on. We need to address this issue and support our retailers. I ask the Taoiseach to please take this on.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: A huge amount of resources went from the Department of the Taoiseach last year into trying to strategise and manage the visit to the White House for St. Patrick's Day. I am wondering what the hell level will be needed this year for the Taoiseach to manage such a visit if it goes ahead because we have a demagogue, dangerously unleashed at this point. I was never a fan of the shamrock at the White House. There are other ways of meeting important people without giving that photo opportunity to somebody like Donald Trump. What is the Taoiseach's red line? Trump is a racist who has unleashed ICE to kill people, to strike fear into people of colour, who cannot go into the US right now. He is a tyrant who has invaded Venezuela and kidnapped its leader. That leader will be on trial on 17 March, if the Taoiseach is planning to go. Now Trump is emboldened to attack Greenland. He is a misogynist who has promoted the sexual assault of women and the demeaning of female journalists. He is a known rapist. He was convicted in a civil trial. I know women's lives do not matter much but do children matter because he is obviously a paedophile as well? He is listed in the Epstein files. He is pictured with very young girls constantly. He spied on the dressing rooms at teen pageants. Does any of this matter at all? Will we continue to talk about bread on the table and allow a dangerous demagogue like this to operate on the world?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The mission statement for the Department of the Taoiseach in its report says it is about ensuring a sustainable economy and a successful society. Neither of those things is possible unless we address the lack of social and affordable housing and the housing crisis that is faced in this country. Recently, in my area, an area called Old Connaught, on the border of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and Wicklow, there was a local area plan discussion about building social and affordable housing. Our councillors, Melisa Halpin and Dave O'Keeffe, proposed that we should have a condition that all the housing, much of it on public land, should be social and affordable, because we do not need more unaffordable housing. The Government's councillors laughed and scoffed at that, then proposed and voted through plans to cut the developer levies, in other words to give a handout to the developers. How is that compatible with the aspirations of the Department of the Taoiseach?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach's Government and governments around the world have an important choice to make. The choice is whether the profits of big tech corporations are going to come before the health and safety of our children. For now, these interests are counterposed. We saw it in a stark way in the mass production of child sexual abuse imagery and sexual abuse imagery of women on Grok. There was a protest outside the offices of X at

the weekend. I know the Taoiseach previously heralded AI as akin to the industrial revolution or the printing press. This is how it is being used by the big tech corporations. A big question is whether we will follow the original advice from Coimisiún na Meán to turn off the toxic algorithms on social media. They are algorithms made to maximise eyeballs on the screen, to maximise profits, and which push hateful, misogynistic, suicidal material, and eating disorders on young people. Does the Taoiseach agree that we should turn off the toxic algorithms? We will introduce a Bill to do that on Thursday.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who raised a variety of issues. Deputy O'Meara raised the issue of affordable housing, specifically in Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny in a variety of towns. There is a variety of schemes to help people to afford housing. Lots of people have used the help to buy and first home schemes. The local authority affordable scheme has had applications in some counties more effectively than others. Some of that is to do with valuations and so on. We will see what we can do to make sure that every county benefits from those schemes. I was in Wexford last week, where plenty of affordable houses were built with subsidies through the local authority affordable scheme. I will talk to the Minister for housing about what is happening in Tipperary, north-west Kilkenny and those areas. Affordable housing is the significant issue because we are making progress on social housing.

Deputy Conway-Walsh raised the issue of the public service media. Again, I know there is a conference but we are actually doing work on that under the shared island initiative. We have allocated very substantial investment through the shared island initiative to media to increase reporting North and South and to have a more seamless interaction across both. This has not been happening to the degree it should have been in the past number of years, either with Southern media covering Northern Ireland or Northern Ireland media covering the Republic. We have put substantial funding through the shared island endeavour. Public service media in the modern era is critical for societal cohesion and it has to operate to very high standards of impartiality and with the public interest at the core.

On Deputy Ó Murchú and special education, again, this is a matter for the Minister for education. I know Deputy McGreehan has been raising these issues also. We will relay that back to the Department. The Deputy is saying, and I have no doubt he is in contact with the Department-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, but there is a time delay-----

The Taoiseach: We will keep going. Deputy Doherty raised the issue of those who were on hunger strike. We have made very good progress in respect of that. I have communicated in respect of that to those involved. I have written but they may not have received anything.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They have received it.

The Taoiseach: Fine. It is very clear from that correspondence that we are very close now-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is there an apology next week?

The Taoiseach: -----to bringing that to finality, including the issue of an apology.

Turning to Deputy O'Sullivan, again in terms of disability and inclusion, we have since this report and the general election, established a disability unit in the Department, which manifested itself in the budget in terms of the domiciliary care allowance, the monthly allowance, going up another €20, and in terms of the income disregard for carers being significantly enhanced and the level of increases going up. In terms of the residential and respite area, the investment in the budget was an extra 20% in services. There are issues in the residential and respite areas. There is no doubt about that. We were at the Horizons centre last Saturday morning. I was there as was the Deputy and we heard first hand the issues facing many parents of children. There is then the issue of adults with disabilities and the future for them and how their elderly parents worry about that. A lot of our work in the coming months will be focused on residential and respite. There is the changing nature of respite as well, which I thought was an important point made by the Horizons group last weekend. I will certainly meet the before we die group and see how best we can address the issue. We do need to take the anxiety and the undoubted worry and stress from the parents and those who are going through that uncertainty and lack of clear knowledge as to the future.

Moving to Deputy McGrath, specifically on retailers, there is a lot of pressure on them. I think we have to work more with local authorities again in respect of the cost framework and cost environment. A lot of good work has happened on the public realm investments in terms of facilitating footfall and making city streetscapes pleasant so people will want to come into a town or city centre. There is also the active travel dimension but that too can restrict other aspects of access to city centres as well in terms of traffic. It is about trying to get the balance right there.

Deputy Coppinger said we had deployed huge resources last year. We did not. It was just human capital.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sorry. It was what?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Human capital.

The Taoiseach: Just human capital. Myself and a couple of others.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes. That is what I mean. That takes money.

The Taoiseach: There were no huge resources. No huge resources are allocated to strategising about how we engage and meet with other leaders.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach is not named.

The Taoiseach: I will say this to the Deputy on where our focus always is. The economic relationship is critical. I would not undermine that. It is not about the profit of companies but that critical economic relationship is about employment for a lot of people in this country. It works both ways, by the way. Irish companies have access to the market there and do well in the United States, and want to continue to do well. We are in a very difficult situation - Europe

is and Ireland is. I outlined earlier during Leaders' Questions the approach we are going to take.

Turning to Deputy Boyd Barrett, yes, we do need a sustainable society. We need social and affordable housing. I do not believe our councillors scoff at anything to do with housing. They take it very seriously.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They did.

The Taoiseach: They want more housing. They want more affordable and social housing and to enable people to either buy or rent at affordable prices. We need to get supply up. I think some of Deputy Boyd Barrett's policies would depress supply. That is where we differ. We need to get supply to 50,000 or 60,000 per annum. I think a lot of what the Deputy has articulated over the years would depress supply. It is not possible to do it all through social housing. We need private sector investment as well as public sector investment on a huge scale.

Turning to what Deputy Murphy talked about, nothing can come before the health and well-being and safety and security of our children. No company can. The 1998 Act is very clear. Any sharing or any generation or possession of child abuse images, child sexual abuse images, is illegal and must be prosecuted. The Garda is pursuing it. The European Commission has responsibility for very large online platforms like X. Coimisiún na Meán is working with the European Commission in respect of what has transpired with the Grok app. It is a very serious situation. I would point out that comments are made very generally about Ireland and the regulatory environment. The Data Protection Commission, DPC, levied €4 billion in six years on technology companies. That is not evidence of people taking a light-handed approach.

Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025: Second Stage

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

I am very pleased to introduce the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025 to the House. I look forward to hearing the contributions of Deputies today, and to working with all Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann to progress this important legislation through both Houses. Home support is a vital service that is delivered to thousands of people nationwide every day. It provides a very important service to individuals of every age and their families, as it enables people to maintain independence and dignity while living at home. In line with Sláintecare, this Government is committed to ensuring that we take concrete actions that support and empower people to stay in their own homes and in their communities.

At the outset, I wish to acknowledge the services provided by the carers and service providers that deliver home support. Improving access to home support is an absolute priority for this Government, and home support hours have increased every year since 2020, from 17.8 million hours in 2020 to 30.6 million hours in 2026. This represents 26.7 million hours for older persons services and 3.9 million hours for disability services. The programme for Government commits to designing a statutory home care scheme to allow people to stay in

their own home for as long as possible. The first, essential step towards the scheme is to ensure that home care is regulated and that there are quality standards in place that services can be inspected against. This legislation will therefore ensure that, for the first time in Ireland, home support providers - whether public, private or voluntary - are required to operate in a regulated environment.

There are inherent risks for service users in the provision of health and social care services by an unregulated sector. In vital areas such as infection prevention and control, staff training, and clinical governance, there are no standards or regulations that all home support providers must comply with. There are standards of service that can be expected from the HSE, through HSE funded services, or through the terms of private contracts. However, there are currently no consistent, minimum standards of care that apply universally to home support providers. There is also no independent oversight of the provision of services, so, therefore, there is no independent mechanism to ensure that the standards that do exist, such as HIQA's National Standards for Better Safer Healthcare 2012 are complied with.

The regulations that will be made on foot of this legislation will therefore offer quality assurance to service users that their service meets the same minimum standards wherever and however it is provided. The introduction of a statutory framework to provide independent oversight of home support providers will ensure increased compliance with regulations and quality standards, which will increase public confidence in home support services.

The Health Act 2007 established the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, and the Office of the Chief Inspector of Social Services. It also provides the regulatory framework for residential services for older people, persons with disabilities and children in need of care and protection. The Chief Inspector of Social Services monitors compliance with this regulatory framework. The Bill before the House is modelled after the regulatory framework for designated centres as set out under the Health Act. This was outlined in the general scheme. It amends the 2007 Act, establishing a regulatory framework for home support providers who will be required to meet minimum requirements set out under Ministerial regulations in order to provide a home support service. This framework will be further supported by HIQA's National Standards for Home Support Services.

These amendments will act to safeguard service users and raise the quality and consistency of home care nationally and will be a first step in meeting the programme for Government commitment to design a statutory home care scheme. The framework will extend to all service users regardless of age who by reason of illness, frailty or disability require a home support service. As such it applies to home support provision funded by both the Departments of Health, and Children, Disability and Equality.

The Bill will introduce, for the first time, the registration and regulation by HIQA and the Chief Inspector of Social Services of all home support providers in Ireland. Among other measures, it will provide the chief inspector with a range of powers and will make it an offence to provide a home support service without being registered. The chief inspector will also be responsible for monitoring and assessing compliance of registered home support providers against regulations and HIQA standards. The new system of regulation for home support will ensure that the public can be confident that the services provided are of a high standard and will bring Ireland in line with best international practice.

I will take the House through the Bill to briefly outline the content of each section. The legislation has two Parts consisting of 22 sections. Part 1 relates to preliminary and general matters and contains sections 1 to 4, inclusive. Section 1 provides for the Short Title of the Bill, collective citation, and for the commencement of its provisions.

Section 2 provides definitions of key terms used in the Bill.

Section 3 provides that the operation of the Act must be reviewed within five years of enactment after which a report on the findings is to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Section 4 repeals a section of the Human Tissues (Transplantation, Post-Mortem, Anatomical Examination and Public Display) Act 2024.

Part 2 sets out amendments to the Health Act and consists of 18 sections. Section 5 amends the principal Act to provide for the definition of key terms relating to the regulatory framework for home support providers.

Section 6 amends section 8 of the principal Act to provide for new functions for HIQA to set standards on safety and quality in relation to home support services.

Section 7 provides for HIQA to conduct investigations of registered home support providers.

Section 8 expands the functions of the chief inspector to establish and maintain a register of home support providers, collect key data in relation to home support providers, inspect premises where he or she suspects the business of a home support service is being carried out, and register and inspect home support providers against both ministerial regulations and HIQA standards.

Section 9 inserts a new part, Part 8A, to the principal Act to provide for the registration of home support providers through the insertion of 29 new sections, Nos. 69B to 69ZD.

Section 69B provides for the definition of key terms used in Part 8A and provides for exemptions to the requirement to register as a home support provider.

Section 69C provides for a prohibition on carrying out the business of a home support service without being registered.

Section 69D provides for a prohibition on making false or misleading statements in a material respect when applying for registration or renewal of registration.

Section 69E provides for the application process for a person seeking to register or renew the registration of a home support provider.

Section 69F provides for the establishment of a register of home support providers.

Section 69G provides for the grant or refusal of the registration of a home support provider.

Section 69H provides for grounds under which the chief inspector can cancel, vary or remove a condition, or attach an additional condition to a registration of a home support provider.

Section 69I provides that the chief inspector may remove a condition attached to a registered home support provider's registration where they deem it is appropriate and will not adversely affect a service user receiving support from that provider.

Section 69J provides that a registered home support provider may apply to the chief inspector for the variation or removal of any condition that has been placed on their registration.

Section 69K provides for notices to be issued by the chief inspector to an applicant or a registered home support provider, as appropriate, in respect of a proposed decisions to an application submitted under sections 69E and 69J.

Section 69L provides that an applicant or registered home support provider, as appropriate, has 14 days after a notice is given of a proposed decision of the chief inspector under section 69J to make a written representation to the chief inspector concerning the proposal.

Section 69M provides that the chief inspector is to give written notice to an applicant or registered provider of a decision to refuse or grant an application, to cancel a registration, remove or vary a condition or attach additional condition or to remove a condition of a registration.

Section 69N provides for when the chief inspector proposes to make certain decisions where the home support service is provided or proposed to be provided by an applicant or a registered home support providers from more than one business premises and a single application has been made for registration.

Section 69O provides for required and prohibited conduct for registered home support providers.

Section 69P provides for the appeals process from a decision of the chief inspector regarding an application for registration.

Section 69Q provides for the chief inspector to seek a District Court order enforcing certain decisions under sections 69G, 69J, and 69H.

Section 69R provides for the chief inspector to seek a District Court order where they believe there is a serious risk to a service user due to the actions of a registered home support provider or person acting on their behalf.

Section 69S provides for the chief inspector to make an application under section 69R as an *ex parte* interim order.

Section 69T provides for a final determination of matters dealt with in an *ex parte* interim order under section 69R.

Section 69U provides that an appeal of a District Court decision under section 69N lies to the Circuit Court.

Section 69V provides that the chief inspector is a party to any court proceeding taken under this Part of the principal Act and is entitled to appear, be heard, adduce or give evidence.

Section 69W provides for the submission of information to the chief inspector by registered home support providers.

Section 69X provides for the collection of key data from registered home support providers, the sharing of information with the Minister and public bodies, such as HIQA and the HSE, and the publication of this data in aggregate form by the chief inspector.

Section 69Y provides that a registered home support provider shall not submit false or misleading information to the chief inspector under sections 69W or 69X.

Section 69Z provides that where a registered home support provider decides to cease to carry on the business of a home support service, they are to notify the chief inspector of the date in which they are to cease operating in accordance with the timeline set out under regulations. Section 69ZA provides that where a registered home support provider ceases to carry on its business, the chief inspector will make a note in the appropriate register and cancel the registration of the provider. Section 69ZB provides that where a person is appointed by or under law to take charge of the business of a registered home support provider, that person is to notify the chief inspector as soon as practicable and no later than 48 hours after the appointment. Section 69ZC provides for the notifications by the chief inspector relating to certain home support providers. Section 69ZD provides for transitional arrangements for persons providing a home support service immediately before this Bill comes into operation.

Section 10 provides for the HSE to appoint persons to examine business premises of a home support provider that is providing service on behalf of the HSE. A person appointed under this section will be authorised to enter any business premises of the home support provider and examine any records relating to the service and interview any employees of the provider.

Section 11 provides the right of entry and inspection by the chief inspector to the business premises used or proposed to be used by a home support provider or the private dwelling of a service user where a home support service is provided with the consent of the service user concerned.

Section 12 provides that if the chief inspector has reasonable grounds to believe that the business of a home support provider is being carried out on a premises which is not registered, the chief inspector may enter the premises to inspect it.

Section 13 provides for the District Court to issue a warrant to authorise the chief inspector entry to premises where the chief inspector suspects the business of a home support provider is being carried out, if required.

Section 14 provides the inclusion in the definition of dwelling of any part of the business premises of a registered home support provider that is occupied as a private residence by that person or a member of staff of the provider.

Section 15 provides for the inclusion of a reference to home support providers in relation to the further circumstances in which the District Court may issue a warrant.

Section 16 provides that HIQA may prepare and publish reports relating to the monitoring of compliance and standards by registered home support providers, and the manner in which those reports should be prepared.

Section 17 provides for the serving of compliance notices on registered home support providers. Under this amendment, where the chief inspector is satisfied that a registered home support provider has contravened a relevant provision of legislation, he or she may issue a compliance notice. A registered home support provider who fails to comply with the compliance notice by the date specified in the notice shall be guilty of an offence and liable to prosecution. Registered home support providers will have the right to make an appeal to the District Court within 14 days.

Section 18 requires the chief inspector to maintain a non-compliance list of providers on whom a fine or penalty has been imposed.

Section 19 amends section 79 of the principal Act providing for offences for home support providers.

Section 20 amends section 99 of the principal Act providing the Minister for Health, in consultation with the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality as appropriate, to make regulations relating to the registration of home support providers under the Act.

Section 21 provides the Minister for Health, in consultation with the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality as appropriate, to make regulations for home support providers to ensure proper standards in relation to the home support services they provide.

Section 22 inserts a new section 101C into the principal Act providing the Minister for Health with regulation-making powers to prescribe the collection, sharing and publication of data regarding registered home support providers. Regulations will determine the type of data to be collected, shared and published and the frequency of the submission and sharing of information.

It will be necessary to introduce a small number of Government amendments, including technical amendments, as the Bill makes its way through the Houses of the Oireachtas. The most significant of these relate to necessary enhancements of consent provisions to reflect the more recent policy change to include home support services provided to under-18s within the scope of the Bill. This legislation is the major first step towards designing a statutory home care scheme. The establishment of a regulatory framework for home support providers will act to provide new protections for service users and will raise the safety, quality and consistency of care nationally.

I look forward to the contributions of Deputies and to working with all Members of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann to progress this important legislation through both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Deputy David Cullinane: I have ten minutes, and I am sharing time with two of my colleagues.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute. We will support the Bill on Second Stage because the private homes support sector must be regulated, and families deserve basic assurances of safety standards and accountability. However, supporting a Bill is not the same, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree, as applauding the Government's record, which I wish to turn to. This legislation is necessary, but it is also a stark admission of how little has been delivered and how low the Government's ambition has fallen. The Bill's purpose is to amend the Health Act to create a statutory regulatory framework for registration, minimum standards, inspection, enforcement and data collection for home support providers. It brings the framework for home support providers into line with the model used for designated centres, HIQA standards and an expanded role for the chief inspector, all of which I agree with. It provides for a public register of providers, including key details and conditions of registration, a prohibition on operating without registration with offences and penalties, inspection and enforcement powers, including compliance notices and court applications where serious risk is

identified, data collection and publication in aggregate forum ensuring that we can finally see what is happening in the sector.

In plain language, this is about regulating providers, but it is not about delivering entitlements for patients. Not only is there a commitment to a statutory home care scheme in the programme for Government, but it was included in the previous programme for Government, . This was to operate on a similar basis to the fair deal scheme. We still have no details of how that will work. We still have no details of who will be entitled to it or who qualify, what equity issues will be in play and when this will see the light of day. I suspect that we have not seen a statutory home care scheme in place or any movement on this issue because we do not have the capacity to deliver it. The Government should be straight and upfront with people. We know and all deal every day in our constituency offices with families who are waiting for home care or intensive home care packages. Some families and some people get them. Some get partial hours, which is not all the hours that they need. Others do not get any at all and are stuck on waiting lists. Two of my colleagues in Donegal, Deputies Doherty and Mac Lochlainn, have alerted me to serious problems in the county in accessing intensive home care packages. There is a long waiting list. We have patients and families who need urgent support at home, and they cannot get it. I suspect that is what is happening here. Statutory home care is a game-changer. It means that there will be a statutory right or a statutory obligation for a person to have access to home care. That will place more of a burden and obligation on the State to provide that care. The Government, HSE and Department are not equipped to deliver it.

It reminds me a bit of the Disability Act 2005 where the Government of the day decided rightly that we would confer a legal right for a child to access an assessment of need and that that assessment of would look at the health and education needs of each child. On the basis of the aggregate assessment of need carried out, the Department would then be able to plan and provide the appropriate resources, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and so on. That never happened. Of course, what has happened is that people are waiting, waiting and waiting. Parents are taking the State to court. I have a concern that is what is holding back the Government on this. It is saying, "Hang on a second here", or maybe it is coming from the Department saying, "Let us be very careful about statutory schemes because that places an obligation on the State." However, the reality is that this is badly needed for many families. Everybody has the right to the best available care. A long time ago - well before Sláintecare - it was an accepted principle in the health care system that if it is appropriate for a person to be cared for at home that is where they should be. We have far too many people in hospital who should be at home, but they cannot be discharged from hospital because the home care supports are not available.

I deal with this all the time as the health spokesperson for my party. I get queries in from all over the State relating to people who are in hospital and want to be discharged to their homes. Their families want them at home. It is the best place for them. They can care for them to a level, but they need additional supports to discharge them. They have additional needs, and they cannot get the supports. They are pleading with the hospital and community services. Sometimes there is not joined -p thinking between all those services but for the most part, the capacity is not there and the person cannot be discharged. If a person cannot get care at home, he or she ends up in hospital. There are major advances in health care. I am a member of the Joint Committee on Health, as is the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. We are learning all the

time of the advances in technology. For example, we hear about virtual beds, the principle of which is great. A person could be cared for and monitored, including their blood pressure, from home. Huge advances have been made where a person does not necessarily have to be in hospital to get certain care. Some people do, but there are categories of patients who can be cared for at home. The problem is that we cannot realise that potential because we do not have the capacity. What happens is that it is a postcode lottery, patients go on a waiting list, and they may or may not get the home care supports that they need. That is not what should be in place. That is not where we need to be.

I have seen it far too often in healthcare, particularly under the previous Minister for Health and indeed, the current Government as well. Big promises are made that we are going to do all these wonderful things with Sláintecare being the biggest one. It was the big vision for healthcare, but then we do not see the practical delivery of it. We have seen it in so many areas of healthcare. Beds that were promised were not delivered. Staff that were promised were not delivered. Pharmacy agreements that were promised were not delivered. The Government made these big announcements and then left people high and dry. That is what was done with the statutory home care scheme.

What is really frustrating is that despite two programmes for Government that promised a statutory home care scheme, and all of the years that have gone by, the best the Government has done is to say it will regulate the area, have a registry and make sure service providers are registered. That is great but it should have been done years ago. That it is taken so long for even this Bill to be brought forward, given the commitments we were given, is staggering. I imagine that most people probably thought this was already in place. That is something that is really basic. Of course all home care support services should be registered, of course they should be subject to regulation, and of course HIQA has to have the powers to look at these areas. For most people this is a no-brainer and they would have expected it to have been in place. The fact we are only dealing with this now is problematic, and we still do not have the statutory home care scheme, as I said.

I ask the Minister of State to examine the difficulties in the north west. It is an issue that an Teachta Doherty in particular has raised with me. I have spoken to the head of the HSE on this and he has acknowledged that there is an issue, which is a staffing issue.

I want to make a point on something I am concerned about generally in healthcare. When we are speaking about home care we have to accept that because of decades of a lack of investment in public home care, the vast majority of providers are now private. We have also seen this with nursing homes. At one point a majority of nursing homes were public but they are now private. The majority of home care is now being provided by private providers. I am not casting aspersions on the private providers, and the staff and the people do a good job, but we need to build up public capacity and we need to make sure we are getting value for money and bang for buck.

We are paying premiums to private providers to provide services that should be provided through the public system, given that we have all signed up to the principle of a universal healthcare system, public healthcare and Sláintecare. This is what we have all signed up to but what I see is more and more privatisation and systems dependent on the private sector. We see it with dentistry. We have more private dentists than public dentists. We have more private nursing homes than public nursing homes. We have more private home care providers than we

have public providers. This is wrong and we need to rebalance the scales. We need to invest in the public service. We are not going to be able to roll out a statutory home care scheme unless we have public infrastructure. I imagine there is even push-back against this from some of the private providers.

The role of the State and the role of the Government is to make sure we can deliver on this. It is the job of the Minister of State and the Government to deliver on the promises made in this area. I do not believe the Government will be able to do it unless it builds public capacity. It has not built up public capacity which is why year after year it comes with Bills like this as opposed to a statutory home care scheme. It is simply not equipped or in a position to deliver it.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: A fundamental issue facing us is how we care for older people in society and for those in need of care due to a disability. The welfare and treatment of the most vulnerable people is a mark of the society in which we want to live. What we are being told by advocacy groups and by the people themselves is that they want support to stay in their own homes and live with as much as dignity as possible.

The Bill seeks to regulate private home care providers, establish a register, set minimum standards to be enforced by HIQA and create an inspector regime. While all of these are very welcome, the time it has taken for the Bill to be progressed shows how much of a priority it is for the Government. The Bill is yet another missed opportunity by the Government. The reform that the sector and families have been seeking for years is nowhere to be seen. The Bill represents a profound failure of ambition.

The previous programme for Government promised a statutory home care scheme. That was six years ago. Where is it? How many more years will the public have to wait for an equivalent of the nursing home support scheme that will deliver universal home care? We need to see universal and affordable access to home care. It is the right thing to do and it is the wise thing to do. Properly supported home care reduces pressure on our overwhelmed hospitals. It is better for the individual, the State and the entire health system.

After all the time spent on this legislation, what do we get? We get a register of private providers. The legislation is yet another example of the do-nothing Government getting the bare minimum done. Without a public scheme the Bill will only further embed the privatisation of care. The Bill is full of shortfall after shortfall. Affordability of care is completely absent. For the thousands of families who are crippled each and every month, the Bill will change nothing. It will police a system that is failing people and families across the State.

The Bill is needed but it does not go anywhere near far enough. It has become clearer by the day that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have little to no interest in building a genuinely fair and public system. The Bill is more proof of this. What we are seeing is the further embedding of privatisation. Two thirds of home care provided is private and public provision continues to drop. Can the Minister of State point to a single public service that has improved thanks to the Government pushing for further privatisation? Is there anything, be it housing, roads, water, infrastructure or the energy sector? All that "the market will provide" privatisation model has done is drive up the cost of services for everyone, from the State to ordinary workers, while driving down quality and services. Where is the recognition of different levels of need? The Bill treats the provider of basic assistance the same as the provider of complex high dependency

care with no differentiated funding or support except for a tiny number of intensive packages. This is a blunt instrument that fails to match the reality of care.

While we are debating the Bill, 34,000 carers across Ireland are in a state of anxiety and fear. This has been caused by the Minister of State and his colleagues. It is fear about the thousands of euro that Revenue will be looking for as part of a back payment of tax for part of three years. This is yet another act of utter heartlessness by the Minister of State and his colleagues, going after carers who provide so much to our society. My father was one of the lucky ones as he chose to stay at home. There was space there and my mother could provide care for him. The vital care that carers such as my mother provide goes unnoticed. A clap on the back is not good enough. They are not getting near minimum wage for 24 hours, seven days a week. To tax them on this is ridiculous. They get the respite grant but it does not go anywhere near respite. It pays bills and pays for electricity. This is all it does.

As I said, my father was one of the lucky ones. A report into a nursing home in Kilkenny stated that people were cold and did not have enough bedsheets and there was a strong smell of urine. HIQA inspectors concluded that the residents in the home did not receive a good standard of care. Carers continue to shoulder the consequences of decades of underinvestment in home care supports, all while saving the State billions in care each and every year. How can the Minister of State justify going after so many who are already struggling to get by while, at the same time, giving massive tax breaks to the likes of Starbucks and McDonalds. It spells out clearly where the Government's priorities lie.

Will the Minister of State provide an update on the adult safeguarding legislation in his closing remarks? The policy framework was published in December but we are still none the wiser as to when the Government will bring forward this much-needed legislation. The Law Reform Commission has done most of the work. When will the Bill be brought forward?

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am really glad to have the opportunity to speak on this very important legislation.

5 o'clock

In reading through the Bill, I was reminded of the very damning HIQA report that was published at the time, which called for a complete overhaul of home care services. That report raised concerns around the fact that there are no minimum standards of care when it comes to home care services. I recall raising this very report during Leaders' Questions. At that time, I was assured the regulations were being worked on by the Minister. That report and that Leaders' Questions were from December 2021, over four years ago.

I have always found it disturbing that we have home care workers going into homes, particularly where older people live on their own where they are extremely vulnerable, and there are no regulations in place. The Minister of State said in his statement, "There are inherent risks for service users in the provision of health and social care services by an unregulated sector." It does not really bear thinking about what those risks have been in all the years gone by, and how they have played out in some circumstances. It never made sense to me that when we raised questions in terms of home care, the HSE was not in a position to provide a list of private providers who go into homes of older people, people with disabilities and our most vulnerable citizens. This legislation is long overdue and it is extremely welcome,

but it is really urgent that it is moved on as quickly as possible. For many in the sector who have waited so long for this, such as those represented by Home and Community Care Ireland, HCCI, we need to give assurances that these regulations will be fit for purpose. We also need to give clarity on the timeframe for this.

As we know, some private providers are very much partnered with the HSE and essentially do the work of the HSE. They provide the home care that the HSE cannot provide. I have referenced Roscommon Homecare Services in the Dáil before in terms of the excellent care they provide. This not-for-profit organisation provides so much home care support and services in our communities and in the wider area.

It is important when debating this Bill to acknowledge that this is just one issue. This legislation typically deals with the regulations and the need for regulations but there are many other issues that are constant in terms of home care, particularly the waiting list. The latest figures I have for Galway state that 357 people are waiting for home care. It is significant that 248 people receiving the service have been found to be entitled to additional hours but are waiting to receive those additional hours. That puts so much stress and worry on the person and on their loved ones.

The question of rushed visits has been raised many times, particularly for the workers themselves. We have to acknowledge not only that workers are being rushed in terms of these visits with the travel and all of that, but also the impact that has on the person they are caring for, who is made to feel merely like a ticked box. It must be a horrible feeling for someone who is vulnerable. It is so important we get this Bill through as quickly as possible. I hope the Minister of State might be able to provide some kind of timeframe for that.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much welcome this Bill. It is long overdue, as we badly need to have a statutory regulatory framework for home care support in this country. There is a glaring need to have minimum standards and a licensing regime for providers. Others have referenced the scandal we saw within the nursing home sector last year and in many previous years. We do not really have any idea of the quality and standard of the much-needed care that is taking place within peoples' homes.

This Bill will, for the first time, allow for licensing inspection and enforcement of minimum standards. It is important to say that how the ministerial regulations will be set will be critical to the success or otherwise of this legislation. I am particularly mindful of the timeliness of this now, given that the approximately 28 million home care hours provided across the State in 2022 will almost double in about 18 years by 2040. The reliance on home care support packages across the State with an ageing population means getting this legislation right is going to be critical.

Before I talk about my concerns about the Bill and indeed about what is not in it, I am conscious that 100 staff in Coolock from Northside Home Care Services are currently on strike because of their failure to be recognised within the section 39, section 56 and section 10 pay deal that was agreed 18 months ago. It is wrong that they have been excluded. We should decide whether they are part of our health service. The reality we have known for some time is that when we try to get services on the cheap, we end up in very serious and dangerous territory in healthcare. We need to make sure that these workers who are going in and out of people's homes day in, day out are afforded the dignity and respect of proper pay. SIPTU has

also balloted for industrial action with a 95% vote across counties Donegal, Clare, Cork, Kerry and other counties because of long-standing failures to meet proper working conditions in the sector in those particular organisations.

Regarding the Bill itself, today we are talking about a statutory regulatory framework for providers. A critical part of the jigsaw is the statutory right to be cared for within one's home. As we all know, there is a statutory right to access public hospitals in this country, but there is nothing regarding care within our homes. That has to be a critical part of ensuring people get the care, dignity and service they are entitled to and deserve within their home in future years if the Government is serious about moving care out of our acute hospital system and into the community.

I also have a concern about what I see as the growing marketisation of the home care sector. For a long period of time it was very much based on the co-operative model. It was based on voluntary providers and community-based providers providing home care assistance within communities. That is now slowly changing, and we are seeing corporate entities come into the market and it is not so different from the nursing home sector in terms of their ability to swallow up smaller operations. In terms of some of the requirements set down in this Bill, there is a very real question for the Government regarding what kind of model of home care support it wants. Does the Government want it to be driven and delivered by large corporate entities, or does it still want to accommodate that community-based model? That is a question I would like the Minister of State to answer today because failings in how the Government has responded over many years with regard to the nursing home sector paved the way for the mess that happened last year. I know there are some changes now within HIQA with regard to having to declare the ultimate beneficiary. That is important but it is not enough because we have to be mindful of who is ultimately going to be controlling the market or the sector for home care. Another key thing is the financial support to be made available to HIQA, not just to administer the licensing but also in terms of the inspections regime. There are also the exemptions within this Bill, particularly with regard to personal assistance and those other carve-outs which are very concerning.

We know there are about 200 home care support providers in Ireland with up to 29,000 staff. I do not want to see in five years that 200 figure go down to 50 or below, but it could because of the administrative requirements envisaged within this Bill. The key question, which is outside this Bill but is very much for the Minister of State in terms of deciding the budget, is whether sufficient funding will be allowed for in the tendering process for this additional administrative requirement? If there is, the Government can ensure the survival and, indeed, the thriving of the many home care support providers at the moment. If there is not, we know the direction of travel and we are going to see a much smaller number of very big entities.

We also know that the 29,000 people who are providing home care support at the moment are not enough. There are massive shortages in certain parts of this country, including Cork, Kerry and parts of Limerick. Some 900 people are waiting for home care support in Cork and Kerry alone. Some 4,945 people are on a waiting list, as of June of last year. That is a huge amount of unmet need.

The cost of keeping people at home is relatively low compared with the alternative, which is that if they do not get support and care, they end up in a nursing home or they are readmitted to hospital. We must do much more to ensure we attract people into these roles, and that comes

down to pay and conditions. I spoke about the strike that is happening at the moment, and the ballot for industrial dispute. It also comes down to the hours that are worked and making sure that people get proper transport and other allowances. It is also about reaching out to the many people, in particular women, who are outside of the labour force. We often talk about the unemployment rate in Ireland being about 4% or 5%, but the potential labour supply in this country is of the order of 16% to 18%. I refer to people who would like to work but cannot do so because of structural circumstances in their lives, whether it is a lack of childcare, a lack of transport or because they are caring for an elderly parent or relative. There are people who would like to work and we must figure out a way to bring such people in particular into a sector like this. For example, they could work part time or full time. We need to tap in to the untapped resource that exists.

I am concerned about how much in this Bill we are not hard-wiring into primary legislation but instead delegating to ministerial regulation. I refer in particular to the consent piece and the access piece into people's homes. It is important to work out the detail on that. That is something that should be debated here on the floor of the Dáil and the Seanad, as opposed to confining it to ministerial regulation.

The second key issue relates to the qualifications of home care providers. Very serious questions were raised during pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill on the desired minimum training and education, but the Bill does not provide any clarity on this. It would be worthwhile to hardwire this into the legislation.

There is always a danger of there being a loophole with the exclusions. I understand why exclusions are put in place; we do not want to completely strangle or muffle a system. However, the reality is that if a provider has four clients or fewer, they should be regulated as well.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is three or fewer.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I apologise. We all understand if there is an informal arrangement in place for looking after a relative or a neighbour, where it is only one person, but it is a business if a person is looking after three or fewer clients. I do not want us to be in a place in a number of years time where we are talking about the disaster of not regulating these entities. We are talking about people's lives. We are talking about people in a very vulnerable situation. In some situations they may not have very strong family support or they may have no family support around them at all. Who are we trying to safeguard here? We are trying to safeguard the person being cared for in their home and indeed the worker as well. That is critically important. To be frank, some of the workers involved last year were thrown under a bus. They were scapegoated and blamed for what took place in the nursing homes when, arguably, management and the owners got off scot-free. I have serious concerns about the exemptions.

The other key concern is the classification or designation as a personal assistance service. There is a fine line between the two. I am worried that we would see organisations trying to classify themselves in that space and then being exempt from this legislation. At the end of the day we want to prevent abuse and exploitation of the person who is being cared for, and we also want to look after the worker who is providing that service.

On the market and the cost of regulation, I spoke about the larger for-profit organisations that are effectively buying up voluntary and community-based organisations at the moment. There must be provision for the administrative burden in the funding provided to these organisations, through the tendering process.

My last point relates to HIQA. In 2024, HIQA estimated that it would cost €1.1 million per annum to introduce licensing. In the first instance, we must get a commitment from the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, that the comprehensive costs of licensing will be covered by the Department. I am sure it is much more than €1.1 million now. I have had serious concerns about the HIQA inspection regime, in particular with regard to nursing homes. We articulated that last year. We accept there has been an increase in the number of inspections and that is to be welcomed, but as I articulated earlier, there are concerns about how HIQA is going to enforce the licensing and how it is going to inspect and access people's homes. Ultimately, if licensing is not going to be a superficial act of these Houses of the Oireachtas, and if it is to mean something, we need to have a clear sense of what the enforcement framework is going to look like. In regard to nursing home registration, HIQA had to go to the District Court to seek the cancellation of a licence. I believe we need to do something stronger here. HIQA needs to be invested with greater powers to cancel the licence of a provider if wrongdoing is found. A much clearer message must be sent to the public that much swifter and more comprehensive action will be taken by HIQA if there are concerns. Right now, there is a belief among the public that we do not have an enforcement regime that will speedily respond when there are concerns and that too much time is taken. The reality is that abuses may continue to take place in the time it takes to make an application to the District Court. We must take more immediate action.

We very much welcome this Bill. We want to see it move at a timely pace through this House and on to the Seanad. We need to see a substantial beefing up of the substance and content of the Bill for us to have the confidence that we will have a comprehensive and rigorous licensing, inspection and enforcement regime for home care support in this country.

Deputy John McGuinness: There is no doubt that the Bill is needed and that the regulatory framework to which the Minister of State commits is needed. In fact, it is long overdue. I am happy to see the service providers in this area regulated. I am also happy to see HIQA applying standards and that there are safeguards for the users of the service. Likewise, the role of the chief inspector and the work to be undertaken by that office is necessary. I read through the Minister of State's statement and I found no fault with the intentions of the Bill, and the reasons it is needed.

However, the question I have for the Minister of State is whether he has costed the consequences of the implementation of this legislation because there is no doubt that all of what he is going to enforce through it is going to cost the service provider and, at the end of the day, it is the customer that will pay. As private and not-for-profit companies implement what is necessary under this Bill, they will incur huge costs. I have not seen any breakdown of the expected consequences of those costs for individual service providers. How is the Minister of State going to regulate for that? Are we going to have a situation like that of the nursing homes? They are price takers. They constantly complain that there is no profit in their sector because the Department is the entity that makes them price takers and that the Department has little or no consideration for the actual cost. If you do not acknowledge the

actual cost, you risk the possibility of a lower standard being applied when the chief inspector or HIQA is not watching. That is my very serious concern.

The current situation is that the Government pays for up to 3.9 million hours of disability services. Over the period from 2020, this has increased substantially. There is also provision for 26.7 million hours of older people's services. I support care of the person in the home. I want to see more of it. However, for a hospital to promise families that the service providers will provide a certain level of care to older people being discharged to their homes only for that not to be delivered is a bad way to do business. Those in the hospitals should be truthful to the families concerned so that they know what they will be given rather than being promised a lot more. The Minister of State has to address that because it is not fair to families who opt to care for these people at home. It is not fair for them to be misled by the hospital as to what can be delivered.

I am not saying it is the hospitals' fault. The expectation is that the staff will be there. However, the reality is that staff are forced to make all sorts of efforts. They are forced to do five minutes here and then 15 minutes over there, which really makes little or no contribution to the person's state of care or to the family. They are pushed to the pin of their collar to fulfil the hours given to them by the service providers. Many of these are commercial entities as distinct from not-for-profit or community-based entities. I would like to see far more community-based providers so that people in local nursing homes would be getting care provided by people who are deeply interested in a standard, even without the legislation being in place. I am deeply concerned about the current situation. It is not right that people are not given the care their families are promised.

I will make reference to a matter I have raised here and was referred to earlier on in the debate, the taxation of carer's allowance. Today, Revenue informed my office that it would not be undertaking inspections that might identify where arrears have arisen. I accept that. With regard to value for money, I ask the Minister of State to look at the money we are currently spending on caring for people in their homes and tell me whether he believes we are getting value for that money. Does he believe those being cared for are getting value?

Deputy Michael Cahill: Home support services are vital for our older people, people with disabilities and their families. They allow individuals to live independently in their communities and their homes and help to reduce pressure on hospitals and residential care settings. Despite ongoing investment, the home support system in Ireland is facing deepening challenges that require urgent policy attention and sustained resourcing. It is fair to say that the majority of us wish to keep our loved ones at home for as long as possible.

Today, 5,500 to 6,000 people remain on home care waiting lists in Ireland. Waiting times vary significantly by region. People in rural areas wait far longer than those in urban centres. In the Cork-Kerry region, some 1,300 people are on waiting lists due to staffing shortages. This represents nearly a quarter of the national total. The waiting list in Cork-Kerry is the longest. It is equivalent to 25% of the national waiting list. That has to be addressed.

I recently received a reply from the HSE regarding respite care. It said that, unfortunately, due to exceptionally high demand for respite services, the HSE was only able to allocate a maximum of two weeks' respite to clients requesting it. This is a new change. The service has been halved. Families usually got four weeks. My office is dealing with numerous cases in

west Kerry, throughout the Iveragh Peninsula, in mid-Kerry, in east Kerry and in north Kerry. It is just adding to the pressures on families who wish to look after their loved ones in the home.

Persistent problems with recruitment and retention hinder service delivery. In some rural counties, recruitment has been extremely low. In large parts of Kerry, only a handful of carers have been hired for more than a year. The average time to hire a home care worker can be long, which compounds delays in service provision. Workforce scarcity contributes directly to waiting lists and limits the number of home support hours available to clients. The Department of Health has criticised the HSE for rationing home care hours to stay within budget. This practice is seen as having negative impacts on individuals' health and on patient flows through the wider health system.

Although the provision of home support hours has increased compared with previous years, the system is still under strain and access can feel arbitrary without statutory entitlement. There is a lack of statutory home support rights. Ireland does not yet have a fully implemented statutory home support scheme, meaning there is no legal entitlement to home care comparable to the provisions of the fair deal scheme for residential care. This contributes to unequal access, a lack of transparency, variable standards, inconsistent waiting time data and a lack of formal quality benchmarks tailored to home care needs.

There are financial and administrative barriers for carers. Family carers are under significant strain. Many face long waits of more than four months for decisions on carer's allowance appeals, exacerbating financial stress. Current eligibility rules and means tests for carers' supports are seen by advocacy groups as outdated and not reflective of modern care realities. The 18.5 hour limit on carers' working hours has an impact on continuity of care and recruitment as some carers cannot work additional hours without losing support.

The Home Care Coalition, a group of more than 20 organisations, has called for increased investment and has highlighted that home support receives significantly less funding than long-term residential care despite rising demand. There is strong sectoral support for the implementation of a rights-based statutory homes support scheme; a dedicated workforce strategy; carer career pathways; better pay, training and retention supports for home care workers; and reform of financial supports for family carers. It is critical that the Government fully implement a statutory home care support scheme with guaranteed entitlements and national quality standards; invest significantly in workforce recruitment and retention, including pay, training and career pathways; address the rural-urban disparities in waiting lists and targeted regional strategies; reform carer's allowance and supports to reflect modern care demands and reduce administrative delays; and increase home support funding in future budgets to close the gap with residential care investment.

Home support is more than a service. It is a lifeline that enables dignity, independence and quality of life. Today's statistics show that Ireland's ageing population and rising demand make reform urgent. With the right investment and policy leadership, we can build a home support system that truly meets people's needs. I welcome the Bill and ask that the Minister of State look closely at County Kerry's situation. We need more home support and carers.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Bill is a step forward but it is a really small step forward. What we needed was a giant leap to really take this by the scruff of the neck. Five years ago, loads of promises were made and we were expecting to make further progress in relation to regulation

and the provision of care. What we are seeing now is more privatisation when we need more community-based services. We need more resources and people. The reality is that without addressing affordability, the Bill means nothing. I am really concerned. I am contacted regularly by people who are stuck in hospital beds. They want to get out but there is no package, no care plan to get them from the hospital bed to their home where they want to be. Sometimes the package is granted but there is no package there. It is all well and good. Does the Minister of State know the guilt that families are feeling when they are told to take their loved ones home and they have no one at home to mind them? There is no care package to mind them. They are being put under pressure in the hospital because the hospital is crying out for beds. The person themselves, the mother, father or family member, wants to get home. Who is going to look after them? I know of people who have given up their jobs and got a shift. I know families that are lucky and are big enough that someone is staying there every day. The pressure it is putting on the families is just immense. We do not need privatisation. We need more HSE care assistants to provide services for these people.

There is a nursing home in my constituency, Heather House, Gurranabraher, on the old orthopaedic campus, the St. Mary's campus. There are 19 beds in a special dementia unit. In August the HSE said it was being snagged. On 16 October, I was told it was completed. On 22 November, I was told they were waiting on registration. Yesterday they were still waiting on this registration. With the number of people I am aware of in the north side of Cork, I could fill it. Not the HSE, I could fill that dementia unit today at Heather House.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Write to us on that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will. I could fill that today. I am dealing with one family. The back garden of their house backs onto the wall of the hospital and they cannot get into it. The man's family are looking out the door when they are caring for their father and there is a dementia unit right there, 200 or 300 yd from his house. Another lady has to stay miles away because there is a shortage of dementia units and beds where people can go. The staff tell her daughter that when she comes to visit, the improvement in her mam is visible and that they can all see it. She is miles away; half an hour or 45 minutes away. When you have a small family with just two people who have their own families trying to make that journey, we need to provide this care locally.

We want to take giant steps forward. We want to work with the Minister of State on home care supports and services. The healthcare assistants are going on strike, the HSE support services in Cork, the home care assistants. I want to send my support to and express my solidarity with them. I ask the Minister of State to do everything in his power to resolve the case because they are really needed.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I welcome this Bill to finally regulate home care services. The Social Democrats have long advocated for a statutory right to home care and this regulatory framework is an important element of that. As it stands, home care services remain unregulated, despite the vast majority of home care hours being funded by the HSE. While State-provided and State-funded home care is subject to HSE standards and policies, that is no replacement for statutory independent oversight. Unlike the nursing home sector, HIQA has no role in regulating services. For instance, it does not set standards,

monitor compliance or register providers. This regulatory vacuum has prevailed for far too long despite the potential risk to service users. In reality, there is no barrier whatsoever to entering the home care sector. If a provider is not receiving State funding, there is no obligation for them to comply with HSE standards and policies. Given that millions of hours of home care are privately funded each year, that should be a cause for real concern. This Bill to regulate services is therefore long overdue, as is a statutory right to home care.

We can all accept that residential care is rarely anyone's first choice. Most older people prefer to stay in their homes and the State should support that. Remaining in the home can allow people to retain their independence. It is associated with better health outcomes and is much more cost-effective than residential care. More importantly, every person deserves a meaningful choice in how and where they live. Home care provides that choice. It provides the respect and dignity that we all aspire to towards our older years. The current model of long-term care in Ireland, with its over-reliance on nursing homes, denies too many people any real say in where they live.

In 2023, Sage Advocacy published a report on long-term care in Ireland from a human rights perspective. One of the key issues identified by Sage was the infringement of people's right to liberty. Why? It is because there are insufficient long-term care services in the community that would enable and support people to remain in their own homes. I would like to take a moment to commend Sage Advocacy on the incredible work it does in this space.

This is not just theoretical. The lack of home care services in some parts of the country means that nursing home residents are not prioritised for home care. That further compromises their liberty, as they have to remain in a nursing home setting against their wishes. Sage found that many of these residents would require relatively little assistance to live in their communities but the support simply is not there. The easiest option, and often the only one seriously pursued, is therefore for them to remain in a nursing home. Without the necessary services in the community, nursing home care is presented as a *fait accompli*.

When it comes to waiting lists, at any one time thousands of people are on a home care waiting list. They have been assessed and approved for home care but no carer is available. At the end of September, 5,392 people were waiting for home care, up from 4,805 at the beginning of 2025. In the waiting lists there are significant regional disparities, with particular black spots, as we have heard, in Donegal, Mayo and rural parts of Cork. The worst performing integrated healthcare area, IHA, is Cork South Lee. It consistently has the highest waiting list in the country and accounts for over 40% of the entire south-west region home care waiting list. Although this is not captured in the data provided to TDs by the HSE, we know that some older people are waiting over a year for home care services.

With this level of unmet need, it is particularly galling that there is no action plan to tackle home care waiting lists. It is all well and good to pontificate about the importance of home care and moving away from the State's over-reliance on residential care but what is this Government actually doing to make that a reality? Demand is not going to taper off, it is only going to rise. A 2025 ESRI report found that between 2022 and 2040, annual home care hours would need to increase from 28.7 million to between 44.9 million and 54.9 million.

At the higher-pressure end of that projection, that is a 91% increase.

I acknowledge that the number of hours provided by the HSE in 2025 exceeded expected activity by 1.46 million hours but that has not had a substantial impact on waiting lists. The target of 24 million home care hours for 2025 was too low to begin with. The 2026 target also lacks ambition at 26.7 million hours. We also know from ESRI estimates that over 7.6 million home support hours were privately purchased in 2022, accounting for 26% of all home support hours provided that year.

Clearly, there is a huge level of unmet need in this country. In the absence of a statutory entitlement, large numbers of people will continue to pay out of pocket for expensive private home care. From my observations of constituents who have come to me with these issues, it is often at the end of a conversation, when we are talking about the other pressures in their lives, that they also mention they cannot get the care they need for their father, for example, who is at home and needs support. It is when they come to me with other issues. There is also a massive amount of unseen pressure that is simply not reported by people.

A statutory right to home care, despite this Government's stated commitment to introducing a statutory home care scheme, remains undelivered. Delivery of this key Sláintecare reform has been allowed to drift for almost a decade. In 2017, the current Tánaiste and then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, committed to a statutory right to home care. That very same year, the current Minister for foreign affairs and then Minister of State for older people, Helen McEntee, said the statutory scheme and necessary regulations would be delivered in two to three years. In 2019, the Secretary General said that a statutory entitlement was an absolute priority for the Department of Health and was going to be introduced shortly. In 2020, when the statutory scheme was originally earmarked for delivery, the new Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, committed to delivering it by 2022. In the years since, the statutory scheme has largely been sidelined. As of last September, the Department was still researching different funding models more than five years after it was supposed to be delivered.

The Minister of State may deny it but it is quite clear that the statutory scheme is not a priority. In the latter part of the previous Minister for Health's tenure, he stopped talking about the statutory scheme almost entirely. Any requests for updates were met with stock responses about the importance of progressing regulation. The new Minister has continued to stick to that narrative. I accept that progressing regulation is important but if it was so important to the current Minister and her predecessor, why are we only taking Second Stage of the Bill now in 2026? While regulation is an important step on the road to a statutory scheme, it is a far cry from delivering the radically different model of long-term care that is so desperately needed, which was promised after Covid. The reality is we still only have a statutory scheme for nursing home care and not home care, which is discretionary. In 2026, the system still incentivises residential care, despite the clear preference of many to be cared for at home. Why is this disparity still not addressed? I sincerely hope that the delivering of a statutory right to home care has not been put on pause until the work of the commission on care concludes. That is not to say the work of that commission is not important but we do not need another report to tell us that a statutory scheme is required. We just need a Minister and Government willing to deliver it.

On the commission on care, I will make a couple of broader points about our elder care model, which I hope will be addressed by that commission. One of my primary concerns with the current model is the financialisation of services. Increasingly, care is being viewed as a

commodity. We see this most aggressively in the nursing home sector, where 80% of beds are privately run. Increasingly, the nursing home sector is being financed by international investors. All the while, smaller community-based nursing homes, which should be supported, are on the verge of extinction. We also see this worrying commodification of services in home care, with just 36% of home care provided directly by the HSE in 2024. This move towards increasingly contracting out public services is often thought to result in efficiencies but the argument does not hold up. This is because most of those supposed efficiencies have costs, as we just heard from one of the Minister of State's colleagues. Those costs tend to be borne by workers, patients and service users.

The commission on care should articulate a new vision for elder care, one where the State leads in the provision of publicly-funded integrated care delivered primarily in the community. All of this, of course, is the vision of Sláintecare. This new model should have a deliberate bias towards the home in sharp contrast to the current elder care model. Groups such as Sage Advocacy and ALONE have consistently advocated for alternative care options. Unfortunately, a major deficit in delivery has prevented the realisation of such ageing-at-home policies. I note that the EU care strategy - there was a national action plan for 2023-24 to respond to that strategy - looks at that visionary, end-to-end system of care, where we recognise that across the course of all of our lives, we all receive, and many of us give, care. That is where we need to be at. That is about radical reform, not this piecemeal progress.

Returning to the Bill before us, I once again reiterate the Social Democrats' support. It is welcome that the Minister has taken on board concerns related to paediatric home care packages, which my colleague, Deputy Rice, and others raised with her last year. Children were omitted from the draft scheme but the Ombudsman for Children, HIQA and the previous Oireachtas health committee all recommended their inclusion. According to the ombudsman, over 650 children with complex needs are in receipt of paediatric home care packages. Providers of these services should be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as adult home care providers. I welcome that these providers are now captured in the Bill. I do, however, have concerns about other provisions, for example, the exemption from regulation, as we heard, of service providers with three or less clients. The pre-legislative scrutiny report recommended that all State-funded services should be covered by this legislation and the associated regulations but this was not accepted. This exemption presents potential risks for clients in terms of standards of care and protections. Equally, there are very real risks for workers in terms of exploitation and bogus self-employment. In particular, I have concerns about migrant workers who might be more vulnerable to exploitation when it comes to pay and conditions. I do not accept the Department's response that this exemption is needed to ensure the legislation is proportionate.

I will raise a couple of points on the subject of workers. The biggest challenge facing the home care sector is the recruitment and retention of staff. In response to this looming crisis, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, established the strategic workforce advisory group in March 2022. Six months later, that group published a report with 16 recommendations. For a while, there seemed to be momentum behind this group but that has stalled completely. The implementation group has not met or published a quarterly progress report since July 2024. Implementation just stopped without explanation, even though only three of the 16 recommendations had been implemented when the most recent progress report was published. A further three recommendations were paused due to the HSE recruitment freeze that was in

place at the time. What of the other ten? At the end of last year, my colleague, Deputy Rice, was told that an updated strategic workforce advisory group report would be published following a survey of home care workers and healthcare assistants. You would have to wonder why this is only happening now. Where is the sense of urgency?

While it is regrettable that implementation has been put on ice once again, I hope two issues in particular are finally addressed this time. The first is a real living wage for workers and not this Government's version of the living wage, which of course is not a living wage at all. The real living wage currently stands at €15.40 per hour. Anything less would show a complete disregard for these vital workers. This must also be accompanied by a commitment to maintaining parity with a real living wage going forward. Another pressing issue that must be addressed is the payment of mileage rather than travel time because that is a real problem for those workers, particularly in rural areas.

Ultimately, this Bill is a step in the right direction, albeit a small one, which should have been taken years ago. Clearly, the provision of person-centred care is just not a priority for this Government. If it were a priority, there would not be this piecemeal approach to reform. Frankly, it is unforgivable that almost six years on from the first Covid lockdown, we have made virtually no progress on developing a new model of care for older people. Reports have been published, evaluations are ongoing and a commission is under way but what has actually changed for people in receipt of this care? It is very little, more importantly, for those who are not in receipt of this care. The whole system of elder care is still weighted towards residential care, with the wishes of older people still seen as little more than an afterthought. Rights-based care will continue to be purely notional in this country without more radical reform. This Bill may be welcome but it represents the bare minimum intervention.

I spoke with my daughter this morning; we had breakfast together after our Pilates class. She worked in the home care sector right after she left school a number of years ago during Covid.

She loved the work. She loved being with people, providing them with care and providing them with the dignity and respect they need. She worked for a private home care provider under HSE funding. I started to tell her about this Bill and what is being done. She was passionate about it and wanted to share with me her experience, which I said I would share on the floor of the Dáil today. She said that as a worker in that space, the pressure you are put under to commodify care and simply move in half-hour slots between one service user and another and to try to provide them with dignity in that time was virtually impossible.

When we talk about privatisation of care I am not saying there are not good people in those places who are trying to provide care. Quite the opposite, people get into that work because they want to do this. They want to provide care for people and provide them with dignity and respect in their most vulnerable time of need. Many of those business owners are trying to do exactly that. Ultimately, care cannot be commodified.

In the AI space, we hear about this massive labour displacement that is coming. Do you know what you cannot automate? Care. We need to invest in it as a State and respect the work of care that has been largely undervalued by our society across the globe, mostly because it is done by women. That goes for paid and unpaid care. We need to start thinking about it differently, looking at it differently and start valuing it.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the home support providers Bill. It is long overdue, as my colleague Deputy Gibney said, that there is a statutory scheme for the registration and inspection of home support providers. Regulation and oversight are essential, particularly where care is delivered behind closed doors in people's private homes and to people in vulnerable circumstances. This Bill establishes a process for registration and inspection but it is largely silent on the principles, standards and obligations that should underpin the delivery of professional care in a person's home. That silence is not a technical oversight. It is a substantive gap, and it needs to be addressed. The Bill does not set out the scope of home care, the professional duties owed to care recipients, or the safeguards required when care is delivered to people who may lack decision-making capacity. This omission is particularly striking, given the extensive work already done in this area.

As far back as 2011, the Law Reform Commission in its report on the legal aspects of professional home care identified key principles that should inform any legislative framework. These include independent living, privacy and dignity, quality of care and the protection of adults receiving professional home care. These principles are not adequately contained in this Bill. Section 21 of the Bill allows for regulations concerning needs assessments, the care, welfare and well-being of service users and the preparation of support plans. This is positive but regulations alone are not enough. There must be a clear statutory requirement that home care is delivered through a rights-based approach, one that not only considers needs but the outcomes desired by the person receiving care.

The Bill is also silent on contracts for care. There is no legislative requirement for a written agreement that protects autonomy and independence and safeguards against financial abuse. This is despite the fact that contracts for care in nursing homes are already subject to oversight under consumer protection legislation. There is no justification for a lower standard simply because care is delivered in the home.

Safeguarding is another critical gap. Many recipients of home support lack decision-making capacity and may have no family or informal supports. Questions therefore arise such as who signs the contract, who receives information and who can raise concerns? These are safeguarding issues, yet the Bill does not address them.

The Law Reform Commission's recent work on adult safeguarding informed by national safeguarding standards provides a clear framework that should be reflected in this legislation. While the Bill provides for complaints procedures, complaints are only one part of safeguarding. There must also be statutory provision for the recognition and reporting of safeguarding concerns, appropriate information sharing, the appointment of safeguarding officers and the mandatory training of staff on human rights and respect for will and preferences.

Crucially, the Bill makes no provision for access to independent advocacy. We already recognise the necessity of independent advocacy in nursing homes and disability services. The Department of Health's own safeguarding policy confirms its importance. There is no credible reason why people receiving care in their homes should have fewer protections.

The Bill lacks guiding principles. The Law Reform Commission has been clear that principles matter because they shape how statutory powers are exercised. Accountability in particular must be explicit for providers and individuals within organisations, for their actions

and interventions. This is especially important where care is provided to people in vulnerable circumstances out of public view.

Registration and inspection are necessary and welcome but they are not sufficient. The legislation must be strengthened to include guiding principles, enforceable standards, safeguarding obligations, access to independent advocacy and accountability mechanisms. If we fail to do so, we risk regulating the process of home care without really protecting the people who rely on it. This would be a serious missed opportunity and one we should not allow pass.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am delighted to get the opportunity to speak on the home support providers Bill. The Government is committed to supporting people to stay in their homes as long as possible. It is something I feel passionately about, and the Government feels passionately about. The State currently invests heavily in the provision of home support through the HSE. Home support is provided by the HSE and then indirectly through national contractual arrangements with private home support providers and not-for-profit organisations. Huge funding has gone into this area over the past number of years but there is still a huge amount of work to be done. As our population ages and more individuals prefer to stay in their homes for as long as possible, the demand for quality home care increases. However, with this demand come significant challenges we must address.

First and foremost, funding and resources are major concerns. Many home care providers struggle to secure adequate funding to meet the needs of their clients. Current Government supports often fall short, leaving both care workers and recipients in precarious situations. Many families are forced to pick up the financial burden, which can lead to stress and anxiety.

For me, the biggest challenge is the workforce shortage. Recruiting and retaining qualified home care givers is becoming increasingly difficult. In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, the HSE is at full capacity in terms of what it can do on the home care side of things. It outsources to different providers but still every single week I have somebody in touch with me who has challenges. They have the hours approved and are delighted to have them approved but the workforce is not there to meet the demand. In rural Ireland in particular, this is a huge issue. I spoke with a woman recently. I will not give her exact details but she is almost 100 years of age. She was in hospital before Christmas but is back out. She has been approved for three visits per day, one hour each, for 21 visits over the course of a week. They cannot get anybody to service it.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I will work on that.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I will speak to the Minister of State specifically about it offline. It is these sorts of incidences. It is approved. The will is there but the specific person is not there. I appreciate that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, will take that on for me because I have another case as well of a lady in her early 40s who due to her medical condition is unfortunately wheelchair bound. When this lady left hospital they could not get anyone to cover the hours, so she ended up going into the local nursing home. She was in the nursing for six weeks all the while her hours were approved. Huge work was done by the HSE and the providers but they simply were not there. Something might need to be done on the education

side of things such as making sure there is more access to home care packages qualifications but it is a huge issue in rural Ireland.

I am from a place called Skeaghvasteen in County Kilkenny. There might be somebody in Kilkenny city but to drive from Kilkenny city to Skeaghvasteen for a half hour or an hour will not pay them in terms of paying for diesel. It is a huge issue, and it needs to be addressed. The lack of standardisation across services can also be problematic. If you have different agencies providing home care, there is inconsistency in training and quality of service but I think this Bill will really help. I really welcome this element of the Bill where you get that consistency. If we could join it up with some sort of ETB or education training course - a level 5 or level 6 course - that would be really helpful.

We also have to consider the emotional and psychological challenges for families and care givers alike with the stress, pressure and anxiety these families are under. By the time they come to me they are on their knees. They are nearly begging. These people are going to the wall themselves but they need that bit of hope and support. The right to be in your own home is huge. That is really important.

Addressing the challenges in home care and home help packages is not just about improving services but it is about enhancing quality of life for our elderly and for our vulnerable populations.

6 o'clock

Together we can work towards a future where everyone has access to compassionate and reliable home care. I trust in the Minister of State that when this Bill is brought through, it will make a difference to families right across the county, but in particular in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny and my constituents who I represent on a daily basis. I appreciate him taking a couple of individual cases on board.

I am going to finish up now because myself and Deputy O'Meara have a Pilates class at 6.30 p.m. and we need to get to it. We are meeting the Social Democrats afterwards.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I am more interested in the food after the Pilates class. I welcome and support the Bill, which provides a registration framework for home support providers while making it an offence to operate a home support service without registration and incorporating transitional arrangements for existing home support providers.

Home support providers will be required to adhere to a registration framework supported by national quality standards developed by HIQA and meet minimum requirements set out under ministerial regulations. The Bill will safeguard service users and raise the quality and consistency of care nationally.

It is on the consistency of care nationally that I want to focus some of my contribution. I acknowledge that the Minister of State and I represent constituencies in the same HSE region, which is HSE mid-west, and I also want to acknowledge his work and passion in this area. I particularly want to acknowledge his recent visit to the Newport day care centre and the work he is doing there. Among other issues we are working on in the constituency, I want to recognise that.

I also want to recognise and discuss the major challenges we are facing in north Tipperary in relation to home help hours. As many other speakers I am sure will say in the debate and have experienced, it is not really an issue getting hours allocated for someone who needs them, particularly an elderly person in their home, but there is a major challenge in getting those hours filled.

I have two examples I would like to share without giving personal details. These are two really challenging cases. We have lots of cases out there of people who need the help at home, but these are two cases that I find hard to understand how these individuals are still in their homes while their care hours have been pulled because private providers are no longer able to meet their contractual obligations.

One individual had two carers coming in twice a day, but consistent care ceased in October. I am told that sometimes they receive a reduced schedule or none at all. They no longer receive a schedule in advance, which is highly unsuitable for a family trying to cover the level of care for this individual. This person has motor neurone disease. The person has no mobility and requires the use of hoists to get in and out of chairs and beds. It came as a massive blow to the family to find out that the hours were being cut because the contracted provider could no longer fulfil its contractual obligations. I do not know how a family with the added stress and worry of a family member who needs to be cared for at home can function when people are trying to go to work or to school and having to fit this in around schedules. This person can be cared for best at home with their family in a loving environment, but the family is really struggling now.

Another case I have relates to an individual who was getting three calls a day, with one hour for each call, seven days a week. There were three different individuals calling to the home. The family recognised the level of care was exceptional and the individual getting the level of care relied on it, but really appreciated it, needed it and never had a complaint about it.

Of the three people who called, one went on maternity leave and another left the job to go into another one, which resulted in the contract being pulled. I have been over and back with the HSE on both of these cases. I will send them on to the Minister of State straight after this debate and thank him for that. To be fair to HSE, it has been very good to come back to me during my engagements with it, but the responses have not solved the problems for us. That is the reason I am highlighting both cases. They are high-dependency cases. These are two individuals who can stay in their own homes, but only if care is provided.

That brings me to my overall point and one that others have made, which is that the contracted hours to private providers clearly are not working in my part of the country and I imagine they are not working in many parts of the country. There is a battle with the HSE to get those hours filled. It can only do so much when it does not have all of the staff to cover the hours that are being allocated to people. It is creating enormous uncertainty, worry, anxiety and massive pressure on the person relying on the care but also the family members who are then trying to step in and cover the care when they simply cannot do it.

For those carers who are caring for a loved one at home, that hour in the day or couple of hours in the week could be their only respite. It might be the only break they get to get out the house for an hour or even half an hour and do something for themselves. In the cases where

the contracts are being handed back, that is being pulled from them. It is just being taken from them. It is the one respite they can get.

While I am on carers and family carers, I want to acknowledge the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and the issue he raised last week relating to the Revenue during Questions on Promised Legislation. I understand the good news he got today in relation to back taxes that were being claimed. I acknowledge that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle did an extremely important piece of work.

Carer's allowance should not be taxed. The amount that carers save this State by caring for loved ones at home - in their own home or the loved one's home - is absolutely astronomical. The level of personal care they get and the love they get from the loved one who cares for them should not go unrecognised in the sense that the allowance is being taxed like an income. The carer does not do that work for an income. They do it out of personal care, love and affection for their family member and should not face a tax bill. If that carer did not do that work, how much would it cost the State to have their loved one in a healthcare setting or in a hospital bed when we need those beds, particularly in the mid-west?

I acknowledge the challenges that are there for homecare providers in terms of the level of staffing that is there and the challenges placed on loved ones and family members when that care is pulled, but also the stress that is being put on carers by being taxed. That is something we really have to look at in the context of a budget.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome the Government bringing forward legislation to regulate the private home care sector. What is disappointing is that after five years, all the Government has to show for itself is this Bill regulating the sector. What was promised was a statutory home care scheme, which would be a better and improved version of the nursing home support scheme.

Sinn Féin believes that people deserve to live in their homes as long as they can. The Bill falls well short of what is needed. It addresses nothing about access or affordability and more deeply entrenches the privatisation of care. Crucially, it fails to recognise the difference between funding for basic assistance and high-need care with few exceptions. We often talk about the need for issues to be addressed more wholly or holistically. The Government needs to place a greater priority on supporting people to age in place through home support and adoption grants to ensure healthy age-friendly homes.

Long-term residential care needs to be available for those who need or want it but it should not be the default. We should seek to reduce our reliance on nursing homes and re-orientate care to support this. I recently saw an age-friendly home development down the country and it looked like an incredible development. I also commend the work of the team in Monaghan County Council on its age friendly programme, but a greater priority needs to be placed on this issue and more resources directed there.

Part of why this Bill is disappointing is not only does it not appear that it is simply one part of a whole strategy in terms of care and housing for people as they age, it does not even appear to be the level of substance needed to address this one area - home care within the home. Facilitating people to age in place reduces pressures on our hospitals. It facilitates people to continue to live in their own communities. I say "facilitates" rather than "allows" because

unless it is necessary, people should be entitled to age within their homes or facilitated through appropriate accommodations to age within their own communities as much as is possible.

In only the past day, the media have highlighted what has been described as a growing crisis in the number of older people becoming homeless.

The Simon Communities have highlighted that hundreds of people over 65 are living in emergency accommodation. Ireland's ageing population necessitates a whole-of-government response, in terms housing, our funding models and care. That is the Minister of State's specific remit. What I ask him take away from this is that the Government is not doing enough and certainly not at pace. For all the announcements, statements of strategy, implementation plans, action plans or whole-of-government announcements, it often seems that we actually get very little done and that something needs to change radically. What is needed now is for access and affordability to be addressed and the Minister of State to outline how the Government intends to address the difference in funding based on need. I would really appreciate if he could do this in his reply.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The debate around this is very important. I generally welcome the Bill, which is important. Safeguards for users and providers are important. That it covers the care of both the elderly and those with disabilities is the crux of this. However, there are issues around provision and standards that we need to keep an eye on as well as the availability of home help hours and home care hours. We have censuses and we have them for a reason. They allow the State to plan for what is coming down the tracks. Everyone knows that we have an increasing age profile in our population. By 2030, we will have over a million people over the age of 66. County Laois is estimated to have between 13,000 and 14,000 people over that age. According to the 2022 census, 11,978 people were over that age. That is four years ago. We know that the population overall of the county has increased and certainly the population of the elderly in the county has increased. Rural isolation is a problem in Laois and we have big rural areas across the Slieve Bloom Mountains and Slievemargy to the east and west and to the south of the county down to Ballaghmore and places like that, back across to Erril. Loneliness and isolation are damaging both mental health and physical health. I have dealt with a number of cases where there is a shortage of home care hours. People are what is called waitlisted and they will get word that they are entitled to hours and the HSE is granting hours but it is not in a position to provide them. I have to say this to the Minister of State because his party has been in power for 15 years. The emphasis has been on private nursing home care but, in general, people want to be at home. Nursing homes should be last resort and only if they really want that and if the level of care required requires them to be in a residence. Private nursing homes have been the number one Government option and they have mushroomed. We have seen the scandals in County Laois, in The Residence for example, not too far from my own house. We have seen the Drumneen situation and that is an unfolding story. We have seen difficulties in Kilminchy Lodge. Some private nursing homes have been good and Ballard Lodge was one but, unfortunately, it has been closed due to HIQA. This was one that had good reports and good satisfaction from residents and families was being reported.

We need to enable people to continue to live independently and to do that there are a few basic requirements. Homes being adapted to meet people's needs is obviously important. I want to pay tribute to the housing section of Laois County Council. In my experience, any money that is granted is matched by the council in terms of alterations for stair lifts and

extensions and making a house wheelchair accessible. That is really important. The provision of day care centres is important. It is important that people go somewhere one or two days a week to have a meal with other people and meet their contemporaries and have a social event, etc. The meals on wheels service is really important. That is the other part of it but the most important element is the home helps. They are the four legs of the stool and if one is taken away it will keel over. That is the best way of saying it. We also recognise the right of the people to have a level of care in their own home and to continue living there. All of these provisions are far less expensive than nursing homes or acute hospitals and the preferred option of the majority. I want to highlight that I deal with cases where people are being discharged from hospital, but the home care package is not in place. I have had to intervene and I recall one case where an elderly woman was being sent home on a Friday evening and there was absolutely nothing where she was going home to. The ambulance was on its way with her and was subsequently turned around and brought back. She would not have survived over the weekend without the appropriate care. She did not have what she needed in her own home at that stage. There needs to be proper joined-up thinking between the hospitals and the home care services and that needs to be sorted out. We need to be sure that we have the home care package that the person needs when he or she goes home.

I also want to address the issue of the stopwatch approach where 15 minutes is given for this and 15 minutes for that and the person has half an hour. We have home helps racing around in rural areas. Laois is a sizeable rural county and I have outlined some of the extensive rural areas in the county. If people are racing from one place to another, they are not able to provide adequate care. There is not time to carry out the tasks. There needs to be flexibility to allow the home care workers, as they are now being called, to provide that level of care. Very little can be done in half an hour. We all know that sometimes in our office we can get very little done in half an hour. It could take an hour or an hour and a half to deal with one issue. The same applies for a home help going to look after an elderly person. We need to be mindful of that.

Another issue I want to address is the quality of the employment. There is a labour shortage in the sector, but we still have a lot of people who are not employed or under-employed. I find it very frustrating that some of them are not trained to provide the level of care. I know from my time on the Committee of Public Accounts that HSE employees are cheaper in the long run and in the short run than staff provided by private companies. Private companies providing care and they are doing a good job but less than 40% of care now being provided directly by the HSE and that needs to be looked at and that needs to change. Those directly employed by the HSE have better terms and conditions and we need to make sure that they are upheld. The quality of jobs in the sector is really important. It is important that all people have a proper living wage whether they are employed by the private sector or public sector.

Travel times and travel costs in rural areas need to be looked after because a home care worker might be visiting seven or eight people in a day. It is also important that we have trained and vetted staff, because the safety and well-being of the service user has to be paramount. There is a need for clarity regarding how home care will be funded. There is a Bill coming and we need to make sure that this can be paid for and that the people who need it, regardless of whether they can pay for it, should not be prevented from getting home care.

On the Bill itself, the overall provisions relate to registration, which is a positive move for the HSE, voluntary and private providers and a chief inspector of social services. In England the social services departments are very local. They are based in the local council areas, which is very interesting. They organise home helps and home care and they have huge powers. We do not have that here. The State will have to examine whether the big HSE model is the best one for doing it. Does that need to be separated out? I do not know. I do not want to create another quango. I am not going to tell the Minister of State to do that. I am all for reducing. A lot of these bodies are needed and I am not going to get into the populist argument about doing away with quangos.

However, the question of who provides this needs to be examined. The regulation of providers and the minimum requirements and standards are really important. The Bill has provisions for the inspections of businesses and homes, including private homes. That needs to be very sensitively handled, as do the interviews with service users and home helps plus the families. That could get into a really tricky area. Without running away with ourselves, I think we can see that would need to be handled in a very careful way because you could get bogged down very easily in that, but, obviously, it is important that there are interviews with the service users.

I urge caution on the exemption for the providers with four or less clients. I will not come down on it completely-----

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Three or less.

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----but it is an area that may need to be looked at. I know what the Government is trying to do. It does not have to do away with the informal pieces that are there. I think Deputy Charles Ward is okay with my taking another minute or two. As regards the informal care and what the Government is trying to cater for there, I do not want to kill that off altogether, but it may need to be examined. I am not totally sure about that. It makes sense to have informal arrangements.

Overall, I welcome the Bill. The Minister of State has heard what I said about the labour shortage. That is directly related to the quality of the jobs. The HSE is the cheapest way. That has been proven. If the Minister of State looks at the figures, he will see it. The last I saw, I think the private providers were €34 an hour or thereabouts. That is two years ago now. What is important here is that we increase the number of people in this. Surely within that 5% who are unemployed at the moment we can find some people who can be trained up to provide care in their local communities. We need to be able to keep this local. A few people driving across the county, from Ballylinan over to Camross or somewhere like that, will not work. We need to be able to keep it within local areas. It does not work otherwise for the home helps. I hope the Minister of State will look at that area.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity to speak on the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025. It is long awaited. Initially, it was due before the House five years ago. Repeated delays in its publication have had a detrimental effect on carers and the people who require home care support. This Bill means that home support in Ireland will be independently regulated for the first time. It shows a troubling

disregard for home support providers and users in this country. It is all about regulation. I look at it from my unique point of view as somebody who has worked in this sector and been a victim of a lack of regulation with regard to defective concrete. The two go hand in hand. To me, looking at this, the sectors are completely unregulated. This is going on in 2026 and it needs to be looked at seriously.

There are currently no regulations that home care providers have to adhere to in areas such as staff training and infection control, which is vital when we are dealing with people with sickness in certain elements. There are no consistent minimum standards of care that apply to home care providers universally and there are no independent oversight provisions for home care services, which is vital. Due to absence of regulation, there is a huge disparity between the level and quality of care geographically. If you are dealing with somebody in Malin Head who has to go to certain parts of Malin or into certain parts of Buncrana, they are on the road and they are on the clock, basically. In Donegal, for example, there are severe shortages of home carers for quality services. It varies massively due to enormous pressures put on home care workers. It is about that time element again whereby you are going in to look after and care for somebody and you are getting them ready for bed but you are also conscious that there is somebody else waiting for you and that the clock is ticking and the time is running down. According to the HSE, there are nearly 3,000 people receiving home support in Donegal and over 350 people waiting to avail of that support.

Speaking of such cases, I will not mention names, but during a phone call today a cousin of mine who is in Letterkenny general hospital told me about a 93-year-old lady in the hospital who wants to go home. She is ready to go home. She has been in there for nearly a fortnight but they cannot get the home packages in place. They are close. I would be grateful for anything the Minister of State could do to intervene in this. I will get back to him on that.

Any further delays could push the implementation of this out to 2030, which would be another unacceptable delay. As we have heard throughout the House, we have a population that is ageing and we need to evolve with that. We need to ensure that the sector is regulated and that quality and consistency of care is raised nationally in order that we have a standard that is the pride of Europe. It is all about the standard and the pride in your work. That needs to be really looked at, especially when it comes to home care. The impression you make on that person determines their day. It is very hard to encourage people to come into this sector because it is demanding and you are on the road for 12 hours a day. You leave your house at 7 o'clock in the morning and sometimes it is 9 o'clock at night before you get home, when you have put the last of your clients to bed. Steps need to be taken to encourage home care providers to continue this service. More people need to be working in this sector.

There are definitely ways around this. When I was training, the HSE would come in to try to recruit, but it was not flexible. I was willing to do that type of work but the issue for people like me was that we were needed on full-time contracts. A full-time contract would not have suited me because I was providing care for my four children, but I had time during the day - four hours, perhaps - when I could have provided care in the community. I definitely would have done so if flexibility had been provided for. That flexibility leaves open the possibility that when your children grow up, you could go into it full-time. If that were sorted out, it could be a real game changer because a lot of parents would be willing to go into this area and, if they were paid properly, would make it their career. We need to look at that in the long run.

In 2016 the Government made a commitment to introduce a statutory right to home care through a statutory home care support scheme. A decade later, this has still not been implemented. We need to make sure it is done. The fair deal scheme provides statutory rights to residential care, but no equivalent scheme currently exists when it comes to home care. We need to look at that because, as has been said, we have an ageing population. In Donegal, for example, we have a heavy reliance - when they are operating - on our hospitals in Lifford, Dungloe and so on. We need to make sure we have sufficient beds in place. There will be people who need care, but the majority of people can be provided with care at home and they will stay in their home for as long as possible before they have to go into some form of care. I recognise that.

There is a way out of this if we get the staffing levels right and look at the model. The HSE model is a good example, but the flexibility would be a game changer. It is a matter of allowing parents to come on board properly trained. That is a very important aspect of this. If you are training somebody to do this properly, it takes two years to go in, do your modules, come out of it with a good standard and then do your work experience. Then you go out into the community and you are doing that with a family. It is challenging and hard but it can be done. I look at the private model and I believe we are missing a trick here. The private providers charge a certain amount of money. If we were to pay people the right wage, we would attract numbers that would actually solve this issue. Going forward, we need to look at that. If the Minister of State looks at the model in place now, which does not have that flexibility, he will understand that by allowing somebody to come in at certain times of the day, tied not to a full-time contract but to some kind of contract that means they will give part-time hours, they will be able to fill a gap and help to meet staffing levels, and in the long run they will be attracted to come into this sector.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the carers and the home helps who come into our homes and take such good care of our mothers, fathers and loved ones.

Without them, quite frankly, I am not sure if I or my family could function properly day to day. That is my first thought on this Bill.

Overall, the Bill is very positive. It is timely that the sector is regulated. I still see some gaps, however. First and foremost - I have heard my colleague speak about this - the time stops and gaps of half an hour, three quarters of an hour or an hour two or three times a day need to be looked at further and addressed. In rural areas, constituent after constituent comes to me to tell me that their mum or dad has been approved for a home care package, which is in place, yet they cannot find the staff. It seems that once the street lights finish, people do not want to travel further and further into the rural areas. One of the reasons for that could be the fact that many of these agencies are not paying mileage to their staff. As a result, it is a far more efficient use of their time to do three or four calls in Drogheda or Dundalk rather than spending 20 or 25 minutes travelling to Togher or Tallanstown to do one call for half an hour, only to come back into town to do the rest of the calls. That is an issue the length and breadth of the country, not just in County Louth.

I wish to speak about the most important gap in the Bill. I am grateful that we have somebody who may call for half an hour two or three times a day but with the passage of time, some of our loved ones will need more care. We know that people thrive in their homes and

are healthier for longer when they are able to stay in their homes, but the unfortunate reality is that the cost of getting somebody to stay in the home with their loved one and provide that care is way beyond the means of the vast majority of people. We have the fair deal scheme, which is very effective, but now we are seeing that people who do not necessarily have to go into a nursing home at a particular stage are now seeking to apply for the fair deal scheme and go into a nursing home because the alternative is not there. Two or three calls a day are no longer sufficient. The family cannot make up those gaps. Therefore, the alternative is to seek a place in the nursing home. I am looking for a statutory footing on which we would adopt a fair deal scheme to allow people to stay in their homes. It might seem complicated, but at the same time, I do not think it needs to be overly complicated. This is a scheme where I believe an entity like Revenue could be brought in. At the same time, we provide a value of the asset, which is the home, which evaluates the care, and we pay the nursing homes. If we come in and have an agency taking care of our parents or loved ones, we are invoicing them and we can upload it to Revenue, surely there is some way to make a scheme that is simple and effective for families so they are provided with care in their homes and can stay in their homes, hopefully to their very last breath? They would not go into nursing homes until the very last second.

There is a practical side to this too, because in County Louth the nursing homes are full. The waiting lists are long. If people ring a nursing home today to look for a place for a loved one, the home will ask if they have started looking in County Meath or County Dublin because the waiting lists in some cases are closed. We are not addressing that issue because the demand is so strong. I believe we are handing over our care to too many private companies. We have to look at the community model once again. The issue, in essence, stems from the fact that if we give people the option to be able to stay in their home and use their asset to provide for the care in their home, we alleviate the pressure on the nursing homes and we guarantee the best type of care to people in our society.

Deputy Peter Roche: Like previous speakers, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025, which represents a significant and long-awaited step in reforming how home support services are regulated in this State. I want to quickly touch on my hope and expectation that this legislation becomes a real enabler of access to home supports across our country, particularly in regions like the west, where the need is acute. In the west, we are crying out for home care supports. I have many constituents, especially older people, people with disabilities and their families, who have been assessed as needing home support and are still waiting for months on a list. There are people who want to remain in their own homes and are trying to avoid hospital admission or premature placement in residential care, yet the supports they need simply sometimes are not there.

This Bill matters because it begins to put structure, consistency and oversight into a system that has grown rapidly but unevenly by regulating providers, setting national standards and bringing transparency to who is delivering services. We finally have a foundation on which access can be expanded fairly and sustainably. For too long, access to home supports has been dependent on geography. In some parts of the country, services are available. In others, including large parts of the west, providers struggle to recruit, services are fragmented, and families are left waiting. Regulation alone is not a fix, but it is a necessary first step if we are serious about building capacity, supporting providers to operate safely and ensuring that services can be delivered consistently across our regions.

My hope is that this Bill will not be an end to reform but, rather, the beginning. I hope it will support the development of a stronger home support sector, encourage provider stability and ultimately lead to shorter waiting lists and better access, particularly in areas that have been historically under-served. Regulation must mean more than standards on paper; for the people waiting at home in the west, including Galway East, regulation must translate into real supports. Delivery must be timely where we live.

I concur with Deputy Butterly in acknowledging the people caring for and supporting people who want to remain at home. Like most people here, we are fundamentally aware of the daily challenges for carers. Sometimes all they need is respect. The one thing that is damning for them is that the respect is not shown from the legislative side. That is why I welcome moves that we are making here.

We are all well aware of people who, as was mentioned, are caring on a 24-7 basis and do not look to the State for anything. They are doing a magnificent job out of love for a loved one who wants to remain at home. I want to say to those who do not demand pay, and those who are getting pay and need respect and support, that I thank them for that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I acknowledge Deputy Malcolm Byrne and his group in the Public Gallery. It is the second time I have seen him there this evening. I hope they are enjoying their venture into Leinster House and I hope their visit goes well.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome the moves in this Bill to regulate private providers and to set minimum standards for services. However, this Bill is far from what it could have been. The current and previous programme for Government promised a statutory home care scheme but after five years, the Government has only got as far as a register of private providers. There is nothing in this Bill about access and affordability of different levels of care.

It is a system designed around private provision. The ambition of the Government should be to build a genuinely public health and social care system accessible to all. In County Galway, 362 people are waiting for either a new home care package or additional supports that they have been found to be entitled to. These are often very vulnerable people. Many are suffering because they are not receiving those supports they are entitled to. This is a critical support to ensuring people can continue to live independently in their homes for as long as that is their wish. Government failure is pushing older people into hospitals and nursing homes and adding to the pressure on those services, when people could and should be cared for in their own homes.

I was recently contacted by a woman who had spinal surgery. She is unable to move out of the bed by herself as a result. She is not getting the full allocation of hours she needs. A man who recently had been in hospital for 15 weeks has Parkinson's disease, heart failure and other health issues. He cannot walk. He needs help to be fed. He needs to be hoisted in and out of bed. The family was told he would not get all the hours he is entitled to and not in the evening time or at weekends. We cannot underestimate the human impact of this situation. Some of the most vulnerable people are being failed. Delivering proper home care would reduce the length of hospital stays and reduce the risk of hospitalisation, which would, in turn, reduce hospital pressure. We have an ageing population. We need to plan and prepare for this and do everything we can to support people to live independently and take the pressure off hospitals

and nursing homes. The long-promised statutory home care scheme centred on access and a legal entitlement to home care must finally be progressed to ensure people have that choice, alongside proper resourcing and building up the public system instead of relying on outsourcing.

I also want to speak about healthcare assistants who provide these services. The HSE has not fulfilled previous agreements with staff around working conditions and issues like the lack of a roster system and overtime pay. All of this is leading to stress and burnout. I know the staff in a number of counties have been balloted by their union but the same issues are replicated across the State. I call on the Minister and the HSE to engage with their representatives and get these issues resolved. They are a very important group of workers who deserve to be treated fairly.

Finally, I just want to express concern regarding the letters that have been issued to family carers, who do Trojan work as we all know. We need absolute clarity that family carers will not be pursued by the Revenue. They have been treated shamefully for so long, despite the fact they save the State billions of euro every year. Pursuing them for tax liabilities would be in stark contrast to the treatment of Government Ministers who have been overpaid and have failed to pay back money owed. These family carers play a vital role. The Government's objective should be to support them and not to pursue them for tax liability. We need absolute clarity on this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I should have mentioned a group that is representative of the British-Irish Chamber of Commerce. I call Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This Government has significantly neglected older people for many years. We saw during the Covid crisis the number of older people who were moved out of hospitals and into nursing homes were in their thousands. It happened all of a sudden. It happened on the direction of the HSE and it had the effect of bringing older people from hospitals, without testing them properly for Covid, and placing them into nursing homes. It seeded Covid in nursing homes throughout the country. It led to hundreds of deaths, no doubt. I have a letter from the National Treatment Purchase Fund which proves this was a policy of the HSE at the time. It was a shocking, horrendous action.

We also know that when the nursing homes tried to close first, the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, said they could not and had to reopen and allow people in and out of the nursing homes, again seeding Covid in those nursing homes. When people were dying in those nursing homes on their own, the Government had a policy of not letting their families in to be with them when they died. Hundreds of people died on their own in solitary confinement in this country during that time. It was an incredible injustice to them. Even when those people died, their families were often prevented from even attending their funerals. Supplies of oxygen for nursing homes were actually taken, intercepted by the HSE, and stopped going into the nursing homes. Testing was inadequate. In the end, about 2,300 people died in those nursing homes. Of all the deaths that happened during Covid, 27% happened in nursing homes. The nursing homes were the ground zero of the Covid crisis and the most exposed place during the Covid crisis.

One of the real angers people throughout the country have at the moment is that most Governments internationally have had fully public inquiries with the powers to compel people and papers. This Government did not do that. It resisted it. All it is having instead is a review, one where there is not the power to compel people and papers. It is not being held in public. I have no confidence in that review. I believe it is likely to be a whitewash. I believe this Government does not want to have an investigation into its own actions during Covid, and that is a big problem.

I will just give one example. There is a constituent in my county called Mary Bartley Meehan. Mary had a husband and a son in a nursing home at the time. Unfortunately, her husband, Ultan Meehan, had cancer in the face and wounds in the face. So badly was he treated that when Mary went in to see her husband, there were maggots in the wound of Ultan's face. It was a shocking situation. It is an absolute disgrace that Ultan died and Mary has never received justice for the treatment or death of Ultan. Why? It is because HIQA does not have the right to regulate and oversee the clinical decisions in nursing homes. If the Minister is seeking to really update the legislation in terms of protecting older people, can I urge the Minister to give somebody the opportunity to regulate and oversee the clinical decisions made in nursing homes? The ombudsman for older people has cried out and urged the Government to do this. It is a necessity to do this. I think it is really important.

Turning to another issue in terms of older people, I got an answer to a parliamentary question recently that showed 100 patients in the country still occupying beds two months after they had been clinically discharged. Two months after the doctors said they could do no more for people in hospitals and they should be somewhere else, either at home, in a rehabilitation centre or some step-down facility, 100 patients are still occupying those beds. That is not on. We found out, shockingly, that 12 of these individuals have been stuck in hospital for more than nine months. Actually, two people have been clinically discharged for more than two years and are stuck in a hospital for the want of a step-down facility, a nursing home or home care.

In terms of home care, so many of the people who do home care in this country do the most wonderful work. It is actually incredibly hard work. If anyone has cared, they will know it is really hard, intense and difficult work but it is fiercely rewarding as well. In this country, though, we do not match really important work with income. Those who mind our children, our older people and children in State care are among the lowest paid in the country. We will give plaudits and patronising conversations here all day long but we will not pay the same people who are looking after our mothers and fathers and that is quite something. If you want to know what the Government values, watch where the money goes.

I will say that there is a significant problem, which has been mentioned before, with the lack of home care hours. That has the effect of forcing older people into nursing homes, which usually shortens their lives somewhat. It is also more expensive for the family and the State. Another major problem, because of the lack of the proper resourcing of this, is that so many nursing home hours fall. There are old people around this country today who expected to have a carer in at 5 p.m. to help them with their dinner or to help them to get ready for the evening. Those carers did not show up. Those nursing home companies did not provide them. No shows are happening at a rate right across the country and this is having a significant impact. There is a lot that can be done but I do not believe the Government means business in terms of older people in this country.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the Bill. We all recognise the benefits of being able to allow people who need some level of support to remain independently in their homes as long as possible. In amending the Health Act 2007, the legislation will create the first statutory regulatory framework for home support providers, with mandatory registration, HIQA-led standards, inspections and criminal penalties for unregistered operators, bringing Ireland into line with other jurisdictions, including our neighbours in the UK. This is all well and good, but it is about the enforcement.

Over the years, the HSE has been gradually outsourcing services for older people and persons with disabilities to private companies. Between 2018 and 2022, the total home support hours increased by 22% but the HSE-delivered hours only increased by 7.6%.

By 2023, according to HSE data analysed by Home and Community Care Ireland, the independent sector, made up largely of private operators and a small number of voluntary community providers, made up 61% of all home support hours, with the HSE only accounting for 39%. The outsourcing trend has been driven by a number of factors, not least that the HSE is struggling to recruit and retain home support workers due to public sector pay issues, rostering and the basic demographics of the country with an ageing population, creating a demand that apparently rose faster than the HSE could hire staff or pay for them directly. This is what has led us to this situation where we are dependent on an insufficiently regulated sector and we need to bring in meaningful legislation. Hopefully, this is meaningful.

With so many private operators, there are massive turnovers of staff, and the risk to the patient care is suited to fit the schedule of the company rather than the needs of the client. I have seen this myself where a constituent who was catered for directly from the HSE was shifted into a calendar that did not suit her needs. However, when you try to raise issues with the provider, you are routinely ignored. There are no checks and balances or parliamentary questions, only an indirect means of seeking an inspection. This is why an enforceable, HIQA-led standard is important, along with a system of proper inspections, stiff penalties for companies that operate without being registered and meaningful consequences for operators that do not provide adequate levels of care for clients.

Of course, these higher standards may require more training and more staffing in a sector already facing shortages, which may mean people rightly needing to be paid more. That is all well and good, but the Minister of State needs to accommodate the additional outsource costs. We need guarantees that people will be paid properly. Compliance demands could also reduce the available care hours. We need some form of grant system to ensure that the companies will do this without taking away the actual hours for service.

Ultimately, what we are trying to do is keep people at home. This legislation, by the time it is scrutinised and amended, will hopefully create the framework. The resources for training, inspection and enforcement absolutely need to be provided, as well as measures to make the sector more attractive for the additional workers needed.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Independent Ireland had asked the Government that there would be no means test for carers. It said that there should no means test for carers for one very good reason: how can you put a price on care? People are coming into people's homes for an hour. They are driving ten miles, driving to different parts of the county and giving an hour to a family member. The statistics show that with the way the birth rate is going at the

moment, we will not have the population to care for the older generation - maybe in two decades' time when the Minister of State and I will be looking for care. There will be no carers if the Government disincentivises them now.

I was very lucky that my father was cared for at home. As a family, we cared for him but we also had carers who came in to help us. They came in and lit a fire while we were out. They came in and did the basic things. From a security point of view, he knew they were coming, what time they were coming at and he knew everything about it. They became part of the family. To me, carers are family. They are looking after our loved ones in their homes, in their own environment, and in the years when they need it most. These people who looked after us and gave us benefits to make sure we could rear our own families. They paid their taxes, worked hard and looked after us as a generation. The least we can do is provide them with care in their own homes.

A woman I know very well from my parish phoned me. She has to drive to the Kerry border every day to look after her father because they cannot get a carer. That is what she has to do. They cannot get the adequate hours. She is trying to work in between doing that and being a mother. She is trying to run all of this because we cannot get the carers.

We talk about nursing homes. People have called me trying to get people in for nursing care. They cannot get into places because they are full. Why are we putting an obstacle in the way, stopping people being cared for in their own homes? If we took in the financial aspect of it, it makes economic sense for them to be cared for in their own homes if it is possible to do so. It costs the State less to have them cared for in their own homes. Why are we putting an obstacle in the way of care when the Government itself cannot provide it? We do not have the staff for it. We do not have the infrastructure in place for it.

Independent Ireland started by saying that it did not want carers to be means tested. Yet, they are getting letters now from the tax office. They are calling me asking what the letters are about. The letters are hostile. Anyone who gets a letter from the tax man says they are hostile. It puts the fear of God in them. We are saying to the carers to go out and care but we are going to frighten the life out of them in case they have a dot out of place. There is no price on care. Remember that for our own families. Would you not love to see your parents being cared for properly in the confines of their homes? We have had it. Why are we not giving the opportunities to other people to have the same?

Deputy Michael Collins: This Bill is about something very simple, namely who we trust to go into homes of our older people and people with disabilities and what standards we insist on. Independent Ireland supports strong, common-sense regulation. Nobody wants low-quality or unsafe care happening behind closed doors. There are positives here. For the first time, home support providers will have to register with HIQA. There will be national standards and proper inspections with the person's consent. There will also be a public register that families can check and emergency powers to stop dangerous services. We will finally get real data on where home support hours are going and who is providing them.

Regulation on its own is not enough. There is still no statutory right to home care, promised since 2017. It is still missing today. This Bill does not deliver a single extra hour of support. You cannot regulate your way out of the staffing and beds crisis. Once again, family carers are invisible. There is no relief, no supports and no move to end the means test. Home help

workers, who have been doing an incredible job, are being contracted for one set of hours, and then pressurised to work far more.

A worker might have a 20-hour contract on paper, something that affects their mortgage and family life but is regularly pushed to work 30 hours or more. Others with 39-hour contracts are only given 30 hours in a week, with the rest pushed into the next. Split shifts are now routine. Workers sit at home, unpaid for hours, only to be called back out while the agency staff are being brought in to fill gaps. If they get sick, take a holiday or need a day off, they are expected to arrange their own cover without proper rosters. They are missing out on overtime and other entitlements. That is a direct loss of income for people who are already stretched. These workers are not asking for anything extra; they are simply asking for management to honour their contracts, proper 39-hour rosters issued four weeks in advance, and agencies used only when absolutely necessary. In my own constituency, families waited months for basic home help hours. An older person should not have to choose between a nursing home they do not want and no support at home. Independent Ireland stands for safe care, fair care and a real choice to age at home.

I just had a case where an 82-year-old man in west Cork with stage 4 cancer has been discharged from Bantry Hospital after three months and cannot get home help. This gentleman needs help with personal care and administering his medication but there is no home help available to this vulnerable man. In another case, a gentleman in west Cork has been waiting for over four months for home help. The HSE is unable to provide it as it has no staff available. That is what we are being told. Private operators, such as Bluebird Care, that work for the HSE were unable to provide it due to the lack of staff. Interestingly, Bluebird could provide it if the family were to pay privately, rather than through the HSE.

In another case, a young man, again from west Cork - I have the addresses here but I do not like reading out addresses because it might identify someone - is farming and caring for his mother who has dementia. He can only get home help Monday to Friday. There is no home help at the weekends. He wishes that farming was a five-day week job but it is not. Another case features a gentleman in a retirement village in west Cork who is looking for home help for his wife who has numerous medical issues. He is unable to get the home help.

The bottom line is that the home helps can do the extra hours but they will not be given them. Those at the top tell me that there are no home help hours available. There is strange carry-on going on behind the scenes that I would like to get to the bottom of but if I opened the can, there would be worms flying everywhere. There are people who get home help in the evenings and the home helps are calling at 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. and putting the person to bed. There seems to be no allowance for people who would like to go to bed later. CoAction is adopting a new method for training their recruits called "earn as you learn" whereby those who are training to work as home support workers with CoAction do not have to have a QQI level 5 in order to apply for the position.

7 o'clock

They do the practical work with an experienced qualified support worker, study in the evenings and get paid from get-go.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have read through the Bill entirely. When we look at the opening sections of this Bill, it is about people entering the home and the quality and standard of the type of person who comes in as a home carer. I find it amazing that we are now in 2026, and we are discussing that. This Bill should have been before this House 20 years. It is totally outdated. This Bill does not push for oversight. It risks more bureaucracy and costs for the people. I have been in the House for the entire debate. It has been mentioned that there are four- to five-month waiting lists to apply for carer's allowance. That is the average in this country at the moment. That is the average that TDs around this House are telling the Minister of State. I will be honest with him: I have seen it go up to six to seven months with people applying for carer's allowance. We now have a situation in the Cork-Kerry region where we have 1,300 people on a waiting list. A total of 25% of the national waiting list is in the Cork-Kerry region waiting for home helps. That is an absolute disgrace. Nothing has been addressed about that. We are not addressing that in this Bill. We are not addressing it in this House. We are seeing the figures go up week after week and month after month but we are doing nothing about it. The one thing this Government is good at and has excelled at is waiting lists and statistics. That is what it is really good at. However, the waiting lists are not going down. They are only going up. That seems to be continuously the situation here.

Deputy John McGuinness and I brought up an issue relating to the Revenue in this House last week. Deputy O'Donoghue also just spoke about the Revenue letters that went out to people and home carers. I am delighted that Revenue has written back to some of us as TDs over the past number of days and said it will not be pursuing people prior to 1 January. There is a lot more on people's plate when they are a carer for somebody when they are stressed out of their minds about how they get the dinner and cleaning done and a small bit of a break in the day to receive a letter like that from Revenue. I have yet to see a revenue commissioner in this country or any other country leave a bundle of cash behind them when they have to collect it. I would be seriously questioning the intent of Revenue after that. With the style and standard of the letter it sent out to everybody and what I have read through, and I have seen plenty of copies of them come through my office, I would seriously question the intention of the Revenue.

The Bill is good. In fairness, there are an awful lot of standards in this Bill, which mean a lot of bureaucracy. There are HSE and ICT systems that cannot provide the virtual beds that we are being told about where people can convalesce at home and be monitored. That system is not in place. That system was meant to be there two years ago. There are regulations on the State that the Government will not be able to deliver in this Bill. While the intent might be great, but the Government will not be able to deliver it. It cannot bring down waiting list. How will it deliver this?

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister of State is well aware, there are an awful lot of problems regarding the provision of home packages. One of the big issues that strikes me is the privatisation of it. At the moment, about 60% of the home care packages are provided by private companies. It used to be the opposite way around. It was 60% to 40%. A total of 60% or 70% of packages in years gone by were provided by the State through the HSE. That is still the way it should be done if possible. While this Bill is about regulation, one of the issues is that if a person signs up to be a home care provider at the moment in this country, he or she will be paid about €16 per hour. The minimum wage is €14.15. It is not even €2 above the

minimum wage for somebody to go out there and care for an elderly person or a person with disabilities. That is something that needs to be looked at. Yet, when the State provides that and 60% of it is provided by the private companies, it is paying nearly double that per hour because it has to pay for the administration fees and the profit margins that the companies have to make. That is their business. Fair play to them. That is fine. The State should be ensuring that they pay adequately. I talk to all of the people on the ground, and they keep telling me that they cannot get carers and people to do it. It is because they are not paying them enough. We need to be pay over €20 an hour to attract people to go in to do that kind of work. That is the reality. If the State does not step up to the mark in respect of that, it will simply not be able to provide that service.

The other issue we have to recognise relates to what they are doing when they go out to provide the care. It has now moved from being just care services only. If an elderly person needs to have a shower or whatever, they can get that done. However, if they need a few dishes picked up off the table and put them in the sink and run the brush around the floor for two minutes, the carer is not allowed to do it. The carer cannot do that. If there is something spilt on the floor, which could be a slip hazard, the carer is not allowed to mop it up. They are not allowed to that because it is not a care service. That is one of the key things that changed in the past number of years, which an awful lot of elderly people that I talk to tell me is a huge problem. There needs to be a way in which they can provide service that they need as well as the care services out there.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is vitally important that we do not take carers and care workers for granted. Too often that is the case. Regarding carers themselves, there was an awful lot of talk about that in the general election. What has happened since then has not been anywhere near what was committed to. We are very lucky in this country that we have such a strength in terms of family carers who are willing to offer support out of duty, responsibility and love. The truth of it is that we should not take that for granted. Abolishing the means test for carers is not only the right thing to do, but in recognition of the fact that many people are providing an amount of care that the State could never provide and are getting very little and in many instances nothing for it. We need to redress that. The Government has not moved fast enough. That is also true of people who are working in care.

There is the whole issue that we used to call them home helps. There is huge respect for home helps given the work they do. They are now called healthcare assistants or home support workers. When we talk about them being taken for granted, which is too often the case, they have balloted for industrial action because of their frustrations at trying to get the HSE to implement things that it has already agreed to. That includes being paid for their 15-minute break. Most people who are working in jobs that are paid by the hour are paid for their break. That is what they are expected to be able to do. In many instances, they are not getting the required 11 hours between shifts. That is a breach of the working time Act. When that happens, the HSE is breaking the working time Act. There are split shifts too often and outsourcing. As my colleague emphasised, it is more expensive in the end. It does not provide the same standard of care. We need to tackle the issue of increasingly the HSE moving towards outsourcing home care. We have some of the best people working as what was previously known as home helps. They are fantastic and committed people. They are committed to their clients, but they need the support and recognition that they deserve. The HSE has to implement

those things that it was previously holding back on. I fully support the actions of the health care assistants and home helps.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí mé ar an nguthán le Sonia Borwick díreach ansin. I was just on the phone with Sonia Borwick. Northside Home Care is on day five of strike in relation to caring. Sixty men and woman are on strike because what is happening them is unfair. In relation to the Bill, the carers have been on strike since 16 January. They are not doing this lightly. They are doing it because they have been pushed to the edge. These people who looked after my grandparents are all proud northsiders. Yet, speaking on the phone to her, she informed me that six of these workers had been made homeless while working as a carer. They are living in a hub in Coolock while still going out every day to care for others. That really sunk in. For years, these workers had pay parity with other healthcare staff. When the recession hit, they were included in the Haddington Road agreement. Through decisions that were made in this House, they effectively lost out. They also lost section 39 status. This was not because their work rate change, but because decisions were made in here. These were always workers who were working the best they could. The only thing that changed is how they are being treated.

Speaking to them, they told me that their pay has gone down since 2007. This policy choice needs to change. The Minister of State agrees with me. There has been a lot of work done. I welcome some of the work that his Department has done. There is no price that we can put on care. There is no price on seeing and knowing that your loved one is being cared for correctly. These workers are not asking for us to change the world. They are asking for us to change their world. It is very simple for us to do that. I will continue to raise this with the Minister and the HSE. It is day six of the strike tomorrow. They will be outside of the Dáil. It is important that we listen to them. They need to be seen. The Northside Home Care Services is vital in north Dublin. They look after all of elderly, sick and anyone with a disability. They are vital. They are tireless workers. We need to look after them. I urge the Department to look at and change what is going on with these men and women.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the Bill because there is an urgent need for the Government to prioritise the enactment of legislation aimed at setting out a registration framework for providers of home support services. I want to reference in particular those sections of the Bill under which the chief inspector of social services at HIQA will have responsibility for establishing and maintaining a register for home support services operating in Ireland. The Bill will also provide for criminal liability to be assigned for unregistered home support services and the ability to cancel registration of a provider where serious non-compliance is established. As I understand it, the HSE currently operates under its non-statutory home support authorisation scheme, which was established in 2023. Approved providers are merely obliged to adhere to the authorisation scheme's service specifications and associated standard operating procedures. This is not about pointing the finger at any individual home support service provider, many of which provide compassionate care every day and, along with their staff, do incredible work under very difficult conditions at times.

Increasingly what I see and hear from my constituents in County Offaly is that there is a sense they are caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to the care delivered by staff, who appear to have very little training or who are, in some cases, literally unable to communicate with either the person receiving the care or their families because of language

barriers. This is becoming a source of frustration. The staff are often visibly under enormous pressure to get in and get out and onto the next house. This can be very upsetting for everyone, including the staff members themselves. We need to ensure we have a national home support service capable of delivering care according to the highest standards.

In terms of the provision of home help, serious gaps need to be addressed. It has come to my attention many times in my constituency offices that when the staff or home helps take their annual leave, as they are entitled to do, or if they are ill, they are not replaced. This causes a lot of frustration and a lot of difficulty for families struggling to cope to try to fill the gap until the home help comes back. It is unfair on the home help who happens to be out that there is no substitute or replacement while they are gone. This seems to be a recurring theme. It has been brought to my attention too many times and I hope it will be addressed.

We need national legislation to be introduced as a matter of urgency. Reliance on guidelines and what are effectively voluntary codes is not ideal and it needs to be changed urgently. The fact remains that we need to respond far more effectively to the concerns of those families who can clearly identify the failings in the standard of care delivered to their loved ones. We need to listen to these people and take on board what they are telling us. These people are sometimes fearful of speaking out because they feel they are risking the minimal care time they have and receive. They fear it will be withdrawn. It is important that we listen, that we acknowledge the failings in the services, that we strive to improve and that we bring forward legislation to make sure that providers are protected and that the recipients of the care are also protected.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank all of the people involved in home care and all of the home helps around the county of Kerry and around all of the other counties. I know the great work they do in the confined time and space they are given to do it. While I welcome regulation, and the Bill states it will ensure home care is regulated and standards are in place for all home care support for all who need it, the question I ask the Minister of State is whether there is a deficiency in the amount of home help that older people are getting. Will this be highlighted in the Bill? Is the Bill catering for this? I know of too many people who are not getting enough home help. They are left behind on weekends and holidays. When the staff, who are entitled to their holidays, go on their own holidays and things are arranged, no one is there to take up the slack. These elderly people are then otherwise compromised. Will the Bill ensure they are looked after properly? This is what it should do.

We need an awful lot more home help. When someone goes into University Hospital Kerry with a virus or whatever it is, they fully intend to come home but they may have to go to a community hospital or district hospital in the various places. A home care plan should be put in place at the time they leave University Hospital Kerry because they will spend a certain number of days, a week or two weeks at the very most, in a community hospital or district hospital. This is not happening. This is where the void and hurt happens. The family may be not available or may be far away. If we want to keep these old people, and these people who are not able to manage for themselves, in their own homes then some home care plan should be put in place at the point in time they leave University Hospital Kerry. It should not be left to the managers of the district hospitals, who are asked to make the bed available for someone else after a week or two. The conveyor belt keeps going on, people do not stop needing help and another person will need to go into the bed. The home help should be in place and we should have enough home helps.

I know young fellows who have trained to be home helps and I have often asked them whether they are working and they have told me they were not. At the same time, I know of elderly people who cannot get home help. It was awarded to them and allocated to them but no one showed up because we keep getting told there is no staff. I have known these cases and I cannot understand it. If the Bill is going to mean anything, this issue needs to be dealt with to explain whether or not home help is available and whether staff are trained up. If they are not trained up, they should be. As other Deputies have said, maybe we are not paying the home helps enough. Maybe too much pressure is being put on them. I hear they are being told to go here and there and to the next person. It hurts me very much when I hear that a home help is not allowed to do certain things for elderly people who may be not agile or mobile enough to do something for themselves. I know that some of them do so anyway. As I said, they are not supposed to be doing some of these things and this is ridiculous.

We need to develop a model like they have in Denmark. There are hardly any nursing homes there. Why is this? It is because everyone is looked after in their own homes where it costs a lot less. The Government needs to look into this a whole lot more and go into it in greater depth. I appreciate that it is looking after the issue of people not being properly trained or Garda vetted and there could be other problems. It will look after that side of it but we need to work harder on the side of it whereby the patient, elderly person or disabled person is being left without home help.

We have other issues in Kerry also which all concern elderly people. We have a new community hospital in Killarney that has been finished for almost a year. It is a community hospital and nursing unit. It is there on the side of the bypass but it has not been opened. When that is opened, we are supposed to develop the old district hospital and St. Columbanus Home to have a primary care centre and more respite beds. People are being told that where carers mind people at home and have to be with them all the time they are entitled to four weeks of respite in the year.

Those people are entitled to a bit of respite, but they are not getting it because we do not have the beds for respite in Killarney, Kenmare, Listowel, Dingle, Cahersiveen or anywhere else. We do not have enough respite beds. Then we are waiting for a minor injuries unit in the town of Killarney. This could be put into the old buildings and it could be a new modern unit. The space is there but we are waiting for the new hospital to open. What is the cause of the delay? Has the Department the staff engaged? Has the Department found the staff? Those are the questions people are asking.

Carers provide invaluable service. Some of them were terrorised with the notion that the Revenue Commissioners were going after them. Many of them were wondering what they would be done for and what they might be caught for. These things are terrible. The amount of lines the media gave it was totally out of balance and out of kilter when most of it is not true at all.

One of the things we looked for in our programme to support the Government was the abolition of the means test because many of those who care for their people at home are doing it voluntarily and they would do it anyway if they were to get nothing for it. It is very unfair. No one could put a price on the amount of money these family carers are saving the State. They need to be looked after. The means test is totally out of kilter. We are helping them in a

small way this year. It is supposed to be abolished over five years. I am asking the Minister of State to expedite that.

For elderly people I see a great need for therapy and for physiotherapy. When old people go into hospital, they have other problems like viruses and they have different issues. We do not have enough physiotherapists in our hospitals. What would be wrong with having physiotherapists call to people's homes? If a person cannot move around or if there is something stiff with their leg or hand, physiotherapy works for a lot of people and it will work for those people as well. We would save a lot of money if we were to help people with those therapies and ensure they get them in their home or wherever they are. Whatever hospital or whatever care setting it is, we should be providing more physiotherapy for those people. There are lots of other therapies that elderly people would benefit from because when they are not moving around at all, they seize up and the problem gets worse. Two people are needed to operate hoists and such things whereas if the elderly people were kept going as good as they could be and for as long as they could, we would save the State a lot of money. We need to look into a lot of those things.

Why do we not look at the Denmark model to see what is happening there and why they have hardly any use for nursing homes? I appreciate the great work our nursing homes are doing. Indeed, our community hospitals like Kenmare Community Hospital and St. Columbanus Community Hospital do great work for long-term care as well as short-term care. People are very appreciative of those settings as well as the private care that is provided. In County Kerry we have great private nursing homes and they are doing great work but they are all under savage pressure and it is hard at any stage to get a bed for someone. When people are ready to go home, we should have a home care package. There is a lot of talk about it, but it does not materialise. When the person is a good bit better and can and should go home, they do not seem to be able to do so. Even though they are awarded a package and the hours are allocated, it does not materialise for whatever reason.

When I meet the youngsters who are trained up, they say they have not got any work yet. When I meet the elderly person or their family, they say they were awarded home help on a certain date but no one has arrived yet. In line with this new Bill, which is being brought in to protect and look after other measures, I am asking the Minister of State to get some section working to see how long people are without home help. How long after they leave the university hospital and go to the district hospital are they waiting for home help? That is what is happening. What happens when it gets out of order altogether? They have to apply for the fair deal scheme and try to go into a nursing home. The family does not want that, the elderly person certainly does not want it and the Government should not want it because it is costing a lot more. That is what I am saying.

There is some good in the Bill, but I hope a lot more good will come out of it because we need to ensure anyone who needs home help and is awarded it gets it. It should be included in this Bill that someone is going around to see what is happening and why people are not getting home help.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank the Members for their contributions. There were 27 contributors in total and they spoke on a range of aspects of this issue. I welcome the general support for the Bill in terms of regulation. To

recap, the objective of the proposed legislation is to improve the safety and quality of support services by ensuring that registered home support providers do not operate below the standards set by ministerial regulations and that those regulations are provided in a consistent and systematic way. Before getting a registration, providers must satisfy the chief inspector of social services that they can comply with these regulations and other requirements under the legislation.

In the limited time I have, I want to go through a number of the points that were raised by TDs. Deputy Newsome Drennan brought up a number of points. I want to deal with family carers. Deputy John McGuinness referenced this and brought it up last week. The Revenue Commissioners have said today that they will not in any way be looking at previous years. That is to be welcomed. I want to put on record the fantastic work that family carers do. It is acknowledged and respected. They do phenomenal work for their families and loved ones. Hopefully the measure today from Revenue will bring reassurance in that area.

Deputy Newsome Drennan made reference to the adult safeguarding legislation. At the end of last year, for the first time ever, we brought out the first national adult safeguarding policy. Legislation is being prepared and I want to bring it forward as quickly as possible. It was a priority for me as well as the home care providers legislation. I want to see the safeguarding legislation coming forward as quickly as possible. It is something I am absolutely committed to doing.

People made reference to consent for the under-18s. The under-18s are now included in the Bill. They were not included in the general scheme. There was a discussion with the Department of children and they are now included. We will be bringing forward amendments around the whole consent area for people under 18 years of age. That is a very important point.

The other issue was the personal assistance, PA, exemption. It was exempted under the general scheme. It continues to be but there is work ongoing by the PA review group under the Department of children. We want to respect the work it is doing. Depending on the outcome of that, we will look at amendments if the review group wishes to bring them forward but we want to respect the integrity of the PA service. It is hugely important. We want to allow the PA review group under the Department of children to do its work within the HSE.

The three or less clients provision is included in the Bill because it is proportionate.

It was in the general scheme and we want to ensure it is proportionate.

This is all about improving the service. Deputy John McGuinness raised the funding model. Based on the regulatory impact that was done, it was estimated that the cost would be €1.1 million over the first three years for HIQA to be able to bring in the legislation and the process itself. We will engage with the sector on the regulation of costs. We are conscious of that issue.

It is important that Members are aware that the legislation is to regulate home care providers, regardless of whether they are in the public, private or voluntary sector. That is going to bring about an increase in the quality, safety and consistency of service delivered throughout the length and breadth of Ireland.

It is also important to note that this year alone we are looking at 1.7 million additional home care hours. Since 2020 we have increased from 17 million hours to 30.6 million hours. This year there are 26.7 million hours for older person's services and 3.9 million hours for disability

services. I am conscious that, like me, Members here represent people the length and breadth of Ireland. I am in continuous engagement with officials in the Department and the HSE on the issues that arise in respect of the current home care service that is delivered. I will continue to engage with them on the particular points Members have raised today. These are matters I will take up with the HSE in terms of the delivery of the service. We want to get value for money. We want to look after people that are in receipt of the home support service. It is something that I will continue to work on. Regulation is hugely important.

We committed in the programme for Government to design a statutory home care service in the lifetime of this Government. When I came into the brief I looked at it in great depth with the officials. The first step in doing that is to regulate the home care providers, which we are doing with this Bill. I want to get the Bill through. I will work with Members, both here and in the Seanad, to get this legislation through as quickly as possible. I am committed to working with the officials and my Government colleagues to progress the design of a statutory home care scheme. It is an absolute priority, but it must be built on a process. As it stands at the moment, the sector is not regulated. I want to see the home care providers sector regulated. We owe that to the people to whom they deliver the service. The Bill is welcomed by the sector itself. It is something I want to work with it on to ensure we get it up and running as quickly as possible.

The other issues that were raised by Members relate to their own areas and regions. That is something we will take up and work on with the HSE. Regardless of where someone lives, I want to ensure the quality and safety of the level of service that is provided to the public. That is something that is hugely important.

Many of the speakers in the House today have worked in this sector, and that came across. I very much take on board what was said. No one has a monopoly on knowledge in this area. I very much want to work with colleagues to improve all aspects of the home care service. The issue we are debating today relates to the regulation of the sector, which is the first step in the roll-out of a statutory home care scheme.

Other issues that were raised include the work healthcare assistants do. That is hugely important. I very much value that. Members have raised particular issues that currently arise. My understanding is that the HSE is engaging on those aspects. I hope a resolution can be arrived at. Ultimately, this is all about getting to a point where we can put in place a statutory home care scheme in Ireland. This is something the Government and I are utterly committed to, but to get to that point we must regulate the sector.

We have had a very constructive debate here tonight. We will continue to work through the legislation. I welcome further ideas or amendments from Members on Committee Stage when the Bill proceeds to that Stage. The single most important point is that we have now published a Bill to regulate the home care providers sector, which will involve independent regulation of the delivery of the service. I believe this will greatly enhance both the safety, quality and consistency of the home support service delivered the length and breadth of Ireland. I thank all Members for their very comprehensive contributions tonight. I look forward to continuing to work with them on the legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Health pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Mark Ward: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Before I get on to the Bill, I want to say I am disappointed but not surprised that the Government is going to delay this Bill by nine months. Nitrous oxide is an epidemic and will only get worse in the next nine months. The Minister's amendment tonight is symptomatic of this do-nothing Government. There is no urgency and no action. It is delaying this life-changing legislation simply because it is a Sinn Féin Bill. This is no way to govern. I am sure the Minister's team of staff will find problems in the Bill and no doubt he will refer to them when he speaks, but they will be the same problems when the Minister lets the Bill pass in nine months. The Bill should be referred to the select committee at this stage because that is what the committee is for, namely, to tease out any issues with legislation. The Minister is literally kicking the can down the road. I ask him to withdraw his amendment.

As the Minister is aware, nitrous oxide has legitimate purposes. It is used in the healthcare sector, in the medical sector and in veterinary businesses as well. It is commonly known on the streets as laughing gas, balloons and whippets. When people get their hands on nitrous oxide, especially young people, they inhale it through balloons. It cuts off oxygen to the brain and gives a light-headed giddy effect. That is where the name "laughing gas" came from.

When it first came in, it was in small silver canisters of probably about 8 g of nitrous oxide but this has changed because of a lack of regulation over the years into super-sized canisters of 670 g. There are even bigger ones than that. Nitrous oxide causes major problems when it gets into the hands of young people. The Minister does not have to believe me, as there have been a number of reports in the last five years on nitrous oxide. The Mater hospital has said there has been an increase in the number of young people presenting to the accident and emergency department with sensory and balance issues, neurological conditions, mental health conditions and respiratory conditions. I could go on and on.

Just before Christmas, Tallaght Hospital produced a report on nitrous oxide. In the previous 12 months it had 18 people presenting to the hospital who were diagnosed with a neurological condition just because of inhaling nitrous oxide.

These conditions can be life-altering. As was reported on RTE news, children are presenting to Crumlin children's hospital with third degree burns from inhaling nitrous oxide. When let out of the canister, compressed nitrous oxide is cold. If people put it straight to their mouths,

they get third degree frostbite burns. If they hold it in their hands, they get burns on their hands as well.

A recent study by the adolescent addiction service in Cherry Orchard showed an increase of 175% in the number of young people presenting to the HSE's addiction services looking for help with their nitrous oxide use. I have worked in addiction services. When you see an increase of 175% in one year, you know there is a problem.

The EU has produced a report and is looking to put in place a derogation to prohibit the sale of nitrous oxide to the public because of the damage it is doing to people's reproductive health. That is when it is used in a clinical setting, such as in dentistry. God knows what it is doing to young people who are inhaling nitrous oxide if it is causing damage in those controlled settings. Is this one of the reasons the Minister is kicking it down the road? Why wait? We are a sovereign country. We do not have to wait for the EU. We can do this here and now.

The Bill itself is similar to legislation that was introduced in Holland a couple of years ago. There are a few changes. I thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers in the Oireachtas for its help on this. The Bill is 20 pages long. It was not just thrown together. It took 14 months to get to this stage. It went through every kind of critical thinking and stakeholder conversation possible. On that note, I thank the Clondalkin Drug and Alcohol Task Force for its help with the Bill. I welcome those from Dublin city's Comhairle na nÓg who are in the Gallery tonight. They have done a huge amount of work to raise awareness around nitrous oxide among young people. I will simplify these 20 pages. The Bill will require wholesalers to hold a licence to sell nitrous oxide products. Retailers who sell nitrous oxide products will need to be on a register of approved sellers. It will only be possible to sell these products to exempt purchasers. It is a simple Bill that can make a big difference. The Minister has five years. He can kick this down the road for nine years but he has five years and has not come up with an alternative. If he comes up with an alternative in his ten-minute speech after I have sat down, I am open to listening to it, but urgency is needed on this.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Molaim mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Mark Ward, as a chuid obair feachtasaíochta ar an gceist seo. Deputy Ward deserves huge credit for the work he has done not only in bringing forward this legislation but in setting out the issues around nitrous oxide for this House. We know it has legitimate uses in the medical and catering sectors but it is clear that its sale must be regulated in the interests of public health. That case has been made very strongly. Given what has been said by gardaí, customs officials, youth workers and medical practitioners, it is incredible that the Government is seeking to delay this Bill. It is important to say that this Bill will not criminalise young people for simple possession of nitrous oxide. However, it will give gardaí the power to seize canisters from those without appropriate licences.

Unfortunately, the misuse of nitrous oxide has become more commonplace across the State. It is clear that young people are using it because it is cheaper than alcohol and because it is readily available. This House has to listen to the people in the field. Sometimes we do things with the best intentions only for them to have other impacts. Ciara Murphy, project leader at the Finglas youth service, highlighted to "Prime Time" how the price of alcohol is driving the use of nitrous oxide. She basically said that young people at parties may not be drinking

because alcohol is expensive and so they choose nitrous oxide to get their buzz. We have to listen to voices like hers.

Many of the young people who are using this product do not have an awareness of the potential dangers. Many think it is a harmless activity. The reality is very different, however. Nitrous oxide cuts off oxygen to the brain. Those who have treated young people who have ended up in hospital as a result of misusing this product have raised serious concerns. Inhalation often makes users feel light-headed. It can cause headaches and loss of consciousness. In certain cases, its use can trigger serious side-effects, including spinal cord damage. Across Europe, nitrous oxide has been linked to numerous road collisions and yet, unlike alcohol and other drugs, it is not tested for. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

This is a growing problem, particularly now, with the involvement of organised crime. Revenue and customs have said that more than 1,000 large canisters are being seized at ports every week. These are being brought into the State by organised criminal gangs. The failure to regulate the sale of nitrous oxide before now has allowed a new market to be developed, where it is being used as a recreational drug, particularly by young people. We have to take action now. The first step must be the passage of this Bill tonight.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The harms from using nitrous oxide are very well known. I do not think the Minister will dispute any of the information that Deputy Ward has provided. There is not a TD in the Dáil who does not want to ensure that this drug is kept from destroying another young life. We are all in agreement on that. I am mystified as to why the Minister wants to kick this down the road given that we all agree that action is needed. The Minister and the Government say they want to take action but, for some bizarre reason, they just do not want to act now. Will the Minister make that make sense for me?

Figures from the HSE tell us that taking action on nitrous oxide cannot wait. The 175% increase in the numbers attending the adolescent addiction services who have taken nitrous oxide tell us that this is a growing problem. The problem is growing because nitrous oxide is freely available. The people who make it and the people who sell it are far ahead of the Government and moving much faster. They are already latching onto flavours, they have colourful packaging and they are heavily marketing this to children and yet the Minister says that action can wait. That does not make any sense. There is not a town or a village in my constituency or any other constituency that has not seen the upsurge in these cans. You can see the canisters lying around. You see them lying around in the evenings. If the Minister does not believe me, he can talk to his local Tidy Towns group. They will tell him the same. It is everywhere. The reason it is everywhere and the reason it is growing is that it is freely available and unregulated. That is on the Government.

I commend Deputy Ward on the work he has done not just on this legislation but in this area generally. It is incredibly worthwhile work but it all points in the one direction, as the Minister knows. It points in the direction of us taking action. We know what the harms are. We know that young people are taking this as a cheap alternative to alcohol. We know that, in many cases, they are not aware of the potential damage. We know that the potential for damage is huge. There is only one way to deal with this and that is through regulation. That should be done today. The Minister knows well that legislation does not pass in the blink of an eye. It

takes time. If there are issues with the legislation, the Minister should work with Deputy Ward to figure those out. Let us do the pre-legislative scrutiny and get this legislation passed. Let us send a message to young people, to their parents and to our communities that we take this issue seriously and that the Government is willing to take action on it. I urge the Minister to withdraw his amendment.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I commend Deputy Ward and Joseph O'Callaghan in his office on bringing forward this legislation. It is well thought-out and well developed. The Bill Deputy Ward is bringing forward is comprehensive. It does not work against the Government. The Deputy is reaching across the floor, saying that this needs to be implemented and asking the Government to work with us. The Minister has decided to postpone it for nine months. As Deputy O'Reilly said, with how long it takes legislation to get through, it might as well have been kicked into another Dáil by the time the Government gets to it. To be fair to Deputy Ward, for years he has been out front warning about the dangers of nitrous oxide and explaining how young people are at risk and can be harmed. He is trying to do something. You often hear people asking what we do up here. Deputy Ward is trying to make a difference. He is trying to come up with a solution. The Minister should engage with him and with us. We should come together.

This is surely something we can all agree on and work with. A consultant neurologist says this is causing nerve damage and potential lifelong harms and impacts to young people. Sinn Féin and Deputy Mark Ward are bringing forward a solution. The Government has had years to act. Deputies have raised this on the floor of the House. The Government once again is failing to protect young people, to regulate and to act. The EU has recognised its dangerous impacts. Holland has moved on it. Britain is looking at banning it. How many young people must be harmed before Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael finally take action? Is this because the areas the Government Deputies represent in the leafy suburbs or whatever might not be affected on the ground, the way working class and some inner city areas are being affected? Maybe then, if it comes to those doors, the private schools and the children of the wealthy, action might be taken.

One in five young people attending the HSE adolescent addiction services is now admitting to using it. There is a 175% increase in the last 12 months. How can the Government continue to ignore it? Deputy Ward is working hard. We are trying to make a difference. He has done Trojan work. This should be a no-brainer. This is something we should get together on. We are deeply disappointed by the Minister's amendment to move it out by nine months. I ask him to listen to Deputy Ward and withdraw it. We can work together then to make this the best legislation possible. This is not about criminalising young people; it is about protecting them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The misuse of nitrous oxide is no longer a fringe issue. It is not something novel. It is happening in housing estates, parks and town centres, and at the back of parish halls all across the State, urban and rural. It is overwhelmingly impacting young people. This substance has legitimate uses in medicine and licensed food businesses and no one disputes that. What we are seeing now is widespread misuse, industrial sized canisters with no legitimate purpose, and a complete failure by Government to keep pace with what is actually happening on the ground. A dangerous drug is being sold online in bulk, trafficked into our communities and pushed on children for profit. Industrial cans of nitrous oxide are

ending up in the hands of teenagers. Young people are being told this is harmless when doctors are now treating nerve damage, frostbite and long-term neurological harm. Communities once again are left dealing with the damage. Gardaí are left without clear powers and without a steer. The Government is sitting, once again, on its hands. This Bill shuts down that trade, protects children and gives gardaí the tools they need. The question is whether the Government is prepared to act. The Minister's amendment suggests it is not; it is happy to wait another nine months.

The medical evidence is now stark. Consultant neurologists have warned of a clear rise in nerve damage linked directly to nitrous oxide misuse. Young people are presenting with numbness in their hands and feet, balance problems, heart rhythm issues and serious mental health effects. Tallaght hospital has reported multiple neurological diagnoses following inhalation of this gas. The HSE's adolescent addiction service reported that 22% of young people attending the service admitted to using nitrous oxide. That is a startling figure in anybody's language, that so many children are disclosing that as part of their treatment. Those are the children who can avail of that treatment, who are in services, who are connected with the HSE. There are serious public safety implications, too. Driving ability can be impaired, as was stated earlier.

This is why this legislation matters. The Bill introduces licensing for wholesalers and a register for retailers. It bans sales to and by under-18s, tightens online sales and, crucially, gives gardaí clear powers to seize and dispose of products that are being misused.

I want to acknowledge the work of my colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, who has been raising this issue for years and has shown leadership where Government has not in bringing this Bill before the Dáil. Do not wait nine months to take action. We do not need to wait for other EU member states. If we were to wait for EU member states at every juncture, there would be nothing done. That strikes me as the attitude of this Government to any issue that arises in working-class and rural communities. I am calling on the Minister to support the Bill, to withdraw his amendment and to finally act to protect children, public health and community safety. I urge him to do the right thing here, withdraw his amendment and support this common-sense piece of legislation.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all accept that nitrous oxide has legitimate uses in medicine, healthcare, veterinary and catering. This legislation ensures that those who legitimately want to sell, buy and use this are the only people who are allowed so that it no longer has the impact it is having on young people across the country. Deputy Ward is absolutely correct. The Government has known about this for a significant period of time. I do not think anyone has to go too far. I do not take the dog for a walk too often but over Christmas I did, with my wife, my youngest son and my niece. At that part of the Blackrock Road where it hits the Red Barns Road, I came across three of these. They are no longer the silver bullets; we are looking at these big industrial pieces.

A couple of months ago, I was going in to work in my constituency office. I parked in the Ramparts, the Louth County Council car park. There must have been a major party there as there were eight or nine canisters. That is no big deal. We see them every day, every week, almost everywhere, in parks like the park in my own estate. I do not know how many times they have been posted on the neighbourhood watch Facebook page. They are everywhere.

What has also been detailed is the absolute harm it is doing, including neurological harm, frostbite and burns, respiratory issues, nerve damage and right down to the mental health impact that we cannot even contemplate at this point. This is something we can move on today. There is still time for due diligence. The Minister could withdraw his amendment. We could let this go through. On Committee Stage, we could deal with whatever anomalies the Minister says are in this Bill. We could have something fit for purpose, like the Dutch have. I fear an awful lot of states will have something similar before this one does. The Minister and I have had many interactions on the fact that we have not got to grips with the impact drugs are having.

Organised crime has a capacity and an ability and is making an absolute fortune out of this. Unfortunately, it is legal because we have not introduced the legislation. We heard recently from the Garda that there are 169 organised crime groups, with 65% involved in drugs. We need to get serious about the whole drugs issue and about nitrous oxide. The Minister can take action now. I commend Deputy Ward on doing a decent piece of work from Opposition. We would like to see the Government follow through and deliver for the young people out there.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): The Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor will move the amendment when she is closing. I will begin in the same way all the other speakers have begun, by commending Deputy Ward on the Bill he has put before the House this evening. It is important that we can have a debate on nitrous oxide. Regrettably, everyone in this House is aware of the prevalence of nitrous oxide being used throughout the country. It is evident in the canisters on the ground in all parts of Ireland. Deputy Gould suggested it was limited to certain areas or certain parts of constituencies. I represent the inner city and south city of Dublin. It is there throughout every part of the constituency that I represent. This is not an issue that is limited to one particular area of our communities. It is very beneficial that we have an opportunity to talk about it, so we can warn younger people about the dangers of taking nitrous oxide. The dangers are very significant, as has been mentioned already. It has significant neurological impact on individuals and can result in serious physical conditions as well. Somebody who is taking nitrous oxide, I regret to say, is playing Russian roulette with their health.

A number of colleagues have complained about the fact that it is the proposal of Government to put forward a timed amendment. The reason for that is not that this is a Sinn Féin Bill. Deputy Ward will be aware, and Deputy Carthy will be aware that the last time Sinn Féin had a Bill in Private Members' time, I did not oppose it and it went through. It is not because of that. In truth, the Bill only came to our attention very recently, last week, and some time is required to give careful consideration, particularly since at present, and this may not be recognised, it is a criminal offence to sell nitrous oxide for human consumption.

8 o'clock

I want to use the timed amendment that Deputy Murnane O'Connor will propose to engage with other Departments and An Garda Síochána in order that we can determine the extent to which this legislation can be moved forward. Deputy Ward will be aware, from recent developments at EU level, that consideration has to be given to it because of our membership of the EU. The timed amendment has not been designed to vote down a Bill just because it is coming from the Opposition. If that were my objective, I would be opposing it and voting it down now.

As I mentioned briefly, the misuse of nitrous oxide is already addressed under several Acts. It falls under the definition of a psychoactive substance. Section 3 of the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010 states: "A person who sells a psychoactive substance knowing or being reckless as to whether that substance is being acquired or supplied for human consumption shall be guilty of an offence." The sale of it for human consumption is a criminal offence. Section 74 of the Child Care Act also states: "It shall be an offence for a person to sell, offer or make available a substance to a person under the age of eighteen years or to a person acting on behalf of that person if he knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the substance is ... likely to be inhaled by the person under the age of eighteen years for the purpose of causing intoxication." Responsibility for these Acts rests with my Department and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, respectively. I have to engage with them.

It is noteworthy that the proposed Bill does not list nitrous oxide as a controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. This is a deliberate and significant policy choice. It means that unlike cannabis or heroin, the simple possession of nitrous oxide for personal use is not being criminalised. The Bill is squarely aimed at the supply chain, not the end user, which aligns with the harm reduction approach favoured by many health experts.

I will take this opportunity to commend the ongoing work of the HSE and community groups in responding to the rise of nitrous oxide use. Through public awareness campaigns, harm reduction advice and engagement with at-risk groups, they are working to mitigate the very real health risks, including nerve damage. The HSE actively monitors usage trends and runs targeted awareness campaigns for adults aged over 18 highlighting the long-term risks, such as vitamin B12 deficiency. A key part of this strategy is disseminating a harm reduction fact sheet detailing risks, effects and advice to drug and alcohol task forces, student unions and at festivals. Additionally, parents are also supported with information through various formats, including the *drugs.ie* website, dedicated fact sheets and a series of webinars. This multifaceted approach is delivered in collaboration with task forces across the country aligning with recommendations from the European Union Drugs Agency.

It is also worth highlighting that there are legitimate uses, as Deputy Ward and others indicated, for nitrous oxide. That is why it cannot just be categorised under the Misuse of Drugs Act. That legitimate use is in the area of the medical and catering industries. However, the challenge, as with any substance open to misuse, is to regulate its supply chain effectively without unduly penalising legitimate enterprise. In relation to regulating the supply chain, it is necessary to consider developments at EU level.

First, the EU has formally adopted a new harmonised classification for dinitrogen oxide, which is the chemical name for nitrous oxide, under the EU regulation on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures. This new classification, which will apply from 1 February 2027, designates nitrous oxide, among other things, as a substance that is harmful to reproductive health and causes damage to the nervous system. This reclassification is not merely a technical change. It is the trigger for further regulatory action. The Commission has also published a draft amendment to the regulation on the registration, evaluation, annual authorisation and restriction of chemicals that would restrict the placing on the market of dinitrogen oxide for supply to the public, subject to narrowly defined derogations. Notably, to minimise the possibility of misuse, it is under consideration at EU level whether the derogation should include specific conditions for the sale of cartridges containing this substance, such as

restrictions on the maximum volume of the substance that can be sold to members of public as well as age restrictions on the sale of cartridges containing the substance.

The second key consideration is procedural. The Bill is likely to be considered a technical regulation under EU Directive No. 2015/1535. This means it is subject to the technical regulations information system notification process, which Deputy Ward is aware of. That requires us to notify the European Commission of the draft legislation. This notification triggers an initial three-month period during which the Bill cannot be adopted. This period allows the Commission and other member states to review the measure. If a detailed opinion is issued, for example, if concerns are raised about potential barriers to trade, this period may be extended for a further three months for products resulting in a total of six months. A longer postponement of 12 to 18 months could occur if the Commission decided to block the national measure in favour of proposing its own comprehensive EU-harmonised legislation. Both developments must be carefully weighed when considering the progress of this domestic legislation.

Regardless of the EU developments, the administrative architecture proposed in this Bill raises significant questions about its practical implementation. It would impose a considerable regulatory and financial burden on reputable sellers as well as significant cost to the Exchequer. These costs include the designation and resourcing of a competent licensing and registering authority, the development and implementation of entirely new administrative systems for processing applications and maintaining registers and the necessity of conducting a comprehensive regulatory impact assessment, particularly concerning the effect on the many small- and medium-sized enterprises that legitimately use this on a daily basis.

Other issues that would require consideration with stakeholders concern the proposed offences, penalties and powers of search and seizure contained in the Bill. A primary concern is the potential for legal ambiguity due to overlap with existing legislation. For example, section 3 of the psychoactive substances Act I referred to, makes it an offence to sell a substance for human consumption, while the Bill creates a parallel offence of selling nitrous oxide without a licence under section 2. Therefore, a single act of illicitly selling a nitrous oxide canister could be an offence under two different pieces of legislation creating uncertainty as to which should be used for prosecution. I also draw the House's attention to the proposed penalties in the Bill. Under section 14 of the Bill, for the utmost serious offence of illegal sale on indictment, the penalty is a fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or both. That is significantly lower than the offence under the 2010 Act, which allows for penalties up to five years.

I again commend Deputy Ward on the effort he has gone to in drafting this legislation. Both he and I share a desire to inform young people about the dangers of nitrous oxide. I want to see it regulated in such a way that it cannot be availed of by young people. At present, it is a criminal offence to sell nitrous oxide for human consumption. It is also a criminal offence to sell it to somebody aged under 18. As I indicated in my response, however, there are regulatory issues involved with the EU and other matters that require consideration. The easy thing for me to do would be to just vote it down or even to let it through, but further consideration is required in order to give this Bill the consideration it deserves.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I commend my colleague Deputy Mark Ward on his relentless work on this Bill. Throughout the length and breadth of the country, we are seeing that what were once small silver bullet containers of nitrous oxide are now huge canisters littering our parks, streets and shopping areas. This is no longer a small-scale issue. I have been sent photos by my constituents of an entire shopping area in my hometown covered by empty boxes of canisters and huge canisters lying around in plain sight. In one residential area alone, the noise, litter and antisocial behaviour from people using these huge canisters on a daily and nightly basis became so bad that local residents, Drogheda gardaí, myself and my party colleague, Councillor Eric Donovan, had to put a collective special focus on the area for a sustained period to end the behaviour. The owners' management company installed new CCTV cameras to look at the area being used to consume vast amounts of FastGas. Local residents had to clean up the area. They ensured that whenever cars from outside their area parked and the groups began to gather to distribute and use the balloons, Drogheda gardaí were called immediately. Thankfully, they responded to the calls and moved the people with laughing gas on. That was several months ago and, thankfully, residents have reported that the gangs, canisters and antisocial behaviour stayed away from this area but, unfortunately, it just spreads elsewhere.

Only last month, Revenue officials were at the public accounts committee, where I raised this Bill and what it contained with them. Revenue and customs officials said that nitrous oxide is being brought into Ireland at scale by organised crime gangs and is being used nationwide. While the smaller cartridges have a use in catering, Mr. Thomas Talbot, from Revenue's criminal investigation team said there is no legitimate use for the larger canisters. There is growing evidence of the use of nitrous oxide in communities. The number of instances of harm caused by the misuse of nitrous oxide are becoming increasingly apparent.

I explained to the Revenue officials that this Bill was coming before the House to provide for the regulation of the sale of nitrous oxide. I told them it would ensure that nitrous oxide would be regulated for commercial use only and this Bill would give An Garda powers to seize canisters from those lacking the appropriate licences. I asked if it was something Revenue would support. They responded, on the public record, that they support this legislation. I ask the Minister to take the revenue stream away from criminal gangs and protect the health of our youth. Not only should he be supporting this Bill now, but he should be doing all in his power to enact it without delay.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Bill is about protecting children, making it harder for them to purchase so-called laughing gas and ensuring that it is only sold for legitimate commercial and health purposes. Nitrous oxide has legitimate uses in health as a sedative and in the catering industry for use in whipped cream canisters. Unfortunately, and particularly since the Covid era, we have seen its misuse by some young people. Anyone, particularly those of us living in urban areas, will have seen the discarded so-called silver bullets on the footpaths and roadsides where young people congregate. They are literally littered all over parts of my city of Limerick. It is a drug that can have a long-term impact on health. A recent study found that health workers who have been exposed to small amounts of the gas can experience fertility issues. A Mater hospital neurologist has reported on the increase in people presenting with nerve damage following consumption of so-called laughing gas. The more immediate impacts on the youths who use it in a social setting include numbness in their extremities, balance issues, increased heart rate and frostbite. Longer term there is real concern about its impact on the mental health

of adolescents. The damage it does can be severe. Excessive use blocks the development of the coating that protects nerves and can lead to spinal cord damage. The aims of the Bill are straightforward and focus on the protection of our young people. It aims to make it hard for the product to be purchased by under 18-year-olds. Criminal gangs are aware of the profits they can make from selling this product. They are purchasing it in bulk cheaply and selling it for a profit to young people. It is an attractive product for younger people to use as it provides a high for up to 45 minutes and is less expensive than alcohol. The sale and supply of this product is not a niche problem. During a recent "Prime Time" programme, Revenue noted that they are seizing more than 1,000 large canisters per week. Thomas Talbot, who leads the Revenue criminal investigation function said that organised crime is making money on the back of society. While I am talking about organised crime, in Limerick we are in a battle against the criminal gangs, which we are unfortunately not winning. This was cruelly seen over the weekend in the Ballincurra Weston, Garryowen and St. Mary's Park areas with shootings, petrol bombs and other attacks on homes, properties and cars. I ask the Minister to speak with the Garda Commissioner about this issue, because we have a massive problem in Limerick, and I am concerned people will be killed.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Here we go again. The Government has decided to kick the can down the road on a common-sense Bill. It knows there is no way that anybody would oppose this Bill so instead it decided to delay it by nine months. Government talks about all of us working together. Yet here we have a positive piece of work and instead of supporting it going to Committee Stage and teasing out any of the issues he has, the Minister has decided to delay it. In my constituency, the use of nitrous oxide by teenagers has been an ongoing problem since way before the pandemic. Football and GAA teams have to show up early to clear their pitches of canisters, in some cases boxes of them, before a match can kick off. It is the same with our playgrounds. Parents are going to playgrounds to clean them up. The reason the use of this drug has increased so much is it is cheap, and users and sellers face little risk under the law. Anybody can go online and order a crate of it, then resell these canisters individually and make a tidy profit. This Bill cuts out all that. Anybody wanting to sell it wholesale will need a licence. Anybody selling it via retail will need to be on a register of approved sellers. The other rules in the Bill are similar to those for alcohol. The person purchasing and the person selling it will have to be over 18, and it allows gardaí to seize canisters from anybody they suspect is under the age of 18. It is simple. We all know that nitrous oxide misuse is not low risk when it comes to a person's health. We see people who use it suffering serious nerve damage, neurological conditions, seizures and much more. This Bill provides a common-sense way forward. Instead of criminalising these young people who are using it, the Bill will regulate the sale and make it much more difficult for it be misused. There is no legitimate reason for a teenager to be using this. There is none, so please let us get working on this Bill.

Deputy Ann Graves: I commend my colleague Teachta Ward, not only on the work he has done recently but over the past number of years. This is not work that has been done over the past two months. A lot of time and effort has been invested in it. We are all aware that nitrous oxide has become a scourge in all of our communities. Our young people are being put at serious risk by people who are making profit out of children's health. I have met with community and support groups and been contacted by members of the public across my area of Fingal East who are coming across discarded canisters outside schools and playgrounds and

on football pitches where young people are. They are just discarded on the road. I went out of my house to the green area across the road and picked up 15 canisters last weekend. That was just on a green space outside my house. Every time our Tidy Towns and other volunteering groups are collecting litter, they are cleaning up bag loads of canisters all over the place. It is not only a public health issue, but an environmental challenge.

Sinn Féin's Bill is a solutions-based common-sense approach. I urge the Minister to reconsider, withdraw his amendment and not delay this by nine months. How many more children's lives will be affected in a nine-month period? We are delaying dealing with the issues just to tie it up. They could be dealt with on Committee Stage. The Minister mentioned this himself. Every time our young people use this gas they are playing Russian roulette with their health and with their lives. We need to deal with it, and we need to deal with it now. The Bill covers the sale of nitrous oxide from abroad. It deals with where it should be despatched within the State. This would require wholesalers to have a licence to sell this gas and related products. Retailers would also have to be on an approved register to sell related products. It would be illegal to sell to under 18s. It would be illegal to have under 18s sell the products even if it is on a licensed premises, in the same way as it is for them to sell alcohol. The Bill will allow gardaí to seize the nitrous oxide if they believe the person is under 18 or if the person is to use it as an intoxicant. These canisters can then be disposed of or destroyed properly. I heard stories over Hallowe'en where they have been flung into fires and were going off like missiles. There are loads of addendums to this that need to be dealt with. At the moment it is urgency. It is about our children's lives. We need to look after it. I call on the Minister to withdraw his amendment, to look at this and deal with it in the manner it needs to be, as quickly and urgently as possible.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Before the Minister leaves, I commend Deputy Ward on this Bill. This should have been brought in years ago. The issues with nitrous oxide, otherwise known as laughing gas to the common man and woman, have been causing damage for years. However, what has happened in recent years is that it has become a component of criminal activity. I am sorry, but the large-scale canisters have little use in this country in the professions the Minister spoke about. While I understand, in fairness to him, that on other occasions he has not opposed different legislation being brought in by the Opposition and let it go through, I cannot for the life of me think why he would not do the same here. This Bill may not be perfect, but certainly it is worthy of going to Committee Stage where he can bring in all of the amendments he wants. I do not understand the following: we know this issue has to be addressed, and he says he needs nine months to consider it. Why has his Department not been considering it before this?

It is glaringly obvious that this issue has to be dealt with. I know the Minister has had a lot of change in his Department and has a whole range of issues coming over from the Department of children, but surely within the relevant section his officials knew this was an issue. I think the Minister's response is downright lazy. It is lazy. It is also lazy from his Department to take nine months. If I was in the Minister's shoes, I would think that this is a pretty simple Bill to draft. He goes on about regulation and how the gardaí would enforce this, etc. They are all pretty minor things that could be dealt with on Committee Stage. Why will the Minister not let the Bill through? Why can he not ensure, through working positively with the Opposition, that we deal with these issues on Committee Stage and protect our young people?

I presume this will take more than nine months. If any situations happen within the next nine months, if serious incidents or accidents happen or, dare I say, if a death occurs because of this, we may replay this back to the Minister. This issue is glaringly obvious. It is not complicated. It has to be dealt with. We all know there are uses for this in catering, healthcare and a range of other things. What is going on now is you walk through any estate in every part of Ireland and you will find these canisters. The canisters are being brought into areas by criminals who are selling them. They are then distributed and young children are using them.

There are a whole range of neurological impacts from them, which have been outlined by many Deputies already. I have heard stories in my own office in relation to people who have been pretty severely affected with severe burns as a consequence because they do not know what they are doing. There are addiction elements and a whole range of other elements. All of this is avoidable, if we had the regulatory process in place, if we had the licensing in place and if we had the enforcement capacity in place to allow gardaí to do their job.

I have had gardaí speak to me about this. It has been raised with me that in particular parts of my constituency, the volume of it coming in is quite extraordinary. I am from rural Tipperary. We have a lot of towns, but still. It is at that extreme where young kids are going out at night or at weekend and using this. We are not necessarily talking about those who are involved in other activities later on when they are 17 or 18; we are talking about children who are 13, 14 or 15 years of age.

I am really disappointed in the Department and the Minister because this is not something we should be having any form of political toing and froing on. This can be dealt with quickly. As someone who I think has the potential to change his mind for the right reason on the floor of the Dáil, I urge him to do so.

If Sinn Féin had not brought in this Bill, we probably would have brought it in, to be honest. I encourage the Minister to accept it and not take the run-of-the-mill action whereby he just signs off on it and leaves it be because it is downright lazy. It is not good enough. I think the Minister is better than that. I think he has the capacity to deal with this very quickly through the various Stages of the Bill whether it is Committee Stage or Report Stage. This would ensure that the children of Ireland are not left open to this and do not have the opportunity to use this, that those who are involved in this at a criminal level have the legs taken out from them, that gardaí are empowered to seize these within reasonable reason in relation to what they are used for and that the law will protect that decision making. It would also ensure that communities across Ireland do not have the spectre of Tidy Towns groups going around every weekend picking these up canisters all over the place. From a healthcare point of view, it would ensure we do not have situations whereby every weekend if you go into University Hospital Limerick, South Tipperary General Hospital or many other model 3 or 4 hospitals across the country you will have a range of children, in particular, who will have burns on their faces and hands because of the misuse of this substance. There are also neurological and reproductive issues because of this.

I ask the Minister to do the right thing. This Bill is not perfect and I do not think Deputy Ward said it was perfect, but it deserves to go to Committee Stage. I expect the Government to change its mind and do the right thing. We can all work on it then and at least it will be in the process of being legislated for and will give hope to people who know this is the right thing to do.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Of course, the Social Democrats are going to support this Bill, but I first want to commend Deputy Mark Ward on having the diligence to bring forth such a comprehensive Bill. I also commend the heart he brings to this issue. We are supporting this Bill because quite clearly nitrous oxide misuse has become visible in too many communities because of the current free-for-all around access, particularly for children and teenagers. It is quite simply not good enough and is actually worse than not good enough. It is also the case - this was captured in the Minister's opening contribution - that the sale of nitrous oxide is already illegal under the psychotic substances Act and is already provided for under the children's Act. That screams another larger question, does it not?

When I go up to watch a local football team on a Sunday morning, go for a walk through town or bring my dog for a walk in the morning, I see these canisters everywhere. We have heard stories - I know people talk to me about it in the constituency - and we have heard media reports about how many young people are consuming these poisonous products. We have also heard about the damage that is being caused, but I do not think one single shop has been convicted for the sale of these products. The Minister talked earlier about the illegality of these products, but there is a big flashing warning sign that despite how prevalent they are in front of our eyes, there is no enforcement.

Deputy Ward has been told that the House will come back to it in nine months. However, as I support the Bill, I will support it honestly and not just simply as a box-ticking exercise because it will not be legislation on its own that will solve what people are seeing in our streets, parks and outside schools. The reality is that nitrous oxide admittedly exists in an awkward place. It is a legitimate product with lawful uses in healthcare and food preparation but it is very clearly being exploited and used as a harmful intoxicant. That is why I do not believe blunt criminalisation would work in this instance and it is very welcome that Deputy Ward is not going down this road.

Doing nothing is also a choice, and that choice has left families and local communities feeling like the State has been absent. They will hear tonight that we are doing nothing for a further nine months and then for whatever time after that. At its core, the legislation introduces a licensing and regulatory system. Wholesales must be licensed and retailers must be registered. That is the spine of the Bill. There does not seem to be anything controversial in there to me. It simply brings visibility to who is selling nitrous oxide, from where and on what basis. It restricts sales to exempt purchasers only: people in businesses with legitimate reasons to buy nitrous oxide including medical professionals and food and catering businesses. It introduces a clear prohibition on sales to under 18s, including online sales and proxy purchasing. It also gives gardaí powers to seize nitrous oxide in public spaces where there are reasonable grounds to believe it is being used as an intoxicant alongside search, disposal and enforcement provision. Those are very meaningful steps. On an issue like this, clarity would be very helpful for all involved, especially the gardaí.

It also very clearly matters to communities and to parents. I want to put something on the record that goes beyond this product because nitrous oxide does not exist in a vacuum. What people are experiencing in our communities is not just littered canisters; it is the normalisation of drug use and the presence of informal supply chains. In many areas, drug-related intimidation is making daily life not just unsafe but also unbearable. Families see who controls the spaces, young people know who supplies what and the State often arrives late or very rarely

at all in some instances. The hardest part is addressing the demand, the culture and the perception of harm or lack thereof. Nitrous oxide is still treated by many as harmless fun when we simply know that is not true. The neurological damage, the emergency presentation and the long-term harm are very real and very terrifying. Schools are often dealing with this without supports, and parents are dealing with it without the answers from the State.

I support bringing order to the supply chain, but I will not pretend this Bill creates the education, prevention or treatment pathways to make that regulation stick.

That is where the wider failure in the drugs policy becomes impossible to ignore. I am the Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drug Use. This committee was established to ensure our drugs policy is evidence-based, health-led and effective. Yet, as we stand here today, the committee is still waiting patiently for a copy of the national drugs strategy. In fact, we have asked and we have had very little contact from the Department as to when we will see a copy of that document, which is really important to the work of all of us. I would like to see some urgency and some leadership in this area that reflects the scale of the crisis that our communities are living with the length and breadth of Ireland. If the drugs trade is at the heart of intimidation, harm and exploitation in our communities, and it very much is, then we cannot keep treating drugs policy as something to be parked or delayed for a further nine months. This Bill very clearly shows what happens when urgency exists. Deputy Mark Ward has brought a very comprehensive Bill through two Stages now. It would be very worthwhile for us to explore this at the justice committee. I do not see what harm would come from allowing it to pass.

On awareness, we also need to be honest about awareness campaigns. Awareness is a word we reach for when we do not want to fund services. Everyone says they want awareness campaigns but awareness is not automatically effective and is not automatically harmless either. There is strong emerging research that shows that poorly designed universal, skill-based interventions can lead to unintended harms, including increased anxiety and reduced well-being for some young people. That matters because if we charge into schools with a one-size-fits-all message, we risk failing to change behaviour while also increasing distress and poor-quality information. I want the State to intervene in the concept of awareness but I want it to do so in an evidence-based way. It must be properly co-designed with young people, targeted where needed, linked with real supports and evaluated honestly and consistently. A licensing and regulation system will only work if the body running it is properly resourced. This Bill allows for a licensing authority to be designated and I think at a committee level we could explore how that would work, what enforcement capacity it would have and how best compliance would be monitored at scale.

The online market is another challenge. While the Bill addresses remote sales, the reality is that young people access products through platforms, social media and delivery routes that are notoriously difficult to police. Without serious work on platform accountability, customs controls and age verification standards that actually work, we risk displacing supply rather than stopping it. Displacement is a familiar pattern in drugs policy. If we restrict one product without building a prevention and support mechanism, the use simply shifts elsewhere. That is not a reason to do nothing, but it is a reason to ensure supply control is part of a health-led strategy and not a substitute for one.

Seizure powers can also cut both ways. If they are used proportionally, they can and should prevent harm. If they are used bluntly, they can deepen it. If the only interaction a young person has with the State is a form of worthy confiscation on the part of An Garda Síochána, with the subsequent humiliation that comes with it, we risk entrenching disengagement rather than reducing harm. Enforcement must be paired with diversion, youth services and family supports. We will of course be supporting the Bill, but supporting it should mean supporting it as a foundation, not as a finished product. If this was allowed to progress to Committee Stage - I see no justifiable reason it should not - what we could be exploring at Committee Stage would be stronger traceability and record keeping, meaningful online age verification standards, sensible product capacity restrictions and a statutory link to health and education so that prevention is not left to those who are demonstrating improvisation in their schools and communities in the absence of State support. Above all, it should mean real resources because a register without enforcement is just a spreadsheet, and seizure power without follow-through is often just a headline.

I assure the families and communities who I know will be watching debates such as this with interest that they are very clearly not imagining what they are seeing. They are seeing the effects of a drugs trade that is embedded, adaptive and too often unchecked. Too often communities are told that they have laws, as we were told earlier, but then they wonder why they never seem to be enforced. I support the Bill. I absolutely commend Deputy Ward on the work he has done in bringing it forward, I will be asking the Government to simply allow it to pass. I do not have much expectation because all too frequently during these nine months the Opposition brings forward a Bill and then on a Tuesday or Wednesday the Taoiseach will tell us that we do not bring forward any ideas. On Thursday the drugs committee will also be exploring the area of nitrous oxide and aerosol abuse and we look forward to scrutinising different areas of expertise within that also.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Like my other colleagues around the House and from the Government benches as well, I want to congratulate Deputy Ward on this Bill, which is well put together. I accept, as the Minister said, that a little bit of tweaking here and there and a little bit of change to X, Y and Z needs to be done. That could be achieved by leaving this Bill go forward to Committee Stage. I cannot help but think there is a bit of politics being played here tonight. As a previous speaker said, we are being berated here by a Government Minister who is telling us to come up with our own legislation and come up with a new plan. In fairness, we are putting new plans together all the time. We are putting forward new legislation. We are submitting ideas to the House. We are giving information to the House and providing credible opposition. Something we are all united on - the voices around the House have been all united tonight - is that there is a serious problem with nitrous oxide. I am familiar with this product because I used it in my catering business and in my bar and restaurant business. I am familiar with the size of it. It amazes me now when I see these products coming online. I used to buy the silver bullets in packs of ten which cost about €14.95 to buy for a catering business. I used to buy it from Musgraves or MP O'Sullivan's and I would use that. Those in the medical profession would use the very large canisters. There is no need for the super-sized canisters that we are now finding in football and GAA pitches, in housing estates and on the edge of the road. Whether we are in Cork, Dublin, Limerick, Waterford or Galway, we are finding them everywhere. Every Tidy Towns committee is saying the same thing.

The other thing that has not been addressed in this House is that when nitrous oxide canisters are put into incinerators, they cause huge damage across the country. Nobody is mentioning that. This is a serious problem that has been noted in the Dublin incineration plans. It is causing litter problems and damage to incinerators. As we all know in this House, nitrous oxide is just one of the issues. We have head shops in Cork city, Limerick city, Galway city and Dublin city. These head shops are selling legal highs. The nitrous oxide and the other items sold in head shops, are, to my mind, the gateway drugs of today. Kids are starting off as young as 12, 13 or 14 and being introduced to this. Years ago we used to hear stories of sniffing bags of glue. Now it is filling up a balloon and sniffing this laughing gas. It is a small way of getting into illegal highs, but what is next? Is it going to be marijuana in a year's time? Is it going to be cocaine? We all know this is readily available. We all know the types of characters that are supplying this. They are buying it from wholesalers or directly importing it on Amazon or from companies in China. They are buying large amounts of this, bringing it into the country and selling it directly, sometimes for three, four or ten times the price of what an ordinary bullet would actually cost.

On the proposed legislation and how it has been put together, what the Government has said is very minute. The Government is saying it will wait for Europe. Why is Ireland not taking a lead on this? Why are we not the leading country on this? Why do we have to wait? For example, why did we have to wait for Ciaran Mullooly in Europe recently to head the charge on Mercosur? The Government stayed quiet. The Taoiseach was saying one thing in China and Fianna Fáil TDs were saying something else in the background. Here we are again, waiting for the almighty masters of Europe to tell us what to do. Why are we not taking charge of this ourselves? That is what we are meant to be doing. If we continue to respond by saying we have to wait for the European legislation to come in, this House is superfluous. There is no point in being in this House. There is no point in writing Irish legislation if we are going to be waiting for that. I have to say I am very disappointed. It seems to me that we are playing politics. I would like the Government to reverse this decision, as Deputy Alan Kelly has said. There is no shame in changing your mind at the eleventh hour when the idea is right. Leave it go to Committee Stage and leave us add extras such as the head shops. If we legislate to protect our young people, we can stop this.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support fully this Bill by my Sinn Féin constituency colleague, Deputy Mark Ward. In terms of its efforts to restrict the sale, possession and supply of nitrous oxide products, it has added to the whole debate. It should absolutely be lauded. In that context, while I take on board what the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, said about EU legislation and having to give notice and having to look at the legislation because it was seen only in the past while, we know that Second Stage Bills coming from Opposition parties cannot proceed to Committee and Report Stages unless the Government facilitates that in any event. There is a lot of time, even up to nine months, that could have been used to prepare the Bill for the next Stage and have that proper debate, so I do not see the excuse as being particularly valid. I do take on board what the Minister said about the existing legislation that makes it an offence to sell nitrous oxide if it is for unpermitted use as a drug product. The question I ask there is that if that is the case, how come that legislation has not been enforced to the extent we would like it to be enforced over the past ten years? That is a question that has not been answered. If this legislation, as proposed, makes it a little heavier and puts greater onus on the supply chain, it can only be a good thing.

There is the question, as others have mentioned, if this were to go through tomorrow, no matter what way it were to be amended, as to whether the Garda has the resources to follow up. Will the inspection authority have the resources to follow it up and prosecute where required? These are questions that have not been answered.

There is a wider issue as well, as Deputy Gannon and others have referred to. I go back to one of the comments made by one of the Sinn Féin contributors, who quoted Ciara Murphy, project leader at the Finglas youth service, who highlighted on "Prime Time" how the price of alcohol is actually driving the use of nitrous oxide. If anything, that should be seen as a slight positive in the sense that alcohol still causes a significantly higher number of deaths among young people than nitrous oxide. Alcohol is one of the biggest risk factors for death and disability in 15-to-24-year-olds in Ireland, and one in four deaths of young men aged 15 to 34 is directly related to alcohol. With 50,000 children starting to drink in Ireland every year, anything we can do legislatively through the pricing mechanism - the minimum price, etc. - is a good thing. Almost 50% of young driver fatalities - I am going back now because I do not have the up-to-date legislation - from 2013 to 2017 had toxicology for alcohol. More recently, we have toxicology for drugs as well.

Nitrous oxide usage is a growing public health concern. I and my team, when we go around, are picking canisters up left, right and centre. We have been told by the local authority that you can put them into domestic bins. Where they go after the domestic bins, however, is definitely another question because they can cause safety hazards for workers sifting through that rubbish, so it is better to bring them to recycling centres. I mentioned the other day, in relation to nitrous oxide but during debate on the vaping legislation, that there is a different angle in terms of the storage, supply and monitoring from a safety and environmental perspective in relation to nitrous oxide canisters. Tonight is not the time to digress too much in that regard but we have all seen them all over the place causing a blight on our landscape, so it is not just the numerous health issues, for young people in particular, but also the environmental damage. The environmental aspect needs to be brought back.

I will talk for a second about the issue of the addiction in general. I note that this legislation deliberately, and rightly, seeks not to criminalise young people for possession of nitrous oxide canisters but no more than people caught with bottles of vodka or bottles of gin, there seems to be no mechanism for intervening from a public health perspective. When we had some of the debates at local authority and national levels about decriminalisation of cannabis, for example, the Portuguese model was often cited where it was seen as a health issue. In the context of this, I am not sure about the technical nature of this proposed legislation or if it can be worked in here but if people are caught in possession of nitrous oxide canisters, or indeed bottles of alcohol, it should be recorded, not as a criminal offence but to ensure that there is some form of intervention, whether it is through youth services, an education programme or some sort of mental health service, depending on whether the community gardai are involved and know the individuals concerned. Too often, addiction spreads out. It covers a multitude. This just happens to be the addiction of choice for a lot of people in the current age. If we clamp down on this, they will find something else. There was an incident recently involving a poor young lad in relation to aerosol usage, for example. No matter what, people will try to find ways to get that buzz. It is the why people want to get that buzz as well as the how people want to get that buzz that needs to be tackled in the wider context. I am not trying to say, "There are other issues we need to look at; therefore, this Bill is not important." This Bill is extremely important.

It needs to be brought to Committee Stage as soon as possible so we can have a proper debate on it. I thank my constituency colleague, Deputy Ward, along with other colleagues and the service who worked with him on this, for bringing it forward because it is very useful legislation. That has to be recognised.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Deputy Ward for making us all aware of this. If anyone thinks I knew anything about nitrous gas or laughing gas or whatever it is, I did not. I can understand now, since it has been explained to me, its disastrous effect. It can seriously impair youngsters. Perhaps the Bill will do nothing but make parents aware and make us all more aware.

I was listening to the Minister. Apparently, he does not have the legislation he wants to put in place ready yet. He says this is being covered by other rules or other regulations and is covered in a different way, but I would like to see more stringent controls and awareness for youngsters who may be inclined to seek this buzz, like Deputy Gogarty said, or whatever it is. Youngsters, being youngsters, will try different things at different points in time. It is good that we have this talk and that legislation will be put in place in the short term. I will ask the Minister to expedite this. He said it would be nine months. I would like to have it put in place maybe in three or four months' time. We are talking about human life. When something happens in human life and if people die, they cannot be brought back, so there is urgency.

As I said at the outset, I know little about this. I am thankful for being made aware of it. I hope that we will all work together and ensure that proper legislation is brought forward to deal with it. I appeal to the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, to ensure we get the answer and the legislation we need to curb this. As well as that, I would like people to be made more aware of this. I thought I knew a lot. I am on the road every day and night and out everywhere but I never heard of this nitrous gas before. That is how it is. I am thankful for the opportunity to talk about this. I will vote for legislation when it is brought forward. I know Sinn Féin would like to have this brought forward now but I am honest, and maybe there is more to be looked at. We will give the Minister the chance to do that.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025 be deemed to be read a second time this day nine months."

Following on from my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan's earlier remarks, I too commend the Deputies on their Bill, which attempts to address the scourge of nitrous oxide misuse and its damaging effects on public health, communities and young people in particular. While we share the aim and acknowledge the intentions behind the Bill, the Government is not convinced that this approach is the correct way of achieving it. However, I commend Deputies on their willingness to explore solutions to this problem.

In my role as Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, one of my main priorities is to respond to emerging trends and to reduce the harm caused by misuse of substances. Prevention and awareness are crucial, which was brought up tonight. I am mindful

of that in helping our young people as they navigate a society where the drugs and substance situation is evolving. I know we spoke about the drugs strategy. We have not had a drugs strategy in ten years. It is nearly ready. I should have it in the next few days for the committee. Everything is changing all the time. It is important that we are ahead of this, how we look at it and how we get the right solutions. I am also conscious that there is a major environmental problem with the disposal of the canisters, which are seen littering many of our towns and villages.

The HSE continues to monitor the use of nitrous oxide, which is commonly known as laughing gas. As other speakers have said, it is most commonly known as laughing gas. It is important to tailor appropriate and targeted messages. Targeted advertisements are shared every few weeks on the topic of nitrous oxide with audiences over the age of 18 as well as messages which aim to create awareness of long-term use and signs of concern which people can look out for. There is awareness. We need to look again at whether we need to adjust it and how we work on that but there is awareness and it is important that we get that message out.

The European Union Drugs Agency has conducted an EU-wide review of nitrous oxide and it highlighted several key issues regarding the prevention of use, including the role of youth workers, targeted distribution of messages, and the role of parents. In line with the EU Drugs Agency's recommendations, the HSE continues to provide a targeted approach, working together with drug and alcohol task forces around the country. We have 24 task forces. I know and value their work. This is important. Parents are offered information on nitrous oxide by the HSE in various formats. It is important that they are well informed. Specific information is available on *drugs.ie* and through a parent fact sheet. The HSE has developed a harm reduction fact sheet. It is including the risks, effects and harm reduction advice. These fact sheets have been distributed to the drug and alcohol task forces, student unions, at festivals, and to third level institutions. Social media channels and *drugs.ie* provide nitrous oxide content that is informative, helpful and shareable. The HSE social media team responds directly to people's questions about substances, including nitrous oxide, through direct messaging on all channels. The HSE's social media posts also drive web traffic to its dedicated content on *drugs.ie*.

I know that we need to do more. That is why the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I are saying this. We will work with Deputies on it. Strengthening the prevention of drug and alcohol use among children and young people is a strategic priority under the national drugs strategy. Some €1.5 million has been allocated in my Department for a three-year drug and alcohol prevention and education programme which aims to strengthen the prevention of drug and alcohol use and related harm among children and young people. We know that the challenge of regulating nitrous oxide cuts across multiple Departments and existing laws. It is a public health issue for my Department and the HSE. It is a public order issue for the Department of justice and An Garda Síochána. I also commend the work of Revenue in tackling the illegal importation of nitrous oxide at our ports. That is another area that we have to strengthen. I compliment it for its work. It is an environmental issue concerning hazardous waste disposal for the Department of the environment. It is a trade and enterprise issue for the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. As the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, outlined, there are important developments at EU level which must be considered carefully in our response.

Given the number of Departments involved, it is important that we work together on this challenge. A coherent and consistent approach is therefore essential. These issues need to be considered in a broader context to ensure a more developed legislative policy and operational infrastructure that addresses the issues. I am conscious of the concerns of this House and among parents as we see increasing use of nitrous oxide and the evidence from doctors of the serious harm that it is causing. I know that it is worrying and that people are frustrated as they see companies flouting the law or advertising these substances. As Minister of State at the Department of Health, I am committed to protecting the health of our young people. I will be working with my Government colleagues on the best way to do this.

As we saw the rise of HHC before it was banned, new trends are constantly emerging with serious consequences for health. I want to ensure that under our new national drugs strategy, which I will soon be bringing to Government, our health system is responsive and people can access the information and help they need. Where something like nitrous oxide is widely available and has many legitimate uses, such as catering and in the motor industry, preventing harm is difficult but I know that my Government colleagues share my determination.

This has been a really useful debate and I thank the Deputies, particularly Deputy Mark Ward, who I have worked with for a long time. He and Deputy Seán Crowe have worked extremely hard on this. I see their concerns. I know we are putting it back by nine months but I know the Bill is important. The contributions, and steps the Deputies have taken, are really important. I know, like the Deputies, that these are life issues that are being discussed, which relate directly to public health, community safety, and our obligation to correctly comply with EU laws. The approach of the Government this evening reflects that. I believe that the timed amendment provides the necessary space for this analysis. I have heard Deputy Ward speak on this several times. I know his commitment. Working in my own remit in the Department of Health and on the drugs strategy, we see things changing all the time. I thank Deputy Ward.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Three and a half years ago, I raised during Questions on Policy or Legislation the use of nitrous oxide, also known as hippie crack, as recreational drug, and asked that the Government put in place legislation to regulate its sale. To date, this has not been done, and this Sinn Féin Bill, sponsored by my colleagues, Mark Ward and Seán Crowe, is a timely response to the Government's failure to put forward similar legislation. The use of nitrous oxide has become pervasive in many communities across Ireland, particularly among more economically disadvantaged communities. A number of years ago, it would not be uncommon to find large quantities of discarded small silver canisters along the footpaths of estates or around greens. These piles of small canisters are less commonly seen now and have been replaced by larger, fast gas canisters, which can be bought for as little as €20 or less. The hundreds of discarded canisters lying around estates, parks and rural areas pose an environmental hazard, particularly for wildlife, domestic pets and livestock.

Those using this gas are putting their health at risk. Doctors have warned of the dangers of using the gas. It has caused neurological damage and can even cause frostbite burns, which can be so severe that some children using the gas have needed skin grafts, which has led to permanent scarring. The gas is released at sub-zero temperatures and if this is inhaled, it can cause severe injury to the mouth, throat and lungs, as well as potentially rupturing lung tissue. Emergency departments are increasingly seeing cases of young people showing progressive

nerve damage in their arms and legs. The sheer volume of canisters that are being found in communities every day shows that they are far too easily accessible.

9 o'clock

There are even reports that children as young as ten are using the gas. The use of nitrous oxide as a recreational drug has now become a major public health issue. This is a gas whose intended use is for medical and industrial purposes. It should not be freely available for purchase by the general public. This Bill takes a common-sense approach whereby access to these gas canisters is regulated and only sold through licensed suppliers, thereby ensuring they only go to the people who are meant to have them. I urge the Government to support this Bill and help to safeguard our children and communities from this pervasive and harmful gas.

Deputy Seán Crowe: A number of years ago, I was on a clean-up of one of the parks in my constituency. It was a beautiful day. I remember looking down to the stream and I could see all these little silver canisters. I was aware it was really young people, children, who were actually using them. I coined the phrase "silver bullets" on the basis that these kids were basically playing Russian roulette. I came up with legislation and its aim was that, like cigarettes, this would be banned. I went to the Minister for children at the time, who was putting forward legislation. I met his officials and so on. Anyway, it was not a fit. I got the impression the people I was talking to did not really get the challenge being faced. At that time, the canisters were a different size. As was said, the canisters are now bigger. We have all seen them. It is not surprising that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae does not know about it because a lot of parents do not but they see these blue things at the side of the road.

Deputy Mark Ward and I put our heads together then to try to decide how we would respond to it. One of the key things was that the children taking this thing should not be criminalised. That was the approach we wanted to take. I was also aware from the Garda of the challenges its members were facing. If they seized the drugs, technically, some of these people importing them could say it was for a legitimate use. One of the things I was told was that putting it on the drugs register would make it more difficult for them and they would actually have to prove it. As people said, the challenge nowadays is that there are so many young people doing this. It is really children. I am not talking about teenagers but about children who are using it. We have heard people talking about the impact it can have. They are literally risking their lives in relation to it. We have heard about some of the hospitals and adults and children presenting in relation to it. It has become very popular and people think it is safe. Others have spoken about the effects it can have on your brain or collapsed lungs, frostbite and so on. There is a whole range of things. A lot of the young people who are trying it are not particularly interested in that; they just want a legal high. It is so cheap, and, as someone said, it is a gateway. It is probably a gateway for some and probably the first drug they have ever used.

I am appealing to the Minister of State. I do not care whose legislation goes forward. We need to do something in relation to this and we need to do it now. I am disappointed that the Government is adopting this approach. Collectively, though, we need to come together and sort this out.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I call Deputy Ward to conclude.

Deputy Mark Ward: I just want to thank everyone who spoke in support of this Bill. I thank Deputy Crowe in particular because, in fairness to him, he did a hell of a lot of work on this Bill to make sure we protect the children and the end-user was not criminalised. I thank the other Opposition parties whose members spoke in support of the legislation, including the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, Independent Ireland and Deputy Paul Gogarty. As was said, this is a common-sense Bill and it should be allowed to go onto Committee Stage. Deputy Gannon, I think, said it is like a foundation that can be built on. I am not egotistical enough to think this Bill is absolutely perfect. I am willing to work with the Minister of State and the Government to improve it.

I was bemused by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. I thought I wrote his speech myself because he was making all the same points I was making. When I come in here to talk about a Bill, often there is clear blue water between the Government and the Opposition. There did not seem to be on this legislation. I cannot think of any legitimate reason, and I know a multitude of reasons was given, other than this is just a political decision not to pass this Bill. The Minister actually commended me on the legislation itself. What he did say, which does not wash with me, is that he only became aware of this Bill in the past week. I introduced this Bill in the last Dáil term, and then I reintroduced it as soon as I could in this Dáil, so this legislation has been ready to go to Second Stage for quite some time. Every chance I get when I am in this House, and the Minister of State herself will know this, I will raise this legislation. The Minister coming in here and saying he was not aware of the Bill simply does not wash.

The Minister also mentioned there were several pieces of legislation already out there that should be working in relation to combating nitrous oxide. Walk down any park, street or stream, as Deputy Crowe said, and you will see discarded nitrous oxide canisters. It is not working. How many people have been convicted of selling nitrous oxide over the past number of years? I could not find anybody who has been convicted, so the legislation out there is not working.

Regarding the EU issue and kicking this down the road until the EU comes in with its derogation in 2027, I said in my contribution that we are an independent, sovereign state. We should be making our own laws. We do not have to wait for the EU to come in with a law. Holland has done it already. It came out with legislation a couple of years ago, which was very similar to this. It is not waiting on the EU. We know how liberal that country is in relation to drug laws. If it is bringing legislation to tackle nitrous oxide, we know there is a problem.

The financial burden on businesses was mentioned. There is no financial burden on businesses from this legislation. There is no cost for a licence. An application is made to the Minister for the licence and to be on the approved list of retailers. There is no cost to retailers or sellers who have a legitimate reason to use nitrous oxide. The Minister also mentioned the Garda having the powers to seize nitrous oxide not being in this Bill. If we turn to sections 6 and 11, section 6 will give the Garda the power to seize nitrous oxide canisters from people who it is believed intend to use it as an intoxicant. Section 11 of this Bill sets out the powers gardaí will have to enter and search properties they reasonably suspect are being used to sell nitrous oxide without a licence or to the non-exempted purchaser.

I pay tribute to Joe who works in my office. Joe, myself and the OPLA worked on this legislation. I do not have a team of staff like the Minister has. I do not think he read the Bill if he did not see sections 6 and 11 that specifically work in relation to giving the Garda the

right to seize nitrous oxide canisters. The Government often comes in here and criticises the Opposition for not bringing solutions. I am bringing in solutions. I was on "Prime Time" with the Minister of State a month ago and I offered her the Bill. She can take the Bill and call it a Government Bill. As Deputy Crowe said, I do not really care who brings this legislation in. The Clondalkin drug and alcohol task force has said children as young as 12 are using its service because of nitrous oxide use. Is it okay for those 12-year-olds to turn into 13-year-olds? This period of nine months does not make sense.

I said I am willing to work with anyone on this legislation. No legislation is perfect. The Government brings forward amendments, and then it tables amendments to its own legislation, so do not criticise the Opposition for doing the same. I am willing to work with the Government, all parties and none, to bring this legislation in. At this stage, I will be asking the Minister of State to withdraw this amendment because I really do not think it is good enough. We are giving the Government a solution. We are giving it the answer. We are willing to work with it but it is kicking us down the road.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Hear, hear.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): I thank the Deputy.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The division is postponed until the weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Sports Funding

130. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the total amount of both LSSIF and CSFF funding drawn down in 2025; the list of all groups that received funding, in tabular form; if, in light of the arduous grant applications process and difficulties organisations have found with the LSSIF-CSFF process, he has recognised this difficulty, resulting in future rounds being simplified; if not, if he has considered providing assistance for voluntary-led organisations that might not have the skill set to navigate through the existing difficult application process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4111/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Byrne for the question. I know these are funds she has a strong interest in.

As the Deputy knows, my Department operates two capital funding programmes for sport, namely the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. Sporting organisations can apply directly for CSFF funding while applications

to the LSSIF must be made through either a national governing body, NGB, of a sport or a local authority.

The Department made a total of 2,500 CSFF payments to over 1,400 sporting organisations in 2025, with a total value of just over €71 million. Details of all CSFF payments made to clubs in 2025 are available on the Department's website. That is relevant to the Deputy's question. Payments to LSSIF grantees in 2025 totalled just under €25 million. Details of those payments are available on the Department's website. I will ask my Department to send the links directly to the Deputy.

I am acutely aware of the need to assist all applicants, in particular first-time and rural organisations, in advance of the next funding round in terms of guidance on the scheme itself and on the application process. In this regard, I am currently inviting sporting organisations to information and consultation evenings on the CSFF. We held one of those in County Louth just before Christmas. We held another in Galway East and another will be held in Kilkenny this coming Thursday. The feedback from these information evenings is valuable to the Department to better understand the experiences, needs and challenges faced by clubs and other organisations. This feedback will be an important input to our preparations for the next round. My aim is to have as many eligible sporting bodies as possible in a position to apply so that the Government is in a position to support them in the important work they do at community and grassroots levels.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am delighted for all the successful applicants and I know the funding will be put to good use. All of these grants are vital to our counties and local communities' sporting infrastructure. Many of our sporting bodies, from national governing bodies to local clubs, have put out reports and press statements on the need for new infrastructure and the upgrading of existing facilities. These funding streams are crucial to that. In the last round of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, there were 96 applications, with just 35 being successful. We need a new focus on sport in this country and additional funding to be allocated. I am going to keep repeating that.

Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made commitments in their manifestos to increase the betting tax from 2% to 3% and to use this funding to invest in sport, but this has not been done yet. That increase of 1% in the levy would have raised an additional €50 million in desperately needed funding for Irish sport.

To harness and evolve various sports, the simple fact is we need more funding, but we also need application processes that are user friendly. The information and consultation evenings are welcome. I look forward to seeing more of them being rolled out.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Our objective is to try to make the application process for both the sports facilities fund and the large-scale infrastructure fund as accessible and workable for clubs as possible. Obviously, when it comes to the large-scale infrastructure fund, the grants are of a much more significant scale - into the millions - and there is therefore more involved in the application process. We take on board the views of local authorities and the national governing bodies in relation to the prioritisation of those. We have had two rounds since 2019 of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. The fund was recommended as part of the national sports strategy. There had not been a fund to cater for projects of this scale before. It was a

really important step to ensure that there was funding for projects of scale to be able to be supported by the Government. Obviously, the demand is larger than the supply. Under the national development plan, though, we have funding for another round over the course of this Government. We will be looking to ensure that we engage with sporting organisations, local authorities and national governing bodies in advance of that to make sure that the process is as practical as possible while being robust at the same time.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It is important to note that national governing bodies are finding difficulties with the application process. I have been around the country, as has the Minister of State, meeting these organisations. There is a general agreement any time we talk about the grant application processes that they are overly bureaucratic. It is all right for large organisations that have the funds to hire in companies to assist them with their applications, but it is still a drain on limited resources. Smaller organisations simply do not have that luxury. Could we bear that in mind going forward and, if a remedy is needed, do something about it?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is something that we bore in mind. We are aiming at having a new round of the sports capital fund by early summer. We will certainly be taking on board the feedback we receive before then from sports clubs around the country and Deputies on trying to make sure that it is as accessible as possible. I know there have been challenges in the past. The smaller the organisation, the more challenging and daunting it can seem to apply. We do not want that to be the case. In terms of how we structure it, while we will have to have a robust and fair system, we also want to make sure it is an accessible system. That will be to the forefront of our minds in the final framing of the application process.

Sports Organisations

131. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he accepts that safeguarding in sport must extend beyond child protection to include clear and enforceable adult safeguarding standards; the steps taken by his Department and Sport Ireland to ensure consistent adult safeguarding policies across all sports organisations; and if he will introduce a requirement that all sporting bodies adopt such policies as a condition of public funding and affiliation. [3661/26]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Safeguarding in sport must be extended beyond child protection to include clear and enforceable adult safeguarding standards.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for his question on an important issue. As we know, everyone involved in sport in any capacity, regardless of age, should be able to enjoy an experience that is free from any form of abuse. The creation of a culture that promotes the safety and welfare of all involved must be at the core of the operations of all of our national governing bodies of sport. Sport Ireland, as the authority tasked with the development of sport in Ireland, works with the NGBs to ensure that appropriate safeguarding and athlete welfare policies are put in place, as well as mechanisms to handle complaints or issues when they arise.

Sport Ireland launched a national code of conduct template for sporting organisations in 2023, setting out guidelines and principles promoting the behaviours and conduct expected from athletes, coaches, parents and guardians as well as supporters, referees and officials, and club members. All NGBs were asked to use this template code of conduct as an opportunity to review their existing policies and procedures for handling code breaches in order to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all involved in Irish sport.

In 2025, Sport Ireland commissioned Safe Sport International to conduct a needs analysis in the area of safe sport for adults. The analysis included extensive consultation with sport sector stakeholders, safe sport advocates and other relevant stakeholders, including people with lived experience in this area. Sport Ireland is currently considering the resultant report, which will be central to informing future guidance.

Sport Ireland has an extensive suite of guidelines and codes of practice for the protection of children in sport, consistent with child protection guidance and legislation. There is regular communication between Sport Ireland and NGBs regarding NGBs' responsibilities in these areas.

As Minister of State, I fully support the implementation of effective safeguarding policies and procedures for adults and children across the sports sector while acknowledging that NGBs are independent, autonomous organisations responsible for their own governance, including safeguarding procedures and disciplinary and complaints processes.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Given the increasing and well-evidenced recognition of abuse, coercive control and harassment experienced by adults across sporting environments, not only within elite levels of sports but within community clubs and local clubs, does the Minister of State accept that the continued absence of a mandatory adult safeguarding policy constitutes a serious gap in governance, accountability and participant protection? In light of the clear duty of care owed to all participants, how can the Minister for State justify the reliance on voluntary and inconsistent safeguarding measures, particularly where power imbalances, dependency and vulnerability are known risks? Concrete steps need to be taken to develop a comprehensive national framework for adult safeguarding in sport. It would be great if the Minister of State could outline a clear timeline for the introduction and implementation of mandatory safeguarding standards for adults across all sporting bodies. He mentioned guidelines. Is there anything more concrete on a timeline?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It is crucial that everyone has a security and safety support network around them to ensure they can safely participate in sport. This takes a lot of effort by our clubs to make sure those structures are in place. It also forms a key part of the Government's work, with Sport Ireland, to ensure support and guidance are provided to NGBs. That is fully expected and required of the NGBs to continue to be able to avail of State support and funding. The ongoing work by clubs in all sports is exceptional. It takes massive voluntary effort by people every evening and at weekends to make sure support is available to young people and adults to participate in sports and structures are in place to ensure they are safe and protected from risk. We will continue to make sure this at the core of everything we do from a sporting point of view.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The absence of robust safeguarding policies in many sports often comes to light by chance. However, even minimal scrutiny reveals that safeguarding is frequently treated as an afterthought for adults. It is only considered once something goes seriously wrong. When these situations arise, clubs are often ill prepared to respond appropriately. Responsibility is often placed on ordinary volunteers and members, many of whom have no training or experience in dealing with domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, stalking or intimidation. They are left attempting to address policies retroactively rather than proactively. By that stage, damage has already been done, trust has been broken and the safety and well-being of club members may have been profoundly compromised.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Sport Ireland sets the criteria. It has a strong set of criteria for child safeguarding compliance. It is a compulsory requirement for NGBs and a critical element of NGB funding. These criteria are reviewed twice annually. NGBs are required to submit their child safeguarding statements to Sport Ireland for review. Sport Ireland expects all funded organisations, as does the Government which funds Sport Ireland, to maintain those high standards of governance, strategic planning and operational delivery, including but not limited to coaching, development, anti-doping and safeguarding. Failure to meet these standards that are agreed to, whether through governance shortcomings, failure to deliver on strategic objectives, financial mismanagement or actions that not supportive of the commitments to national programmes, such as safeguarding, may result in a range of consequences, including repayment, cessation of funding, suspension or termination of funding or of formal recognition. We have a strong oversight mechanism in place and we will continue to keep a strong focus on it.

Departmental Funding

132. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the steps he will take to ensure stronger oversight, better value for money and improved transparency in the use of public funds across the arts, culture, and media sectors (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4110/26]

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. The public accounts committee published a report last November in respect of the 2023 appropriation account for Vote 33, which was the then Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, together with the 2023 financial statement of the Arts Council and the National Gallery of Ireland. In the report, the committee identified governance and oversight concerns across the Department and its agencies, including the Arts Council and the National Gallery. I understand the Minister for public expenditure will shortly issue his formal reply to the committee on the report.

I am committed to ensuring the highest standards of oversight, value for money and transparency. I have acted to address the issues identified in the report. These include the appointment of an expert advisory committee in regard to the Arts Council whose report I brought to the Government today; engagement with the Institute of Public Administration to provide expert independent advice around governance and oversight to my Department; and establishing a dedicated State body governance unit within the Department.

Transparency regarding departmental use of funds is ensured via publication of the annual budget books, the annual Revised Estimate and the annual appropriation account, as audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Each of these bodies under the aegis of the Department produces its own annual report and accounts, which are subject to audit and laid before both Houses. The Department and the bodies under its aegis, where relevant, appear before the public accounts committee and both Joint and Select Committees on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport.

My Department continues to advance work to improve oversight and governance of the State bodies under its aegis. This will ensure the highest robust, comprehensive, transparent and efficient oversight and governance framework for all those bodies, consistent with my commitment to ensuring that State bodies operate with accountability, integrity and efficiency. In addition, the Department has completed an evaluation of the Department's performance information system, as recommended in the 2023 report on the accounts of the public services issued by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Guidance and training on the value of performance information and approach to choosing robust indicators has been provided for all staff. These steps, together with ongoing compliance within procurement and appraisal guidelines, will help to ensure the Department delivers value for money.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am a member of the public accounts committee. I am glad the Minister mentioned the report we published in November. The highlights of that were the capital underspend in 2023; the National Gallery's X-ray equipment; the Art Council's failed IT project; departmental oversight and governance failures; decline in the RTÉ licence fee income and emergency funding; performance measurement deficiencies; the Art Council's grant funding; and strategic funding transparency. It is a laundry list of failures of oversight and management by the Government that has dominated hours of debates in this Chamber and at multiple committees. These were only the 2023 scandals. I ask for a commitment that we will not see a repeat of this in the 2024 reports.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: What the Deputy has seen from me so far is that once I become aware of the issue with the Art Council and the issues in the National Gallery, I dealt with them, and I did so fairly comprehensively. The report on the Arts Council was published today. It runs to 245 pages and contains well in excess of 190 recommendations. There are recommendations for all Departments, including my Department, State bodies and the Arts Council.

Regarding the issue with the National Gallery, we dealt with that. The X-ray scanner went into use before Christmas. Regarding capital underspend, I have addressed this issue with the Deputy and Deputy Ó Snodaigh previously. The problem we have with many of the buildings housing the national cultural institutions is that they are not straightforward buildings like Leinster House. We have to go through a difficult and protracted procurement system. If we did not do so, we would be accused of jumping the gun and not obeying procurement rules or adhering to the public spending code. Based on the changes we have made in 2025, we will see a far better outcome regarding capital output in 2026.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: That is a heartening response. I will point out that there are 149 recommendations in the report dealing with one entity. We sincerely hope we will not have to

have reports on all these bodies with similar recommendations. If we are learning from that going forward, that is warmly welcomed.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I hope the Deputy had a chance to look at the report. It took me from 5 January until today to get in under the bonnet of it. Not all 149 recommendations are necessarily attributable to the Arts Council alone. There is an awful lot in the report from which other agencies can learn as well. Similar issues have arisen in other bodies, as I know from my time on the public accounts committee. One of the greatest learnings of the report is that small bodies such as the Arts Council sometimes expect to deliver once-in-a-lifetime projects and they do not have the experience to do so. The failings were laid bare in this case. The report will make important reading, not only for the Arts Council but for other State agencies and Government Departments.

Arts Council

133. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he will publish the report of Professor Niamh Brennan into governance and culture at the Arts Council; and the timetable for the implementation of the recommendations within that report. [4113/26]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In February 2025, I ordered an external review of the governance and organisational culture in the Arts Council, following the disclosure of a loss on a failed €6.675 million IT project in the Arts Council's annual report for 2023. With the agreement of the Government, I established an expert advisory committee comprising Professor Niamh Brennan, Dr. Margaret Cullen and John McCarthy to deliver the review. The committee has concluded its work and today I brought its review to Government, which approved its publication and it is now publicly available.

The committee was fully independent in its approach and has ensured that the review process was robust, fair and transparent, leading to practical, actionable recommendations to improve the Arts Council's governance. The review includes 149 recommendations, as Deputy Ó Snodaigh has said, of which 100 are addressed to the Arts Council. The remainder are to the Department, the Department of public expenditure and reform and other Departments. It includes proposals for legislative changes, on which I intend to revert to Government. As I have mentioned, there are also a number of recommendations directed at my Department and more widely for the Government.

It is vital that we put in place structures to prevent future governance failures and I intend to implement in full the recommendations which are addressed to my Department and to the Arts Council. The Department will now engage directly with the interim director and the chair of the Arts Council to ensure that the organisation is supported during this interim period, ahead of what will be a time of significant change. This will be important for the wider arts sector and I want to assure it that the council will continue its day-to-day operation of supporting artists.

The Arts Council will have six weeks from today to submit a plan to me that sets out the actions it will take to implement the committee's recommendations, along with timelines for

delivery. I have also instructed officials in the Department to establish a monitoring group to measure the Arts Council's progress and to ensure that it delivers on its implementation plan.

The recommendations that relate to my Department have been accepted and will be implemented in full, under the oversight of the management board. Progress will be measured through a quarterly report with a view to ensuring that the Department has a robust, comprehensive and effective governance oversight framework in place, not just in respect of the Arts Council but for all of the bodies under our responsibility.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome that there is already a set timetable in terms of the recommendations for the Arts Council and the Minister's Department but the report itself goes beyond the Department and some of it is cross-cutting. The report was commissioned by the Minister and I take the opportunity to thank Professor Brennan and her team for publishing it. It identifies a lot of issues, some of which have already been addressed in the Arts Council and some of which have already been addressed, as far as I know, in the Department. There are substantial issues in terms of the public service as a whole to ensure such debacles do not happen again in smaller public sector bodies. There are recommendations which go beyond the Department. Has the Minister liaised with the Department of public expenditure and reform to ensure the recommendations associated with it will also progress?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Ó Snodaigh has raised a very important issue. The formulation, compilation and completion of the report was done independently but prior to the conclusion of the report the chapters relating to each individual entity were circulated to those entities for their observations. I did not receive the final report until 5 January and I published it today. I have accepted Professor Brennan's recommendations together with the committee in full and I thank the committee for the work it has done. As they say, it has done the State some service here. There is an opportunity as well for the committee of which Deputy Ó Snodaigh is a member to peruse the report, go through the recommendations and see. I will bring forward a timetable for implementation from the Arts Council which I will take back to the Government. I will have a quarterly review from my management board which I will also report to the Government. There is an awful lot here for other Departments, State bodies and semi-State bodies to examine to see whether there are recommendations that cross over and to see how they could be implemented to improve the operation of these bodies.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: One of the key points that jumped out at me, given the context of other failed IT programmes, is that the report emphasised that a multiplicity of public service bodies of a similar scale to the Arts Council should be better supported from within the public sector when it comes to undertaking projects akin to the Arts Council project. There is a challenge there for the Government as a whole. The Minister is not responsible for this but I urge him to use the opportunity at Cabinet, when the report comes up, to remind all Departments that it is public money at the end of the day.

There is still an IT issue in the Arts Council. The project collapsed and obviously there is a need to address the grants application system, which was using a defunct system which was held together with Sellotape, I am told. There is also the issue of the directorship. Dr. Moling Ryan is temporarily in the job as an interim director. Is there any word on when the Minister is likely to be able to fill the role permanently?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I think Deputy Ó Snodaigh would agree with me that the Arts Council has gone through a fairly tumultuous period of change in the recent past, and I acknowledge the role that Dr. Moling Ryan has played as an interim director. I have no plans in the immediate future to do any further chopping and changing. I want to leave things bed down and get a genuine schedule and timetable for the change management that is now required to go through. There will also be legislative requirements and Professor Niamh Brennan referred to this also. Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I have discussed possible changes to the existing Arts Act. There will obviously be consultation and engagement with the committee that we will have to do. I do not want to see any other major change. There is a sufficient amount there.

On whether the Arts Council will get a new IT system, there is a board and executive and it may be that they may feel it is worthy to come back to the Department and revisit this whole thing from the start. There was a suggestion of an off-the-shelf version that could be acquired. I will consider anything but at the moment the most important thing is that the report is there, the recommendations need to be implemented, there is a schedule of timeframes before the implementation, there is engagement with the committee and there is the Arts Council getting back to the daily business of what it is best at.

Artificial Intelligence

134. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he has had engagement with an organisation (details supplied) in relation to the use of AI to generate harmful and illegal content on the platform, the dissemination of same on the platform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3728/26]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: In recent weeks we have seen extremely troubling reports about the misuse of Grok, the AI tool developed by xAI and integrated into the X platform. This tool has enabled users to generate sexualised images of real people, including children. What engagement has the Minister had with this organisation in relation to the use of AI to generate harmful and illegal content on that platform over the past number of weeks?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I want to put on the record my disgust at the type of material that is being created and shared on social media. It is abhorrent. My first concern is with those affected, in particular women, young children and young people in general.

The sharing of non-consensual intimate images is illegal under the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, also known as Coco's Law; and the generation or distribution of any child sexual abuse material is illegal under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998. If a member of the public is concerned about images shared online, they should report it immediately to An Garda Síochána. Such reports and complaints are important for An Garda Síochána in its investigations of suspected criminality, and it is the responsibility of the Director of Public Prosecutions to direct prosecution of any individual or company for alleged offences.

People should also report this type of content to *Hotline.ie*, the national reporting centre, which will also pursue the removal of that content. Finally, under our online safety framework,

there is an obligation on platforms to act on reports of illegal content. This is why I would encourage any user to report illegal content to the online platform where they saw it and to Coimisiún na Meán. An coimisiún utilises complaints to help assess compliance by platforms with the online safety framework so reporting illegal content helps an coimisiún in its work.

Under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission has lead responsibility for the oversight of very large online platforms, including X. The European Commission has been very clear in warning X that it must remedy this matter and X has claimed it has taken certain steps to do so. However, the European Commission is taking investigative steps and an announcement on further action is expected imminently. This may include interim measures such as requiring a change to a service.

Coimisiún na Meán is Ireland's digital services co-ordinator under the Digital Services Act and in this role it is continuing to work with the European Commission on this serious matter. I support the European Commission, as the lead regulator, in taking all possible and necessary steps to ensure that X is brought into compliance with its regulatory obligations.

As Minister, it would be wrong to seek to interfere with the process of investigation but I am committed, along with my Government colleagues, to doing all that is required to ensure that people, in particular women, children and young people, are protected online. Ireland has strong laws in place and the Attorney General is continuing to examine whether these can be further strengthened. I will bring a memorandum to Government in the coming weeks to set out our next steps.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I echo his sentiment. I and other members of the media committee feel the behaviour that has occurred in recent weeks is illegal and harmful and we cannot tolerate it.

Can the Minister outline any direct interaction he has had with X? Has he had such interaction with it or does he intend to do so? One thing I picked up from the witnesses who appeared before the media committee last week is that there is probably plenty of legislation in place but that the necessary resources are lacking in the context of ensuring that we can enforce it. I found it interesting that from the point of view of some of those witnesses, it is almost expected that the large social media platforms will honour their side of the bargain in terms of enforcement. Outside of X, does the Minister feel that this kind of mutual co-operation in enforcing legislation is there among all the social media platforms?

The representatives from the Garda Síochána indicated that the force was investigating 200 or so images at that point. Does the Minister know if the number of such images has increased in the week since their appearance at the media committee?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will take the last question first. I do not know if the number has increased. That is because it is a Garda matter. It is not for the Government to interfere in the operations of the Garda Síochána, nor is it the role of the Minister to interfere where there is an independent regulator. In this case, there are two independent regulators, namely Coimisiún na Meán and the European Commission. Due to the very large nature of the online platform under scrutiny in this instance, X, this is a matter for the Commission in the first instance. As the Deputy probably heard me say, I am expecting a statement imminently from

the European Commission on this matter. I thought it would have come today or yesterday but it did not. I expect that, hopefully, it will come before the end of the week. The sooner it comes the better, to be quite honest.

In the context of my interaction with X, I met with its representatives prior to Christmas. I met them along with representatives from a number of other platforms, including Google, TikTok, Meta and LinkedIn. In respect of the latest controversy, given the fact I am the Minister with responsibility for the regulator and ensuring that the regulator fulfils its role, I do not think, to be quite honest, that it would be appropriate for me to meet somebody who would potentially be under investigation, no more than it would be appropriate for the Minister for Justice to meet them if it was a Garda-related matter.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: A lot of this is new to us. This is obviously developing very fast. The very nature of these media platforms and AI tools in particular mean that much of it is new. When questioning the Minister, I am not trying to point the finger at Coimisiún na Meán or anybody else. In retrospect, does the Minister think that we could have acted on this faster, particularly in the context of learning lessons for the future and so on? The Minister said he hopes that a statement will be forthcoming, and the sooner the better. In that context, does he think, in retrospect, that we could have done anything better?

The Minister is probably aware that X has refused to send representatives to appear before the media committee of which Deputy Byrne and I are members. Does the Minister think that is an error on X's part and that it should reconsider its position?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do think it is a mistake. To be quite honest, X should send representatives. The company is operating in the jurisdiction. The last time I was asked about people attending the committee in question was when the FAI said that it was not going to send representatives. I was asked on the radio whether I thought its representatives should appear and I said that they should. I also stated that a letter should be issued on the afternoon of that day. A letter was issued. I think X's representatives should go in. Representatives from all the platforms should do so. Failure to engage with the people's representatives in Dáil Éireann says an awful lot. I do not think other social media platforms take that view. They have engaged with the committee and I know that Coimisiún na Meán has done so as well.

In relation to what we have done, it is important to point out that the House has taken significant steps with regard to issues around child sex abuse, pornography and pornographic images of children. The State has acted in that context. It has also acted very clearly in respect of the sharing of images in a non-consensual fashion. It is illegal to do that in this country. We had a meeting the other night, convened by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, in respect of this issue. I will be bringing a memorandum to the Government on this matter shortly in order to update it on what exactly the current situation is *vis-à-vis* the law. If there are further changes that I or the Minister of Justice or both of us together need to do in this space, we will make them. Ideally, this should be done by the European Commission. It is regrettable that the European Union has not done more in this space.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Telecommunications Infrastructure

135. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if his Department is aware that areas in rural Ireland, including Mountbellew in County Galway, continue to experience significant gaps in mobile phone coverage and effectively remain dead zones for cellular reception; if he will provide an update on measures being taken to address these coverage deficits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3651/26]

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to bring to the Minister's attention the lack of mobile phone coverage in one of our busiest little towns in east Galway. I refer to Mountbellew, which hosts quite a lot of activity in terms of national schools, two secondary schools and a the new third level college, namely the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, campus. The one thing that is really dogging those who live and work in Mountbellew is the lack of mobile phone coverage. We need a plan in terms of making Mountbellew an attractive place to do business.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Mobile network operators are continuously enhancing and improving their networks across rural and urban areas. However, I am aware that the quality of network coverage is not uniform across the country. While the availability of mobile phone coverage is primarily a matter for mobile network operators, operating on a commercial basis in a liberalised market, they are regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg. In the first instance, where customers are not receiving the coverage, they should contact the customer care team of their mobile phone operator to make a complaint regarding poor coverage and follow their official complaint procedure. Complaints, if not resolved to the consumer's satisfaction, can then be escalated to ComReg.

It should be noted that ComReg completed a multi-band spectrum award, MBSA, in January 2023 to assign long-term rights of use in four spectrum bands to enable operators to provide improved services to meet increasing consumer demand for mobile services. This award represented a 46% increase in the harmonised spectrum assigned for the provision of wireless broadband services, including 4G and 5G, in Ireland and included significant coverage obligations for operators.

Those MBSA2 licence obligations place a key focus on delivering improved coverage to population centres, such as places where people work and live, rather than solely focusing on geographical coverage. They also focus on improving network coverage of the national primary road network. Those obligations will come into effect on an incremental basis three, five and seven years after the licences were first awarded in 2023. As such, it is expected that ComReg will assess operators' compliance with their three-year obligations under the licence this year.

Operators continue to add new capacity to their networks using their newly acquired radio spectrum. The timing of the improvements delivered by mobile operators are influenced in part by their ability to acquire and build new sites for increased coverage.

While the Department has no role in developing site-specific strategies for mobile coverage improvements, its digital connectivity strategy, which was published in 2022, sets ambitious targets for fixed and mobile connectivity. To assist consumers to choose the network provider that best meets their needs, ComReg continually updates and enhances its online national

outdoor mobile coverage map at *coveragemap.comreg.ie*, which provides information on mobile network providers for 2G, 3G, 4G and 5G mobile networks.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. People have made calls to the relevant service providers. Unfortunately, that has not changed matters as they stand. My concern is that Mountbellew is a thriving town. It needs the interconnectivity to which I refer. What is happening is not just an inconvenience. Obviously, safety is an issue. Older people all require access to mobile phone coverage. Regrettably, people have to drive at least two or three miles outside the town of Mountbellew before they can use their mobile phones. That is fundamentally damning in this day and age, particularly in the context of a thriving village where many things are happening in the very busy co-operative mart, on the ATU campus and in the secondary and national schools. It behoves us to exert pressure wherever is required in order to make sure that Mountbellew is not left behind. At present, it is being left behind.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will refer the Deputy's queries directly to ComReg and get a more comprehensive reply with regard to the specific geographical area. I do not know whether operators have, for instance, sought planning permission for masts or other infrastructure in the area or whether, if they have, these have been looked upon favourably by Galway County Council. Anecdotally, all of us in this House know of situations where mobile phone coverage is poor. This is always linked back to the lack of mobile phone infrastructure.

We have all been at meetings where people are present who do not want mobile phone masts but who also probably will contact our constituency offices to state they have poor mobile phone coverage. What will make an improvement is the roll-out of the national broadband plan because it will provide for improvement for indoor wireless coverage. That can be vastly improved. The roll-out of that plan by commercial operators is significantly improving across the country, including in County Galway.

Deputy Peter Roche: Just by way of conclusion, Mountbellew has people, businesses, educational institutions and ambition but what it lacks is the urgent need for basic, reliable mobile phone coverage.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In a lot of cases, existing public infrastructure is used for the installation of mobile telephony infrastructure and other infrastructure, for example, by the Office of Public Works for Garda stations and by local authorities when it comes to water towers, reservoirs and other such sites. In its own way, the national broadband plan will improve the quality of internal calls because people will be diverted directly on to their Wi-Fi. They will also be able to make calls via the Internet, which will make things an awful lot easier. I will get a more comprehensive reply from ComReg to the specific issue the Deputy has raised, which relates to the town of Mountbellew.

Question No. 136 taken with Written Answers.

National Broadband Plan

137. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to confirm that the connection timeframes anticipated will be met on the NBI roll-out for deployment areas (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4128/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I want to raise with the Minister the roll-out of the national broadband plan in the area west of Macroom - the switches for Carriganimmy, Béal Átha an Ghaorthaidh and Dunmanway. They cover large rural areas going from Clondrohid around Cill na Martra, Reananerree, on down towards Cappeen, Kilmichael, Johnstown and out around Togher, Shanacrane, and Doirín na Cathrach. It is a very large rural area and they are keen to get that roll-out advanced as soon as possible.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In December 2022, Ireland's digital connectivity strategy was published, which supports the ambition outlined in the national digital strategy and sets out a number of targets including that all households and businesses will be covered by a gigabit network not later than 2028.

The Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future, published in January 2025, sets a number of targets which include the completion of the installation of high-speed fibre broadband to 1.1 million people, including houses, farms and businesses nationwide, by 2026.

The NBP is the Government's initiative to deliver high-speed broadband services to all premises in Ireland. National Broadband Ireland is connecting approximately 4,500 homes every month.

In the Deputy's own county of Cork, NBI has passed 56,360 premises with a high-speed fibre broadband connection and over 58,750 are available to order or pre-order, with 18,996 premises now connected. A further almost 26,600 premises in Cork will be passed by NBI's high-speed fibre broadband by the end of the network deployment.

Further details on specific areas within County Cork can be monitored via the NBI's website. The National Broadband Ireland roll-out will include 4,190 premises in Dunmanway, 963 premises in Ballingeary and 3,975 premises in the Carriganimmy deployment area. Network build is in progress for all three of the deployment areas, and all premises in the Dunmanway deployment area will be made available to order or passed in the period July 2026 to September 2026, while the deployment areas of Ballingeary and Carriganimmy will be made available to order or passed in the period October 2026 to December 2026 - so by the end of the year.

The latest information on when high-speed broadband will become available can be found on NBI's website. This website is regularly updated and provides the expected timelines for the delivery and status of works in any area.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I fully appreciate that the roll-out of such a large plan has to start somewhere and has to end somewhere. The switches in the Carriganimmy, Ballingeary and Dunmanway area are towards the latter part of the plan. Residents in those areas could reasonably expect that things that would have been learned from the earlier deployments could be put in place to speed up the later deployments, such as in the area west of Macroom. Is that actually being done? Is it possible to get it done faster in the later deployments than in the earlier deployments? For example, people in Ballingeary will have seen the coils of pipes

standing there probably for most of the year at this stage, as the deployment has been ongoing there. They have been very patient, perhaps too patient. They want to see more headway on it and to make sure that those timelines are being met. Could the Minister confirm that the deployments will meet the timelines? Is there a way of bringing them forward?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I can confirm that the work is ahead of time. As well as being ahead of schedule, the work is also ahead of budget. When Deputy Moynihan and I first came into the Dáil there was a time when broadband was the be all and end all and came up every second day. You could not stick your head outside the door but someone would take it off over broadband. Thankfully, we made an awful lot of progress.

As of 9 January, National Broadband Ireland reports that 62,996 km of cable has been installed. I do not know how far away the moon is from here, but I think it is a couple of times the distance from here to the moon. Some 181,757 poles have been installed. A total of 568,081 premises have been completed. A total of 567,132 premises have been submitted to Open Eir to make ready for works, and 519,013 premises have had Open Eir works completed. An enormous amount of work has been done.

Deputy Moynihan answered part of the question earlier: we had to start somewhere and we have to finish somewhere. The Deputy made specific points about Ballingeary and Carriganimmy. I will see if they can be truncated with existing works and I will come back to him on that.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. He raises a very reasonable point about the way it was when we came in here, when it was a much bigger issue, but for the people in the Ballingeary, Carriganimmy and Dunmanway area, it has continued to be an issue. They were in the later part of the deployment and in fairness to them, they have been very patient. There is a level of frustration and people need to see that headway can now be made, and that possible lessons that would have been learned from earlier parts of the deployment can advance things more quickly in the later part of the deployment. Are they able to get ahead of schedule? Does the Minister have any more details on whether they will release all three switches at the same time or is there a possibility that an issue on any one of those switches could delay the other ones? Principally, people want reassurance and certainty that they are going to get that broadband roll-out over the coming months.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is no bother. The most important assurances that I can give him is that the work is running 12 months ahead of schedule at the moment nationally, which is a massive achievement for the Government. When this was being done first, certain people in this House and certain commentators in the media said it was an awful waste of money. I do not know where those people are today, but I do not hear them crowing about it today or saying that it was a waste of money. The people in the Deputy's constituency, and in my constituency, which borders it, would say that is far from a waste of money. Those political commentators will have their own day out in the near future when this is completed.

I will find out whether the existing works can be truncated. I know from my own constituency that there is always going to be someone at the end of a road where the work stops. In fairness to the contractors working for National Broadband Ireland at the moment,

they are all over the country. We pass them everywhere. We see so many of them that they are almost part of the fabric of the local area now. The statistics in relation to this are absolutely phenomenal: 63,000 km of cable laid. That is an absolutely massive feat of engineering. I will come back to the Deputy on the specifics.

Sport and Recreational Development

138. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the initiatives his Department is undertaking to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate in sport. [3713/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Sorca Clarke: Question No. 138 will be introduced by Deputy O'Meara.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Access to sport is not a luxury, it is a right. Participation in sport delivers profound physical and mental health benefits, builds confidence, reduces isolation and strengthens community connection for people of all ages and abilities. For people with disabilities, inclusive access to sport can be life-changing, yet too many still face practical and financial barriers to participation. What efforts is the Minister undertaking to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in sport?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thought it was the next question, which is in the Deputy's name. I thank Deputy O'Meara very much for raising the matter this evening. We both know that inclusion and diversity in sport are key priorities for this Government. Despite recent progress, there is an enduring participation gap between persons with either a long-term illness or a disability and those without an illness or a disability.

10 o'clock

The Irish Sports Monitor survey reports that this participation gap stands at 32%, which is quite large. It is clear that more work needs to be done to make this participation gap a thing of the past.

Increased funding of €1 million was allocated in budget 2025 to establish a new and dedicated disability in sport funding stream. Sport Ireland appointed a disability in sport lead in February of last year who is now collaborating with national governing bodies, local sports partnerships and other funded organisations to develop programmes to promote accessibility and participation for individuals with disabilities. To highlight this progress, the first-ever Sport Ireland disability in sport week took place in December 2025. The theme was Celebrating Ability or Ag Ceiliúradh Cumas. Sport Ireland worked with a wide range of stakeholders to promote progress made under the five pillars of its disability inclusion in sport policy: leadership, capacity, communication, change and access. In addition, Sport Ireland allocates €1.2 million at local level on behalf of the Government to fund a national network of sports inclusion disability officers aligned to each of the 29 local sports partnerships. Sport Ireland allocates €2.4 million in support of disability sport-focused national governing bodies to continue their work in this area. Capital support for the development of sports facilities and infrastructure is provided through my Department's community sports facilities fund and the

large-scale sport infrastructure fund. Both funds include specific criteria encouraging applications that improve accessibility and inclusion.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I acknowledge the positive work already under way. The sports capital programme has prioritised accessibility and universal design. Dormant accounts funding has supported disability-specific initiatives and training. Through local sports partnerships, Sport Ireland continues to play a key role in promoting inclusive support at community level. In my constituency, which comprises north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny, there is strong goodwill among clubs, volunteers and families to expand inclusive sporting opportunities. However, many local groups point to ongoing challenges with access to adaptive equipment, suitable facilities, trained coaches and volunteers, and the sustainability of inclusive programmes at grassroots level. The Minister pointed out the reason behind this question, the participation gap of over 30%. If we are working towards an Ireland for all, something our party has championed for many years, we have to continue to focus on this area within the Minister's Department.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Deputy is right to focus on it. We have seen progress on the participation of those with a disability in sport but the gap has not narrowed because participation has also increased among the general adult and child populations, for which we can be thankful. The gap has remained, however. It is a particular focus for the Government. We are going to look to see how we can address that gap further because it is simply not acceptable that people who have a disability or illness are not being given the opportunity to participate in sport in the same way as others. We are particularly focused on that. Over the last ten years, we have made great progress on the gap between genders, between women and men. That has now almost closed. Sport Ireland appointed a lead for women in sport, which made a significant impact. We have now done the same for disabilities and I think that will also make an impact. We must all work with those clubs and sporting organisations that are doing really strong work to address this gap. It is very important that people have the opportunity to participate in sport in their local community, regardless of their ability or disability.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: A lot of the local clubs I have spoken to are very interested in getting more supports, more funding and more training for their coaches. I think about cases where a child in a family is involved in sport, for example, a soccer club, and there is also a child in the family with some form of disability. If the parents in that family are involved in the club, they will obviously want both of their children, or however many children they have, to have the same chance to be full active participants to the best of their ability. Ballymackey FC, for which I played when under age, has a fantastic football for all initiative. It is absolutely brilliant. It is one of the strongest I have ever seen. It is a strong and growing club. The model of clubs like Ballymackey needs to be brought into other clubs. We need to get coaches in to get them trained to give every single child and adult, regardless of ability, the full opportunity to participate in sport.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I strongly support my colleague Deputy O'Meara on this. The Oireachtas committee on sport has considered this as a serious issue. When the Minister of State looks to the next round of sports capital funding, we urge him to include this as a factor

in deciding on funding. One of our local soccer clubs, Courtown Hibs, runs very inclusive soccer training for children and young people who are neurodivergent or who have physical disabilities or special needs. On the first Saturday of every month, Gorey parkrun runs a particularly inclusive parkrun event, inviting people from Advocates for Autism, Special Olympics Ireland and other groups to take part. It is a model that has been followed by other parkrun organisers. In decisions being made on the next round of sports capital funding, those clubs and organisations that have an inclusive approach at their heart should be recognised.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is absolutely necessary that we have this focus. That focus means resources to ensure all children can involve themselves in sport, particularly those who will have greater challenges. High Five is a programme run for children, particularly those with autism, in boxing clubs. My own local club, Clann Naofa, has such a programme ongoing. We have all seen the all-stars programmes run by the GAA. I am talking in particular about Dundalk Gaels, St. Bride's and Cooley Kickhams. It is absolutely fabulous to see.

I will also speak to the likes of the Louth Disability Cycling Club. People may be aware of this club and of Kevin O'Brien, who has great interaction with the club on behalf of Variety. Variety runs the recycle mobility programme, through which families can avail of adapted bikes. These are absolutely perfect to enable children to cycle who might not have believed that was possible. It is brilliant for children with mobility issues, autism or Down's syndrome. It is a really good community interaction. We would have hoped that things would have been further on in relation to our dealings with Louth County Council on having a permanent base. I thank those groups that have contacted Louth Disability Cycling Club about putting a real base in operation. An example has been established in south County Dublin in the last while and I hope we will get something similar in Louth. We need to see that kind of support at Government level and at local authority level to deliver.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputies O'Meara, Byrne and Ó Murchú. The Deputies have put an emphasis on access and support for those with disabilities. The Government is very focused on making progress in this area. Budget 2025 was the first to provide specific disability funding to national governing bodies through Sport Ireland. That was important. We have seen the appointment of a Sport Ireland disability lead, which is really important. We have also seen funding for each of our 29 sports partnerships across the country to employ officers to work with sporting organisations in each partnership area to ensure opportunities are in place. As each of the Deputies has described, it is wonderful and inspiring to go to a club and see children or people of any age with a disability or illness participating in sport. It gives a wonderful sense of energy and opportunity. Those opportunities might not be as plentiful for them as they are for people who do not have a disability. We need to work together collectively to support more and more of those opportunities so that participation gap continues to close and we see more and more people get those opportunities in every community right across the country. I thank the Deputy for raising this here today.

Sports Funding

139. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the next round of sports capital applications will open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4116/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The sports capital grants are an extremely important funding stream for many of the communities I represent in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny. During the lifetime of the previous Government, two different funds were announced for clubs in my constituency. It is nearly two years since sports capital funding was last announced and allocated. Clubs are now spending that funding and looking towards the future. When will the next round of sports capital funding open?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy O'Meara for raising this and for his advocacy on behalf of clubs in his constituency. As he will know, the programme for Government commits to maintaining sports funding to get more people participating in all levels of sport, particularly targeting cohorts in society where there are lower than average participation levels. The community sport facilities fund provides grants to assist in the development or refurbishment of sports facilities and the provision of sports equipment.

Its purpose is to develop high-quality, accessible, safe, well-designed and sustainable facilities in appropriate locations and to provide appropriate equipment to help maximise participation in sport and physical recreation.

Over 19,000 projects have benefited from the fund to the tune of over €1.4 billion since it was first established in 1998. Over €250 million was allocated in the most recent round with over 3,000 clubs benefiting from that, representing the largest ever investment in sports facilities. Over 40 different sports benefited from the fund as well.

The objective now in the plan - I know Deputy O'Meara's key question is when the next one will be - is to be able to support those clubs that need support. We plan to have completed another round of the community sports facility fund by the end of this year, opening up in early summer with applications over the course of the summer and with the aim of having decisions made by the end of the year. I am also currently inviting sporting organisations to information and consultation evenings on the community sports facilities fund. We will be in Kilkenny. The Deputy tends to north-west Kilkenny very well, I know. I will be there on Thursday night. We will be seeing some clubs on Tuesday night in Wexford with the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Malcolm Byrne. This is about helping to prepare clubs for the next round and also to gain their feedback on what is most important for them and where they are finding the pressures, so we can make sure that the next round is tailored to best support clubs at ground level in terms of the phenomenal work they do providing facilities in communities.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I thank the Minister of State. From my own experience of dealing with clubs during the last round, I trust that the bureaucratic nature of it is something that has been addressed ahead of the next round opening. I fully understand we are dealing with public moneys here and they have to be spent correctly, but we are also dealing with voluntary organisations that are doing incredible work, often in long-term development plans for their clubs. The level of paperwork and detail they have to go into sometimes can be a bit excessive. Examples that I would give come from the last round when clubs went to appeal. It was

announced some time around March 2025 and appeals were decided by September. A lot of issues around appeals the last time had to do with the appendices to the grant applications being slightly wrong, just something being slightly inaccurate in them. The information provided by the club had already answered the question, but they had not filled in the exact piece of paperwork to answer the question. They might have sent in a title document or something without signing that piece of paper. It is very important that we not deal with that level of hurdle for voluntary clubs.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is certainly my objective and that of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, in terms of the next round to make sure that we have it as amenable to clubs as possible and as practical as possible for them to be able to apply. Last time around with the appeals, almost all of the clubs that applied were supported. They were given the opportunity through the appeals process to have any issues corrected. The objective here has to be to work to make sure that clubs get the support they need, not to exclude them from it. That will be the objective again.

As we gather information and feedback from around the country in advance of the next round opening, we will be listening to what people are saying to make sure that it works. Obviously, it has to be a robust and effective application system. We want to make sure it is as practical as possible and also that clubs of all sizes do not feel intimidated by the process, and that they do apply. As I travel the country, I rarely come across a club anywhere that is not under pressure for space. That is a reflection of the success of the great work the volunteers and clubs are putting in. It also puts an onus on us to support them in developing those facilities to meet the demand they are creating.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I acknowledge the work of the officials in the Minister of State's Department. The officials I have dealt with in getting answers for clubs in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny in recent years have been fantastic, even for previous payments that we are trying to get out to clubs now. I am delighted to see the Minister of State coming to the Kilkenny Ormonde Hotel on Thursday at 5:30 p.m. for a briefing. I also look forward to welcoming him to Tipperary - hopefully, north Tipperary - in the near future for a briefing with a lot of clubs that are in contact with me also.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the announcement that there will be a further round of the sports capital scheme later. I commend the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, on their commitment to the development of not just clubs, but the critical role they play within our communities.

I would ask that, in the announcements, regard would be had to rapidly growing communities. As the Minister of State will appreciate, with rapidly growing communities, there is a demand for space. It is right that the Government's top priority be the provision of housing, but we also need to provide sporting, cultural and community facilities. That is critical. I would also ask the Minister of State to consider what is often a problem for minority sports, that being, where they do not own their own lands or have access to long leases on land or premises. I would ask that, when the next round opens, there is some imaginative way to try to facilitate those minority sports.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know the importance of sports capital for sporting organisations across the State. We are talking about this opening at the end of summer 2026. I thought it would be quarter 1 but once we have a date, sports clubs can work around it.

I agree with what has been said. There needs to be added effort in facilitating local authorities to provide municipal pitches and sporting settings in some cases, which can allow for a whole pile of other sports.

On the large-scale sports infrastructure funding, what is the timeline for that? I think we were talking about it being opened every two years. I have spoken to the Minister of State before about Louth GAA and its belief that it is on the reserve list. I suppose it is a matter of the works that are being done at the minute, not very far from my own home, continuing. Drogheda United FC was also on a reserve list. I would like to think that Dundalk FC could be in at the time it would be open. Anyone who has been to Oriel Park knows it needs a lot of work done, as happy as we are to be back in the premiership.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I look forward to seeing Deputy O'Meara in Tipperary. He has been speaking to me about that already.

In response to Deputy Byrne, the objective will be to ensure we are looking to see where the need is greatest. We are gathering that information at the moment to make sure that, when the round is announced, it is focusing on the areas of greatest need. Having said that, I think we would all accept that the great work that is happening in clubs is putting pressure on space and capacity at all levels. We need to work to support all sports and all clubs, particularly focusing on those where the pressures are particularly acute.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú on the large-scale infrastructure fund, we have funding under the national development plan to run another round over the course of this Government. We do not have a date yet for when that will be. The focus at the moment is on making sure in the two rounds we have run - the 2019 and 2024 rounds - that we work with those projects to make sure they are moving forward. We will monitor them to see if there is additional funding available within what has already been allocated to be ready to do more. The focus is very much on making them move on, and some of them need to get moving and get running with what they have been approved for.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: They will be shovel-ready.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are looking at another round then, certainly within the course of this Government, but it is to be decided.

Swimming Pools

141. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to outline his investment in public swimming pools; the new pools that will be opened in 2026 and 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [3342/26]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There are two capital funding programmes for sport, namely, the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, and the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. In total, over €1.5 million was allocated to swimming under the 2023 community sports facilities fund round as part of an overall CSFF investment of over €3.7 million in the last ten years. Swimming may also have benefited from allocations to multisport projects under the community sports facilities fund. Applications for the refurbishment of pools, installation of pop-up pools, improvements to the energy efficiencies of pools as well as improvements to the accessibility of pools can be made under the fund.

In line with previous rounds of the fund, a review of the current funding round is being undertaken. Preparations are under way for a further round of the community sports facilities fund this year.

It is anticipated the next round will particularly target areas and sports that have been underinvested in over the years.

The LSSIF supports the development of new swimming pools as well as the refurbishment of existing pools. To date, that fund has allocated €297 million to projects, which includes allocations of €41.4 million to 12 swimming pool projects. Details of these allocations are available on the Department's website. In addition, the Department has also awarded design funding in 2024 to three swimming pools at Buncrana, Mullingar and Edenderry. It is anticipated that the design phase for those pools will be concluded by 2027.

Regarding a future round of the LSSIF, as I said to Deputy Ó Murchú, our current focus is on ensuring project delivery for the first two rounds of the fund. This process will inform any decisions regarding the timing of a future round. No decisions have been made yet regarding the next round of the LSSIF.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State for that response. I was prompted to submit this question, in the first instance, by the Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report, which the Minister of State will be familiar with, published in December and commissioned by Swim Ireland and, second, as a parent trying to access swimming lessons for my kids. I recognise the picture on the front of this report. It is of Kells Swimming Club, which is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year. I went to school about 20 yards away from it and had access that very many children across Ireland do not have when it comes to swimming pools. One of the key findings of the report relates to access to a swimming pool. In Ireland, we have just one public pool per 81,000 people compared with Scotland, for example, which has one per 14,000. What will the Minister of State do to address that lack of access?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising the gap analysis report. On what we are going to do about it, the first thing we did was to fund that report. We funded Swim Ireland to carry it out because we want to assess what the situation is across the country, what the level of service provision is, what the current infrastructure is like, where the gaps are most acute and what issues there are with existing infrastructure. The report outlines the heavy reliance on private pool provision, particularly hotel pools. Our officials are considering that report now. We will look at it in detail. It will also inform future funding decisions.

There is a need for us to invest more in swimming pools. We have not seen as many projects as we would like to see come through community sport facilities fund applications. We will now consider where the gaps are, particularly with local authorities and, working with Swim Ireland, see what models work well in meeting provision in the most cost-effective way. We will then assess how we can best try to meet some of the gaps that report, which we funded, identified.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I mentioned my experience as a child going to school in Kells. We had pretty unique access to Kells Swimming Pool, which is a public swimming pool. There are a number of important findings in the report. I am glad the Department commissioned it. I hope it pays attention to those findings and acts on them. The important piece is access. I talk about Kells, and we think of areas in Leinster, Connacht and south Munster where it is very stark. The issue with hotel pools is they mask a greater problem. I talked about my experience, which is a very wide experience in terms of access to lessons for kids. In County Meath, 100% of the swimming pools have a waiting list. It is a very significant issue.

I will ask about something in my supplementary question that the Minister of State touched on. There is a key finding in the report in relation to the dependence on the private sector and hotels, but also local authorities essentially stepping away from this work and passing it over to the private sector. As a result of that, there is closure of swimming pools or pools being available on a reduced hours basis, although not to swimming clubs. Swim Ireland referenced an alternative model. Is that something the Minister of State will consider as a potential to increase access?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We will certainly look at all options. We need local authorities to step up and get into this space. It has been a challenging space. It has been challenging for pools to be run profitably. That has seen local authorities shy away and has led to some of the gaps we have. We need to see them step up. Certainly, the Department, working with Swim Ireland and Sport Ireland, will look to try to ensure that is the case as we go forward. That report is important in scoping out the current situation and looking to see what the challenges are around current provision. It is also about looking at what new models might work best and could work most profitably in a way that ensures there is provision and service that is even in communities. It is to ensure all kids have access, as the Deputy was fortunate enough to have in Kells, which is not the case everywhere. That should be addressed. We are very much intent on stepping forward from that report, looking at what the lessons are from it and seeing how we can address them.

Sports Facilities

142. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his plans to improve sports and recreation facilities in west Wicklow in particular a sports centre for Baltinglass; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4090/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: West Wicklow has no major sports facility. It does not even have a swimming pool. A number of years ago, I successfully proposed a zoning in Baltinglass for a sports centre on council-owned land. A local sports group led by the basketball club have

conducted a feasibility study, which demonstrates the need for such a centre in west Wicklow. Will the Minister of State support this project?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this and for his advocacy on behalf of the development of facilities in west Wicklow. He will have heard my previous response in relation to the support available through the community sport facilities fund and the large scale sport infrastructure fund. On Baltinglass, I confirm that no application for funding was received under either the LSSIF or the CSFF for a sports centre there. We are opening up, as I said, the CSFF over the course of this year and, in particular, the LSSIF will be considered over the course of this Government.

As I mentioned in the previous response, we have a number of situations across the country like the situation the Deputy described in west Wicklow, where there is not the provision of swimming facilities to meet the needs of the local community. Following on from the completion of the Swim Ireland report, something we will consider is where those gaps are. We will also look to see what models can be put in place that would work and be viable in developing more facilities, could be run in a way that is cost-effective and provide the services needed in terms of swim facilities for local communities.

I will certainly work with the Deputy on his advocacy for developing facilities in west Wicklow and seeing what steps the Government can take to ensure that future funding meets the needs of communities where there is a particular gap, such as in his constituency.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Baltinglass is situated in south-west Wicklow and is 38 miles from here. It is the centre of a large hinterland. Currently, there is no sporting facility in the wider area. This project would also align with all the national policies that support balanced regional development, from the national planning framework to the Baltinglass town plan. The project is supported by Wicklow County Council and several local clubs and community groups in west Wicklow. Recent public and club-level consultations indicate significant demand for improved sports facilities within the wider area. The centre would be used by clubs from all over west Wicklow as well as nearby Carlow and south Kildare. To date, Wicklow has not received its fair share of large scale sport infrastructure funding. That should change.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: In the most recent round of the community sport facilities fund, we saw €7 million allocated to sporting projects across County Wicklow. I know this is a project the Deputy is clear is very much needed and is working closely with Wicklow County Council in relation to it. I am very open to continuing to work with him to see how we can ensure that as we open future rounds of the CSFF this year, and are looking towards the next LSSIF round, that applications, such as for the sports centre he is working on, can be considered as part of that. I acknowledge the work and advocacy the Deputy is doing to try to address a real need within the community. From the Government's point of view, it is our objective to try to support the further development of facilities. We will work with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Edward Timmins: The recreation, leisure and sports audit for Baltinglass municipal district was commissioned by Wicklow County Council to assess the current provision of recreational, leisure and sporting facilities across the area and to identify future needs. Some 86% of participants in the audit said that lack of facilities was the main barrier to partaking in

sport and recreation. This would fill that gap. I also know that many clubs in the area have no home. This facility, which would be community based, would allow these clubs to have a home. This is especially true of the successful basketball club. It has members who come from all over west Wicklow and Kildare. West Wicklow has nothing in the way of large sports facilities. This project, which is being promoted by a group of dedicated people, looks to correct this and I urge the Minister of State to support it.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I recognise the work of the county council in working with the group. The future provision of sporting facilities is something we want to see being done on a collaborative basis as much as possible, particularly with local authorities trying to bring sporting clubs together to ensure there is synergy in the utilisation of existing land and the investment in facilities. I acknowledge the merits of the project the Deputy is putting forward and we will work with him in relation to upcoming funding rounds to ensure it can be considered.

Arts Policy

143. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he is concerned by the lack of space for arts and culture in Dublin city centre; the efforts, if any, and his plans to support a space for arts and culture in the area in light of recent developments affecting The Complex venue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4121/26]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for raising this. The provision of local arts centres is a matter in the first instance for the relevant local authority. County and city development plans are drawn up by local authorities, including the policy objectives for development of the arts. Annual support, including programming and revenue supports, is provided to the arts and culture centres by local authorities and the Arts Council. My Department provides grants as a contribution towards maintaining and enhancing existing arts and culture infrastructure but does not provide funding for the purchase of buildings. The Complex had been leasing its building from a private landlord on a site ringfenced for redevelopment. Officials from my Department met with the chair of The Complex and other members of the team in December 2024 and advised them that the Department was not in a position to fund the purchase of the property. Further communication in June 2025 reiterated that position. More recently, The Complex kept the Department updated of the evolving situation with its tenancy and I am aware that they were in close contact with Dublin City Council during this time. I regret that a solution could not be found with the developer to keep them in their current building, and I understand the council is now supporting them in sourcing alternative accommodation.

Separately, my Department is engaged with Dublin City Council on the potential transfer of part of the site of the Digital Hub in the Liberties area of Dublin to the local authority. I have requested that the city council consider whether any of the activities which are currently conducted at The Complex could in time be facilitated in the Digital Hub complex. The Department would be happy to work with the city council on any proposals, including consideration of whether any of the Department's funding schemes could be of assistance in

this regard. More broadly, the Department has allocated €3 million in funding to Space to Create, an initiative that aims to provide up to 60 artist workspaces in Dublin city, and these projects are currently being progressed in partnership with the city council. In addition, under the artist workspace scheme, €6 million capital funding is available for local authorities to increase the provision of artist workspaces across Ireland. In December 2025, I announced just under €1 million for five local authorities for the development of up to 22 workspaces, which brings the total awarded under this scheme to date at €1.2 million.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is concerning that there is no strategy for the arts spaces infrastructure and that we do not have an arts capital fund such as the sports capital fund and at that scale to address what is happening around the country, not just in Dublin, where large and small arts venues are closing. Many of those arts centres are in buildings that are semi-derelict or in precarious rental agreements. When the money comes for development of apartments or the like they are the first to go. Given our reputation as a country that supports the arts, it is important to not just depend on local authorities but to go beyond that. The State has to step up to increase the funding available to venues such as The Complex, which hosted quite a lot of artists over the years. It was open for 18 years and had music, art and theatre under the one roof. It was an eclectic place to be in and I encourage the Minister to look again not just at The Complex but at the strategy around arts infrastructure.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: We have been looking at a strategy with regard to arts infrastructure. We may be bring forward an arts capital scheme similar to the sports capital scheme we administer. To reiterate, we have offered Dublin City Council properties to look at that have wound up in the charge of the Department through the Digital Hub in the Liberties. I would say you could puck a ball from the Digital Hub to where The Complex was. I hope Dublin City Council will engage with it. These buildings were previously offered to the city council for other uses, and it refused them. The Office of Public Works has part of the buildings taken. We will try to do whatever we can. We do not acquire buildings. We do not buy buildings. The only agencies that buy buildings publicly for the State are either councils - the largest one is Dublin City Council, which is the best resourced and best financed in the country - or the Office of Public Works. I put that on the record of the House before. If Dublin City Council wants to look at properties we have wound up with, we will be happy to engage with it to see if alternative accommodation could be sourced.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I will not get into the finances of Dublin City Council and the problem that most of the funding that is meant to go to Dublin City Council sometimes does not end in Dublin City Council especially when you take into consideration the property tax that disappears out of Dublin. Having said that, I was not necessarily asking that at this stage that the Department purchase The Complex. However, there is a need that a greater fund be available, not just for Dublin City Council, but also for Galway council. There are other areas around the country that have identified sites. Dublin City Council will reluctantly take on buildings. It has a good strategy, but most of the buildings that have been offered to it require a substantial amount of investment to bring them up to modern standards. That is one of the problems with Dublin City Council. I know well the buildings the Minister is talking about in the Digital Hub. I know the costs to bring them up to a modern standard. They have been used up to recently by the National College of Art and Design. It would satisfy one part of what The

Complex is doing but not all of it and it is not the only venue that closed in this city in the past couple of years.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will not get into the finances of Dublin City Council either. Suffice to say, and the Deputy knows this probably better than I do, that it is one of a few local authorities in the country that has consistently reduced their property tax over the number of years. If it can afford to do that, maybe it could afford to see. While there is money coming out of the council-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It has not reduced it this year.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: -----going to places like Leitrim and Sligo, I am sure Deputy Martin Kenny would be very upset with Deputy Ó Snodaigh suggesting the money should not be going to Sligo and Leitrim from Dublin City Council.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is going from the Government.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am not going to lecture a former member of Dublin City Council on the reduction of the rates in Dublin City Council-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I was never a Dublin city councillor.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: -----either commercial or housing. Suffice to say, I welcome the opportunity for Dublin City Council to engage with us on the property we do own. The Office of Public Works owns quite a considerable amount as well. It cannot just throw its hands up in the air and say this is all the Government's fault and problem. If we are coming forward with alternative accommodation the least it could do is engage with us. Yes, it will require money, but it is the wealthiest local authority in the country, and it should invest in the arts on that basis.

Sports Facilities

144. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the engagement his Department has had with Dublin local authorities regarding their experience of acquiring land for the development of new playing pitches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4078/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: The purpose of this question is to understand the level and nature of the engagement the Minister of State's Department has had with Dublin's local authorities with regard to their experience in acquiring land for new playing pitches. As he knows, access to pitches is a significant pressure point across Dublin, particularly in the faster-growing communities like Lucan, Clondalkin and Saggart, and the advent of new towns like Clonburris and Adamstown. Local authorities need that national support to secure much-needed playing facilities for those new populations.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this. The programme for Government commits to supporting local authorities in the acquisition of new lands for parks and playing pitches to help build liveable communities. While neither of my Department's sports capital funding programmes - the community sport facilities fund, CSFF, and the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF - provide for the acquisition of land, I am supportive of any funding proposal to enable local authorities to acquire lands for sport and recreation purposes. I have not had engagement with local authorities directly on this issue, but I am conscious of the pressure on playing space availability in urban areas in particular.

Funding to local authorities to improve the amenity of communities is primarily a matter for the Department of housing and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and I intend to engage with him regarding the programme for Government commitment to ensure we can move it forward. Once lands are acquired for sporting purposes, applications for capital investment, including equipment, on those lands can be supported via the community sports facilities fund as well as the large-scale sports infrastructure fund.

Over a quarter of a billion euro was allocated to 3,048 community sports clubs and facilities in 2024 from the 2023 round of the CSFF, representing the largest ever investment in sports facilities in communities across Ireland. I have asked my Department to prepare for a further round of the CSFF in 2026.

In 2024, the second round of LSSIF received an unprecedented demand for funding. On 4 November 2024, grants totalling €173 million were awarded to 35 projects, and my current focus is on ensuring project delivery under the first two rounds of the LSSIF. No decisions have been taken regarding the next round of the LSSIF as of yet.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: As I have said and the Minister of State has acknowledged, Dublin local authorities continue to highlight the ongoing challenges in acquiring land for active recreation and sports facilities, not least of all because of the housing pressures that are in the capital and the pressure on them to deliver housing, as well as the fact that they often cannot compete with the premium that is on land that is being bought for houses and that could be used to develop additional playing pitches.

Clubs and community groups have repeatedly raised the pressures with elected representatives and my clinic has often been attended by club representatives who point to the fact that there is a huge shortage of pitches. This is brought into focus when we see, for example, that less than 30% of the pitches that GAA clubs play on in Dublin are owned by the GAA clubs themselves, so they massively rely on the pitches the local authorities provide.

Dublin City Council last year stated that there is no capacity to accommodate new playing fields in existing public parks and open spaces. South Dublin County Council operates 166 pitches serving over 1,000 teams. The local authorities have rightly been told to focus on housing, but that means that they are not necessarily always able to compete with developers. Will there be an outcome from the engagement between the Minister of State's Department and the Department of housing on what this looks like as a concrete proposal for local authorities?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is a real challenge. I have met lots of Dublin clubs over the last period of time. Access to land is a real difficulty for them in meeting the needs of their

local communities. Certainly, in order to develop thriving communities, if we are developing new houses, we have to make sure we are developing the recreation and sporting facilities to be able to match that as we go forward. It is something on which I will be intensively engaging with the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, and his Department to make sure we have an integrated and co-ordinated approach as we develop and meet the real challenge we have in housing and, equally, ensuring that sporting facilities can be developed alongside that. I am certainly very happy to work with the Deputy and other Deputies across the city to try to make progress on that. I thank him for raising it here in the Chamber this evening.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I welcome the Minister of State's positive engagement on this matter. Pointing to an example in my own constituency of late, the Dublin City Services Sports and Social Club on the Coldcut Road became available for purchase. I think it is a classic example where, if such a fund existed, it could have supported the local authority in acquiring that asset and making it available for amenity in a part of Dublin that is underserved in terms of overall sports provision.

It is important when we talk about the acquisition of land for playing pitches that we also ensure we put the proper pavilions and dressing rooms on those pitches to ensure we maximise participation in sport by boys and girls and that the playing areas and lands acquired are of such dimensions that they facilitate as many disciplines as possible. One of the things we are noticing with the Clonburr strategic development zone, which was passed a number of years ago, is that it does not always facilitate a full-size GAA pitch on the multi-use playing areas that are being made available.

I look forward to the outcome of this engagement. I might take up the matter with the Minister of State in the coming months to see if we can progress this and give local authorities support to provide the pitches that are so desperately needed in the Dublin local authorities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Moynihan. I know this is something he has been raising with local authorities and advocating very strongly on. I have engaged with them on this issue as well. I look forward to working closely with the Deputy to see how we can make progress on this really pressing need.

Sports Funding

140. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the sports capital programme will be open again for applications; the other funding streams available for sports facilities, including those in schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4101/26]

147. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to consider creating a school's stream within the sports capital grant, in which schools can individually apply for sports capital funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4117/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The programme for Government states that the Government will prioritise the development of physical education halls and sporting facilities, including yards

and play areas, for schools in conjunction with the sports capital fund to deliver for both schools and communities. Will the Minister of State therefore consider creating a schools stream within the sports capital grant in which schools can individually - that is very important - apply for sports capital funding?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I propose to take Questions Nos. 140 and 147 together.

I thank Deputy O'Meara for raising this issue. The programme for Government commits, as the Deputy knows, to continued sports funding to get more people participating in all levels of sport, particularly targeting cohorts in society where there are lower than average participation levels. The community sports facilities fund, CSFF, provides grants to assist in the development or refurbishment of sports facilities and the provision of sports equipment. This programme has operated annually since 1998. One of the objectives of the community sports facilities fund is to assist voluntary and community organisations, sport national governing bodies, NGBs, local authorities, education and training boards and schools to develop high-quality, accessible, safe, well-designed and sustainable facilities in appropriate locations.

Funding for sports facilities in schools is primarily a matter for the Department of Education and Youth. However, third level colleges, education and training boards and schools are eligible to apply to the community sports facilities fund jointly with sports clubs. Such applications must provide evidence of facility-sharing arrangements that will allow sports clubs to use the proposed facilities throughout the year when not in use by the school. There are no plans to change this approach given the existing demands on the community sports facilities fund. Sports clubs within schools and third level colleges are not entitled to apply for funding directly to the CSFF. A joint application with a school enables clubs in high-density areas to access high-quality facilities without needing to purchase and develop a new site and allows a club to provide facilities that are close to home for its members, reducing travel time, and help drive increased participation in sport.

It is something we certainly want to encourage in the upcoming round. There are a lot of synergies that can be gained whereby schools can be using these facilities during the day and clubs can be using them in the evening. It can work really well for everyone, especially for everyone in the community. It is something we will be looking to encourage collaboration on.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I would like to raise the case of Youghalarra National School in Newtown in relation to its summer works programme funding which came from the Department of education. It was a very useful grant and was for the installation of a 608 sq. m ball court. However, to have the best usage of that court and to mitigate against injuries, the board of management wish to have an AstroTurf surface installed on this. This would be very achievable with the funds allocated, but unfortunately the guidelines from the Department of education only allow for tarmac and concrete surfaces to be considered.

The reason I have asked this question is that this is a somewhat stand-alone school. For safety reasons, it needs the sports facilities within the school grounds. I am looking to see if we can get a stand-alone application for the school. Is it possible to engage with the Department of education? The Department of education is giving money to build the court but says its surface can only be tarmacadam or concrete or something along those lines when AstroTurf

would work and would suit what the Minister of State's Department is trying to do. I think it is absolutely incredible and unbelievable that the school would not be able to do that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There has been engagement between our two Departments and we will certainly continue to collaborate to see how best we can work together and ensure that, through good co-operation, we are serving local communities well. With the community sports facilities fund coming up now and to be completed by the end of this year, there is a real opportunity there for schools to assess the potential they have to develop their facilities, to work with local clubs in their area and to come forward with an application that can work for everyone. I will certainly continue to engage with the Minister for education, as will my Department, on how we can work well together in pursuit of that too.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The example I gave of Youghalarra National School is one that probably will not fit in to what the Minister of State is saying the next round of the sports capital fund will be, but if the Department of education is giving out grants to build something, surely when the Department of sport is trying to build facilities such as AstroTurf pitches, and we want to see AstroTurf pitches because they get so much usage and are so much safer and cleaner for schools in particular, that the Minister of State would be able to engage with the Minister for education to see if the summer works programme can be changed so that, although the funding is not coming from the Minister of State's Department, it is very much sport-related. My reason for raising this question was to try and fit it in for sports capital funding, but perhaps we could get common sense to prevail here and the Department of sport would advise that section within the Department of education, as the expertise exists within the Minister of State's Department.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I speak in strong support of Deputy O'Meara's question in this regard. I have regularly asked the Department of education what facilities are specifically going to be provided for sport, particularly for new builds, but also in terms of existing funding streams that can be made available to schools to get sports funding. I look at somewhere like Riverchapel National School in County Wexford.

Incidentally, it is the primary school of the Minister of State's colleague and mine, the Minister, Deputy Lawless. It has over 300 pupils and it has a hard tarmac and flawed play area at the back. It is not a real sporting facility. The Minister of State needs to tell the Department of education that there has to be a more integrated approach to the provision of sport in education at primary and second levels.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputies O'Meara and Byrne. They make eminent sense in relation to the potential at school level to serve the community as well as serving the school population during school times. I will be engaging with the Minister for education and her Department to see how we can better pursue that objective. I thank the Deputies for raising the matter on the floor of the Dáil today.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): 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 Michael Cahill - To discuss upgrading of the N70 Ring of Kerry national secondary road and footpath through Cahersiveen town.

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

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the decision to defer the commencement of the delivery of the Dart+ South West project to 2030.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned redevelopment at Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss section 254 licence applications in relation to telecommunications infrastructure.

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

Deputy Keira Keogh - To discuss the timeline for changes to the primary medical certificate criteria.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss commercial rates bills for Waterford childcare providers participating in the ECCE scheme.

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 Louis O'Hara - To discuss the remaining sections of the Athenry relief road.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss enhancing public transport links between Lucan and Dublin Airport.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss an application of Coláiste Daibhéid under the additional school accommodation scheme.

The matters raised by Deputies Keira Keogh, Malcolm Byrne, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire, Aidan Farrelly and Darren O'Rourke have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Disability Services

Deputy Keira Keogh: I ask the Minister of State to cast his mind back six years to 2020 and imagine a constituent of my predecessor, former Deputy, Michael Ring, walking into his office at the age of 18. The constituent needed a primary medical certificate to access the disabled

driver's and disabled passenger's scheme, DDS. They were refused. They appealed and lost the appeal. This was not because they can walk unaided because they cannot. It was not because they can safely drive a standard vehicle, because they cannot. They were refused because they do not meet an exceptionally narrow and outdated set of medical criteria that prioritise amputations over functional ability. This young person would not be able to walk unaided from where I am standing to where the Minister of State is. This young person cannot reliably press the brake pedal with their disabled foot. Yet, because their limb is not amputated, they do not qualify. Six years later, they are about to turn 24 and still cannot drive. This is six years without independence and without equal access to work, education or social life. It is six years reliant on family, friends and taxis, not because the support does not exist but because the system is stuck in limbo with rigid criteria.

This injustice is compounded when we look at the timeline and the movements of responsibility between Departments. Under action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017 to 2022, the State committed to reviewing transport supports, including the DDS. An interdepartmental transport working group was formed in 2020 but that was, unfortunately, paused due to Covid. Two years later, in January 2022, the Minister of State with responsibility for disability reconvened that group as a matter of priority at the time. Another year later, in February 2023, the final report concluded correctly that the DDS is not fit for purpose and should be replaced with a needs-based, grant-aided vehicle adaptation scheme and that responsibility should be moved away from the Department of Finance. By that point, my constituent had already been waiting three years.

In June 2003, the Taoiseach said he would convene all relevant Departments to develop proposals. That work progressed through further interdepartmental engagement, with the subgroup reporting to the Department of the Taoiseach a year and a half later, bringing us to February 2025. In May and June last year, the Department of Transport announced that it would now be the Department to develop a new needs-based vehicle adaptation scheme. We are now told the Department is beginning extensive engagement and public consultation while working towards January 2027 for the scheme to be up and running. That would mean seven years from my constituent's first application, which was made when they were aged 18, without being able to drive.

I know the response I am going to receive tonight is that the Department of Finance shares my concerns, that the DDS is outdated, that a new scheme is being developed by the Department of Transport following work co-ordinated with the Department of the Taoiseach and that, in the meantime, the existing DDS remains with the Department of Finance and assessments remain with the HSE. That, however, is exactly the problem. While responsibility has been moving from Department to Department, people are being left behind.

My constituent has not been failed by a lack of reports or reviews; they have been failed by a lack of common sense and discretion. If someone can demonstrate that they cannot safely operate a brake pedal, then they need a vehicle adaptation. That should not require an amputation to be believed. What immediate direction can be given to the HSE and the appeals board by the Department of Finance to apply a more functional and humane interpretation of the existing criteria? My constituent cannot wait until 2027 for independence.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputy for raising this extremely important topic. She is right in part of what she said. The Department of Finance, the Tánaiste and I acknowledge that the disabled driver's and disabled passenger's scheme, as the Deputy outlined, is not fit for purpose. That has been confirmed on multiple occasions. While acknowledging that it is not fit for purpose, it is important to recognise that the scheme provides relief from VRT and VAT on the use of adapted cars. It also provides an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant scheme for anyone who holds a primary medical certificate. In 2024, €150 million was spent on the scheme. That is very welcome and beneficial to those who qualify. However, the Deputy is right, and she makes a very valid point in this regard, that the scheme is very rigid and excludes many people. She gave an example of someone in her constituency and I am aware of people in my constituency who I have tried to assist in relation to this. I did not come in with a prepared script from the Department because, quite frankly, some of it is embarrassing. The Deputy has given a timeline for a commitment given to reform a scheme or multiple schemes that all of us, including me and my predecessors, acknowledge are not fit for purpose. The timeline for implementation is embarrassing. I say that with regret.

In 2022, a report was published based on the national disability inclusion strategy, having established a transport working group as part of the review of all Government-funded transport and mobility schemes. I am not going to outline the findings of the report. Suffice to say that they are not at all positive. If we roll on four years, despite the fact that my Department has made a significant contribution to the national disability inclusion strategy to develop a proposal that would be fit for purpose and would mirror international best practice, we do not seem to be any further along. It is fair to say, however, that the new Government, on assuming office, prioritised disability services. Disability and supporting people with a disability into work, education and independent living are a priority.

The delay in implementing this reform further reinforces the decision the Taoiseach made to establish a disability unit within the Department of Taoiseach to ensure that schemes such as this one are pushed ahead at speed. As Government Ministers, we have to take responsibility for ensuring the decisions we take are implemented in a timely fashion by the officials working for us in our respective Departments. I cannot give a definitive timeline tonight, but what I can say is that the Deputy's amplification of this problem further reinforces an issue that needs to be prioritised. I will talk directly to the Taoiseach to ensure the unit within his Department prioritises a speedy decision in relation to the new scheme. I will talk to my colleague, the Tánaiste, as I am sure the Deputy will, to ensure this process moves ahead at pace. We cannot afford to wait any longer for the new scheme to be implemented. The consultation has already happened. There should not be any need for further consultation.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State and I respect his decision to move away from the prepared script. My concern is that in 2020, nobody saw Covid coming down the line and this led to the working group being paused. We have had different reports over the years from different Departments. We now know the Department of Transport is putting the scheme out for public consultation. I am pleased to hear that the Minister of State is going to talk with others about the fact that we do not need a consultation. I am not confident, however, that the consultation will not be pushed ahead. We do not know what will happen in the world in the next year, so the scheme could be pushed further down the line.

11 o'clock

I know a 94-year-old man with carpal tunnel syndrome who cannot feel his hands. I know a lady in her 80s whose daughter cannot bring her to the doctor five minutes down the road because she cannot get her into the car. They have been asked to go to Dún Laoghaire. People from Mayo have to go to Dún Laoghaire for the appeals process. There is no point in their going to the appeals process because in the appeals process they are working off the current criteria, six criteria that we all know they will not meet. There is no point in travelling across the country to Dún Laoghaire to be told you will not get your appeal.

The HSE is carrying out the assessments and the appeals, but this is still with the Department of Finance. My request tonight is as follows. Will the Department of Finance issue interim guidelines to the HSE and the appeals board? We have the two reports. We know the system is failing. We know there is a new system on the way. We hope to have that up and running by January 2027, but the Minister of State and I both know that could roll on until the summer of 2027. God knows what will happen in the world. It could roll on to 2028, and I have constituents who will probably pass away in that time. These are the last years of their lives. Some of them cannot go to the doctor or go down the road. Their children are caring for them. We have to act now. This has been going on almost seven years. Can we please have an interim guideline issued to the appeals board and the HSE in order that they can do something now for the people who have been waiting for years and years?

Deputy Robert Troy: When the Government took office this year, we committed to a step change in the delivery of supports and services for people with a disability and their families. That is a priority for the whole of Government. Budget 2026 is the first step in the delivery of this ambition, providing €3.83 billion to specialist disability services next year. That is an unprecedented increase of €618 million a year, or 20%. That reinforces and demonstrates our commitment to disability services.

I will take back what the Deputy said about an interim measure and I will talk to the Tánaiste when we meet next week about seeing whether that is feasible in the Department. I am told that it is not and that that is the reason a whole new scheme was to be devised. However, none of us as public representatives, be it as TDs, Senators or people who are fortunate enough to serve in executive positions, should accept that decisions that are meant to be implemented at a specific time are just allowed to roll on. We have to hold officials to account such that when a policy decision is taken it is implemented in a timely fashion. I always give the example of planning permissions with local authorities. It is legislatively prescribed that a decision must be taken within two months and a decision is taken within two months. I have said internally in my party that even if we have to bring in legislation that states when a decision is to be taken, the date is not a target but, rather, the decision has to be taken by that time. We are unfortunately allowing too many things slide on by weeks and weeks, which become months, and the only people who are affected are the people whom we are here to represent. That is not good enough.

Disability Services

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to raise this matter and thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting it. This is an issue I have raised consistently and to which I

have had numerous responses at a State-wide level from the HSE. The HSE points to the number of people, over 22,000 adults, in receipt of HSE-funded disability day service supports at 1,200 locations, working with 97 service providers. It acknowledges that many people with a disability need access to transport to enable each person to attend a day service but that the provision of transport services is not part of core services within disability services. The HSE encourages people to use public transport options and to be independent, understandably, but it recognises that public transport options are not always available to many people throughout the country. Specifically in relation to Meath, it reiterates that day services do not have a separate budget for transport.

It says that transport in Meath is managed in a combined way between service providers and the HSE transport manager, who contracts Transport for Ireland, TFI, to supply some historical transport. That is significant. There are 217 service users accommodated on this historical transport to adult day services but there are currently five others on the waiting list for particular transport routes. There is a gap in funding but also in the transport service provision.

I want to raise a specific case of one of those service users who is on a waiting list. I have his and his mother's consent to raise their case in the Dáil this evening. It is the case of Noah Gibney from Slane in County Meath. He is 19 years of age, going on 20. He left school last year and has since been attending Prosper Meath in Navan. Noah is a full-time wheelchair user. He has cerebral palsy, autism, intellectual disability and scoliosis. He is not independent and cannot use public transport to get from his house to Prosper and home again daily. These services are really important. The response we have from the HSE locally is that, unfortunately, no space is currently available on the route for a second wheelchair, as the bus can only accommodate one at a time. The HSE Meath transport manager advises that Noah continues to be wait-listed for transport provision.

It is important that there is no defined timeline for the waiting list. That is really frustrating in this case. The policy objective, which we share, is that people can live independently and be provided with supports to do that. In this case, that is not happening. Noah's mum, Jennifer, has done her very best to secure safe and secure transport for her son, but every door is closed and, as a result, she is bringing him to and from his day services in Prosper every day. That is not a long-term solution and it runs directly contrary to the policy of giving people their independence.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this really important issue and giving me the opportunity to discuss it on the floor of the House. The specialist disability budget supports a range of services funded through the HSE and delivered by section 38 and section 39 organisations, as well as the HSE. This includes, among other services and supports, day services and rehabilitative training for people with specialist disability service requirements.

The HSE funds on an annual basis 97 provider organisations to provide day service supports in line with the new directions policy and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, to more than 21,000 people nationally. The provision of transport is not part of core services provided by the HSE. As a general rule, public transport is used in all circumstances where it is an option. This is in keeping with the principle of mainstreaming, with a clear focus on ensuring persons with disabilities have access to the normal range of

services and participate in community life as far as possible. In general, day service users are in receipt of disability allowance and are automatically entitled to the free travel pass. It is recognised that viable public transport options are not always available throughout the country and that transport support needs vary between individuals. This seems to be the case in Noah's situation.

In the absence of transport options being made available by the National Transport Authority, NTA, some transport supports are provided by the HSE or funded agencies on a case-by-case basis, and a variety of transport solutions are pursued in different health regions. These include travel training to enable public transport to be used, where appropriate, local transport such as Local Link, and private bus transport. Some service providers provide transport where capacity exists. That sounds like the situation the Deputy has raised this evening.

Ireland ratified the UNCRPD in March 2018, which clearly articulates that all State parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access, on an equal basis to others, to transportation. In line with the principle of mainstream-first service delivery, it is incumbent upon all public bodies to execute their functions with proper regard for people with disabilities and Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD.

The HSE has advised that all transport provision in County Meath is managed across a range of services, including disability, between service providers and a HSE transport manager. Day service providers are asked to provide transport to people seeking access to their services. The HSE transport manager contracts TFI to supply some transport. The transport manager covers all transport across disability, primary care, dialysis and some elderly services. The role of transport manager is a legacy role that may be unique to Meath community services. The post is funded across the care groups according to the HSE and there are no transport managers in any of the other five counties that were part of the former CHO 8. There are currently 217 service users accommodated on this legacy transport route, which provides access to a number of adult day service locations. These routes are at capacity, as the Deputy said. As a result, five people are waiting for these particular HSE transport routes. From what the Deputy has said, Noah must be one of those five people.

Sanction was provided to the HSE in 2024 for €3.6 million to be used for the upgrade of transport vehicles in disability day services. Building on a similar approach to addressing the issue of ageing vehicles in disability residential and respite services in 2021, this funding was specifically aimed at supporting the provision of vehicles for transport to day services where other transport solutions are not available and where an ageing fleet exists. This funding was allocated to HSE, section 38 and section 39 services on a one-off basis and has supported the purchase of 77 vehicles, which provide services.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. I know she understands the importance of these services for Noah and everybody else who accesses them for fulfilment, engagement, development and independence. She has articulated here and in the responses I have got before that a unique set of circumstances exist in Meath. It is a frustration for us in Meath that they were there. It is different now for people coming into the system. The wider point is about the need for an integrated system that can ensure that, where people cannot access public transport for whatever reason, a transport system is in place to

allow people to have independence and not to be dependent on individuals. We can all imagine scenarios where someone's carer, support or transport provider, such as a family or friend, is not available because they are sick, away or so on, which has a knock-on impact. I ask the Minister of State to look at this issue, specifically at Noah's case, and at Meath, but also in a wider context at transport for people accessing adult day services. No two cases are the same. There are individual merits, for example, and if a needs assessment was done, a transport need might be identified in an individual case.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy is right that it is important that not only should we provide access to high-quality day services right across the country, which we are, but we should also ensure that people can get there as easily as possible. I appreciate that and every effort is being made to ensure that local public transport links are provided. In Meath's situation, which is unique, there is a bespoke solution that is working for the people there.

I appreciate that there is the waiting list of five, but it is something unique to Meath and I think it is working quite well from the feedback I have had. I will point out now that under pillar 5 of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, our new strategy launched last September, the Department of Transport has the lead responsibility for reducing and, where possible, eliminating transport barriers faced by disabled people. I think that is really important. Under that pillar, there is a commitment to personal mobility and to supporting those who cannot use or easily access any public transport through the provision of enhanced personal mobility options.

The Government's ambition is also reflected in the really significant investment being made in specialist disability services in recent years, with record investment of €3.8 billion in 2026 alone. This includes additional funding for a new cohort of 1,400 school leavers and 53 day-service places for non-school leavers. The Government is absolutely committed to supporting people with disabilities and to ensuring they are enabled to reach their full potential in the spirit of the UNCRPD. I thank the Deputy for raising the case with us here today.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): We now go back to Topical Issue matter No. 2 from Deputy Malcolm Byrne to the Minister for education to discuss the planned redevelopment at Bunclody Community College.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue matter. I appreciate it is not his Department, but I hope he will bring this matter back to the Department of education and that the officials tuning in will be very aware of the concerns around Bunclody Community College. Bunclody Community College is a school with an enrolment of 310 students. This is an increase of 42% since 2019, so it is a rapidly growing school. It is a very good school, with a very committed and excellent teaching staff and some amazing students. I met the student council there. The school had a very successful project at the Stripe Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition around misinformation and disinformation only two weeks ago.

This is a really dedicated team of people working to provide education in an area that has a lot of disadvantage. It is a DEIS-designated school, a champion school of sanctuary and also a pilot school in the supporting Traveller and Roma, STAR, pilot project of the Department to increase participation among those from the Travelling community. This is a really good school as well, when we look at the whole-school evaluations, in terms of the quality of education delivered.

I have to say that of all the schools I deal with in my constituency, and indeed beyond, in terms of the physical structures, this is by far the worst. The school operates on two campuses. It has to because of the expansion of the school. There is a 500 m walk between the two campuses. A lot of the prefabs are on the separate campus. Students have to walk the 500 m, which involves crossing a busy regional road. We are talking about four or five minutes being lost every time for staff and students when they have to travel across between the two campuses. There are only three regular classrooms in this school not currently in prefabs. I do not think there is any other school in the country like this and I will challenge people in this House to identify any other school that is in this situation. Some of the prefabs have been there for more than 20 years.

One of the difficulties is that one of the first parliamentary questions I asked in this term was around what was happening with Bunclody Community College. The response I received was that, "The project referred to by the Deputy, has been devolved for delivery to Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, WWETB", and, essentially, that is at stage 2b. As colleagues in this House will know, I tend to refer to stage 2b as purgatory. It is that sort of holding place that the Department of education has. If a school is told it is in stage 2b, it never knows when it is necessarily going to get out of it. I have eight schools in the constituency in this situation.

In this case, this project has been on the go since at least 2014. In 2019, there were announcements that were welcomed. In fact, the then Minister, Paul Kehoe, described it as one of the most needed investments in a Wexford school. Deputy James Browne, now the Minister of State's ministerial colleague, made very clear about how this project, after many years of campaigning, was finally going to be delivered. That was in May 2019. Complete planning permission for the project was granted in April 2023, so that permission will obviously run out in 2028. Every time I have asked a parliamentary question about this issue since I have come in here, from that first one in January, to one on 29 July, to a further one on 25 November, I have got the same answer again and again, namely, that it is at stage 2b. I hope the Minister of State will fill me with a bit more optimism from the Department and that, as with the previous question, he will not simply read the standard script.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank my friend and colleague. I will read the standard script because the previous question I answered was for my own Department. This one is in relation to the Department of education, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me, on her behalf, an opportunity to update the House on the current position regarding the school building project for Bunclody Community College, Bunclody, County Wexford.

The project referred to by the Deputy is devolved for delivery, as he said, to Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board. The project brief is to provide an extension to the

existing school building, as well as the appropriate refurbishment of the existing buildings to be retained for ongoing educational use. This will cater for a long-term projected enrolment of 550 and provide two special education classrooms.

The project is currently at stage 2b of the architectural design process. This stage allows for detailed design and planning, obtaining necessary statutory permissions and preparation of tender documents. A stage 2b report has been submitted to the Department from WWETB. The report is undergoing a detailed technical and cost review in line with the public spending code. All projects, including this one, are subject to the due diligence requirements of the public infrastructure guidelines. Managing timing, scope and the cost is crucial to staying within budgetary limits for the overall programme. Once the review is complete, the outcome will be communicated to WWETB as the delivery body for this project that will continue to engage directly with the school authorities to keep them fully informed of progress. The length of time a project takes to deliver depends on a number of factors, including scale and complexity, and is subject to the time it takes to progress through the various project stages and the statutory approval process, which I understand, as the Deputy said, it has already gone through.

In July 2025, the Government announced a capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth for the period from 2026 to 2030 under the national development plan. As part of this NDP allocation, the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. In relation to project roll-out for large-scale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance and provide necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project roll-out over the course of the period from 2026 to 2030 to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs.

The NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector and the first tranche of projects to progress to construction will be published by the Department shortly. This NDP implementation plan will optimise outputs from the NDP allocations, with a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in the area is insufficient, and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money, and meets functional needs.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I appreciate it is not his Department but, frankly, there is nothing new in this. This is deeply, deeply frustrating. The challenge for this school and for the staff, the students and the wider community - and I spoke with my good friend and colleague, Councillor Barbara-Anne Murphy, who chairs the board of management of the school - is that this school is tired of, frankly, false promises from the Department. This situation has been running for well over a decade in terms of trying to move things forward.

The difficulty for the school is it sees other schools in the wider community where those projects have progressed much more quickly. As I said, I reiterate the point, in terms of the conditions that this school has to operate under, there are two campuses where students and staff have to travel - the Minister of State knows what the weather was like today - across a

busy regional road, losing valuable education time. We are in a situation where the majority of the school is in prefab classes. That is not acceptable in 2026.

The Minister of State knows I am one of the most passionate advocates for investment in education in this House and support the capital building programme. Lots of work is being done. The question has to be asked as to why this project has taken so long. I invited the Minister of State with responsibility for special education, Deputy Michael Moynihan, to this school because this school has an excellent record in that area. It was willing to expand further in this area, something that not all schools are willing to do, yet we are still not seeing any progress. The Department needs to be much more honest with schools as to the exact timeframe that is involved. This is one of the worst schools I have come across in the country in terms of its physical structure, even though the quality of education is excellent. It deserves a clear answer now from the Minister for education as to when construction work will finally start.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy Byrne for raising this project forcefully and working with Councillor Barbara-Anne Murphy in advocating on behalf of the school, the teachers and the students who go to this school. As I said, the NDP allocation, which was announced last year, was €7.55 billion over 2026 to 2030. The Deputy made a very strong case that this school is part of that allocation process. All I can say is that I will bring the Deputy's message, that he brought very forcefully to the floor of the Dáil, to the Minister for education. It is just the most recent time that he has raised the issue. I know he has been advocating on behalf of the school for a long time. It is a fair request that he has made, that, at the very least, the school authorities should be made aware of an indicative, realistic timeframe as to when they can experience the new building.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This Topical Issue relates to Coláiste Daibhéid and its application under the additional school accommodation scheme. It is important to be open and honest in this place, and I declare an interest. This is where I attended secondary school and it is also where our 14-year-old currently attends in third year. All the same, the issue is substantial and it needs to be addressed because it has been carrying on for far too long.

Coláiste Daibhéid is a school of around 200 children at this moment. It has a projected long-term enrolment of 300. It is an ETB school. Cork Education and Training Board is the patron. It is an Irish-medium school. It is one of the few schools left in Cork city centre. Partially because of that, its growth and development is seriously constrained by the lack of development of its current site. It is a relatively young school. It has been in place for about 33 years now. The location is in St. John's College in the city centre. The buildings are not purpose-built; they are old parts of St. John's College that were provided by the patron, the education and training board. Effectively, the school was never really built. Some extensions were added to existing buildings. One of these buildings is 150 years old.

Níl na foirgnimh maith go leor ar chor ar bith. Tá siad róbheag agus níl go leor spáis ann. Tá roinnt de na foirgnimh sách sean. Caithfear athchóiriú a dhéanamh orthu.

There is no sports hall, which is a huge constraint for any school. There is not an adequate reception area. The classrooms are not adequate to facilitate the potential growth of the school. It is separated across two separate buildings. The school was approved to enter the Department's pipeline for a project under the additional school accommodation scheme. Unfortunately, this has been going on since about 2018. The application is to build a multimedia room, a textiles room, a graphics room, a construction room, a technology preparation room, a science lab, a prep area, one project store, and, crucially, a potential sports hall. That is vitally important. This was submitted in its most recent round for stage 1 review, but that was on 29 July and the school has heard nothing since. That creates a huge difficulty for the school in being able to plan its way forward, and for the patron to plan the way forward and to go ahead.

It is important that a hall is part of these proposals. Project Ireland 2040 has a commitment to a physical education hall build that ensures that students in all post-primary schools have access to state-of-the-art facilities, particularly in the context of roll-out of physical education as a leaving certificate subject. The hall is vitally important. It is also important in the context of students only having their classrooms to go to. There is no place to congregate.

Tá sé tábhachtach chomh maith i bhfianaise thodhchaí na meánscolaíochta trí mheán na Gaeilge. There are eight Irish-medium primary schools in the city council area. This is one of three secondary schools. Clearly there is greater potential and a lack of provision. This is in the context of the then Minister, Joe McHugh, in 2019, stating: "There are ... 60,000 young people in Irish-medium schools right across the country and I want to see an ambitious target set to double that." This is a perfect opportunity to expand the school, to create that potential for the school to grow and to give it the modern facilities that it requires.

I also make the point that the NCSE has been engaging with the school in relation to greater provision for autism classes and units. The buildings need to provide for that. I am looking for an update in relation to this, and to try to see that we can progress this beyond stage 1, that this can be approved in order that the school can get on with planning a building of the future.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity to update the House on the current position regarding the school building project for Coláiste Daibhéid, Cork. The project referred to by the Deputy was approved to enter the Department's pipeline for a project under the additional school accommodation scheme. The project will provide one multimedia room, one textiles room, one graphics room, one construction room, one technology prep area, one science laboratory, and prep area and one project store. The inclusion of a PE hall or general purpose dining hall depends on site feasibility, constraints and input from the local authority and heritage officer. The delivery of this project has been devolved to Cork Education and Training Board.

The stage 1 report outlining the proposed design and costings was submitted to the Department in July 2025. This is currently under review from both a technical and cost perspective in accordance with the requirements of the public spending code. Once the review is completed, the outcome will be communicated to Cork Education and Training Board which will continue to engage directly with the school authorities to keep them fully informed of progress. The Department is committed to ensuring appropriate accommodation is available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context outlined, ensure that each school project on

the school building programme is subject to the due diligence required under the public infrastructure guidelines.

In July 2025, the Government announced a capital allocation of €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth for the period 2026-2030 under the national development plan. As part of this NDP allocation the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. In relation to project rollout for large-scale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance and provide necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project rollout over the course of 2026 to 2030 to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs.

The NDP implementation plan for the education and youth sector and the first tranche of projects to progress to construction will be published by the Department shortly.

The plan will optimise outputs from the NDP allocations, with a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in an area is insufficient and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I appreciate the update. I hoped for a bit more regarding when we might get through the next phase. I appreciate that the Minister of State's Department does not have responsibility in that regard. I would appreciate if he could, on my behalf, bring this matter to the attention of the Minister. I note the presence of my constituency colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, who is also keen to support the school. Perhaps he could use his good offices to contact the Department as well. The school wants to get past this stage. It wants to get to the point of being able to develop all the things that have been outlined in terms of value for money. That is fine; it all makes sense. It is absolutely the case. I have no doubt that the education and training board, which is a very professional and capable organisation, has all of that is lined up.

Will the Minister of State bring a couple of things back to the Department. He stated, "The inclusion of a PE hall or general purpose dining hall depends on site feasibility, constraints and input from the local authority and heritage officer." The school and patron have amply demonstrated the fact that what is proposed is viable and can be delivered, either in the basement or on the roof of the building. They have offered potential designs in that regard.

This is a piece of community infrastructure. We are talking about bringing people into our cities to live, raise their families and work. The south parish does not have a huge number of community facilities. What is proposed here could be a resource for wider community in that part of the inner-city centre, namely the south parish, as opposed to just the school.

At present, there are constraints on the ability to provide PE in the school. There is no place for people to have lunch on rainy days. *Caithfidh freisin a thógáil san áireamh nach bhfuil go leor soláthair ann don mheánscolaíocht trí mheán na Gaeilge i gcathair Chorcaí. Níl ach trí mheánscoil i gcomparáid le hocht mbunscoil. Níl go leor áiteanna do leanaí ar mian leo dul go dtí an mheánscoil trí mheán na Gaeilge.* There is not enough provision for Irish-medium

secondary education. Expansion of this school is necessary to try in order to meet some of that growing demand across the city.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy is dead right. My colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is fully supportive of the upgrade to this school. Last year, in the updated national development plan, €7.55 billion was committed in respect of educational investment. This will ensure the completion of the 300 or so school building projects already under construction, which will deliver over 22,300 new and modernised school places across primary and post-primary, the expansion of special education provision and the provision of a record 14,000 additional places in special education classrooms and new mainstream school capacity. It will also ensure that we continue to invest and keep our existing stock up to a modern standard. It is anticipated that later this year the list of schools that are going to benefit from that substantial investment in school infrastructure will be published. The Deputy makes a very strong case, as does the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, in relation to the school in question. I will be sure to bring the message back to my colleague the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): I wish to support my colleagues because Cónaiste an Phiarsaigh in Glanmire is one of the other schools waiting for a long-awaited extension.

Public Transport

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I appreciate him and the other Ministers of State present giving of their time this evening.

The Minister of State will be well aware of the outrage that met the Minister's announcement regarding the decision to defer the delivery of DART+ South West, a project costed at €1 billion that was set to increase the capacity on rail services running from Hazelhatch and Celbridge, County Kildare, to Dublin from 5,000 to 20,000 passengers at peak times. Essentially, this service was going to change people's lives and the way in which they could interact with their communities and their capital city. Before Christmas, the Minister performed a bit of a U-turn on a project that has been planned for many years. We have not had a justifiable reason as to why that was the case. The latest press release from the Minister suggests that it is something that he would like to do and would like to see come to fruition and that he is not ruling out making a U-turn on his U-turn. I raised this matter in order to try to get on the record what exactly the Government's plan is with regard to DART+ South West.

The aspect that frustrates a lot of people in Kildare, where we have seen such significant population growth over the years, is that many Ministers have been at pains to tell us that individuals and community groups taking judicial reviews are the reason why the provision of significant infrastructure projects in this country has been delayed. The project in question has full planning permission. It has gone through the railway order process. Local authorities both in Dublin and Kildare have done their bit to prepare and get this project incorporated into county development plans. A great deal of planning has gone outside of this House to prepare for this project. Yet, the Minister has essentially stated that he would like to see it happen. Representatives from the National Transport Authority, NTA, were before the public accounts committee last Thursday. I asked them about the DART+ West project and when they expect

to see passengers being able to use DART+ West. They said it would probably be 2030 before that happens. If we extrapolate that timeline in respect of the DART+ South West project, it is obvious that if construction does not start until 2030, we will not see anybody availing of the service until, potentially, 2034, 2035 or beyond. Everything is in place bar the funding.

Do we have a concrete timeline for when the DART+ South West project will progress? Can the Minister, the Minister of State and the Department make it clear that there will be no more changes of heart when it comes to this important project? Planning permissions have been granted on the basis that this infrastructure will be in place. As the Minister of State knows very well, the people of Kildare and Dublin need this service. This is not an optional extra. We need this service to come into place in tandem with DART+ West.

I would appreciate an update from the Minister of State. We will see where we can go from there.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter. He has been consistent in raising matters relating to public transport in the House.

I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Transport. The DART+ programme comprises five different rail projects in and around the greater Dublin area, extending the existing DART network to Maynooth, M3 Parkway, Hazelhatch and Celbridge and Drogheda and improving current DART services from Dublin city to Greystones. The programme will triple the length of the electrified rail network in the Dublin area and double city centre peak hour capacity from 26,000 passengers per direction to 52,000 in future. DART+ South West will extend DART train services from Dublin city centre to Hazelhatch and Celbridge station, including four-tracking from Park West to Heuston station. An Coimisiún Pleanála approved a railway order for DART+ South West in November 2024. In addition, procurement for DART+ South West and DART+ West is progressing, with pre-qualification questionnaire notices for design and build works advertised in May last year.

The Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects. That commitment is evidenced by last year's review of the national development plan, in which a total of €24.3 billion in Exchequer funding was allocated in respect of transport projects for the period 2026 to 2030. Of this total allocation, Exchequer funding of circa €10 billion for public transport infrastructure is earmarked for this period in addition to the €2 billion allocated for MetroLink.

This funding is allocated broadly in line with the Department's national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, intervention hierarchy of maintain, optimise, improve and new. The approach involves prioritising investment in the protection and renewal of existing assets before investing in new ones on economic and environmental grounds. This represents an unprecedented level of investment in public transport infrastructure over the coming five years, which has more than doubled in comparison with the last five-year period under the previous NDP. However, it is a simple fact that within any funding envelope - no matter how big - there are decisions required in relation to sequencing and prioritisation. Those are the decisions that come with the responsibilities of being in government.

The funding under the NDP transport sectoral investment plan will see significant advancements made in a number of public transport projects by 2030, including advancing various elements of the DART+ programme.

The compulsory purchase obligation processes for DART+ South West will commence this year and aspects of the procurement frameworks put in place for DART+ West will be available for use on DART+ South West when its main construction works commence.

It is important to state that, following on from the investment in the new DART+ fleet, DART+ West was also recognised as the critical step in the DART+ programme that will help enable DART+ South West and, indeed, the other infrastructure projects of the programme, to develop for a number of reasons. The new depot in the Maynooth and Kilcock area, to be delivered as part of DART+ West, will provide essential stabling and maintenance facilities for the expanded fleet for the entire DART+ programme, which is a prerequisite for supporting service patterns across the entire DART+ network, including DART+ South West.

DART+ West will deliver the critical electrification of the city centre rail network and the necessary city centre capacity upgrades. This is a prerequisite for future trains coming from DART+ South West to enter the city centre network at Glasnevin junction from the Phoenix Park tunnel. Upgrades delivered under DART+ West, such as re-signalling and electrification, are also vital for accommodating the increased frequency envisaged for DART+ South West. The new station at Spencer Dock, to be introduced as part of DART+ West, is a key node for future service integration, supporting the operational flexibility required for DART+ South West train services, helping to address capacity issues around Connolly Station.

In accordance with the Government commitment on the delivery of major capital projects, the Department will also explore any EU funding which may become available to accelerate public transport projects. Moreover, the NDP will be reviewed around 2028 and updated at that point, and this will also provide an opportunity to examine the potential to provide additional funding to accelerate the delivery of projects such as DART+ South West.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I was preparing myself to get back up to criticise the Minister of State for giving me a blank reply but, in fact, what he has done is given me a very detailed reply and I thank him for it. There is a lot that I can take back with me to constituents and to my colleagues, Councillors Peter Melrose and Nuala Killeen, who have been working tirelessly on this for many years. I had not seen confirmation in writing before tonight that the depot for DART+ West will be in the Maynooth-Kilcock area. When we spoke with the NTA last week it did not confirm this. I really welcome that it has been confirmed this evening. What the NTA did speak about was a public consultation that might be aligned with this. Does the Minister of State know anything specifically about this, whereby communities in the area will be asked their opinion on this? I know Irish Rail has done considerable work in going back to the drawing board with regard to the depot.

I want to press on the Minister of State the importance of this next matter and I cannot underplay its significance. If a depot comes to Kilcock, can we make sure that a stop in Kilcock is part of it? For years people in Kilcock have been told they will have the depot, the noise and the lights, and they will nearly be able to smell it, but they will not be able to use it. It would make absolute sense, if we are bringing the depot as far as Kilcock, which I welcome and I support the Minister of State and the Government wholeheartedly if we can deliver this, that

we can include a station with the depot. It would make massive sense from a future planning perspective. I thank the Minister of State for being here and for giving me such a detailed reply. The only outlying piece is whether there is a timeframe for the public consultation in Kilcock.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I went to college in Maynooth, and Deputy Joe Neville has been on to me, as has Deputy Farrelly in the past, to be fair. Again, on behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank Deputy Farrelly for raising this matter. This is a very important issue and I am familiar with the Kilcock issue, which Deputy Farrelly has spoken about. I do not have a definitive answer on the public consultation but I will ask officials to liaise with Deputy Farrelly on it.

I will recap the developments in the DART+ South West project. It will provide an extension of DART train services from the city centre to Hazelhatch and Celbridge. Procurement for DART+ South West and DART+ West is progressing, with pre-qualification questionnaires for design and build advertised in May 2025. In addition, the railway order for DART+ South West was approved by An Coimisiún Pleanála in November 2024. As I stated earlier, the national development plan sectoral investment plan for transport, which was published by the Department of Transport in November last year, will enable advancement of various elements of the DART+ programme in the coming years, including DART+ West. This funding will also allow for compulsory purchase orders to progress for DART+ South West this year, and will provide for procurement progress for the project, with some of the framework contracts being established in common for DART+ West and DART+ South West.

As the roll-out of the new DART+ fleet, which has started to undergo safety testing, progresses from 2027 onwards, it will allow the cascade of existing trains to serve new areas of the Irish rail network. The redeployment of this fleet is a matter for Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority to decide on, based on a range of factors. There is potential for some of this fleet to be deployed on the DART+ South West line to add capacity in advance of infrastructure upgrades.

As I said earlier, the Department will also explore any EU funding which may become available to accelerate public transport projects. The public transport offering has transformed the whole Maynooth area since my days in college. Moreover, the NDP will be reviewed around 2028 and updated at that point, and this will also provide an opportunity to examine the potential to provide additional funding. I take Deputy Farrelly's point on the acceleration of projects and he made a good point on the population growth.

To be fair to the Government, there has been significant investment in infrastructure and it reflects well on us. I will take back the point on notification of the public consultation. The acceleration of projects with regard to DART+ South West is a good news story and I thank Deputy Farrelly for raising the matter tonight. I thank the staff for being here this late, and I thank An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for chairing the House at this late hour of the night. I wish the staff a safe journey home and if they are on public transport, all the better again.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Farrelly and the Minister of State.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.56 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 21 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.56 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 21 January 2026.