

Vol. 1079
No. 2



Wednesday,
21 January
2026

DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	165
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	166
Health Services Staff	166
Disabilities Assessments	168
Mental Health Services	172
School Accommodation	175
School Admissions	178
Flexible Work and Commuter Delays: Motion [Private Members]	180
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	215
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions	226
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	228
International Developments: Statements	239
Water: Statements	273
Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages	321
Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]	337
Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]	339
Flexible Work and Commuter Delays: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]	342

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 21 Eanáir 2026

Wednesday, 21 January 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): 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 Tom Brabazon - To discuss section 39 arrangements for healthcare assistants.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss waiting times for children awaiting speech and language therapy assessments in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 9.

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the need for a secondary school in Meakstown.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need for additional beds in University Hospital Kerry.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss special education in Kildare North.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss recurring electricity outages in north Galway.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the delivery of level 2 general palliative care services in County Louth.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss serious non-compliance with road traffic legislation.

Deputy Peter Roche - To discuss access to supports for persons with an end-of-life medical card.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss enhancing public transport links between Lucan and Dublin Airport.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss reopening the online portal for applications to special school places for the academic year 2026-27.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - Chun plé a dhéanamh ar moill foilsithe na caighdeáin teanga do na seirbhísí poiblí de réir Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss an enhanced influenza vaccination for older persons.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the statement by the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau about the response to drug debt intimidation and violence.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss section 254 licence applications in relation to telecommunications infrastructure.

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

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss commercial rates bills for Waterford childcare providers participating in the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the remaining sections of the Athenry relief road.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss ongoing issues with the No. 15 bus route in north Dublin.

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

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the demand for suicide crisis assessment nurse, SCAN, services for young people in Kerry.

The matters raised by Deputies Brabazon, Conway-Walsh, Butterly, O'Donoghue and Daly have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Health Services Staff

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raise the issue of arrangements by section 39 organisations for healthcare assistants in respect of the pay increase agreed last year. I refer specifically to the healthcare assistants at Northside Home Care Services who, apparently, were somehow left out of this pay agreement and are now on strike. Northside Home Care Services provides a vital service to the most vulnerable members of society in the Dublin 5 and Dublin 17 areas of my constituency of Dublin Bay North. Approximately 50 healthcare assistants are now on strike due to their recategorisation as non-section 39 workers.

In replies to parliamentary questions submitted by my immediate predecessor, former Deputy, Seán Haughey, in 2024, and by Deputy Dolan last year, the HSE confirmed that Northside Home Care Services is, in fact, a designated section 39 agency. However, while 40,000 other workers in section 39 agencies will see their pay rise, the healthcare assistants at Northside Home Care Services will not see a rise. It is not just the staff who are affected but

also those who use the service, and are now without access to it due to the strike action, and their families, who must make alternative arrangements to ensure their loved ones receive the care they require. This means they have to take time off work and cancel appointments in order to attend to their family members and those close to them. Can any intervention be made in respect of this situation?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue in regard to arrangements by section 39 organisations for healthcare assistants. First, I acknowledge the important role section 39 grant-funded organisations and staff play in our health sector, particularly the healthcare assistants working within those organisations. They have a key role in providing services to people with disabilities and older people in our communities. In the previous Dáil, as Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I worked very closely with various organisations and met with people from Northside Home Care Services, who do phenomenal work. I recall they were classed as walkers because a lot of their work is done in streets immediately close to where they live, which means they do not have to be jumping in and out of cars.

As I stand here today, approximately 56,000 to 57,000 people all over the country will receive home care. It is hugely important to support people to live for as long as possible in their own homes with those vital supports of home care, daycare and meals-on-wheels services. I certainly will raise the Deputy's specific issue with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, under whose remit it falls.

Under section 39 of the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive provides assistance to organisations that provide services similar to a service the HSE may provide. However, section 39 grant-funded organisations are privately owned and run, and the terms and conditions of employment of staff in those organisations, once in line with employment legislation, are strictly between the employer and the employee.

In relation to terms and conditions for those working in section 39 grant-funded organisations, an agreement was reached at the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, on 10 March 2025, between Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, unions and relevant Departments to fund a 9.25% pay increase for health and social care and homeless sector employers, equivalent to increases given under the Public Service Agreement 2024-2026. That was a breakthrough and it was welcomed by all sectors. The pay terms are backdated to start from October 2024, with implementation over a two-year period to the end of 2026, comprising 2.25% on 1 October 2024, 1% on 1 April 2025, 2% on 1 November 2025, 2% on 1 April 2026 and 2% on 1 October 2026.

This agreement applies to organisations grant-funded under section 39 of the Health Act 2004, section 56 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 and section 40 of the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Act 2023. These workers are employed in community and voluntary organisations that are not public bodies. It is only organisations in these categories that are within the scope of the agreement, and therein lies the problem. I am not sure of the details in regard to Northside Home Care Services and why its staff fall outside the scope of the agreement. Many healthcare assistants work in home care, which is now a tendered service and is not grant funded through the section 39 provisions and, as such, there are organisations and workers who are not encompassed by the agreement.

While the agreement is substantial and provides increases for a broad range of employees across sections 10, 39, 40, and 56 funded organisations, it encompasses only those organisations that are grant funded and does not encompass tendered services.

Funding for services commissioned through tendering arrangements is not covered in the agreement as those services are separately contracted with relevant providers. Related considerations can be dealt with through existing procurement processes. When the Deputy responds, he might be able to explain a little more about the situation of Northside Home Care Services. I think he said it was previously classified by the HSE as a section 39 organisation but is now falling outside that scope and, even though an agreement was made with ICTU for an uplift for staff of section 39 organisations, its staff are not able to avail of it.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Minister of State. A response to a parliamentary question in 2024 stated that Northside Home Care Services was categorised as a section 39 organisation. The HSE has communicated to these particular workers' representative body that the issue is due to their employer tendering rather than receiving a grant. We have always had a principle in labour law in this country that there be equal pay for equal work. This group of people are being discriminated against by virtue of how their employer is being paid. It is completely unjust, unfair and inequitable.

Will the Minister of State or her colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, who has specific responsibility for this issue, meet with these people and intervene in this dispute? It is not just affecting the workers; it is also affecting the clients of Northside Home Care Services, who are elderly and vulnerable, as the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is well aware. The workers will be outside Leinster House at 10 a.m. this morning. There is an opportunity for the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to go outside and meet them and discuss their grievances.

Deputy Mary Butler: I certainly will raise this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, this morning. I am not sure whether he is in the building right now. I understand he is not, which is why I am here taking this Topical Issue. I appreciate that some groups, and these workers are not the only such group, are not covered by the WRC agreement and may be disappointed. However, the agreement reached covers only grant-funded organisations, which means it does not apply to those organisations that tender as against receiving a grant. Funding for services commissioned through tendering arrangements are not covered in this agreement as they are separately contracted with relevant providers.

I will speak to the Minister of State to see whether any intervention can be made or, at least, whether it can be looked at to see what is the situation. My understanding is that there might be some other organisations that are in the same circumstances. I will speak to my colleague later in the day.

Disabilities Assessments

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The situation regarding waiting times for speech and language therapy in CHO 9, particularly for children in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, has gone from beyond delay and is entering the territory of systemic neglect. Children in CHO 9 are

waiting not months but years for basic speech and language assessments and then face further delays before therapy begins. These children are at the most critical stage of their development, yet the State is, in effect, telling families to wait and hope the damage is not permanent.

CHO 9 has, going back years, repeatedly reported some of the longest waiting times nationwide for disability services, especially for contact and assessment, mainly due to staff training shortages and high demand. I know the Minister of State realises early intervention is not a slogan; it is an evidence-based practice. When speech and language needs are not addressed early, children fall behind societally and emotionally. I am dealing with families whose children are in school and unable to communicate at the same level as their peers, not because their need was not identified but because the public system is failing to act on time.

These delays are actively undermining children's development. They are increasing demand for resources in education, thereby placing additional strain on teachers. I used to work with those teachers and they have vocalised this to me. The delays are also causing enormous distress to parents whose children are missing crucial developmental milestones. The default response to this crisis has been to cite recruitment and retention difficulties, but recruitment and retention cannot be the only answer when children are being left without services year after year.

I would like the Minister of State to answer a couple of questions directly. What is being done to address the unacceptable waiting times in CHO 9 beyond repeating the same recruitment talking points that families have been hearing for years? What concrete mechanisms are in place to train and deploy more speech and language therapists? Are training places in colleges being increased? Are supervised graduate roles being funded?

Families are not waiting for strategy documents or further policies that may not work; they are waiting for services. While the system fails them, parents are being forced into private therapies just to prevent their children from falling behind. That is not a choice; it is desperation. Families are paying hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of euro because the public system cannot meet the demand. Some families have taken out credit union loans to fund therapies for their children.

I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could clarify one point. Are parents who pay for private therapies being taken off the public waiting lists? In other areas of healthcare, when waiting lists spiral out of control, the State intervenes, and the National Treatment Purchase Fund comes to mind. Why are speech and language services for children treated differently? Why can parents not be reimbursed when they are forced to go private due to excessive public waiting times? A similar reimbursement or purchase scheme would immediately relieve pressure on public services and offer families some measure of fairness, while the Minister works on bringing public waiting times under control.

The current approach is effectively outsourcing early intervention to parents' bank accounts, which is not sustainable. Children in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West and across CHO 9 cannot wait for the system to slowly catch up. I ask the Minister of State to stop managing this process and start resolving it, and to provide clear timelines, meaningful interim supports and a credible plan that delivers services now, not coming up to the next general election.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Minister for Health has asked me to thank the Deputy for raising this matter and for the opportunity to update the Dáil on this important issue. She is acutely aware of the role that primary care services, such as speech and language therapy, have in offering the opportunity for early and cost-effective interventions for children and young people. Nobody will disagree with the Deputy's point that early intervention is key. There is nothing more worrying or frustrating for parents when their child needs an intervention than that the child is on a waiting list. I accept and acknowledge that. We all have issues about that in our own constituencies. The Minister fully acknowledges that waiting lists for primary care therapies have increased significantly over recent years. The waiting lists are too long, with too many people, especially children, waiting a very long time to access services. We know we need to address this.

The HSE has advised that the increased pressure and demand on primary care therapy services are related to an increase in referrals, the increasing complexity of presentations, leading to longer interventions, and challenges related to recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals in the community. These factors have all contributed to an increase in waiting lists for services across the country.

I will now respond to the Deputy's specific questions. In the integrated healthcare area, IHA, for north county Dublin, the HSE has advised that there is an ongoing focus on recruitment to fill the vacancies in this speech and language therapy service. In this area, the HSE has undertaken a number of measures to address the long waiting times for SLT services, working to improve access, ensure appropriate prioritisation and provide ongoing support to families awaiting direct intervention. Such measures include monthly advice clinics that are available to all children and families in the community. These clinics provide an opportunity for families to receive guidance, resources and early support while awaiting an SLT assessment. Additionally, the HSE is running overtime clinics across the area to target children with the longest waiting times.

The HSE has also advised that a prioritisation tool is being utilised to identify children with the highest levels of need, that is, to triage the children to enable the most appropriate response. Furthermore, the HSE is delivering a project for those aged under three years in the north Dublin IHA, which specifically targets younger children and facilitates early intervention, with shorter waiting times.

Notwithstanding that good work, the Minister acknowledges that a lot more needs to be done to improve timely access to services. To address the long waiting times at a national level, the Department of Health is currently working with the HSE on a focused programmatic approach to primary care therapy waiting list management. I have spoken at length with the CEO of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, and the Minister in relation to this issue. I welcome this dedicated focus on a programmatic approach to primary care therapy waiting list management, given that the waiting lists are extremely long. As part of that work programme, the Minister has asked the HSE to reduce the waiting times for three therapies to less than ten months by the end of this year. The three therapies targeted are speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy. This initiative will remove over 60,000 people, including children, from the waiting lists and will be a huge improvement on the current position, which is that approximately one third of people on primary care waiting lists are waiting over a year for a service.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I appreciate the measures being undertaken. This is not an issue to play politics with. To achieve a timeframe of ten months will be a huge bonus in CHO 9, given where we are now.

I have raised this issue previously, although not with the Minister of State. I feel compelled to raise it again, and I have permission from the parents to do so. A child in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, Willow, who turned nine last November, has been waiting for speech and language therapy for two years, since she was seven, so ten months would be a big improvement. We know that children of Willow's age are acutely aware of their differences in school, and the delay is severely affecting her confidence both in school and with her peers. Her parents now feel they have no choice but to consider private therapy. That is why I am asking if they will be taken off the waiting list if they choose to go for private therapy. They are trying to do their best for their child and the family.

I have been pursuing a resolution of this case for over ten months. I continue to be passed from health to disability services and back to health again, but I have failed to progress the matter. In Willow's case, we have failed. We have failed children who continually wait for speech and language therapy. We need to address this issue now. I welcome the Minister of State's response and the measures being taken.

Deputy Mary Butler: I acknowledge the Deputy's continued advocacy on the provision of the myriad therapies that children, young people and adults need. It is important to recognise that overall activity within the eight core primary care therapies was significant in 2025, with approximately 1.24 million appointments provided across occupational therapy, physiotherapy, dietetics, psychology, speech and language therapy, audiology, ophthalmology and podiatry services to the end of November 2025. However, that is cold comfort to any family or child waiting for these services. I thank the Deputy for sharing that story. It is very difficult for a young girl of seven who is awaiting these services. She must be feeling the challenges when in school and noticing the differences among her classmates. I acknowledge all of that. It is extremely difficult.

My understanding of the waiting lists strategy is that if the family decide to go private, I assume they will still be on the HSE waiting list unless they actively remove themselves. I stand open to correction on that.

The Minister is committed to building capacity in primary care, as outlined in the programme for Government, by recruiting additional staff numbers and increasing the number of college training places for health and social care professionals, HSCP. She has worked closely with the Minister for higher education, Deputy Lawless. There are approximately 480 additional college training places this year, and the priorities focus on the therapies. It takes a while for them to come through the college system, but every effort is being made to do that. In June 2025, the Government announced a major expansion in HSCP training places, with 461 new places to be delivered up to 2030 across nine priority disciplines. This expansion relates to the creation of 310 additional student places in 2025, with a further 151 to come in subsequent years.

I again thank the Deputy for raising the issue.

Mental Health Services

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to raise the issue of the need, or demand, for a suicide crisis assessment nurse. A few years ago, I was speaking to a young man, Stephen McCarthy, who lived about 300 yd from where I live. A woman had seen us speaking, and she asked if she could have a word with him because her son was in school with Stephen.

She said she remembered him as a smart intelligent boy and that he seemed to have a deep sense of fairness, because life had not been fair to Stephen. His mother was killed at an early age and his father brought him and his two siblings up. Stephen hanged himself the summer before last. He killed himself about 50 yd from where another member of his family killed themselves in the local GAA club. I am not an expert on people taking their own lives but I know we have the fourth-highest rate in Europe for males aged between 15 and 25 and experts say that is underestimated by 20% to 25%. On Friday, a 14-year-old boy will be buried in Tralee. I spoke to his mother and his grandmother last night. Obviously they are devastated. Their lives have been ruined forever. Stephen McCarthy's father said he is scarred for life. Recently I passed all the graves in Rath graveyard in Tralee and the number of people I knew who had taken their own lives was staggering. In County Kerry alone it was 25 people in 2022, 24 in 2023 and 38 in 2024. That is in one county alone. We do not have the statistics yet for 2025 but in those three years there were 87 deaths, which is phenomenal.

There is a scheme, which I have mentioned, for suicide crisis assessment nurses, SCANs. The Minister of State is aware of it. It is in Cork and in Dublin. The HSE states it "aims to provide a timely response to appropriate requests for assessment of patients in suicidal crisis from named GP practices". It goes back to Sláintecare and the right care in the right place at the right time. This would be timely and it is necessary. Having spoken to people in the community mental health service in Kerry, they see the massive demand for it. It is particularly high in the Traveller community. I do not know why. Is it because of social exclusion? Is it discrimination? Is it a low sense of self-esteem? Is it unemployment? Are there other factors? Stephen's brother told me that as a young Traveller he would feel ashamed seeking help. Travellers, according to the experts I spoke to, will not go to the accident and emergency department. They are slow to say it to people within their community. Talking to women, they might find that difficult - there are culturally different experiences for them. However, something needs to be done. I spoke to Elma Walsh from the Donal Walsh #Lifelife Foundation. She visits schools all over the country. There is a video the HSE prepared and Donal Walsh did great work just before he died asking people to have the courage to reach out. A HSE video was prepared but because of some battle, I understand with the Department of education, it has never been shown in schools. Elma Walsh is going to Derry this week and was in Dublin last week visiting schools. I am asking the Minister of State to set up this SCAN system in County Kerry to deal with the crisis there.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue in relation to suicides in our country. I welcome the opportunity to respond to him because we do not spend enough time speaking about suicide. It goes without saying that even one death by suicide is one too many. I offer my condolences to the family of Stephen McCarthy and the 14-year-old child the Deputy said will be buried this week. It is a really difficult time for their families.

One death by suicide has a huge effect on families, the community, neighbours and school and work communities. It is something I have been working very hard on for the past while. We are currently developing a new Connecting for Life strategy with the National Office for Suicide Prevention. I sat down last week with the deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Philip Dodd and went through the first draft. I will launch it next month. We are very close to having it finalised.

Reducing self-harm and suicide is a priority for this Government. That was evident in the way I tailored the budget for this year. An additional investment of over €15 million will fund new initiatives to support those in mental health crisis. These include new specialist nursing teams for all model 4 hospital emergency departments working out of hours to support the non-consultant hospital doctor, NCHD. We have nine model 4 and ten have been prioritised, namely, the nine model 4 hospitals and the Mercy Hospital in Cork, because it had 1,200 presentations last year relating to self-harm and suicide ideation. Each of those hospitals will receive four nurses each. They will be clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners who can prescribe. They will work in the emergency department out of hours supporting the NCHD. This is important because we have really good teams in place in emergency departments but we always have that issue out of hours, which can be very difficult. I will continue to expand the model 3 hospitals in next year's budget. As a result of not being able to fund the model 3 hospitals in this year's budget - because I have to do it step by step and incrementally - I prioritised three areas for a crisis resolution team and a solace café. One was Donegal, one was the midlands and the other was Kerry. There is recurring funding of €1.3 million that will put in place a crisis resolution team that will work out of hours from Thursday to Monday from approximately 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. until 11 p.m. A crisis resolution team makes an intervention that may not necessarily have to happen in a hospital or clinical setting. They can support the Garda with an incident its members may be called to. It will also provided funding for a solace café. I currently have six of those open around the country. I opened one in Sligo during the summer. There is one open in Galway quite a while, ones opened in Limerick and Galway in only the past couple of weeks, there is one in Dublin and one on Sullivan's Quay in Cork. What these cafés have been shown to do is reduce presentations to emergency departments by 18%. It is clinically-led but it is also peer-led and there are people with lived experience. It is an alternative to having to present to the emergency department, which is really important.

I am very familiar with the SCANs and have built the scheme incrementally in all six budgets since coming into my role. I recently visited Donegal where we have the SCAN U scheme. The medics in Donegal did this all on their own. These are SCANs for people aged under 18. In last year's budget I secured the funding to put two SCANs in CAMHS for the first time ever. They are in Portlinculla up on that side of the country because the area had the highest presentations of young Travellers with suicidal ideation and self-harm. We are making a lot of steps but I will speak directly about SCANs when I come back in.

Deputy Pa Daly: I should mention the name of the boy because I have his family's permission. It is Clancylee Casey, who was known as John. He is the boy who is going to be buried. I appreciate the crisis resolution team the Minister of State has put in place in the solace cafés and that there has been an 18% reduction, but the fact remains a lot of people are slow to go to the emergency department. While what she said is welcome, I ask her to review the

situation and have a look at putting a SCAN system in place in Kerry. She is correct that we do not spend enough time talking about it and I am not the first and certainly will not be the last to raise the issue but because of the extent of the crisis. Suicidal ideation, in the words of someone on the community mental health team, "cannot wait". I ask the Minister of State to deal with it as a matter of urgency. There is also what they call a black escalation in the emergency department in UHK, so they are under enough pressure. If a SCAN system were put in place, it would take some pressure away from the ED. It is important for us in the House to say there is help there. People need to have, as Donal Walsh said, the courage to go out and seek it. I encourage anybody to look at the HSE video Donal did, which is only five or six minutes long, or the 19-minute interview he did on Brendan O'Connor's show before he died.

The Minister of State mentioned CAMHS. We are still waiting for the report. There are still people excluded from the scheme. I have been saying for three years it is inevitable there will be a wider review of the system. Over €2 million has been spent on it. I am told it is completed. I do not know what is holding it up. We were told it was imminent last July but it still is not there

I ask the Minister of State to publish it as soon as possible.

Deputy Mary Butler: On the report, I do not have it yet but as soon as I get it, I will publish it.

Deputy Pa Daly: I know that the Minister of State does not have it but I also know that it is complete.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes, but I do not have it and the Department does not have it either. I want to be clear on that.

To revert to the issue at hand, I want to touch on something I did last September about which I am trying to get the word out as much as possible. In Ireland at the moment, four out of every five suicides are male. It is important to acknowledge that between 2000 and 2021 Ireland saw a 28% reduction in the suicide rate, falling from 12.9 per 100,000 in 2000 to 9.2 per 100,000 in 2021. Currently our figures are at nine per 100,000. I am not playing politics here but am just pointing to facts. I met recently with my counterpart in Northern Ireland and the figures there, believe it or not, are 13.5 per 100,000. We have made progress, for want of a better word, even though one death is one too many. We have seen a reduction in the numbers and the preliminary figures for 2023 are the most positive I have seen to date, notwithstanding the fact that of every five suicides, four are men.

On 1 September last I launched free counselling supports for men across the country. I worked on these supports with the Traveller community in Exchange House in Dublin, the retired veterans association called ONE, the Irish Farmers Association and the College of General Practitioners. When a man who has been on the farm all day or working all day comes home in the evening, he is not going to hop into the shower and then drive into Tralee, Dungarvan or wherever to get counselling supports. He can self-refer to Connect Counselling from 5 p.m. until 9 p.m., seven nights a week. He can simply pick up the phone and have six counselling sessions. When I finish here I will make sure all of the information on this is sent to Deputy Daly.

The most important thing I can say today to any man listening out there is that if, having received counselling supports, he needs to be seen by somebody, that can happen as well. Two thirds of all counselling supports today will be accessed by women. Women are much quicker to sit down, have a cup of coffee or tea and talk to each other. Information is available at yourmentalhealth.ie/men. For the first time ever there are free counselling supports available in this country and the fact that men can access those supports at their own kitchen table is so important. An awful lot of people will not go into a clinical setting for counselling supports. Connect Counselling is providing the supports for us and the take-up is very good. I am doing my best to work within the system. We have run and continue to run ads in the cinemas to make men aware that there are supports out there. I thank Deputy Daly for raising this issue and will send further details on those free counselling supports to him. It would be fantastic if every constituency office would spread the word. I am sorry for going over time.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): That is fine. I did not want to cut in because you were making a very important point. I wish to pass on the condolences of the Ceann Comhairle's office to both of the families mentioned. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue which is quite personal.

School Accommodation

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue on behalf of the staff, pupils and the community of St. Brendan's College in Belmullet. I am asking today for urgent interim funding for a nurture room at the school for students with additional and special needs. This funding would allow the school to act now and provide a much-needed facility for the school community rather than having to wait indefinitely for long-promised extension works.

I will outline the recent history of the funding allocated to St. Brendan's College for extension works. These works were approved as far back as 2009 under the additional accommodation scheme and include seven classrooms and two specialist educational units. The project is now at stage 2a and has been sitting with the Department for several months. In reality this approval is eight years old and the school is still waiting for construction to begin. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is a practical person and I know he will agree that this is absolutely far too long. Pupils who were not even at the school when approval was granted have come out the other end and have not benefited from what was promised then. In the meantime, staff and students continue to work in prefabricated buildings installed in 1991 and 1992. That is over 30 years ago. These prefabs are well beyond their intended lifespan and are no longer fit for purpose. They suffer from water ingress, inadequate heating, ongoing structural deterioration and mould. Despite this, the school was forced to spend €15,000 of its own annual budget this year alone just to keep these units usable for students throughout the winter. This is not a sustainable or acceptable position for any school but particularly for a school that is serving a community with significant disadvantage. St. Brendan's College is a DEIS school in a Gaeltacht area. Over 70% of students come from the primary schools in Erris, a geographically isolated area the size of County Louth. The demand for educational provision and sensory support has grown significantly but the physical infrastructure of the school has not kept pace. The principal, teachers and board of management in St. Brendan's

College cannot be praised enough. I know that from my own experience because my own two boys went to that school and received a wonderful education there.

The Department and the ETB have advised the school to wait for the long-promised extension but the reality is that students cannot wait. Right now there are several students in the school who urgently need access to a quiet space or a nurture room to help them to manage their emotions, anxiety and sensory overload. Without such a space, their ability to engage in learning, remain in school and reach their potential is compromised. In response, school management has taken a proactive approach. Rather than waiting indefinitely, it has identified a small portable building that could be placed on the site and converted into a sensory room. This is a modest, practical and cost-effective solution. The school community has already raised almost €8,000, demonstrating strong local commitment and support. However, the community requires a total of €15,000 to make this project viable.

My question is simple but urgent. Are there any funding streams, grants or discretionary supports available that would allow St. Brendan's College to meet the immediate needs of its most vulnerable students while the larger extension project for the school remains delayed? This request is not about replacing the long-awaited extension but about ensuring that children who need support today are not left without it because of processes that move too slowly.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for raising this issue on behalf of St. Brendan's College in Belmullet. I always appreciate it when a Deputy raises an issue about which he or she has lived experience, in this case, family members in the school in question. I acknowledge the genuine tribute the Deputy has paid to the team in St. Brendan's College, as well as the huge amount of work that is going on across the education system.

The Deputy asks what we can do in this case. We are spending a huge amount of money on special education right across the country. We are trying to make sure that we have the best services available to children with additional needs in both primary and post-primary education. I assure the Deputy that since my appointment over a year ago I have worked extremely hard with the Department and the NCSE to make sure that we are providing the best possible resources across the education system. In all of the decisions that have been taken on additional accommodation or new builds, special education is built in. It is standard practice at this stage to ensure that any investment being made by the Department of education, the State and the taxpayer includes special education provision right across the country so that we bring special education as close as possible to those who need it.

The Deputy put a simple question to me with regard to the nurture room. In many schools that I have visited I have seen imaginative solutions put in place to provide nurture rooms. I absolutely accept that nurture rooms are hugely important for ensuring that children with additional needs have the best possible educational experience. There are some funding mechanisms available to provide additional classrooms in the context of reconfiguring existing spaces. The previous Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, and I had numerous conversations in relation to putting a fund in place and those conversations have continued with the current Minister, Deputy Naughton.

Many schools come to us to say that they or their parents' associations have raised funding. It is something we have looked at very clearly. The Deputy outlined the journey St. Brendan's

College has taken in relation to the additional accommodation on the new build and the extension. The Deputy is right: there are an awful lot of students who were in the school when all these plans were put in place and have long since gone into adulthood and are working well outside the system.

I will do two things on foot of this Topical Issue. First, I will go back to the Department to see if there is any mechanism for the immediate request. Second, I am very committed to the need to put a very simple funding stream in place for nurture rooms or quiet spaces. In mainstream education where they may not have a special class or special unit, they have children with additional needs. If there is a quiet space there, it helps the educational environment. We have looked at it. A lot of schools have raised funds for sensory gardens and quiet spaces which are all hugely important pieces of the education system and the best possible experience. I will first go back to see if there is any way we can help with the immediate request. We will try to find a route for schools in the future for a funding stream for nurture rooms or quiet spaces which would benefit the education system hugely.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I appreciate that. I know the Minister of State is genuine when he says he will do that with St. Brendan's College because doing so would send a clear message that while we plan for the future, we do not abandon the students in the present. I look forward to some movement on that issue. This is a very small investment in terms of the interim measure which would have a profound impact on the students who need that space. This is about fairness, urgency and care and about ensuring children who need support are not left behind while waiting for buildings that may still be years away. After nine years with the Department, one can imagine, even from a public expenditure point of view, how much the Exchequer would have saved if that was done when it was planned and approved, never mind all the benefits for the children who would have benefited in the meantime from having the additional space and the additional rooms which are desperately needed. We are fortunate that there is demand for that school and the numbers are increasing. We see in many rural schools that the numbers are decreasing. It speaks to the excellence of the teachers and management in that school. I have to praise the other two secondary schools in Erris as well which do excellent work. One of the key advantages of living in that area is the education provided. I ask the Minister of State to go back to the Department to say that nine years is too long and that it needs to get moving on this project, get the main project done and in the meantime provide a small bit of money that will make a huge and profound difference to the work the teachers and students are doing there. On behalf of the students, the teachers and the principal, I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: It was remiss of me not to mention at the outset that the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Pa Daly, raised an issue in relation to the HSE and the Department of education. I will follow up on that from our side as well about getting the Donal Walsh video circulated.

On St. Brendan's College, I will go back to the planning and building unit and we will see where that is at. I take the point about funding. The cost of building is going to increase, has increased dramatically over the past while and will continue to increase. The sooner we get these projects up and running, the better. I assure Deputy Conway-Walsh that in all these projects we are very much aware of making special education central in all applications to

make sure we provide for it. Into the future we will look at how we can accommodate it in mainstream education by means of nurture rooms, quiet spaces or sensory gardens because a lot of school communities are fundraising for that. Without guarantees, we will see if there is any way of funding it. We will do what we can. If we can, we will but if we cannot, we will let the Deputy know. We will follow up on the issues the Deputy has raised.

School Admissions

Deputy Paula Butterly: I raise an issue on behalf of one of my constituents who is quite literally pulling out her hair because she has no idea where or if she will place her child in a special school next September. We know that parents of children with special needs face many challenges and one of them is the assessments. Through no fault of her own, last October she knew she was going to miss the deadline because her child has been on a waiting list for an assessment. She made clear to the NCSE that this was going to be the case but only last week she received notice that there is no place for her child in September 2026. As one can imagine, this has caused untold anxiety because she cannot wait and her child cannot wait for a year, staying at home or wondering where to place the child. The Minister of State knows how essential early intervention it is to a child's progression and development. Children cannot afford to stay at home and stay still for a year without knowing. I would like to think this is just one exceptional case but unfortunately there has been a further case in my constituency. I believe this is going to be the case across the island. My ask is quite simple: can the portal be reopened temporarily to allow for these assessments to be put through, if available? We know that the waiting lists for assessments are to the detriment of the children, the parents and the family members in the communities. Can the portal be reopened? If not, can we give instructions to the NCSE to work on a case-by-case basis to find a suitable place for these children in September 2026?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the genuineness of the question. Without filling it out, she has gone directly to the core of the issue. I will respond accordingly. We have had a huge amount of investment in special education, which I am glad to see, over the past number of years and last year we expanded that. This time last year, after being appointed, the deadline was 1 February. We were then correlating and getting the information in February and it was March or April before we were in any position to help families or give certainty to them. My guide in terms of providing in this role is something that happened a number of years ago. I was at the school gate where one child was finishing in a special class and they did not know where they were going to go on 1 September for post-primary education. They were asking me for guidance and help. To see the fear, anxiety and concern of the parent in that instance guided me before I took this position but also in many challenges over the past year. We need to bring certainty. We set it as 1 October and brought it back four months so the Department, the planning and building unit and the NCSE would have an understanding of the need in September 2026 and we could better plan and ensure there is a place for every child whether in a special class, in special school or in mainstream. A lot of work has been done and a huge number of families and guardians notified the NCSE of the special education requirements for their children for September 2026. We are working through that.

A number of families have come forward to say that because of different challenges, they have gone beyond that deadline. We acknowledge that 1 October was a new deadline. We

need to get that into the mindset of the entire educational system into the future. The Department and the NCSE had extensive discussions with Helen McEntee prior to November and have had discussions again this week with Hildegarde Naughton. We are acutely aware of the challenge.

The Deputy asked if we could work on a case-by-case basis. That is what we are doing. The deadline we set was, for the first time, 1 October. An awful lot of good information has come in and we are able to plan better. It allowed us to announce last week the first tranche of special classes, which happened four months earlier than last year. We have a number of families that notified after the 1 October deadline and we are working on that challenge. We will work with and support families.

Deputies across the House have come to me on this. We will work on individual cases. Reopening the portal is not something we are looking at because that would further confuse things. We need to get the information earlier. We know there are specific issues in some families. Parents of children with additional needs face stresses, are trying to balance everything and may have missed it, or they may be waiting for an assessment or for the letters. We need to be mindful of the challenges they face and work to find a solution. I know the Deputy will share the individual cases directly with me and we will work on a case-by-case basis on it.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I truly thank the Minister of State for the reply and look forward to a proactive approach from the NCSE and local SENOs to finding a solution to those individual cases. As the Minister of State said, anxiety is being caused to families by so many issues. If we can alleviate it and make sure these children, who are very special, have the right structures in place, are not delayed any further and get their places in September, that will be a huge achievement for the child and the family.

On Monday, I visited St. Ita's Special School in Drogheda, which has been in existence for over 60 years. I looked at the design for the new build it will share with St. Mary's. It is truly extraordinary but it struck me that before the build is complete, it will already be at capacity, which shows the extraordinary need that exists. I acknowledge all the work being done in the Minister of State's Department to get more resources and places on line. It goes to show we cannot keep up with the need and demand that is there.

When I spoke to Miceál, the principal of St. Ita's, he made another point. He said that while everybody accepts the portal and the process being followed in order to meet demand, every time a child applies for a place in St. Ita's, the parents and child are invited into the school months before they are supposed to start. The piece of paper will say one thing - it may be an indication of the need for a special school or additional supports - but nothing will replace the knowledge and experience of a teacher or principal. We have to find a way to maintain the collaboration of the principals and teachers who are involved in this process. We need to get it right first time and make sure that when a child goes to a new school, it is the right fit. There is nothing more disturbing for a child than being in a place they do not belong.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I would like to pay tribute to Miceál, who is the principal of that school, and the teams in all the special schools across the country - the teachers, SNAs and all the additional people who work there. I was at a special school in the south of Ireland in

September. As I was walking along the corridor, one of the team there was using a measuring tape because they were putting together a chair out of a box for a student. There was no notice taken of it when I stopped to discuss it with them. It was part of their work. The care, love and attention that teams in special schools and special classes, and indeed throughout the education system, give to children with additional needs across the length and breadth of the country is commendable. We have to be ahead of the need.

The Deputy mentioned the need, the extensions and the fact those extensions are full. We have sight of what is needed for September 2026 and are working extremely hard. There were meetings right up to Christmas and again last week, when we announced the first tranche of special classes. We will be announcing more than 600 classes across the entire system to match the need for September 2026.

Going back to the Deputy's original point, people will acknowledge that we brought forward the portal for 1 October. We need to do better on that. This was the first year of it. We have to work on it and ensure that a proper system is in place and that we see the figures long before time. The other thing is that we need Departments to share information like the domiciliary care details from the Department of Social Protection or the AIMS programme, so we understand the need early on as a State. These are some of the barriers we are trying to break down.

The whole of government is involved in that. The Cabinet subcommittee is very clear on the need for a step change in relation to special education. I am fortunate to be in this role and working with Hildegard Naughton on it. We are committed to doing this. There are and will be challenges but we are committed to breaking down those challenges. We will work to find solutions for those who notified after 1 October. I am open to the Deputy and to Deputies across the House. We will try to work on any cases raised. We do not have magic wands. They have not been given to us yet but we will work to make the system better. I thank the Deputy for her interest.

Flexible Work and Commuter Delays: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- employees in Ireland have no right to flexible and remote work, only a right to request it from their employer;
- more workers are being forced back to the office, with some large employers, including in the public sector, moving to increase the number of days per week that must be spent in the workplace;
- in a recent study by INRIX, Dublin ranked as the 11th most congested city in the world, and the third worst in Europe;

- commuters and drivers now experience significant traffic delays, whether through cities like Galway, on roads like the N40 and N25 in Cork, or on arterial routes into Dublin, such as the M1, M4, M7/N7 and M11;
- Transport Infrastructure Ireland has said there is almost nothing it can do to address traffic gridlock on the M50, and that it is at capacity;
- more frequent Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) services, and increased capacity on existing routes, has been delayed due to supply issues with new battery trains, with a knock-on impact on other planned network improvements;
- public transport projects with planning permission are not progressing due to a lack of political will to provide funds, including DART+ South West, now paused at least four years to beyond 2030, and Luas Finglas delayed until 2029;
- commuters cannot rely on bus services to arrive when scheduled, bus lanes are not properly policed, active travel alternatives are not safe, and congestion is worsening;
- delivery of active travel infrastructure to encourage cycling and walking is too slow and inconsistent, and the level of investment is falling as a proportion of the transport budget;
- traffic congestion leads to increased air pollution and poses a significant public health risk; and
- transport is the biggest source of energy demand and the second largest source of emissions in Ireland, which must halve by 2030, and required a decrease of 12.4 per cent in both 2024 and 2025 to meet the sectoral emission ceiling in the first carbon budget, which will not be achieved, with projected reductions of only 1.3 per cent and 2 per cent respectively in those years;

recognises that the lack of a right to flexible and remote work, and the failure to provide reliable and accessible active travel alternatives and public transport, particularly in rural Ireland, is forcing more and more workers to rely on private vehicles to reach their place of work, leading to increased congestion and unnecessary carbon emissions; and

calls on the Government to:

- introduce a real right for employees to flexible and remote work, where it is reasonably practicable;
- ensure that the public service leads by example so that workers are not forced back to the office when their work can be carried out remotely;
- launch a new Operation Free Flow to address congestion, that includes:
 - a rapid response team in situ on all arterial routes into the M50, starting with the M7/N7, to respond to road traffic incidents;
 - the immediate progression of the M4 Bus Priority Lane project, and rollout of this initiative to other routes including the M9 and M7;

- a new campaign to improve driver behaviour on our roads and increased roads policing; and
- a real time app on traffic updates for commuters, and improved reporting of incidents to local and national media;
- urgently introduce an action plan to improve public transport services over the next 12 months, including measures to:
 - provide more early morning and late-night trains, and increase the frequency of services into Dublin and other cities;
 - introduce additional train carriages, and explore all options to increase public transport capacity;
 - fast track the delivery of park and ride/share facilities in cities and outside the greater Dublin area;
 - introduce automatic number plate recognition cameras, to enforce the rules of the road at junctions and bus gates, and ensure bus lanes are properly policed;
 - improve the reliability of bus timetables, real time information displays, and the Transport for Ireland App; and
 - require the National Transport Authority to introduce contactless payment, and guarantee accessibility for people with disabilities on public transport services within 12 months;
- reverse the decision to delay DART+ South West and Luas Finglas, and prioritise the rollout of public transport projects including additional Local Link services, Bus Connects, and active travel infrastructure, including quick-build segregated cycle lanes throughout Dublin city and county; and
- prioritise the rollout of new Luas lines in Cork, Galway, and Dublin, and the improvement and development of new regional and suburban rail links, including to transport hubs such as Shannon Airport and Rosslare Europort, on the Western rail corridor, and to towns like Navan.

I move the motion on behalf of the Labour Party. My colleague, Deputy Wall, was meant to lead on this motion but rather ironically - or perhaps appropriately - he is stuck in traffic right now coming in from Athy. Apparently he has been there for three and a half hours.

This is a timely motion. The M50 cuts through my constituency and anyone unfortunate enough to have to rely on it to get to work in the morning knows it is an absolute nightmare. The same is true in the evening. It is bumper-to-bumper congestion day in, day out. This has obvious knock-on effects for roads across Dublin city and arterial routes into the capital, including the M7 and N7, as Deputy Wall can attest to later.

10 o'clock

While various solutions have been proposed and implemented over the years, none has delivered lasting relief to the congestion. The additional lanes added to certain stretches of the

M50 completed in 2010 helped temporarily but ultimately encouraged more cars onto the motorway - the well-known phenomenon of induced demand.

More recently, the variable speed limit system has made little or no difference to congestion. It is routinely ignored by motorists largely because there is no meaningful enforcement mechanism even though the system is now legally binding. TII, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, has been clear that without a change in Government policy, all of the available options have been exhausted for the M50. We know how fragile the system is. A single incident on the M50 can bring the entire city to a standstill as happened just before Christmas.

As noted in the motion, Dublin is now the third most congested city in Europe and the 11th most congested city in the world. That is a staggering statistic. I am fortunate enough to be able to cycle to work and as I pass rows of stationary traffic on my way to and from Leinster House, I often ask myself how many of those people genuinely need to be sitting in their cars. How many are driving into an office in the city or elsewhere to do work that could just as easily and just as productively be done from home? I would be willing to bet it is a sizeable proportion. There's little doubt in my mind or among my Labour Party colleagues that the absence of a real, meaningful right to flexible and remote work is contributing significantly to congestion across Dublin and the wider greater Dublin area.

We are witnessing a rollback on one of the few genuinely positive legacies of the Covid pandemic. People were forced to work from home at that time and the world did not collapse. Businesses continued to operate and profits largely remained intact. Study after study has demonstrated the positive impact of remote and flexible working on productivity. Despite this evidence, we see large corporations, including AIB and major tech and finance firms, issuing blanket return-to-office mandates. More worryingly still, public bodies have followed suit. Enterprise Ireland's recent reversal of its remote working policy is a prime example. I commend Fórsa on pushing back against these regressive moves, which lack justification and often lack any consultation with staff on them. This is fundamentally a workers' rights issue and a quality-of-life issue.

People are spending hours every week stuck in traffic, time that could be spent with family, pursuing hobbies or simply living healthier lives. Almost anything would be a better use of that time. Even modest flexibility such as varying people's start times at work would make a meaningful difference to people's lives and to congestion on our roads. Instead, people are being forced back into the offices and required to arrive at the same time as everybody else, creating chaos on our roads. This is something the Government could address almost overnight if it wanted to.

We cannot discuss congestion in Dublin without acknowledging the shortcomings in our current system of public transport as well as the state of active travel infrastructure. To my mind, the absolute priority in tackling congestion, along with the associated environmental and climate impacts, must be reducing our reliance on private car use. The only way to achieve that is by making public transport and active travel genuinely viable alternatives.

In that context, the sectoral investment plan for transport under the national development plan, NDP, was deeply disappointing. Crucial shovel-ready projects will not begin construction until after 2030. Projects that have planning permission and have gone through huge amounts of planning and consultation are being long-fingered. Notwithstanding what the Minister said

in this Chamber last week about compulsory purchase order, CPO, processes and procurement, there is a clear lack of urgency from the Government in delivering projects that would do most to alleviate congestion in Dublin and beyond.

Even leaving aside projects still in the pipeline, there is a strong perception in my constituency of Dublin South-West that existing public transport services are deteriorating. While my support for BusConnects is on the record, I cannot say that the roll-out of phase 7 last October has served my constituents well so far. The replacement of the No. 49 bus by the F1 route has added 20 to 30 minutes to the morning commute for people travelling from Tallaght, Firhouse and Knocklyon into the city centre. Ghost buses, cancellations and delays are common on the S orbital routes and have become increasingly frequent on routes such as the 15 and the 15B. Dublin South-West has long been underserved by public transport. Most of my constituents have no access to rail, meaning every cancellation and every delay only deepens existing frustration.

The national development plan was equally disappointing in terms of active travel investment. In real terms, budgets are effectively being cut for active travel over the next five years and have not increased since 2020. This is despite the fact that walking and cycling are the cleanest and most sustainable forms of transport. By reducing investment in safe active travel infrastructure, we undermine people's confidence to leave the car at home. We also forgo significant public health benefits, including reduced air pollution. I would encourage all Members to read the excellent report, "Active Travel: The Magic Pill", from the Climate and Health Alliance on this issue. I recognise that major public transport projects take time, often longer than any of us would like. They cannot be relied upon as immediate solutions to today's congestion crisis.

What this motion offers, namely, a genuine right to flexible remote work, can deliver immediate benefits. We know there are thousands of cars on our roads every morning that do not need to be there. This is a workers' rights issue, a quality-of-life issue, a health issue and a climate issue. People's well-being and the well-being of our planet should not be sacrificed for the sake of outdated notions of corporate office culture.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I commend my colleague Deputy Mark Wall on bringing this forward. For anyone watching us discussing a motion on congestion and the requirement for flexible work, it is absolutely ironic that a man who left his house before 6.30 a.m. is walking through the door of Dáil Éireann at 10.05 a.m. Why? It is because there were accidents on the motorway and everybody across the commuting areas of Kildare, Tipperary, Laois and other areas were held up because of it. This was not planned but it is some statement to prove why we need to deal with this issue in the short term, not the medium term or the long term.

What is going on is insane. The motorways into Dublin and the M50 are car parks. Accidents do happen and it is crazy that there are not emergency vehicles from TII on the slip roads and the hard shoulder, parked up and ready to get vehicles involved in incidents moved immediately. In any other jurisdiction, that is normal. We need it not just on the M50 - we need more on the M50 - but we also need it on the M7, M8 and all other orbital routes into Dublin. We also need it in other areas such as Galway, Limerick and Cork. From my area, getting into Limerick at certain times in the morning and coming out of it in the evening is

chronic even though it is only a short distance obviously because of the volume of people using cars and the lack of public transport options.

The lack of public transport options is real. Over a decade ago, Portlaoise became a hub for commuting to Dublin. Lots of people moved down there. Some people who worked here moved down there. A huge reason was the great train service. The biggest issue was where people could park when going to get the train. Now it has gone down as far as Roscrea and Nenagh. There is not the rail line capacity or the frequency of trains. There are not even the services because the service on the Ballybrophy line is so dire. I would use that to commute to Dublin but I cannot because I cannot rely on it and it does not meet my requirements. That is not acceptable.

We also need to ensure that this gradual push towards pulling people back into work stops. The right to flexible work and the right to work from home must be enshrined. Where it needs to be enshrined most quickly is with us and the public service. In some Departments and some organisations, the pull back into work is high and some of the people who are late for work this morning are people who are working for the State. We all know that some people cannot do flexible work and cannot work from home, but for those who can, we should encourage it as much as possible to avoid the issues we are dealing with.

There are other practical measures that need to be done with park and ride, bus lanes, frequency of trains, integrated ticketing and transport hubs. How come late night bars and nightclubs can have staggered closing times but we cannot have staggered times for work so that people can travel at different times as regards their work hours? Practical changes like that would help alleviate the gridlock that we are seeing coming into Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and everywhere else.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: This motion comes at a critical time for workers in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West where transport pressures are at breaking point. My office receives emails on a daily basis from constituents who simply cannot get to work on time because buses and trains at peak hours are completely full. Workers are being left behind at stops through no fault of their own. I want to share the stories of some of my constituents who have contacted me directly recently. One told me: "Again the impact of not getting onto this bus has caused huge impact on my employer, my personal life and me financially." Another wrote how over the past few years the service has got busier and busier to the point where there was standing room only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from their stop, which is one of the first stops. Another highlighted the stark contrast with Christmas week when:

... the buses were obviously very quiet and I got into the city in less than 30 minutes (to Westland Row Station). It shows how close Balrothery really is to the city and with proper infrastructure what could be possible.

These are not isolated complaints. These are just workers trying to get to their place of employment. Before they even begin their working day, the stress has already started.

Since 2020, we had a growth in flexible working opportunities that reshaped Ireland's employment opportunities. It has had a real positive effect and especially for women. Remote and hybrid work options have driven female workforce participation to record levels, offering greater opportunities for career progression, improved work-life balance and economic

independence. Yet despite all this evidence, workers in Ireland still have no right to flexible remote work, only a right to request it. That is not good enough.

By removing the strain of long commutes, the pressure of securing affordable childcare, and the expectation of constant physical presence in the workplace, flexible working has eased daily pressures for thousands of families. While these benefits apply across the workforce, they are especially significant for women.

If we learned anything from 2020, it is that not every job needs to be done from an office, five days a week. Flexible working should not be considered a perk - it should be considered a workers' right.

I am constantly updating constituents about delays to the DART+ Coastal North line and how there is no increase to bus capacity, especially the 33A and the 33X. These are delays people have no control over but that directly affect their livelihoods.

Granting that right would ease pressure on our transport system, reduce congestion, support childcare arrangements and improve quality of life for workers across my constituency of Dublin Fingal West.

Deputy Mark Wall: I am glad the Minister of State is here today because he will know this is not the first time I have raised issues around the car parks that are the M7 and N7. I have been speaking about this for a number of years and An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will know that. We have had a number of conversations on this and what we can do to solve the problem. This morning, I left my home at 6.30 a.m. and I walked through the doors at 10.05 a.m., having had to take a small phone call on the way. I am among thousands of commuters this morning who were stuck on the M7-N7 and, by extension, the M50 because of an accident on the M50.

Recently, I spoke to TII about the number of accidents on these roads. I want to put on the record that, in the three years before this morning, there had been 2,100 accidents on the M50 alone. Recently, TII officials held up their hands and said there was nothing they could do about it, yet commuters are locked into their cars this morning. What is really worrying is many of those commuters have been late - they have contacted me in the car while I was on my way in - for appointments, including very important appointments in hospitals.

I want to take a point made by my colleague Deputy Kelly about remote work. A lot of the people who have contacted us over the last number of weeks are working for the State. Over the last number of weeks, they have been told by various and many Departments that they must come back into work again - from two days to three and from three days to four - yet they will say that they can work from home and have been doing so for a long time.

What we need, and as outlined in this motion, is something that the Government does not seem to recognise: the right of workers to flexible work. We need the Government to recognise that it needs to lead on the right to flexible work and show leadership by talking to the various Secretaries General and allowing those workers to work from home remotely. Those workers do an outstanding job as we all know. I am sure the Minister of State and his Government will agree with that.

In the short time that I have left, I wish to raise a couple of issues. We have proposed a number of options for the short term. I know the Minister of State will come back to me and

talk about investment and multimillion euro investment. That is something that we in the Labour Party welcome but the problem, as the Minister of State and I both know, is that these will take three, four, five, six or seven years. I will give an example of a project. The M4 bus corridor project has been going on for seven years. My colleague Councillor Angela Feeney informs me that the project has been ready to go for a number of months. It could have made a difference. The problem is that the legislation to allow the hard shoulder to be used as a bus lane has never been completed. The construction has been done but only after the construction was done did the Government decide we needed legislation to allow it to be used. That is what is going on. From conversations I have had with members of the Government, I know we all recognise what is going on in this.

We saw what happened during Covid when people were working from home. Productivity went up and everybody had a quality of life that so many of our workers in this country deserve. This is really a workers' rights issue - there can be no doubt. Over the years, the Minister of State and I have spoken about what we can do. What we in the Labour Party seek is for the Government to recognise that this is an emergency; this is chaos at the moment. People's quality of life is being affected and so is their productivity, day in, day out. The Government needs to work with employers and agencies to ensure a right to flexible work. More importantly, we are calling for the Government to look at intermediate and short-term measures to try to solve the problems for so many commuters.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank my colleague, Deputy Wall, for bringing this motion forward. The right to request flexible work is not even a half measure. It merely formalised the ability of a worker to request flexible work. Workers were not prohibited from making this request prior to that. This once again puts the entirety of the power balance in favour of the employer. The employer has no responsibility to accommodate flexible work for their employee. Does the Minister of State think that granting workers the right only to request flexible work is actually helpful to employees?

Flexible work is vital for workers. For parents, it is an absolute necessity. With childcare in crisis in terms of both costs and places due to Government failure to address the sector, workers need that flexibility for school runs, after-school activities and to actually spend some time with their children. For people with illnesses, disabilities and accessibility issues, flexible work opens up the job market. It removes the barriers of inaccessible workplaces. It allows someone who may not be within commuting distance of their workplace to seek accommodation that is suitable to their needs. Flexible work has benefited rural Ireland and rural economies. People with flexible work can move back to their towns and villages. This reduces the competition in the housing and rental markets in our big cities. People can spend more time in their localities and more money in their local economies.

Multinationals in Cork last year began rowing back on flexible work practices in line with decisions made in the US by the Trump Administration. These companies employ many people in Cork and across Ireland and I fully support them but we must ensure Irish workers have their rights to fall back on and that companies cannot pull the rug from under them just because some idiot on the other side of the world has a hissy fit.

Public transport must be better incentivised. So many of us, whether urban or rural, use private cars and the State must take action to encourage people onto public transport, but people

living in rural Ireland often cannot do that. They rely solely on the car. No matter where you are in the country, ghost buses – buses cancelled without notice – cause people to miss appointments and be late for work or school. This drives home the idea that we must all be in our cars. A person cannot even hop on a bus and tap their bank card. The facts speak volumes about how determined the State is to incentivise public transport. Look at the car parks at train stations. Some are operated by Iarnród Éireann but more by APCOA and other contractor companies. If the Government will not reduce the cost of public transport itself, then at least make parking at stations free and leave Iarnród Éireann car parks in Iarnród Éireann operation and incentivise people out of their cars.

I would have liked more time on this. It is an important topic and one that I hope many across the House will support.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— the Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects, as evidenced by last year's review of the National Development Plan (NDP) allocation of €24.3 billion to transport projects from 2026 to 2030;

— the NDP Sectoral Plan for Transport 2026-2030 involves a funding ratio of at least 2:1 in favour of new public transport over new roads projects, and for the next five years there will be approximately €3.3 billion allocated towards new roads investment and, at a minimum, approximately €7 billion towards new public transport investment;

— while the Government has allocated an unprecedented level of investment in transport, representing an almost 87 per cent increase as compared to the previous five-year period, investment decisions will always require a degree of sequencing and prioritisation of individual projects;

— for public transport infrastructure, there is circa €12.1 billion in funding in the new NDP from 2026 to 2030, and this represents more than double the amount provided in the previous five years;

— the funding in the new NDP will provide for the progression of a number of major public transport projects over this period, including the commencement of construction of MetroLink, Luas Finglas, the Dublin Area Rapid Transport (DART)+ programme, and the Western Rail Corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, as well as the continued implementation of the Cork Area Commuter Rail programme and the BusConnects programmes across Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford cities;

— in particular, the funding will allow Luas Finglas to commence construction within the period of this NDP, which is ahead of the post-2030 schedule for the project's construction commencement in the National Transport Authority Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy;

— furthermore, funding secured under this NDP review will see construction start before 2030 on the DART+ programme, beginning with DART+ West, which is a crucial enabler of the rest of the programme and particularly DART+ South West;

— on public transport services, Public Service Obligation (PSO) journeys have continued to grow steadily, reaching a record 343 million passenger journeys by the end of 2024, and this represents an increase of 32 million journeys compared with 2023, and exceeds pre-pandemic levels, and a significant milestone was reached in October 2024, when PSO services recorded one million journeys in a single day, and although the full year figures are not yet available for 2025, early indicators show continued growth, with Dublin Bus recording 164 million journeys in 2025, an increase of 5 million on 2024 and the highest annual total on record;

— Connecting Ireland is another strong example of progress, delivering exponential growth in rural transport since its launch in 2022, with 185 new and enhanced services having been introduced, resulting in almost 8 million passenger journeys in 2024, and where Connecting Ireland services have been implemented, patronage rose by 38 per cent from 2023 to 2024, and is up by 165 per cent compared to early 2019; and

— in addition, €360 million has been allocated to Active Travel and Greenway Programmes in 2026, continuing the high level of funding which has seen €1 billion invested in walking and cycling infrastructure projects since the start of the decade, and over 1,000 kilometres of active travel infrastructure has been constructed since 2021, with networks of walking and cycling infrastructure beginning to emerge in our towns and cities, allowing commuters to choose active transport modes to travel to work and school; and

affirms Government efforts to:

- deliver public transport projects;
- support households and businesses through addressing congestion; and
- work to address Ireland's climate targets."

I thank the Labour Party for raising this matter this morning. To begin, I will digress from my prepared remarks by agreeing with Deputy Wall that it is time TII sat down with all of us, not just to discuss the M50, M7 or M8, but the N40 in Cork because it is unacceptable that a whole commuter thoroughfare to Dublin or Cork be ground to a complete stop. I have raised the matter with TII and I will meet it soon and will raise the matter again on behalf of Deputy Wall and me.

It is an opportune time for this debate about the issues of flexible working and those faced by commuters in the broader context. I think we will all agree about the importance of developing a strategic public transport network and addressing the issues of congestion and emissions. I also welcome the chance this morning - I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister for Transport - to discuss the solutions already being progressed and those that are captured as part of the wider initiatives across the Government.

I am tabling an amendment, although there is much we agree on and very little we disagree on as regards flexible working and commuter delays. On flexible working, one of the key

actions identified by the 2021 Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy was the right of all workers to request remote work. This right commenced in March 2024 through the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. While the Government did not exclude any category of worker or occupation from this right, not all occupations, industries or particular roles in an enterprise will be suitable for remote working. As such, it is for each employer to determine, in line with legislation, whether it is possible to agree to a remote working arrangement.

Providing a right to request supports and facilitates remote working and supports a productive and more competitive business environment. My Department supports the role remote working can play in taking pressure off the transport network. This is reflected in recommendations to be included in a new transport strategy called "moving together", which is expected to go to the Government shortly. The strategy reflects the Government's commitment to further expanding opportunities for flexible and remote working and encouraging greater utilisation of remote working hubs, having regard to the potential for reducing kilometres travelled, particularly in commuter journeys.

The Government is conscious of the cost of congestion and the turmoil it causes in the lives of people. Analysis by the Department of Transport indicates that by 2040, annual costs of congestion are projected to reach €1.5 billion in the greater Dublin area, €97 million in Cork, €107 million in Galway and €22 million in Waterford. A multifaceted approach is needed to address congestion, having regard to supply and demand. On supply, the Government is making significant investments in transport infrastructure and services, which I will discuss in a moment. In addition, there is also a need to consider overall transport demand and options for optimising the efficiency of the overall transport network, with a particular focus on areas where feasible alternatives are already available or are being delivered. As I mentioned already, it is expected that the new moving together strategy will be approved early this year.

The motion also refers to delays experienced by commuters and drivers on our roads. To deliver on the programme for Government and our roads strategy, work on the first national safe strategy is now at an advanced stage and it is expected it will be approved shortly. This will provide a framework for increased deployment of cameras across the network to assist with the enforcement of a wide range of traffic offences. In addition, the Department is developing the next road traffic Bill to legislate for camera enforcement and mobile phone and seat belt offences and there has been a significant increase in spending on public awareness, communication and education campaigns by the Road Safety Authority in recent years, with a ring-fenced budget of €18 million set aside for these activities this year.

Turning to public transport, within its first year, the Government published a review of the national development plan, which will see record sums of investment in public transport in the years ahead. Over the next four years, €10.1 billion will be invested in public transport infrastructure, with a further €2 billion being drawn down from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund to progress MetroLink. As outlined in the sectoral investment plan for transport published last November, this funding will see commencement of key projects, including MetroLink, Luas Finglas, the DART+ programme, and the western rail corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, as well as implementation of the Cork area commuter rail programme and BusConnects programmes across our cities. I assure all Members of the House that, contrary to some recent media publications and commentary, the sectoral investment plan involves a

funding ratio of at least 2:1 of new public transport to new roads projects. For the next five years, approximately €3.3 billion will be allocated to new roads investment at a minimum, and approximately €7 billion to new public transport investment. In particular, the funding will allow Luas Finglas to commence construction by 2029. This is ahead of the post-2030 schedule for the project's construction in the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy 2022-2042. This will provide significant benefits, not only to the immediate communities, but also to commuters from a wider catchment area thanks to the inclusion of a park and ride facility. As well as this, funding will see construction start on the DART+ programme, beginning with DART+ West over the coming years. It should be understood that this is a crucial enabler of the rest of the programme and particularly of DART+ South West. The programme will provide thousands of additional commuters with quick, frequent access. The Department of Transport will continue to examine the potential to accelerate the construction of DART+ South West in the context of the progress of the wider investment programme in the years ahead, as well as considering the potential afforded by the review of the national development plan allocations in 2028.

Turning to public transport services, the National Transport Authority, NTA, continuously monitors the punctuality and reliability of and demand for services. I heard the remarks of Deputies opposite regarding reliability and ghost buses. The recent roll-out of BusConnects Dublin phase 7, which was responsive to the feedback provided in the interest of passenger needs, demonstrates the collaborative approach between the NTA and the public transport operators. I heard Deputy Ahern's concerns about his area and will bring them back.

It is acknowledged that there have been ongoing challenges regarding reliability and frequency of public transport services, often due to traffic congestion, driver and mechanic shortages or unforeseen incidents. The Department is working closely with the NTA to try address these issues through initiatives such as the public transport workforce task force and robust financial oversight to ensure value for money, leveraging the Department's public service obligation, PSO, oversight group. Further measures are planned to enhance the customer experience across services. Improvements to the vehicle location system are planned under the next-generation automatic vehicle location project and enhanced safety measures are planned with the introduction of the transport security force.

There are three aspects to improving transport accessibility for people with disabilities. The first is ensuring a universal design approach for all new infrastructure, and our ambitious investment programme will adhere to this. The second is addressing legacy infrastructure deficits, and we have also greatly enhanced the funding to retrofit legacy inaccessible parts of our infrastructure. We will maintain that increased level of funding to ensure that disabled people are able to just turn up and go. The third is providing supports for independent travel, and in this regard I understand the NTA is rolling out the expansion of the independent travel support scheme to Dundalk and Drogheda, along with Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim and the Louth-Meath-Fingal Local Link areas.

Turning to rural transport, the Deputies will be aware that the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan is a major public transport initiative developed by the NTA to increase connectivity outside our major cities and towns. As Minister of State with responsibility for rural transport, I can say it has seen exponential growth over the last few years, with 185 new and expanded services rolled out since 2022 and more than 240 towns and villages connected

to the public transport network. Increased services have led to exponential growth in passenger numbers, with almost 8 million passengers recorded across Connecting Ireland services in 2024.

I will outline again the Government's commitment to investing in active travel and diverse transport options to encourage a modal shift away from private car use, reduce transport emissions and alleviate congestion. This week, the Government announced its active travel measures, under which it has committed up to €1.8 billion for active travel and greenway programmes up to 2030. On Monday, the Minister for Transport announced, as I did in Cork, €360 million in funding to local authorities for walking and cycling infrastructure developments this year, which is a continuation of the high level of investment since the start of the decade. Deputy Eoghan Kenny will know how, in his constituency this week, we saw people protesting about the provision of cycle lanes, which poses a question about what is to be done and how it is to be achieved when a council votes - I think unanimously - to support the Part 8 there. With the projects delivered, we are beginning to see connectivity and the transport network improve, but it is vital that we continue to improve the commuter offering and that commuters choose every day to use public transport.

The Government is committed to the delivery of major sustainable transport projects and service improvements. Although it has allocated unprecedented funding to the transport sector for the next four years, investment decisions will require a degree of sequencing and prioritisation of individual projects. However, I am confident, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, that the scaled-up investment in public and active transport, coupled with suitable and targeted demand-management measures, can help to address congestion in a meaningful way over the longer term. I thank the Labour Party for raising the matter this morning. It is an important issue to debate and for which to seek solutions.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It is profoundly depressing and frankly outrageous to read the Government's counter-motion this morning – a motion that cannot even bring itself to acknowledge the problems of congestion and chaos on our roads. It is a motion that does not even make a single reference to remote and flexible work. We have to ask how in touch the Government is when we see the dismissal of people's very real needs and concerns. These are problems that the Government has brought on itself. The congestion on our roads is one of the many symbols of a decade of complete failure by the Government parties to ensure enough housing for its population. People must move farther and farther out of the main urban centres where they wish to hold their jobs because they cannot afford to buy in those centres. That is on the Government, including the Minister of State.

Congestion is a symbol of the failure of the Government to plan for the increase in population. On the one hand, we have a Government trumpeting an increase in jobs but, on the other, there has been a stark failure to plan for the associated housing and public transport needs.

Most crucially this morning, the Minister of State has failed to recognise the solutions we are trying to bring to these issues, the ones that are staring him in the face with regard to affording more people the right to flexible and remote work in this country.

I commend the Trojan work of my colleague Deputy Mark Wall and the rest of my colleagues in producing this motion, which refers to the problems, the responses that need to happen immediately and, crucially, the world of work and how we need to respond. Instead, we get from the Government a list of achievements and plans in place and no genuine recognition of what is happening and of the genuine demand among workers for a right to real and flexible work.

I looked last night at a very good document produced by the Government back in 2021. It is five years old now. It was visionary and forward-thinking for its time. It was about making remote working work. When I read what then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said about the post-pandemic world, I noted his view was that the world of work would change profoundly but that there was so much opportunity to bring more people into the workforce, including people with disabilities, and to ensure greater gender equality. He also referred to spreading more jobs across the country and not losing young workers to places abroad, stating remote and flexible work could play a profound part in achieving these aims. What has the Government done? Little or nothing.

A Bill was introduced in 2023 that did the bare minimum. It ensured that the right to request flexible or remote work would be a perk for good behaviour, available only after six months in a job. The Government put all the power in employers' hands. We see it in the cases taken to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC. The reality is that the Government has stood back and allowed its own Departments, public sector bodies and other big employers in this country to force people back into the office for three, four or five days, not trusting them and showing no leadership on how a different, healthier and more productive world of work could look. How can people be productive if they must spend four or five hours in the car every day commuting to Dublin, Cork, Galway or another main urban centre? The reality is that the Government has not taken the lead.

This motion was very much directed at the Minister for Transport, but he is also the Minister for climate. When we see what is happening with emissions, we should realise the right to flexible and remote work could play an important role in reducing them. The Government has turned the other way, and that is shameful.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend my colleagues Deputies Mark Wall and Ciarán Ahern for proposing this important motion. The Government's counter-motion is deeply disappointing. It does not mention at all the crucial issue of the right to flexible work, which is very disappointing.

The motion proposes a series of practical short- and longer-term measures that could and should be adopted by the Government to ensure better quality of life for workers, families and communities. It would also help our planet because it also emphasises the need for climate action. Giving people a real right to flexible and remote work is climate action. It is action that would have a genuine impact for so many people now stuck in road gridlock and congestion. It would make a real difference to emissions and air quality and provide people with more time for family, caring and community. It would provide people with disabilities with greater access to workplaces. It is deeply disappointing, therefore, that the Minister of State has not seen fit to address this.

My colleagues have spoken about the reality of congestion. Dublin is now one of the most congested cities in Europe. All of us listen to reports of congestion at Bóthar na dTreabh, the Dunkettle Interchange, Johnstown Road and all of the other places where there have been particular issues with congestion. We need to see these addressed and the Government taking a proactive step on investing in cycling infrastructure, active travel and public transport so people have genuine alternatives to the private car and we can address the reality for commuters and others across the country, including in my constituency, who are now facing the awful impacts of gridlock, congestion, poor air quality and climate emissions. We need action from the Government on this, not the pathetic counter-motion.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Bacik should come down to the Dunkettle roundabout. Deputy Eoghan Kenny will tell her about the investment in Dunkettle.

Deputy George Lawlor: Even the Minister of State will agree that the Government's counter-motion is particularly poor and disappointing. The journey from my county, Wexford, and so many others, and indeed parts of Dublin, has become a daily test of endurance. Whether workers are trapped in endless tailbacks on the M11 or squeezed onto overcrowded trains that take much longer than they should, they are paying the price for a system that cannot and does not meet what they require simply to get to work. Hours upon hours are lost before the workday even begins, simply destroying workers' quality of life. The commute is not just inconvenient; it is unsustainable.

People are doing everything right but the infrastructure around them is absolutely failing. No workers should have to fight as hard as they do just to get to their jobs. Hours are stolen from them and their families, affecting productivity and the very quality of life that we as a country claim to value.

We often speak in this Chamber about supporting working people and building a modern and competitive country, yet we continue to tolerate a system that is sapping the energy of workers and punishing them simply for trying to earn a living.

Flexible working is not, and certainly should not be, a luxury. It must not be a favour granted by employers when convenient; it is a practical, evidence-based response to the realities of modern life in this country. It would most certainly reduce congestion, lower stress, improve employee retention, give people better access to employment and allow people time to become immersed in their communities rather than festering in tailback after tailback. When people have the ability to work remotely or stagger their hours, we see fewer cars on the roads and a transport network that can, if invested in, function as originally intended.

We must not keep asking workers to absorb the cost of the inefficiencies created by the State itself. We must not keep pretending long commutes are an unavoidable fact of Irish life; they are not. They are a policy failure, and we in this Chamber have the power to correct it.

This motion is about dignity. It is about recognising that time is a finite resource and that no worker should be forced to sacrifice it unnecessarily. It is also about creating a future for workers in which flexibility is the norm and not some sort of bequest from the boss. This motion seeks to create a workplace measured by output rather than a person's presence, and

circumstances in which our roads and public transport infrastructure are supported by smart policies rather than held back and stifled by outdated rules of management.

If we want an Ireland that is resilient, innovative and humane, we must make decisions that facilitate the workers who contribute greatly to our economy. Flexible work should not just be an option: it should be an obligation. It is time to deliver a system that respects the people who keep this country moving. With the Government totally failing to address the right to remote work in their counter-motion, we in the Labour Party are left with no choice to bring forward legislation now on a real right to remote work. We will publish that legislation next week.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Over the past few years, we have seen how working from home and the essential right to request remote and flexible work has had its benefits and the power to shape a fairer, more productive and more resilient economy if managed correctly. The Government is required by law to review the right to request remote working legislation through a public consultation. Since the right was introduced in March 2024, approximately 60 complaints have been made to the Workplace Relations Commission. This captures both the gains and the gaps we must address.

For thousands of people, flexible and remote work has been life-changing. It is not a luxury but a necessity for working parents, those facing long commutes and people priced out of the housing market in major urban areas. It has helped many to remain in the workforce and opened doors for people across the country. A right to flexible work is a right to a more equal and modern economy. The right to request to work from home was a drawn out process, from the publication of the general scheme of the Bill on the right to request remote working in 2021 to the publication in the code of practice. At different stages, the legislation to deliver a right to request remote working was rewritten, amended and moved from one Department to another.

We had reservations and worried that the code of practice published did not strike a fair balance between the rights of workers and the rights of businesses. The code gives workers the right to request remote working, a request that must be underpinned with a detailed explanation as to why they wish to work in this fashion. Some of the reasoning assessed, such as the inclusion of the distance between the worker's home and their place of work, is an overreach. There is also a checklist of measures for an employer to consider for a request, many of which appear designed to take power away from the worker.

Workers must jump through a multitude of hoops to access remote working. Yet, these arrangements can be refused, changed, withdrawn or terminated with ease. Thankfully, the code of practice provides avenues for workers to vindicate their rights through the WRC.. Still, we fear the code has afforded too much power to employers to deny legitimate remote working requests. For years, Sinn Féin has argued that the right to request remote working should be judged on whether workers can have confidence that it compels employers to be fair, reasonable and consistent in their considerations. We remain unconvinced the code does this and we will be watching the outcome of the review with close attention.

There is a practical side to this debate that ties directly into people's daily lives; namely, transport. Working from home has real benefits for our transport and road networks. It reduces congestion, lowers wears and tear on the roads and eases pressure on public transport systems. However, for many in County Meath, transport remains a persistent problem. Meath is known for its poor and unreliable transport links. Promises for the Navan rail line have been promised

for years, yet tangible progress remains slow. People in Meath are paying significant tolls, with year-on-year increases, and the Government seems happy to sit back and allow this to happen. Congestion is getting worse. Just look at what is happening on the M50. The unreliable bus services in Meath, often described "ghost buses", leaves commuters waiting on the roadside for buses that never arrive.

Despite these failures, some operators have recently been awarded new contracts. Many constituents in Meath have contacted me as they are struggling to get a date for an NCT for their car. Cases like this make the commute to work harder.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Labour Party for bringing this motion forward. We share almost all of what is in this motion. I passionately believe in flexible working hours and the opportunities it can present. This motion goes to the heart of the daily reality for workers of the stress of long commutes, gridlocked roads and unreliable public transport. Workers in Ireland have no right to remote working. They have a right to ask and a right to be refused.

I am a pragmatic person and I completely understand that many jobs that do not lend themselves to working from home or remote working. However, we need to have a comprehensive conversation about how work patterns are changing and how remote working can benefit not only the workers themselves and their families but local communities as well. We can have that conversation in a very constructive way that can benefit everybody. We are seeing more employers, including in the public sector, forcing workers back into offices, regardless of whether their work can be done from home. That is not right.

This is a workers' rights issue. It is also about trust, productivity and work-life balance. It can work brilliantly where employers and employees embrace the system. As was mentioned earlier, it can work brilliantly for the measurement of outcomes. This is always about outcomes. It is not even about outputs but outcomes and how that can be done. Systems have to be set up so that it can be done in way where there is confidence between the employer and employee. That certainly should be done. The thousands of workers who are working remotely and flexibly has meant more time with their families, less stress, better mental health and, often, higher productivity. Yet, instead of building on what works, the Government is pushing people back onto roads that are at breaking point. Dublin is the eleventh most congested city in the world. Commuter routes are gridlocked. Trains are overcrowded or delayed. The vital public transport projects are stalled or abandoned year after year.

This congestion does not exist by accident. It exists because of the Government's failure to deliver transport infrastructure, properly fund public transport and legislate for modern, flexible working. In rural Ireland, it is even more evident. There is no joined-up thinking between the public transport systems.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: There is massive demand for flexible hours and remote work because people know it works. It saves time, reduces stress and allows people to manage work alongside family, caring and community responsibilities. Yet, every morning, workers are still forced into traffic and onto overcrowded buses and trains, travelling at the same hour to the same place, even when the job does not require it. That lost time is taken directly from people's lives. In counties like Waterford, thousands of people are being forced back into long

commutes, even though their work can be done remotely. This is a political choice, in many cases. The Government is responding to corporate pressure instead of listening to workers and families. Supporting flexible and remote work would immediately reduce congestion, cut emissions and give people back hours of their lives every week. The question is: who is policy designed for? Is it for ordinary workers trying to balance their lives or powerful interests pushing a return to the old system?

The CSO shows average commute times rising, with many people travelling an hour or more each way. The National Transport Authority has confirmed that remote working reduces peak demand, lowers costs for commuters and reduces carbon emissions. Despite this evidence, workers face refusals, withdrawn arrangements and constant pressure to return to offices. Across rural Ireland, people are paying the price for top-down decisions and chronic underinvestment. In Waterford, we have seen Local Link routes altered without local input. The Minister of State is aware of that particular issue. There has been a dogged refusal by Government to fund much-needed safety upgrades on the N25, N24 and the N72. Intercity bus stops such as Grange in west Waterford, have been removed. Every year, the school transport system is in chaos.

At the same time, people are told to get back to offices they do not need to be in. Flexible work will not solve congestion on its own but it is an immediate and practical step. Now is the time for a serious programme that protects worker flexibility, reduces commute times, invests properly in transport and delivers a modern, low-emission Ireland.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion. A lot of the time, we come in here and talk about issues that might be abstract or wonder if they really make a difference to people's lives. This actually makes a difference to the lives of workers, families, communities and employers. This provides a solution and a pathway to making a real difference.

In Cork at the moment - the Minister of State will know as he is a Corkman, like myself - the gridlock is unbelievable. People are forced to travel to work when there should be flexibility. People should be able to work from home. Employers should be able to work with workers to come up with solutions. Since Covid, we have seen the drive to get more and more people back to working nine to five. The definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting it to change. At the moment, we have people driven onto roads that are gridlocked to get to jobs when a lot of them could work from home.

A happier worker is a more productive worker and a better employee. It is good for the worker, the family and the employer; it makes sense. Talking about Cork for a minute, we have total gridlock in Cork and the Minister knows this himself, coming from an area that is one of the worst parts of it. Cork is the 38th most congested city in the world, worse than London. How can Cork be more congested than London? However, those are the facts.

We then have a huge number of people being forced to drive every day and we have a public transport system that is on its knees and does not work. I will give an example. To finish on this, a freedom of information request I made stated that one in three buses in Cork is late and in some cases one in two buses does not turn up. That is not good enough. It is wrong.

Deputy Pa Daly: Workers and families across the State are being failed on public transport and worker flexibility. These failures are not abstract; they are the lived reality of people across the island. There are commuters wasting hours of their lives in traffic chaos, waiting for buses or sitting in cars as they inch through gridlocked traffic. It is having a tangible, real life impact on the quality of life for people.

Despite years of promises, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have created a system that is defined by delay and stagnation. Major projects that could have transformed connectivity and mobility have been stalled for years. The MetroLink is a symbol of everything that is wrong with transport planning. It has been decades in development with projected costs of over €20 billion and we still have not broken ground. Dublin is the only large European capital without a metro and with each passing year, the failure to deliver that demonstrates how little concern this Government has for public money.

In another hallmark move, both the Government and Regional Independents have decided not to prioritise the DART+ South West and the Finglas Luas. The situation on the M50 is at crisis point but the only thing the Government has done is to heap further pressure on drivers by increasing petrol and diesel prices through the carbon tax. DART+ South West has been pushed beyond 2030 and the Finglas Luas is delayed until 2029.

In Kerry, I meet people who are losing hours of their lives stuck in traffic, particularly in Killarney where it is very bad, or waiting on bus services that are oversubscribed and do not have enough capacity, and the buses are passing them by. The Government is telling people to get out of their cars but that is not an option in places like Kerry. When students cannot get to college and people cannot get to work and when workers are left at the side of the road and are late to work, that is not an option. The cost of it is staggering and I applaud the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank the Labour Party for bringing it forward.

The people in County Meath are in a daily battle for reliable transport. Our infrastructure is failing to keep pace with our growing population, leaving commuters stranded and communities isolated. Motorists are crucified with increasing costs of petrol and diesel and toll charge increases. The infrastructure deficits are comprehensive and critical. Since 1994, we have had a long promised yet undelivered Navan rail line and our public bus network is in serious difficulty. Routes from the 103 and 109 are systematically failing.

Services in Navan are inadequate. There were 20,000 fewer trips taken on the town bus service last year than there were the year before. Areas like Bellewstown have no service at all. Chronic overcrowding and cancellation are the norm, not the exception. Even where buses run, passengers too often wait without bus shelters and dignity. We know from media reports that senior Department of Transport officials warned that the Government's transport budget for 2026 will not be enough for any new services. That is simply not good enough. This is not about inconvenience. It is about connectivity, opportunity and quality of life. The right to work from home must be considered in this context.

Regardless of that, Meath deserves and has paid for a modern integrated transport network. We need urgent, concrete action from the NTA and the Government to deliver it. We need real

progress on rail and a complete overhaul of bus services to deliver a public transport system that works; one that is accessible, affordable, reliable and safe.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The fact of the matter is remote working works. It works for workers, for businesses and for communities. Workers have really gained control of their work-life balance, businesses have been able to cut their overhead costs and workers and families are now far more involved in their local communities because they can be. I am deeply concerned about recent efforts to undermine these gains. This is a hit to workers across the board but workers in the financial sector have been hit particularly hard.

Workers of both AIB and Bank of Ireland were told last summer, out of the blue, of a new return to office protocol, after being hired under the premise they could work remotely. Both banks announced these changes without consulting the trade unions or workers themselves. Thankfully in December, the Financial Services Union negotiated an agreement with AIB that will allow workers to maintain their pre-existing remote working arrangements. However, no such agreement has been reached with the Bank of Ireland. Bank of Ireland workers in my constituency of Galway West are now mandated to work in Dublin eight days a month. That is an impossible ask for many workers trying to balance their family life and work, bearing in mind they were hired under the premise of being in Galway. I have met with the Financial Services Union and its demand is clear. It wants Bank of Ireland to engage in a meaningful discussion on this. These cases show the urgent need for better legislation on this issue - legislation that gives a right to flexible work and a right to a more equal and modern economy.

As we are talking about commuting, the reality of commuting in Galway city is, whether you are coming from outside or internally in Galway city, that it is disastrous. We have had a standstill traffic situation at peak times for far too long, for decades, and it is the result of underfunding of our infrastructure. We need to have a double track line from Athenry to Galway and it needs to be delivered now.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Deputies for bringing the motion forward this morning and giving us the chance to have this debate.

Nearly 25 years ago, as a shop steward, I processed my first claim for what was called at that stage, "teleworking." It then went on to become "e-working" and now we refer to it as "remote working". It is not new and certainly was not invented in the past while. It most definitely was not invented by the Minister of State's former colleague, Leo Varadkar, despite his claims to the contrary at times.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I do not think he claimed that, to be fair.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It really works for people. I have seen it in workplaces, as a representative and as a trade union official. However, at the time, when we were processing that claim, there was something of a paternalistic attitude applied to the workers. It was almost as if remote working was a treat or a favour the boss might give you if you were perhaps good enough but one that could be withdrawn at any moment and have the capacity to upend your family and work-life balance. It is shocking that the attitude displayed 25 years ago is still in vogue today with this Government.

There were nearly 6,000 incidents on the M50 in 2025, almost 800 of those being car crashes. That is nearly two a day. Some 60% of people in my town of Skerries commute by car. They have absolutely no choice. For those who do not commute by car, they get on overcrowded trains or stand and wait for buses, "ghost buses" as we call them, that sometimes do not arrive. It is past time for the environment, workers, work-life balance, productivity, communities and families that proper consideration is given to workers having the right to remotely work.

Workers are not stupid. The same as me and the Minister of State, they know what works for them. They want to do well in their work and they know they can do that by working remotely.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Labour Party for bringing this motion forward today.

Flexible work, where practical, is of benefit to all sectors of society. The obvious benefits to employers are improved efficiency, fewer sick days, savings on transport, energy bills, facility provisions, car parking and security. Considering the modern and fast pace of life, and the rapid advance of AI technology, flexible hours and remote working make sense.

The influence of remote working on the workforce has added greatly to the quality and value of family life by creating a positive work-life balance. It is a known fact that when workers are happy in their workplace, they work more efficiently and are more likely to go the extra mile for the company and their customers. The positives for society are obvious too, with fewer vehicles on the road, less congestion, a drop in carbon footprint, less pollution, less waste and less energy demand on the grid.

We have all witnessed the long commuter delays on our major roads, especially on the M50 and N11. Alleviation of this problem must include more frequent services on the DART and an overhaul of the timetable, particularly the trains from rural parts, such as the County Wexford Rosslare to Dublin line. The cost of public transport must be reduced.

11 o'clock

Many European countries, such as Luxembourg, have introduced free public travel. Other countries have adopted a monthly pass note worth up to €9, while others have €3 daily passes. Some cities, like Montpellier in France, have free public transport within the city. These options must be seriously considered as the traffic on our motorways has reached full capacity. It is a major reason we are missing our carbon emissions targets. It is time to fully fund our public transport for the betterment of future generations. Sinn Féin fully supports this motion.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: First, I would like to move amendment No. 2 to the motion.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): The Deputy cannot move it but she can discuss it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Okay. To summarise it briefly, it is a small amendment that simply adds a day-one entitlement to the request for remote working. This is based on the fact that I am currently working on legislation in this area which I will soon be bringing to the floor of the Dáil. I will come back to that at the end of my comments.

I thank the Labour Party for bringing this important motion forward. Remote and flexible working is something I am passionate about. As I said, I am currently drafting legislation on it. I appreciate the opportunity today to discuss it. This is an issue of workers' rights, transport and climate. It intersects with many policy areas. It is simply a quality-of-life issue for many people in this country. The way work has changed means that people can do their jobs effectively from anywhere. *Caithfidh muid cinntiú go bhfuil ár ndlíthe ag coinneáil suas leis sin.* We all understand that not every job can be done flexibly or remotely but we have advanced leaps and bounds when it comes to the number of jobs that can. Indeed, if there is any silver lining to the chaos that was Covid, it is surely that we need to embrace, as a species, the concept of remote working. It is not that long ago when the concept of online meetings, hybrid working and working from home in general was foreign to most people. For many, it was impossible because they did not have the Internet at home. They did not have the required technology for a virtual meeting and those they worked with were not familiar with those tools. Many of these barriers have now gone and we have the chance to create a meaningful and participatory workplace, particularly for groups historically excluded like single mothers and people with disabilities.

The Government talks a lot about being innovators and the vanguard for change and, for me, this is an opportunity to say that we should be exactly that. We should be the country where remote working is done best. We should be the best in class in that particular category. We have whole businesses that communicate, create, market and deliver services completely online. This means less time spent commuting, more money going into local businesses and economies, more parent-friendly workplaces and a better work-life balance for many.

Despite these developments and the fact we have more people in fully remote jobs, we are also seeing workers with hybrid and flexible arrangements being ordered back to the office by both private and public sector employers. I was at the helm of a public body - a State agency - during Covid so I have personally grappled with the fact that businesses need to have their employees in the same place at one time and that there are ways in which we need to work to foster collaboration. The track we are seeing both from the Government and leading bodies like IBEC in calling people back to work is not the response we need, however. This is often done without consultation or warning, ignoring that workers shape their lives around flexibility which is now being taken away.

With regard to the transport factor in the motion, our cities and towns are increasingly choked in traffic where our infrastructure has not kept up with new developments. *Tá daoine i mo Dháilcheantar ag streachailt le fadhbanna tráchtá atá ag éirí níos measa gach lá. Tá ár mbóithre tachta le trácht. Cuireann sé seo strus ollmhór orthu agus na daoine timpeall orthu.* In the southern part of my constituency of Dublin-Rathdown in places like Kiltiernan, Stepside and Glencullen, as well as along the N11 towards Dublin city centre, I see the daily struggle. In fact, I am part of the daily struggle that people face to get to work on time and home at a reasonable hour. My colleague, Deputy Whitmore, and I both have the E1 bus, the busiest bus route in the country, running through our constituencies. Thousands of my constituents rely on this service every day to get to school and work but every morning, dozens and dozens of people can be seen at each bus stop on the N11 waiting to go to work as full bus after full bus passes them by.

I am in constant contact with constituents who may be lucky enough to be able to access the Luas service but they cannot get onto it as every single Luas that pulls in is full past the Stillorgan and Kilmacud stops. Those who have to drive may live less than 10 km from the city centre but they have to leave their houses at 7 a.m. or before to be at their desk by 9 a.m. This is without even touching on no-show buses that leave people stranded on the side of the road in some of the most rural parts of my constituency. This crisis is not a one-off problem or an occasional inconvenience; it is a constant daily worry and an invisible burden carried by people who are trying to go about their daily lives.

There are real solutions to these issues, and this motion speaks to many of them, such as funding the expansion of public transport and infrastructure. We know that MetroLink is expected to carry 20,000 passengers per hour in each direction but we have seen literal generational failure of this Government to actually put it into action. Buses and the Luas have taken countless cars off the road which means less connection. Not forcing people into the office means fewer hours stuck in limbo on the N11 or the M50 and more hours spent on leisure, family and productive work. It is clear there is demand because I see that demand stuck on the side of the road waiting for a bus to stop but, instead, watching full buses sail by.

We had a golden opportunity to enshrine remote and flexible working previously and we have been let down with the right to request remote working that is not even a right at all. The current legislation only grants employees a right to request remote working which, for an increasing number of employees, is refused or revoked. Like so many aspects of workers' rights in Ireland, we have created a system where the employee has no power and something that may make no difference to their productivity but a huge difference in their lives can be arbitrarily refused by their employer. The current Act leaves them with long commutes, the financial and climate burden of running a car and the daily strain of rushing to and from work, while balancing all of their family commitments. We know all of these things can push people out of the workforce, particularly women, single parents and people with disabilities. It leaves us with congested roads, packed trains and buses and decreased revenue for small local businesses.

We need a real right to remote and flexible working, which is why I will soon be introducing legislation to the House on this issue. It will address the gap highlighted by today's motion that the right to request remote and flexible working is too weak. We need a real system defined by reasonable expectations of employers and employees with an entitlement from day one. A right to request remote work has been a source of frustration for so many employees who realise, when their request is unreasonably denied, that this right is not particularly useful in changing the situation or helping them to deal with unfair denial of remote or flexible working arrangements.

I commend the Labour Party on bringing forward this motion, especially Deputy Wall who brought his lived experience literally to the floor of the Dáil today as he was delayed on his commute here.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Labour Party and Deputy Wall for bringing this motion forward. We are very happy to support it. A constituent of mine once told me that they did not live in Wicklow town, they merely slept there. That has stuck with me because it is reflective of the lived experience of so many people in a commuter county like Wicklow where

people buy their homes, want to start families and be a part of the community but spend three or four hours a day trying to simply get in and out to work. Anyone who has travelled on the N11 or the M50 recently will know that we do not have any peak times on those roads anymore. There is just a constant stream of traffic that people get stuck in. Indeed, if there is something like a crash, it just makes it impossible to get to work.

Not only does spending hours in that traffic create huge challenges for individuals in the context of their mental health and their ability to spend time with their families and on things they enjoy but it also creates a huge cost to communities. When those people are in their cars, they cannot be out talking in their local shop to shop owners and buying local. They are not going to be out volunteering in their local communities either. Every hour spent on the N11 in a car hollows out the communities from which these people come and where they should be living and enjoying their time.

This is not an isolated instance. This happens to constituents of mine all over the county. We all know that Wicklow has seen an incredible growth in population over the last number of years. What we have not seen, however, is infrastructure keeping pace with that growth. We are probably one of the few counties across Ireland that has a significant number of new houses being bought, but they are not affordable homes. That means that new people are coming into the area who have to keep on travelling in and out of Dublin to make the money to pay the mortgage.

With that lack of investment, when it comes to our public transport we have buses that do not show up, and when they do show up they cannot take anybody on because they are too full. We have train services that are so full going from Gorey to Dublin through Wicklow town that people faint on them because they have to stand for hours on end. We are not seeing the investment in public transport that the population growth in Wicklow should be matched with. There are huge pressures on families. I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward the motion. I ask the Minister of State to look at this from a holistic perspective. Wicklow needs sufficient public transport.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Wall for bringing forward this motion which we in the Green Party are very happy to support. Fundamentally, the motion recognises that our economic health as a country is intrinsically linked to the well-being of workers, students and carers. Our economic health is linked to their ability to live, travel and pursue their lives in a way that is facilitated and supported by the choices that the State makes.

Too often, people feel they face a battle just to get to and from work. They have longer and longer commutes and spend more time away from their kids and families. When this happens every day over many years, it leaves people feeling failed and frustrated that things never seem to change. We know that progress can be made, and we have seen how effective remote and flexible working can be in some areas. Evidence shows it can boost long-term productivity and reduce attrition and turnover. It can allow for people in a caring role to continue as full members of the workforce. Most relevant to this motion, it can tackle issues around congestion, peak commuting capacity failures and associated air quality and emissions issues.

There are many wins in embracing flexibility and remote working in a co-ordinated way. This was at the heart of many of the initiatives my party took in government. Our investment in the prioritisation of public transport has led to record journey numbers being undertaken in

urban and rural areas. We pulled some large public transport projects off the mothball shelf, including metro, Luas and DART electrification. We introduced into Irish labour law for the first time the recognition of flexible and remote working, along with greatly expanding parents' leave and introducing domestic violence leave.

It is important that the Government continues to build on these successes. In the Chamber I have raised a number of times my concerns about where the Government is going on investment in public transport, and we can come back to that on another day. Specifically regarding remote working, I was the Minister to introduce that. I built in a review of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act. That review took place earlier at the end of last year. It will be interesting and valuable for us to know when the review of the Act will be published and whether the Minister of State or the senior Minister in the Department will bring forward changes and improvements to the Bill on foot of that review.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Remote, flexible and hybrid working is here to stay. Recent demands to return to the office from banks, IT companies and Departments seem to challenge that view. Long-term arrangements must be put in place for this type of working. These working arrangements are essential for modern work-life balance and must not be treated as temporary or pandemic related. These working conditions must be based on a legal framework, giving an entitlement to these arrangements.

Recent surveys by the Fórsa trade union found that 86% of members were interested in remote working, with 80% preferring a hybrid situation, that is, work at home with time in the office. A legal framework must be put in place covering, but not exclusive to, protection against forced return to the office. Arbitrary blanket or full-time return to the office must be outlawed. There must be a right to disconnect. These arrangements must not erode working conditions and must protect the right to disconnect outside of working hours. There must be fair access, that is, a legal right of access for all suitable roles to these arrangements. Vitally, an appeals system must be put in place whereby any refusal by an employer can be challenged and employers cannot give vague or spurious reasons for refusal.

These arrangements must be voluntary. Staff must have a right to opt out and equality of rights. These workers must have the same rights, protections and promotional opportunities as office-based staff. Health and safety issues and guidelines must be in place, in particular for workstations and those with mental health difficulties. Particular groups must also have access to these arrangements, including carers and staff with particular health needs. Of course, there is a climate change and pollution aspect to this, which is important. There would be less pollution and a reduced carbon footprint. Workers are currently stuck in cars for hours on end and also incur increased insurance costs, etc. A legal basis is required immediately.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Labour Party and Deputy Wall for bringing forward the motion on the right for employees to request flexible and remote working and the introduction of an action plan to improve transport services over the next 12 months. If I could add one thing to the motion it would be to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to make flexibility and remote working possible, in particular in rural areas. It might shock some Deputies to know that parts of Donegal still do not have access to fibre broadband, which is ridiculous in this day and age. I welcome that this week Tory Island finally received broadband, meaning that 118 homes and businesses on the island now have broadband, which is welcome.

The reality is ridiculous and has been going on for far too long. We have to prioritise the upgrading of the national grid, which is essential, particularly in rural areas. There have been many outages in rural areas due to increasing storms, which has made it very difficult for remote working to be a viable option, in particular in Donegal. It is concerning that when we are trying to encourage people not to travel during weather warnings, they are going into offices. There have been incidents where damage has occurred.

Allowing remote working would allow us to alleviate accommodation and home shortages in Dublin, in particular. There are thousands of people from rural communities working in Dublin. If they had the opportunity to work from home they would do so, which would breathe life back into communities. People of all ages want to retire to their home areas. Parents want to raise their children in rural areas where they grew up. They would take the opportunity to move back out of cities and move back to such areas in the morning if they had the flexibility and option to do so.

People should be given the opportunity to make lives for themselves and have access to work and transport in rural areas. Allowing remote and flexible working would help to breathe life into many towns and villages which have been abandoned and have seen no investment in recent years. It would stop the steady loss of public and essential services that we have seen lately. For example, the village post office in Fanad first opened in 1873 but closed last year. Fintra National School in Killybegs was established in 1841 and now faces closure because it does not have the population to sustain it. Anybody in Donegal who was given the opportunity to move back tomorrow would do so.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Government is barely a year in office and is already on track to be one of the worst Governments on record when it comes to public transport. It depends on right-wing rural TDs who could not care less about commuters in Dublin or elsewhere. All they want is more money for roads in their constituencies. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ministers are perfectly happy with that, relaxing in their chauffeur-driven Mercs and claiming thousands of euro in travel expenses while ordinary workers are stuck behind the wheels of their cars and on buses and trains for hours every day and forced to pay the full cost of fuel, motorway tolls, bus fares and wasted time out of their own pocket.

About the only good thing to come out of Covid was the normalisation of working from home. All of a sudden, hundreds of thousands of workers who could do their jobs just as well at home got parts of their lives back. There were high hopes that the Government's law on remote working would back them up and protect that precious work-life balance. Leo Varadkar even claimed that businesses would need a very good reason not to allow staff to work from home. What happened was that the Government danced to the tune of big business, as usual. It betrayed workers and brought in what is a meaningless right to request remote working. It is not worth the paper it is written on. Over the past year we have seen lobbying from the Dublin Chamber of Commerce to ensure that no real rights are given to workers.

The same thing is happening with the public consultation on the law that started last year. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, is not expecting any significant change even though submissions from frustrated workers outnumbered those from employers by more than ten to one. The level of corporate capture we have seen here is not an isolated case. The campaigning organisation Uplift launched an important report yesterday that lays out in damning detail the

scale of corporate power in this State. Across social media, health and housing, big business is setting the agenda and dominating every aspect of our lives. We can hear it in the car radio as we sit in traffic, forced to drive because of that corporate capture and the long-fingering of projects like DART+ South West and Luas Finglas and the absence of new funding for public transport services this year. The anti-working-from-home trend is going to make things worse. Every fat cat billionaire from Denis O'Brien to Jeff Bezos is pontificating against working from home while they sit on their yachts. We need to give people the right to work from home, and we need to invest in free frequent public transport.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The motion actually has tremendous merit, in fairness. There are ups and downs in the motion and some things about which I would be very sceptical or cautious. It gives the Government a get-out-of-jail card at times.

I will talk about my own constituency. Where is the Cork Luas? It was announced three or four times. There is no shovel in the ground. Where is the northern ring road around Cork? Where is the northern distributor road? It is seven or eight years away. Where is the Mallow distributor road? Where is the orbital bus for Mallow that takes people from my estate to the other side of Mallow or from my estate in Ballyviniter up to the train station so people can genuinely commute?

In parts of north Cork, west Cork and east Cork, we have no broadband connections. People could not work from home. They physically could not work from home because there is no broadband available and certainly not at the bandwidth people would need to work from home. Foreign direct investment has resulted in 52,000 jobs in Cork. I heard a Member here talk about American companies in a very derogatory way. I am very thankful for that foreign direct investment in my constituency and 52,000 jobs in Cork. I am very thankful for that, and I do not think we should be nasty about foreign direct investment or nasty about companies when we do not really know what we are talking about when it comes to employment.

Working from home benefits a lot of people, but it is a double-edged sword. I have seen people been isolated in their own homes as well. They have lost the connection with their workplace. We have to be cognisant of that. We have to be cognisant of the fact that there are many people who start in a new job or new role or who come into this country and work who do not have a huge network of people around them. They also have a situation where they are learning on the job. It is a bit more difficult to send an email to somebody and ask them to explain how to do A, B, C and D rather than nudge the fellow at the next desk to ask how we really get over this problem. We have to be cognisant of that. I support the motion. It is a very well-intentioned motion, but it is not the be-all and end-all, and it is certainly not the answer to everything.

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland would support flexible remote working where it is genuinely practical, and I say genuinely practical. It should be agreed, obviously, with the employer, which would be hugely important to a lot of employers, but it is not an enforcement. I see where it has benefited my own community where quite a lot of people come from all over the world, never mind other parts of west Cork, to live and work remotely. Deputy O'Flynn mentioned connectivity. We are lucky to have a great mobile broadband company in west Cork called Digital Forge, which has made sure that everybody is connected down there. However, the phone service is not great in many places and that is something we need to look into.

I also have concerns about a lot of people who travel the length and breadth of the roads in west Cork. My brother, Councillor Danny Collins, called for emergency funding last week because the roads are in an atrocious condition in west Cork. People send me pictures of potholes when the two front wheels or back wheels of their cars go into them, or they lose part of their cars inside them. The point I am trying to make is about the northern relief road, the southern relief road, the Bandon relief road, the Innishannon relief road, the Bantry relief road - none of them have been worked on. People are spending time in cars that they do not need to spend. If they can spend that time working from home, it will certainly benefit them, but there is not a one-size-fits-all approach here. I am very aware of that. Some employers have concerns about this Bill going forward and we need to maybe iron out those concerns. Certainly, employees are working hard, but they are finding it difficult to travel on the roads we have with the condition they are in. Public transport is another area and while some progress is being made, it is not enough.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I support anyone who wants to work from home. I support any employer that can facilitate working from home. I do not support legalising that it is mandatory that an employer has to make people work from home because there is no glove that fits everyone. That is my problem. That means that the people here could all decide that, legally, they can work from home. We could have people in other sectors saying that, legally, they can work from home. There are general data protection regulation, GDPR, reasons that people cannot work from home. There are different reasons that people cannot work from home.

We also have another side of it. Some people do not want to work from home and that is their right. There are employers that help people when they want them to work from home because they are actually more productive at home. In other cases, we have people with mental health issues who want to come to work. They do not want to work at home. In cases where employers work with people and it is viable for them to work from home and it is beneficial for both parties, I encourage it 100%. However, I have an issue with legalising it unless the criteria can be worked around for all sectors. When it puts all sectors together, then we will have something we can work with. However, what we need to do here is strengthen it to help employers to accommodate people who want to work from home. However, we also need to have the Internet connectivity.

I was on the "The Late Debate" last night with Nessa Cosgrove. She said that Survey Ireland did a survey of 800 people in Dublin. It is a big place. We must look at everyone; we do not just look at one area. That is what was said on "The Late Debate" last night - it only surveyed 800 people in Dublin. The Labour Party wants to apply this the whole country. It is bigger than Dublin, you know. It should come down the country and survey us as well. We would have no problem with that.

Deputy Mark Wall: Up Kildare.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I live in the wonderful constituency of Dublin Mid-West, which has some fantastic people, but it is also the congestion capital of Ireland. That goes back to when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, sometimes with dodgy backhanders, were rezoning land on greenfield sites left, right and centre. They built houses everywhere with no facilities and

infrastructure. Then, when we had a chance with strategic development zones like Clonburris, Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, the Labour Party and the Social Democrats accused me and others in Lucan, where we were trying to put in playing pitches, of being snobs and trying to move houses to Clondalkin instead when we were trying to move houses to Kishoge train station so people could walk down and get a train. We tried to put in measures that would open the train station before any houses were built. That was not passed, and the board did not uphold our appeal. As a result, the train station in Kishoge had to be totally revamped at a cost of €4 million. The car park that was at Kishoge train station is now gone for housing development, so they had to narrow a lane and put the car parking spaces alongside for the National Transport Authority, NTA, to permit it, and that has led to additional congestion.

As someone with a green background, I know that the more roads we build, the more that cars are going to fill them. We are always going to have a congestion equilibrium but if we put the investment into public transport, we are going to have a lower equilibrium. We are still going to have people driving. If the buses are flowing freely and the traffic gets easier, people are going to start driving again - that is human nature. Now, we have the Government asking South Dublin County Council to rezone more and more land all around the county yet Dart+ South West has been put on the long finger. BusConnects is a shambles. I have said before that the NTA is not accountable to anybody. The train service in terms of extra carriages is not being provided, but the Government is asking people to move into places where it cannot guarantee they can get to work. That is why we need flexibility in terms of working hours. It is so people can bring their kids to school or try to find a crèche, if they are lucky enough to bring their kids to a crèche as well. We need more investment, and we need more flexibility.

We also need a change in industrial policy. I mentioned before that in one estate in my constituency, 90% of the people who are paying top dollar for those houses are not from Ireland. They are from abroad. They are working and paying taxes and contributing here. The issue is, though, that they have not grown up in the area. People who have grandparents who could help mind their kids are being priced out of the market. Meanwhile, software companies are saying they want to go to Dublin. There are rural areas that could do with kids in schools and with the added investment and the industrial policy has not been firm enough to say that if people want to set up their software company, they can set it up with the broadband hubs in rural areas. Keep the population and keep the post offices and banks open.

The entire spatial strategy in this country is for the birds. We need a new town in the midlands that is designed properly. We need to redesign city living and build right up in Dublin city centre in order that people can walk around and go to the shops. We need to bring in all the public sector workers, including gardaí, by giving them incentives to live and work in the city centre. We must stop building out in the suburbs unless we can guarantee the infrastructure is there. In fact, the infrastructure situation is getting worse. In Adamstown, Clonburris and other areas like them, residents are now being given restricted parking spaces. They are told there are 0.75 spaces per unit because this is an area with active travel initiatives, a public transport hub, etc., except it is not. The 15-minute cities will be 50-minute ghettos in 20 years' time because people will not be able to get out of the place if they have a car and they might not be able to have a car because there is nowhere to park it. Three lads renting a house, say, and trying to get from A to B across the city cannot get on a train in the first place and have nowhere to park a vehicle. We need to rethink the whole thing and think a little more cleverly.

Deputy Emer Currie: I will not spend two and a half minutes talking about the benefits of remote and flexible working because I spent five years talking about those benefits, as my colleague Deputy Wall knows. Instead, in the two and a half minutes I have, I will focus on the first line of the motion, which states that "employees in Ireland have no right to flexible and remote work, only a right to request it from their employer". Have my Labour Party colleagues found a country that gives people such a right? The only one I have found over the years is Finland and, even there, it is only for office workers. We must be careful not to give the impression that legislation will fix all of this, which is not accurate. A bigger approach is needed when making cultural changes in society and in workplaces.

That is what we did with the remote work strategy that was introduced by the previous Government. It invested in 400 co-working spaces around the country, in the national broadband plan, in training companies on the cultural change and in offering training to employees through Grow Remote, in which I am involved. That is why our statistics around remote working are so strong. We are higher up the table than most countries in Europe in terms of the number of people working fully remotely and the numbers working from home. Is the system perfect? No, it is not, which is why it is time to devise a new strategy on remote and flexible working to protect what we have and improve it.

Ireland should be the best country in the world for remote working. That must be our ambition. We should have a strategy that targets global companies that work remotely and digitally first and attracts them to Ireland. That would have a halo effect on other companies in Ireland because it would show the productivity and success levels of those companies with a remote-first approach. Can the legislation be improved? It absolutely can and should be improved. There is a spectrum when it comes to the right to request remote working and we are on the wrong side of that spectrum in terms of the legislation having teeth. There are ways in which we can make it a lot stronger such that it boils down to allowing only genuine business reasons for companies to have an issue with remote work. We certainly should strengthen the legislation.

There was a missed opportunity in the introduction of flexible work for carers of children only up to the age of 12. The real cultural and social change will come when there is a degendering of that provision and it is not just, as it usually is, the mother accessing flexible work. It should be available to everybody.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim míle buíochas le Páirtí an Lucht Oibre as ucht an intent atá thaobh thiar den tairiscint seo. Tá sé an-tábhachtach, go háirithe sna laethanta seo, go bhfuil an deis ag daoine trasna na tíre remote working a dhéanamh, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs an tráchtá atá ar na bóithre, na timpeallachta agus gach rud mar sin. Tá a fhios ag gach duine – tá staitisticí ar fáil - go bhfuil sé an-mhaith i gcomhthéacs an mhéid CO2 a bhíonn ag teacht amach ó charranna na ndaoine a bhíonn ag dul isteach chuig a n-áiteanna oibre.

I am not supporting the motion because, as Deputy Currie mentioned, the legal right to request remote work, and the framework around it, recognises the important reality that not every job can be done remotely and not every workplace can operate in the same way. The existing system should be reviewed and, in that regard, I support the intent behind the motion and I welcome this discussion. The legislation we need to create must provide certainty for employees. Arís, gabhaim míle buíochas to the cross-party group on remote work, of which I

am part. I spoke to people in Grow Remote yesterday and this morning and they gave me the statistic that Ireland was losing 100,000 jobs due to the current remote working system. We need to examine it with a view to changing it. Access to remote working expands access to jobs for carers. I welcome the work done by the people in the cross-party group.

In north Dublin, there are people who would be 15 minutes from work on a bicycle but when it comes to getting there on a rainy day, they get into traffic congestion and it is not ideal. Those people need to be facilitated if we are serious about tackling congestion, improving quality of life and meeting our climate targets. As we saw recently, we are in line not to meet those targets. We are dealing with this in the climate committee. Action on remote working could be a very important step that would help.

The task now is for Members from all parties and none to work together to see how we can best benefit our economy through remote working, to scale it properly and to support employers and employees. I welcome many of the points made by speakers on all sides of the House today. If we can do this correctly, it will be very beneficial to the Irish people.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): The next speaker is Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. No, in fact, I call Deputy Dolan.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Deputy Healy-Rae must be working remotely.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I will focus on the fact that remote working disproportionately benefits rural communities. The trend I have noticed over the past few years in the area I represent, Galway East, is that the more remote working that is happening, the more people there are working in fantastic jobs in Galway city, Athlone, Mayo and Dublin. It has allowed those people to come closer to home. They are able to make a decision to build a home close to where they are from and not have to buy in Dublin or Galway city in order to have a short commute. They can manage the longer commute much better for the two or three days they go into the office and can be more effective with their time.

When we reflect on life in Ireland in the past few years, it is very clear that one of the single biggest improvements to quality of life has been remote working and how our mindset around work has changed as well. I will support the Government amendment to the motion and I am really excited to see what its proposals will mean for the future of remote working. The Government has done a significant amount in terms of investment and introducing tax allowances to enable people to claim expenses that may arise from working from home. It is really important to acknowledge the work that has been done and to work with the bodies that want to see improvements in remote working. Across Europe right now, companies are looking for remote workers. They are looking for people who are able to contribute in a digital world that is accelerating at an ever greater rate. It is vital to ensure our workforce is educated, equipped and ready to contribute as best as possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank the Labour Party and colleagues on all sides of the House who made really important contributions. It has been a very fair and balanced debate on the pros and cons, as there always are with these matters, of the proposals before the House.

As set out by the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, in moving the amendment to the motion, the Government is committed to delivering sustainable transport projects and facilitating remote work in a way that maximises the economic, social and environmental benefits. As outlined earlier, the Government has provided a right to request, which supports and facilitates remote working at the same time as supporting a productive and competitive business environment. There has been significant uptake of remote work since the Covid-19 pandemic, with recent data from the Central Statistics Office showing that in the third quarter of last year, almost 1 million people reported working from home at least some of the time.

The programme for Government reaffirms the commitment to promoting flexible working arrangements that benefit both workers and employers. The Government is fulfilling this commitment by ensuring the remote working legislation is fit for purpose. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is currently undertaking a statutory review of the operation of the remote working provisions of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023.

Deputy O'Gorman asked when that might be published. We will try to get a concrete timeline for that. The purpose of the review is to assess the effectiveness of the legislation, as well as evaluating its clarity and identifying any unintended consequences. I understand that there has been significant engagement with stakeholders, with the Department receiving over 8,000 responses to the public consultation. The final report of the statutory review will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Work is also being undertaken across Government to inform and support the remote working policy, including the development of a national hub strategy, the working in Ireland survey and other research.

The other aspects of the Deputies' motion are traffic congestion and commuter delays. I smiled when I heard Deputy Murphy say that this only affected Dublin. I have just driven from Bailieborough in County Cavan along the N3, which is a two and a half hour drive. I have always advocated for that area. The issue of remote working in the commuter belt stretches way beyond Wicklow, Kildare and places like that. In County Cavan, along the N3, you will see a pile-up of cars on the hard shoulder, where people are commuting. Obviously, they perhaps now have the flexibility to work from home.

In response to Deputy Dolan's point, it has benefited rural communities in particular. We see that in the footfall in coffee shops, pharmacies and all of the little shops in small towns like Bailieborough, Cootehill, Shercock and Virginia. They have all benefited from that. It does not mean that people cannot live in the more remote parts of the country and have a job in Dublin, like myself.

As noted in the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer's earlier remarks, the Government is investing record levels of public funds into public transport infrastructure. It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge, as a rural Minister of State, what Local Link has meant for rural constituencies like my own. I never thought I would see a day when there were public transport buses travelling every day on certain roads. It is incredible, and it has to be acknowledged. I want to take a bit of latitude to acknowledge that. Over the lifetime of this Government, we will see the shovels in the ground on MetroLink, DART+, Luas Finglas and the western rail corridor. We will also see the completion and progression of core bus corridors in Dublin as part of the BusConnects Dublin programme, and the progression of the Cork area commuter rail. Deputy O'Flynn also raised matters concerning Cork today. These projects, along with

others provided for in the NDP review sectoral investment plan for transport, will help to provide a high-quality, connected public transport system for all passengers and help to alleviate congestion.

Regarding services, an unprecedented funding allocation of €940 million for PSO services was secured in budget 2026, a significant 43% uplift in the allocation from budget 2025. This allocation will allow for the continued delivery of targeted fare initiatives, including the recently introduced free travel for all children up to the age of nine, and the young adult card for those aged 19 to 25, as part of the NTA's national fares strategy. It also prioritises the advancement of ongoing programmes and commitments in line with operational readiness and resource availability.

These measures allow for the continued growth in PSO journeys. The number of journeys has continued to grow steadily and demonstrates how the public are taking positive steps in making the switch to using public transport. I would have to concur with Deputy Whitmore's comments. She is from County Wicklow and I am from County Cavan. I see it myself, in that people are using buses more and the demand is there. The problem now is having enough buses on the routes to accommodate the number of people using them. We saw an all-time high of more than 343 million journeys undertaken across the PSO network in 2024, which was a record-breaking increase of 32 million compared to 2023 figures. Although the data for 2025 is currently being finalised, we are again anticipating a significant uplift on 2024 passenger numbers. This is evidenced by recent figures published by Dublin Bus, reporting 164 million passenger journeys in 2025. The most recent BusConnects progress report was published in December 2025, covering phases 5A, 5B and 6A in Dublin. It shows that eight out of ten users are satisfied with the service, and 45% believe the bus service in their area has improved. We remain fully committed to building on these positive changes and delivering a public transport system that is responsive to passenger needs.

Already, we can see the impact that the increased funding under the public transport retrofit programme is having, in line with the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. As Members know, having reliable and safe lifts at train stations is vital for anyone with mobility difficulties. For example, accessibility and safety at Clongriffin DART station have improved. We will continue to make bus and train stations nationwide more accessible, increase the number of wheelchair-accessible taxis and reduce the period of advance notice for disabled people using public transport.

I assure the Deputies that the Government recognises that transport connectivity is hugely important for people who live and work in rural Ireland. This is evidenced by the launch last year of Ireland's first-ever smart demand responsive transport pilots in Achill, Killarney and the north-east of Limerick city. Using the TFI Anseo app, passengers are now able to book on-demand rides with ease, bringing the convenience of modern ride-share together with the reliability and affordability of public transport. This pilot is funded under the Government's Climate Action Fund, which supports innovative transport solutions that contribute to a greener, more connected Ireland.

The roll-out of the current phase of the towns bus programme began with the launch of the Carlow town bus service in 2023. It was followed by the Clonmel town bus service later that year and the Portlaoise town bus service in February 2025. Mobilisation has commenced for the Mullingar town service, with a target launch in quarter 1 of 2026.

The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, has already touched on the investment being made in walking and cycling infrastructure to encourage commuters to walk and cycle, where possible, and I accept it is not always possible in rural parts. The Government recognises, however, that the investment will only be worthwhile if the infrastructure is safe to use. Vulnerable road users, such as pedestrians and cyclists, need to be safe when utilising our walking and cycling networks to get to and from work and school.

In conclusion, I thank the Deputies for raising these issues and initiating the discussion. However, for all of the reasons I have outlined, the Government is opposing the motion. The Government has high ambitions for our public transport and active travel network and is allocating funding to make them a reality.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Unfortunately, the Government does not have high ambitions. There has been an attempt by the rest of the Opposition and the Government to misrepresent or misunderstand our Bill, our motion and our campaign. We carried out a survey in which 850 workers took part. They were not from Dublin, and it was not a Dublin-based survey. In fact, 840 of those who took part in the survey were from outside Dublin. It was a nationwide campaign. Deputy Dolan made a salient point on how remote working disproportionately and positively impacted rural workers. That is why Members should be supporting our motion and our Bill. The Minister of State herself said that she wanted to maximise the environmental and economic benefits of the right to remote work. She could do that by supporting our Bill. Government policy remains the right to request, which is ultimately the right to nothing.

Deputy Currie misrepresented our Bill, perhaps not deliberately. She took the first line, where we note the current policy, but did not reference what we were calling for, which is to introduce a real right for employees to flexible and remote work where it is reasonably practical. We know that you cannot lay a brick from home, teach at primary school from home or be an outdoor worker for a local authority from home. However, many jobs that are desk-based, predominantly computer-based or office-based can be done, and done effectively and efficiently, from home, with all the subsequent quality of life and climate benefits, and the impact on local economies.

It is the public service, led by Ministers, that is allowing the culture to shift, when we should be leading in the public sector and ensuring that people can work from home where it is reasonably practicable. This is feeding into the private sector and pulling people back into the office - back onto overcrowded train carriages and buses that are not turning up - when they should be working from home. Dublin is the 11th most congested city in the world, and Galway and Cork also have huge congestion problems.

We have a Government that has made a deliberate decision to diminish its investment in active travel and public transport versus its investment in roads. That is what it has done. During Leaders' Questions a number of weeks ago, the Taoiseach told my leader Deputy Bacik he felt the old model of 2:1 in favour of public transport and active travel versus roads was wrong. The Minister of State referenced Local Link but that was brought in by the Green Party. That is going to show no improvement even though it has been brilliant. I have had it in my constituency and it is brilliant, but it will not be invested in and improved under the current Government because all the Government wants to do is invest in more and more roads. We have set out a practical motion that is going to put workers and the climate first. It is going to

reduce traffic and ensure our motorways are not car parks anymore and there is instead an element of free flow. It is a balanced, constructive motion responding to what the Taoiseach always says. This Opposition does make constructive proposals and he needs to listen.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Tá díomá orm nach bhfuil an Rialtas ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún seo agus go bhfuil frithrún curtha isteach ag an Rialtas agus ag an Aire. I am disappointed for a number of reasons. I am disappointed because the amendment as it was presented to us makes no reference to what we have said about remote and flexible work. The Minister of State referenced it in her speech but the amendment to the motion does not reference that. We are lucky in one sense that we have the Minister of State with responsibility for AI with us because the amendment reads like it could have been written by ChatGPT.

We have been banging the drum on this for years now and we need a legal entitlement to flexible and remote work from day 1 for roles where it is reasonably practical. We are not talking about a fella going out to dig the road. We are talking about all the office workers who are stuck in traffic stopping the fellow going out to dig the road from getting to that road in a timely manner. We were told the world of work was going to change post pandemic and I feel we are really going back to the worst of the pre-Covid world and forcing people back into the office for the sake of it. The current legislation is weak. There are far too many refusals and there is no proper appeals mechanism.

Every morning, people are piling onto the M4, M6, M7, M8, M50 and M20 and wasting their lives away in traffic while the Government wonders why that traffic is getting worse. My city of Limerick is more congested than it ever was. Traffic has gone above pre-2019 levels. The roads are absolutely choked. The Mackey roundabout and Ballysimon junction are both lethal. I come from Corbally and the traffic is well backed up as far as east Clare. We were promised BusConnects. It was supposed to be rolled out in 2025 but we will be lucky to get it by 2027 and we have no clarity as to whether we will get the full BusConnects or end up with some sort of Mickey Mouse diet BusConnects. There is also nothing about commuter rail in the Government's sectoral investment plan for transport in relation to Limerick. We have a number of radial railway lines around the city and there is huge potential to develop a network of commuter rail stations to take cars off the road. It is the same with a rail spur to Shannon Airport. All we have are measures that have already been announced like the double track to Limerick Junction and the park and ride, if it ever happens. We need the Government to recalibrate and reprioritise public transport. It was something the previous Government did much better than the current one does.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Labour Party deliberately decided to align transport issues with the Government's chronic track record on providing a right to working people to access remote work. We get an insight today into this Government's thinking on remote work, for two reasons. The first is that the Government's response to our motion is effectively silent on the question of remote work. The second is that Ministers and their Secretaries General are actively working to ensure public and civil servants who worked, in some instances, one day a week at their desk in Dublin are now being instructed - forced - back to those desks on 1 February. They are being forced also onto crowded and congested trains in areas like Drogheda and forced onto roads that were tolled by Fianna Fáil back in the 2000s, adding insult to injury.

I will give some examples from my recent experience on the M1. On 18 December, a very minor tip on the motorway meant thousands of other commuters and I were sitting in traffic outside Drogheda for two and a half hours. The very next day, there was a very serious incident and a woman lost her life. That is the important thing we must remember. That was outside Drogheda on the M1 on 19 December and it caused traffic to be delayed by five and a half hours. The important thing is the emergency services could get to the people who were affected but TII, which is the organisation responsible for providing information on these issues when they arise, was practically silent. There were no updates on social media and belated instructions to drivers on dynamic signage to divert away from the area, and that is simply not good enough.

The right to request remote work as it stands is an empty formula due to the legislation. It is a meaningless melange of words that makes no difference whatsoever to working people. I have a right to request Drogheda United wins the Champion's League but we know that is not going to happen. That is the reality of this kind of situation. The Government is making empty gestures to working people and giving them the impression they have a right that does not exist at all in law. That needs to change. I met a civil servant who has been instructed back to her desk in Dublin who is working productively from home as it stands. I met her on Monday and she asked why, with our antiquated, underfunded transport infrastructure under such well-documented strain, the Government would send civil servants like her and her colleagues who had proven they can successfully worked from home into the chaos of a transport system that was already so dysfunctional.

The Minister of State will know that Drogheda is one of the fastest-growing areas of the country. We are building 5,000 homes on the north side of the town, 2,000 of which have already been built. To take the strain off the train station in Drogheda, we need to be building a second station. If we were building a second train station, I would accept this Government was serious about providing the supports and infrastructure to commuters to allow them get to Dublin for work but that project is nobody's child. Irish Rail is saying, in effect, that developers should build it. There are areas with smaller populations where train stations are being built and the demand is clear in the Drogheda area yet it simply is not happening. As the Minister of State knows, Drogheda's station is chock-a-block every morning before 7 a.m. and you will get clamped if you happen to encroach on, for example, yellow box junctions when you have a ticket and need to get onto the train. All these issues need to be addressed and the easiest and quickest way to address this would be to give workers a right to work remotely.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I wrote to the Taoiseach this morning regarding Bord Bia's chair, Larry Murrin, whose position I now believe to be completely untenable given that his company was importing Brazilian beef. I hope he will act on my letter.

The childcare system is in crisis.

The Taoiseach: On a point of order, what is the leader's question? The Deputy is only allowed bring up one issue at a time.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is correct.

The Taoiseach: We cannot be doing sleight of hand stuff like that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am about to bring up my issue now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Continue with Leaders' Questions, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle, this is important.

An Ceann Comhairle: I absolutely accept it, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy cannot have two or three issues at the one time.

An Ceann Comhairle: I accept the point of order.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy raised an issue and it is sleight of hand because if I do not respond, I will be accused of X, Y and Z.

An Ceann Comhairle: I accept the point of order. If that is not your question, Deputy McDonald, please proceed with your question and observe Standing Orders.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I was merely informing the Taoiseach of a piece of correspondence.

An Ceann Comhairle: Not under Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I do not think the defensive response is entirely necessary, but how and ever, people can judge that for themselves.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Very touchy.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Very tetchy Taoiseach.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Unaffordable fees are crippling families. Parents, in many cases, pay the equivalent of a mortgage each month. Across the State, as the Taoiseach knows, there are nearly 50,000 children on waiting lists denied a childcare place. Many parents find themselves relying on family members to mind their children while they are at work. Some are forced to cut back on their hours or consider leaving their jobs entirely. Now we hear that

mounting cost pressures have seen nearly 1,000 early childcare facilities close their doors over the past six years.

The Government committed to reviewing core funding to operators but that has not happened and it has had devastating consequences. Of course, it is just another promise broken by the Government. The news of these childcare closures will come as no surprise to the tens-of-thousands of parents desperately seeking a childcare place for their child but it will add to their stress. The childcare crisis is one of capacity but it is also one of affordability and the Government has done a very poor job of tackling these persistent issues. The job of government is to build a strong, sustainable childcare system that is affordable and that is good for children, good for society and good for an economy where people can have a good work and family life. However, the Government has not shown any ambition, vision or urgency to deliver this childcare system that working families so desperately need. The Taoiseach has known for a very long time that the Government needs to invest in buildings and sites to increase childcare spaces but it has dithered, it has delayed and now we have tens-of-thousands of children waiting.

The big problem is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are very good on promises but very bad when it comes to delivery. The Taoiseach promised a roadmap to €200 per month childcare within the first 100 days of his Government. Parents waited more than 300 days and what they got was a rehashed pledge to deliver an affordability roadmap sometime between 2027 and 2029. Children needing a childcare space now will have started school by then. Does the Taoiseach really think that hard-pressed parents can wait another two or possibly three years before the Government even produces a plan to cut their childcare bill and wait longer for its delivery? More children in primary school-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, that clock is incorrect. It was reset by mistake. I have the clock in front of me, but I will give you an extra 20 seconds on the basis of that clock.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What is that all about?

An Ceann Comhairle: It was just reset by mistake, so your time is up.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It is four minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Four minutes is up, actually. You have 20 seconds to finish up, Deputy.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Taoiseach used half the time to make his point of order.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach, of course, sabotaged my efforts but there you go.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Which question was it that he sabotaged?

An Ceann Comhairle: You have 20 seconds, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The nub of it is, the Taoiseach promised affordable childcare and he has not delivered it. He failed to produce the childcare places that are necessary and I would like to know what he is going to do about this in the here and now, not in 2027 or 2028.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Families are struggling, children are left without places. What is the Taoiseach's response now? Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: Given that it was raised, I did receive the Deputy's correspondence this morning in respect of Bord Bia. Bord Bia has been performing exceptionally well this year, last year and over the past number of years. If we look at 2020, there were exports of over €13 billion in foodstuffs. This year it is €19 billion. So, it is extraordinary, impressive outcomes and results in the export of foodstuffs including beef. We export beef and Irish food to 75 countries around the world. I am just back from China where I saw Bord Bia executives marketing Irish food very effectively and very efficiently in Mandarin. Do not try to drag down a good organisation.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Be very careful.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is not about the organisation.

The Taoiseach: Do not try to drag it down now. Let us not go for this populist, low-level activity. Let us not go like herd instincts-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Childcare, Taoiseach. Childcare places.

The Taoiseach: ----- by jumping everywhere and go after people wrongly without proper perspective or understanding of the food industry, which has been a good success story for Ireland over the past number of years and continues to be.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: So, is Brazilian beef okay?

An Ceann Comhairle: Your leader asked a question, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Bord Bia has been one of the better State agencies and our food companies, which are global by the way, all over Europe and all over the world-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is what global means.

An Ceann Comhairle: You had your chance, Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: Let us not undermine them just for the sake of chasing other people for votes and for popularity.

In respect of childcare, the Government is very involved in childcare and the State is very involved in childcare in a variety of ways in terms of subsidies, in terms of frozen fees and in terms of investment, capital investment in private and community childcare as well as yesterday announcing a new State childcare capital investment programme which will significantly increase childcare places over the coming years.

We understand the pressures that households and families are under in respect to access to childcare and the cost of childcare, but we have looked at it on a number of fronts in terms of fees, in terms of investment and expansion, in terms of the workforce and in terms of significantly increasing wages for those working in childcare. We acknowledge there is more to do in that regard. In 2024, we saw a five year high in new services opening and a five-year low in pre-school closures. About 357 services opened, 131 closed. That is a net increase of 226. That positive momentum continued in 2025. Data to the end of November last year showed about 372 openings and 122 closures, which is a net increase of 250.

The growth is being matched by rising participation. The number of children using early learning and childcare has grown by 35% between 2020 and 2025. Looking at the CSO data, for example, childcare prices have been falling on aggregate across the entire country. Different parts of the country would be higher than others in cities in particular but there is a broader story to be told. The situation is that we do work with childcare providers. It is challenging and there are tensions obviously, as there were particularly when we sought to limit fees. There has been huge investment to enable that to happen. The national childcare scheme supports about 277,000 children in 2026, which is 27,000 more than last year. Income assessed subsidy thresholds under the childcare scheme will be increased to €34,000 for lower income households and €68,000 for the upper threshold.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The early childhood care and education programme, ECCE, continues for over 105,000, providing two years of free preschool.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Deputy McDonald to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Obviously I have hit a bit of a nerve there with the Taoiseach. Maybe it is just me, but I do not think a chair of Bord Bia whose company was importing Brazilian beef stands on credible ground. That is a view that I hold and I know that will be held by many farmers and people beyond that.

On the childcare issue, the Government is not serious about providing the right number of places. There are 50,000 children now waiting for a place. The Taoiseach's big idea is to provide only 800 places over the next number of years.

That is a joke and a bad one. The Taoiseach has made no reference to his promise of €200 childcare. He has obviously ditched that but he does not have the integrity to just state it plainly. He wants people to wait years more for a plan that might deliver that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Finally, he has done nothing on core funding. He had a specific promise in the programme for Government to review core funding, and to raise it, but there was not a gíog from him.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is not serious about childcare. He is quite happy to let working families struggle and to have children left behind.

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

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: This Government and the previous one did more for childcare in the Past five years than any previous Governments. There has been progress along the way but there was very substantial progress in the Past four to five years. Deputy McDonald does not have it within her to acknowledge that. Core funding increased by 19% under the budget 2026 to over €436 million. That will enable us to maintain fees at 2021 levels in year four.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Some 1,000 providers have closed. Did the Taoiseach miss that?

The Taoiseach: It will also support providers with the cost of the new employment regulation order pay rates and then prepare for year five enhancements, including new funding to reduce the maximum fee cap. We have always said that reducing the fees to €200 was a five-year plan. It will happen. We are not ditching anything. We are committed to that and we are going to do it but it is over the lifetime of the Government. That was always made very clear.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Some 93% of eligible providers have now signed up to the fourth year of core funding.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: There is good news on recruitment in terms of a continued 10% year-on-year increase in the growth of the workforce as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today, I want to raise a single issue: the harrowing case of former Garda, Margaret Loftus. I commend her on her immense courage in coming forward to speak

publicly about her experience. Speaking on RTÉ's "Prime Time" last night, she described years of torture at the hands of her ex-husband, Garda Trevor Bolger. Last week, his three-month sentence for assault was suspended following his guilty plea to a low-end charge. Margaret Loftus described compellingly how her ex-husband exerted control over her right up to sentencing, even censoring her victim impact statement. Her allegations that he had previously made threats to kill and that he exerted coercive control were never tested in court.

Over some years I was proud to work with other women Senators and TDs, with Women's Aid, Safe Ireland and others, to introduce the offence of coercive control into our law. Because violence in intimate settings is rarely one single blow, we know that it tends to constitute patterns of domination, fear and control. Margaret Loftus believes that An Garda Síochána closed ranks around her abuser for a long time. After she reported him, she was met initially with silence. He got a promotion. He was even issued a firearm. She has said her long pursuit of justice was as traumatising and damaging as the abuse itself. Sadly, that is the experience of many survivors.

Margaret Loftus now fears that he may not even lose his Garda uniform. That fear is reinforced by sources which report that other gardaí convicted of similar assaults remained in service - a horrendous precedent. What was the collective response of An Garda Síochána to these troubling revelations? It seems its first response was to launch an investigation into Conor Lally, the journalist who first exposed this story five years ago. That is shameful. Stories like this make it unsurprising that the Garda Inspectorate has found that half of domestic abuse victims were dissatisfied with their experience of making a report to the police. We know that incidents of gender-based violence and domestic violence are lived, endured and survived by women in this country every day. Tragically, sometimes women do not survive these incidents.

Violence against women is an epidemic of shocking proportions. The public body, the service that is primarily tasked with tackling it, in some cases, is quietly facilitating those who perpetrate it. Zero tolerance cannot be an effective slogan if violent men are tolerated within our policing system or within our security apparatus. It is a real concern too within the Defence Forces. We have seen that exposed by the Women of Honour and Natasha O'Brien. Margaret Loftus needs to be given reassurance. She has said she will handcuff herself to the gates of Leinster House if nothing is done to address a culture that may include cover-up. Will the Taoiseach confirm to her that neither the Garda nor the Defence Forces will tolerate the accommodation of abusers within their ranks?

The Taoiseach: First, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. In the first instance, I pay tribute to the victim here - Margaret Loftus. I commend her bravery in speaking out. I did not get an opportunity to see "Prime Time" last evening. Her courage in reporting this matter has seen it come through the courts and a guilty verdict delivered. We applaud her strength and resilience, showing that no matter who the perpetrator is, those engaged in domestic violence will be investigated and will be prosecuted.

The Government will continue to reinforce a zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence and gender-based violence. Such behaviour has no place in any part of modern society. As Deputy Bacik knows, in recent years we established Cuan, and we are pursuing a new strategy. Standards have to apply. I was involved in the matter in regard to the Defence Forces. It applies equally to An Garda Síochána. I have no doubt An Garda Síochána will reflect on these

findings. I do not want to prejudice the outcome of any disciplinary situation. I say that with the best interests of the victim in mind here, in terms of an outcome that could materialise. All of the facts, as the Deputy and the court outlined, would have to be considered by An Garda Síochána. When I reflected on this case, given the Charleton inquiry and earlier inquiries, there is a lot of concern about how this case progressed in terms of the lesser charge and so on. I have real concerns about that because some of that emerged in earlier inquiries as well. I say that without prejudice to this case. How this progressed is a matter of significant concern. The length of time is extraordinary for the victim. This does need to be examined, and will be examined.

There has been a finding of guilt and a conviction. Internal Garda disciplinary processes will now have to be followed. That is where it is right now. Again, there is a broader issue in terms of standards and character that apply to membership of An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces.

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. There is one very practical measure that Women's Aid has recommended could and should be adopted by An Garda Síochána immediately following this very disturbing case. There needs to be clear guidelines on how the Garda addresses a situation where a report of violence is made against a serving garda. These guidelines need to be easily accessible to the public, so that victims or survivors can be reassured and are not deterred from coming forward. In particular, they must be reassured that complaints will be dealt with seriously and expeditiously because, as the Taoiseach rightly says, the length of time in this case is a matter of particular concern.

Speaking more generally, we do know that, as I said, this is one incident in what is an absolute scourge of violent incidents against women. Domestic violence kills. We have seen far too many women killed in the context of their homes and their intimate relationships, by abusive partners. Since 2021, more than half of all murders in Ireland have had a domestic violence motivation. This is chilling.

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We need to ensure as a society that we are taking this very seriously.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Bacik. I call on the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I agree wholeheartedly with the Deputy. It is chilling. It is quite shocking. Every effort will have to be made to deal with this on a societal basis through State agencies and State forces - in terms of An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. There has to be a very clear zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence. As the Deputy says, increasingly such violence has led to fatalities and murder, as we see on an all-too-regular basis. We will work with the Deputy. To be frank, this transcends parties.

If any additional legislative measures are required, we will not be found wanting. The investigating gardaí deserve some credit for pursuing this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Yes, absolutely.

The Taoiseach: That should also be acknowledged. There are regulations in place to deal with the aftermath of the court case. I do not want to prejudice the outcome of that case.

Deputy Charles Ward: Last week, I warned this House that the Housing Agency is stretching IS 465 to exclude homeowners from the defective concrete block remediation scheme. At least one engineer is saying they will not fix defective homes, ignoring the criteria IS 465 sets out for defective blocks. The Government cannot hide behind technical language while families are left unsafe in their homes. What I am raising today confirms that this is not a mistake. It is a pattern and this pattern is now putting people in danger. I am aware of multiple cases where homeowners who clearly meet the eligibility criteria under IS 465 are being refused access to the scheme by engineers employed by the Housing Agency. These are not marginal cases. They are homes in which the mica content is above 6%. They fall under group 4 as regards damage and are officially classified as dangerous buildings. Anyone with eyes in their head can see these homes contain defective concrete and yet these applications were refused.

The agency's own words are clear. In one case, it said that, having considered IS465:2018, as amended in 2020, it was appropriate that the decision in the case was refusal due to the building damage not being caused by the use of defective blocks containing excessive amounts of certain deleterious materials. Let us be clear about this; mica is a deleterious material. Under IS 465, any building incorporating deleterious materials qualifies under the damage threshold and is eligible for remediation. Even if the engineers claim mica is not the sole cause, the blocks are defective under the IS 465 standard. The cause is not the issue. The law and the standard are completely clear. Residents deserve protection right now.

Access is also being denied due to so-called external sulphate attack. Leading scientists advise that external sulphate attack would only reasonably be expected below the damp-proof coursing of the house, that is, in the groundwork and soil below the bell cast. Despite this, detailed IS 465 testing did not examine below the damp-proof course. The very location most at risk was not tested.

Let me be clear, these actions have real-world consequences. People living in extremely unsafe homes are told the damage to those homes was not caused by defective concrete. They are then instructed to pay for further testing out of their own pocket, costing thousands. When they challenge that decision, they are forced into an appeals process that sends the case back to the engineers who made the decision in the first place, so we are going around in a loop. This is not an appeals process. It is a circular State-sanctioned loop.

Will the Taoiseach instruct the Minister for housing and the Housing Agency to immediately stop using this flawed interpretation of IS 465 and to review the decisions in these test cases to protect homeowners? It is a simple yes or no. I know how much the scheme cost and exactly what is involved in it. I just need a yes or a no so that we can look at these test cases and move on.

The Taoiseach: We are moving on in respect of this scheme. The scheme is expected to cost in excess of €2.2 billion. Government is committed to that. That is a key fact and decision. As the Deputy will know, it is estimated that close to 3,000 homeowners are now at various stages of the scheme. That was the figure at the end of August 2025. A lot of people are engaging with the scheme and a lot of cases are being progressed. The grant rates, which were increased in 2024, are based on expert advice and are set at a level that ensures homeowners will get the money they need to put their homes right. As the Deputy will know, there have been ongoing improvements and changes. To ensure the grant scheme followed the most up-to-date science, changes were made to the scheme late in 2024 to take account of the most recent research. A forthcoming Bill will make amendments to the grant scheme to allow these changes to be implemented by the administrators of the grant scheme, which happen to be the local authorities. The Bill will also allow for an increase of up to 10% in grant rates and payments under the scheme.

The Deputy spoke about IS 465 and determinations that have been made. There is an appeals mechanism. By definition, an appeals mechanism has to be independent. The Deputy is saying that we should intervene to change the determinations. It is a statutory process under an appeals panel that is led by a senior counsel and which includes experts from the legal and engineering professions. The panel is appointed by the Minister in a clear and transparent way, which is managed on his behalf by the Public Appointments Service. It is through that service that people are selected to go on the panels. The appeals system is an independent statutory function under the defective concrete blocks Act of 2022. It has now begun to issue determinations to appellants. It has accelerated its work in recent weeks. I will alert the Minister to the fact that the Deputy has raised this issue today but I do not see an alternative to an independent statutory system to hear appeals. There has to be an objective and independent process to hear appeals in cases where people have not been allowed into the scheme. However, I will certainly alert the Minister to what the Deputy has raised.

Deputy Charles Ward: There are 3,000 people on the scheme. I am one of them. Some 300 houses have been built and another 300 are going through that process. At this rate, it will be 150 years before we get 10,000 houses done and we have 25,000 to do. Materials are coming in that IS 465 needs to recognise. That is where the fault is. The appeals board is independent in name only. There is an issue with that, which I will raise with the Taoiseach at a later point. It has been clearly indicated that there are serious structural dangers with the scheme's design. Will the Taoiseach tell the Minister for housing to look at these test cases? I just need to the Minister to look at these test cases. That is what I need to move forward. If he will accept this, it will help to change what is currently going on.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister and ask him to look at these test cases and to revert to the Deputy after doing so. We want to make this work.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Yesterday, there was a development on something that has been brought up in this Dáil in recent years. Jessica Sheedy died at 18 years of age in Limerick. She was admitted to hospital on 8 May 2018 for an operation and died on 11 May 2018. A Medical Council fitness-to-practice inquiry found that three allegations of professional misconduct and ten allegations of poor professional performance made against Dr. Lal were

proven beyond doubt. Dr. Lal also accepts other allegations of professional misconduct were proven. I have brought up this issue many times in here. I know Ann and Jimmy personally. I was at their wedding. It has taken eight years to bring this case to where it is today. I thank the present management at University Hospital Limerick for allowing this to happen. I cannot say I have the same respect for the previous management.

I will let the courts deal with what Dr. Lal did to the Sheedy family, to Jessica Sheedy's friends and to the wider community. However, I believe there should now be a criminal investigation into the CEO at the time of this misconduct. There are allegations of tampering with evidence and misleading an independent inquiry by not providing all documentation required for that inquiry to make a decision. There have been two independent inquiries but it is only now that all of the information has come out. It is alleged that staff members were silenced and made to sign non-disclosure agreements to protect Dr. Lal, who has now admitted misconduct. For eight years, people have been put at risk because of a cover-up in the hospital to protect Dr. Lal. That is what we are on about. There has been nothing about the patients who have gone in there. It is a learning hospital. If best practice was followed and something went wrong, you would put your hands up and fix what is wrong because it is a hospital.

It is a learning place. It was shown that there was no proper person doing the operation. They should never have been allowed do the operation in the first place. By covering it up for eight years, how many people have been seriously injured or have died under that same management? There should be a criminal investigation against the then CEO.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, this shocking situation. I saw it yesterday on the news. It is absolutely unacceptable that a family should lose their daughter in such circumstances. It seems to me that this person should never have proceeded with the operation, should never have been doing the operation. I cannot comprehend how that happened. A benign tumour should have been a straightforward procedure. Then Jessica was taken to intensive care because it was not carried out in an effective manner. We learned that he did not seek the intervention of a vascular surgeon in a sufficiently timely manner - this is in a major hospital in the country - after Jessica suffered a major blood loss during the procedure. There was also a failure to carry out adequate pre-planning for the surgery. That is what the fitness to practise committee heard. The Medical Council has issued its findings. Dr. Lal has been the subject of a number of factual allegations and he has made full admissions. There are very serious issues here. The Medical Council found that each of the allegations had been proven beyond reasonable doubt and each amounted to a serious failing. I think the hearing has been adjourned to Wednesday for the hearing of submissions on a sanction. I do not want to prejudice what may follow here. This has to be examined in the most comprehensive way because questions arise in the light of all of those clinical failings which have resulted in the loss of life of a beautiful young woman. It should never have happened. What flows from that, then, in terms of the broader workings of the hospital? How was a clinician in a position to undertake a surgery of this kind in the manner that was taken? I fully hear what the Deputy is saying. Obviously, different people have to take actions, not at my urging or that of others. They have to be objectively arrived at and pursued. In other cases, disciplinary action was initiated in terms of officials, as the Deputy knows. Again, I am not going to make assertions right here and now. Words are of no use to the Sheedy family.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Taoiseach. I see that the Minister for Health is here, and the Minister for justice as well, and other Ministers. I am asking for their help. This took eight years and only for her mother Ann, Jimmy, Marcella and all her friends keeping at this and having a medical background themselves, this would have been buried for a lot longer. Only for the current management in UHL, this would have been buried. There has to be accountability of the people who were overseeing the hospital at that time. The problem is that this was buried for eight years. It is a learning hospital. If there was a mistake made, put up your hands and do not put anyone else at risk. There has to be accountability for the then CEO. They were in here in the committee. I have brought it up so many times in the Dáil. We have to make sure justice prevails. To me, they have actually put people's health-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: There are no words. Please help and make sure justice is done.

The Taoiseach: There has to be accountability; the Deputy is correct in saying that. I appreciate what he has said about the current management. I also want to place on record that under the leadership of Bernard Gloster, there has been a welcome change in approach to dealing with situations like this---

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: And Sandra Broderick.

The Taoiseach: ---in terms of apologies being made much more timely. Eight years is far too long when everybody knew what had happened here. The Deputy is absolutely correct. In issues like medical surgeries, people should put their hand up. It should be about evaluating, learning and so on. People should say that was done wrongly. It should not take eight years for a family to get some sense of accountability in terms of what happened here. The objective is to make sure it does not happen again to some other young person or some other patient. That always has to be the objective. I thank the Deputy for raising it.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Gillian Toole: My question is quite straightforward. It relates to the establishment of an independent, non-statutory Covid evaluation committee. Why was that route taken, rather than a statutory inquiry similar to other jurisdictions like the UK, Australia and America? Everybody in the House would agree that the greatest wealth we have is health. In this week of the World Economic Forum at Davos and the concerns over Mercosur, we must not forget the people. We are human beings, not human doings. Up to 100 years ago, anecdotal evidence was the norm, the gold standard. There were numerous systems of medicine from Ayurvedic medicine to homoeopathy. Modern medicine, where we have empirical evidence, clinical trials, data gathering and so on, has only evolved in the last 100 years.

I am going to bring the Taoiseach some information that has been given to me in my role as a pharmacist, as a family member, as a friend and from constituents. What I am observing

anecdotally includes stage 4 breast cancers in young women; an increase in prostate cancer in men, where previously it would have been in those aged 70 and over; stage 4 glioblastomas; and pancreatic cancers. These are in people who would not be considered to have underlying health risks. We have cardiovascular problems; sudden death in young men and women; strokes and aneurysms; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; neurological illnesses; and more diagnosis of Parkinson's, MS, motor neurone disease, Bell's palsy, Guillain-Barré syndrome, immunological illness and so on. Shingles was something that only ever occurred after multiple courses of antibiotics, generally after Christmas when pressure was off people. Sepsis, eye problems – I could go on.

There have been studies done. Professor Angus Dalgleish in the UK, a leading oncologist, has dug deep. There are Japanese studies. I previously asked a parliamentary question about whether our State bodies are looking at these studies and possibly changing practices accordingly. I previously raised with the Taoiseach the issue of a protected disclosure, No. 17 of 2025 if memory serves me correctly, which relates to these matters. Because the terms of reference of the Covid evaluation committee are quite limited in scope, and the document is only three or four pages, these matters are not being brought up. We need an inquiry.

The Taoiseach: I am very committed to the evaluation model and have been consistently from the very beginning, even during Covid itself, for a number of reasons. Legal adversarial types of inquiry may not necessarily improve the situation subsequently or indeed for future pandemics as they may arise. We need to learn. We need to find out how to do things better into the future. We do not need people who are in the engine room or in the midst of a future crisis to be looking over their shoulder wondering how this will look in an inquiry, second-guessing their decisions and allowing paralysis to develop. I thought the British inquiry was terrible. I should not say it but that is my own personal, subjective view. Maybe I should not use that phrase.

It was adversarial and great theatre but I am not so sure that brings light. We have established a Covid-19 evaluation. It is a fact-finding and lessons-learned approach. It has a far greater chance of being completed with wide co-operation of all the relevant players in a non-adversarial atmosphere and is likely to be concluded more quickly. That is my view. We know how long statutory tribunals of inquiry can go on in this country and they do not necessarily get the outcomes.

A non-statutory expert-led after-action review offers speed and flexibility. It allows for public and private information giving. A lot of public consultations have been undertaken by this evaluation. There have been round-table events with stakeholder organisations. The proceedings of these round-table events are available to view on the evaluation's dedicated website, www.covid19evaluation.ie. In our view, compared to the statutory inquiry model, this is far more effective, efficient and timely. The chair and panel have a lot of flexibility. There is quite a range of members, including Professor David Heymann, a medical epidemiologist; Dr. Nat O'Connor, an assistant professor of social policy at the school of social policy, UCD; Dr. Nora Strecker, an assistant professor and Ad Astra fellow at University College Dublin's school of economics; Professor Bert Gordijn, professor of ethics and director of the institute for ethics at Dublin City University; and Professor Sara Burke, associate professor and director of the centre for health policy and management at Trinity school of medicine. That is the panel.

Since February of last year, the panel has been reviewing and analysing wide-ranging data and information gathered from public consultation, stakeholders, experts, officials and research reports. These are focused on societal and economic impacts; health and care; rights, including the rights of children; and wider issues such as communication, education and public policy.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Go raibh maith agat, a Thaoisigh. I thank the Taoiseach for the comprehensive reminder of the evaluation committee and the members thereof. I have the height of respect and admiration for Professor Anne Scott, who is quite near me, and has vast years of experience across a broad range of medical disciplines. My question is quite simple. If there is not an inquiry, will the Government expand the scope or terms of reference? This is in relation to the protected disclosure, in particular. As I raised previously, it was first logged in July 2025. The milestones for dealing with it have been exceeded. It was passed to An Garda Síochána and Fiosrú and is integral to the remit of the evaluation committee, but it seems to have fallen into limbo. If we are to assess what has happened and safeguard the future, every submission is of the highest value.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to those responsible in terms of the public disclosure process. As the Deputy knows, we have a fairly elaborate process for the management of public disclosures under a legislative framework. There have been various amendments to the legislation and so forth. I will follow up on that in terms of the specific case she referenced. The terms of reference for the evaluation are quite broad, but I have no difficulty in following that up with the Deputy.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Members that if they cannot make their point in 60 seconds, they have asked the question in the wrong forum. There is one question per TD. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You might stop the clock and put it back to-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will reset the clock.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Thank you. I am obliged.

An Ceann Comhairle: Questions will be taken by the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. The Taoiseach is leaving.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The State not alone failed Garda Margaret Loftus; it actively protected her abuser, Garda Trevor Bolger. Margaret was subjected not alone to a prolonged, sustained and violent assault, as has been commented on in the public domain, but also to a sustained campaign of threat, intimidation and menace by Trevor Bolger. Yet, this man was promoted, given a firearm, given more responsibility and protected. This raises the most serious questions for An Garda Síochána, including its failure to investigate, its promotion of

this individual and his ongoing employment by the State. It also raises a very serious question for the Director of Public Prosecutions. This man was charged with a section 2 assault, which is the most minor assault. He walked away with a suspended sentence of three months, not even a rap on the knuckles.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I also commend Margaret Loftus on her courage in coming forward in public and on securing a conviction, which is a very significant achievement that she achieved. We also need to recognise that Margaret Loftus commended the investigating gardaí. There has now been a conviction. Once a member of An Garda Síochána is convicted of a criminal offence, there is a process under the Garda conduct regulations, which will be a matter initiated by the Commissioner. I have no doubt that those conduct regulations will deal with issues in respect of the garda's continuation within An Garda Síochána or not. That is a matter for the disciplinary process that will be put in place. I commend Margaret Loftus on her bravery. It was a very significant achievement for her to gain a conviction of assault against her abusing husband. She is an example to others as to how we can stand up to domestic violence.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister will be aware that in 2017, I introduced legislation to provide for an exoneration for men who were convicted of engaging in consensual same-sex sexual activity prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993. As he will recall, the first part of that process was the historic State apology issued in both Houses of the Oireachtas in July 2018 for the way in which this State and this society treated their LGBT+ citizens. The second element of that process was the initiation of a process to set aside pre-1993 convictions. There are old men in this country who have criminal records only because of who they are, of who they love and loved, and when. That is plain wrong. Will the Minister update the House, nine years on from the initiation of the original legislation in my name, as to what the status of that proposition is?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for the question. I acknowledge his work in this area in respect of the publication by him of the Bill in 2017. His question is opportune. When I came into office, one of the issues I wanted to expedite was "disregard legislation", as it is referred to. The information I got back was that a lengthy process was ongoing in respect of the preparation of a Bill. I am pleased to say I have managed to expedite that process. I will bring forward an amendment, hopefully in March, to the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which will start in this House tomorrow, that will include amendments in respect of disregard legislation. I am very conscious that these men, and they are predominantly men, have waited a very long time for the exoneration to which they are entitled. I do not want to delay the process any further. I look forward to the Deputy's support and the support of others when that amendment comes in on Committee Stage.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The handling by An Garda Síochána of a domestic violence complaint against Garda Trevor Bolger is hugely concerning. When his ex-wife, Margaret Loftus, first disclosed Bolger's attack on her, she said it seemed impossible to get anyone to take it seriously. She even had to watch as Bolger was promoted to detective and issued with a firearm after she had raised the issue. Ms Loftus had to compile her own case file before an investigation started. Bolger was eventually charged in 2019 and on Friday pleaded guilty to assault. However, it

has now been revealed that a Garda investigation was launched when the media first reported the details of the case in 2020. The security and crime editor of *The Irish Times*, Conor Lally, was interviewed as part of this inquiry. Having dragged their heels in investigating Bolger, no such reticence was shown by gardaí in investigating journalists. This is despite the fact the case had been mentioned in open court and the media were fully entitled to cover it. Is the Minister concerned about the case? Has he asked the Garda Commissioner why an investigation was launched into the media? Is he satisfied that domestic violence complaints made against gardaí are treated appropriately?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am satisfied that An Garda Síochána now takes seriously complaints of domestic violence. I am concerned about the detail provided by the brave Margaret Loftus in respect of how she was concerned that her complaint was not initially taken seriously. However, I recognise that she acknowledges the excellent work done by the investigating gardaí, who got her case and then pursued it relentlessly. In particular, the garda involved in that is the current Commissioner, Justin Kelly. I acknowledge her concerns, but I have to say that when you look at the top of the organisation of An Garda Síochána, it is an organisation that takes these complaints-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: What about the case against the media?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----extremely seriously.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why does the Government have it in for disabled people and carers? It had a budget where disabled people were singled out for a particularly cruel set of cuts, amounting to more than €1,400. Now we have carers being faced with substantial tax bills. One man in his 80s is facing a bill of more than €6,000. These people are not tax dodgers. They are saving the State billions of euro because of the work they are doing in caring for a loved one at a tiny fraction of the cost it would take for the State to pay for it privately. Will the Government leave the carers alone and instead focus its attention on the Ministers who owe tens of thousands of euro to the State and have not made any attempt to repay it over seven months after they found out about it?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. He is incorrect to say this Government has it in for disabled people and carers. That is simply incorrect, and his categorisation of what happened in the budget is not accurate. In terms of what he states about tax bills, the laws in respect of taxation of carers have not changed whatsoever. A letter was sent out by the Revenue Commissioners in November 2025, but the law itself has not changed. The law now is the same as it was prior to the letters going out in November. This Government very much recognises and appreciates the excellent work done by carers. If you look at the measures introduced by the Government in respect of carers and disabled people, you will see that its support for them is evident in what it does. It is not the case that the Government is targeting disabled people or carers. That is not correct.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In the case of Jessica Sheedy and the then CEO of UHL, will the Department of justice do an investigation into somebody who withheld evidence,

misled an independent inquiry by not providing the relevant information at the time, and put people's lives at risk through the delay in providing the information? This independent inquiry has been done twice. It has gone to the UK twice. The final information was given in the UK. The real file was given in the UK recently, which has brought the case against Dr. Lal. There were people silenced under agreements. This was all done under the management at the time and that stands with the CEO. That means they misled an independent inquiry. Justice needs to be served, and people held to account if there is to be any learning in this case.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for raising this. I also thank him for acknowledging the different management that is there now, Sandra Broderick and Ian Carter, who represent a different management culture from that which has gone before. I also recognise the considerable work that Bernard Gloster has done in taking disciplinary proceedings of the kind we have never seen in the health system in respect of some of the senior management in Limerick who predate Mr. Carter and Ms Broderick. Those proceedings continue and are at different stages in the court process at the moment, so I want to be careful in what I say about them. However, I acknowledge there has been an effort in respect of the previous senior management in UHL to have a level of disciplinary process that has never been achieved in the health system before. It is important that those proceedings are let be carried through by Mr. Gloster and his successor and to allow those proceedings to take place.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I raise the importance of having our Garda stations across the country open and accessible to the public. I acknowledge the outstanding work the Minister is doing in relation to garda recruitment and retention. Increasing garda visibility is critically important but so is access to Garda stations across our communities. I represent Cork South-Central, as the Minister knows, and the only Garda station in that five-seat constituency that is open reliable hours is the district headquarters in Togher. I know he visited there recently. We have urban areas with Garda stations located in them, but they are not open in a reliable way to the public. I think the Minister will agree that members of the public want to be able to walk into a Garda station, meet a garda, raise an issue with them and discuss a local issue of concern with them. Suggesting that they should call 999 to contact An Garda Síochána is not acceptable and it is removing gardaí from front-line policing and dealing with the community face to face. I ask the Minister to redouble his efforts in consultation with the Garda Commissioner to ensure that our Garda stations are open better and more reliable hours for the public.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy McGrath for his question. Like every other Deputy in the House, the one demand he wants to see met is to see more gardaí in his constituency. I know everyone in this House wants to see the same. That is a good reflection on An Garda Síochána. The Deputy will know that the number of gardaí in Cork city increased significantly after the most recent attestation in Templemore. I am pleased to see positive reports on the presence of gardaí in Cork over the Christmas period. I will discuss with the Garda Commissioner the issues the Deputy raises in respect of Garda stations. Just as people like to see gardaí, they also want to know there are Garda stations there. Ultimately, if I have to choose between stations or gardaí on the street, I want to see gardaí on the street. There is no point having stations if the gardaí are in there. I will talk with the Commissioner about

trying to make sure that other stations in the Deputy's constituency are open on a more full-time basis.

Deputy Michael Murphy: The Minister just mentioned the allocation of gardaí to Cork. Maintaining law and order is not just a challenge for Cork or Dublin; it is also a challenge for every town and village across Ireland. The absence of a Garda presence has become normalised rather than exceptional in my constituency of south Tipperary. A town without order is a town that shuts down socially and economically. The Minister mentioned the most recent intake of 251, with 154 gardaí allocated - two thirds - to Dublin and Cork. What are we to conclude from that? Will the Minister engage with the Garda Commissioner to ensure we have a balanced regional allocation in terms of the four intakes for 2026?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Again, the Deputy wants to see more gardaí in his constituency. I do not get involved in directing the Commissioner as to where I think he should send gardaí. That would be far too political. What I say to the Commissioner, and it is something he agrees with, is that I want to see high-visibility policing. That means high-visibility policing not just in our urban areas and cities such as Dublin, Cork and Limerick, but throughout the country. When it comes to rural constituencies like the Deputy's constituency, it is more difficult to have the visible presence of gardaí in every area because of the size of the constituency. However, I assure the Deputy that the Commissioner and I are committed to ensuring we get more gardaí out around the country and visible to the people in the area. That will be achieved through garda recruitment. The numbers are looking better at present. We have 14,400 members of An Garda Síochána. I am looking to get to close to 15,000 by the end of the year. Once we get those numbers, we will see more gardaí going to the Deputy's constituency and to everyone else's constituencies.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I raise the issue of the Mercosur trade agreement, which has certainly not gone away. We are in a position over the weekend where we see that Larry Murrin, the chair of Bord Bia, is also the CEO of a company that was providing Brazilian beef. It is simply incompatible with his role in the promotion of Irish food products to remain in that position. That is the first point. We also had good news from the European Parliament this morning because the Mercosur trade agreement has been referred to the European courts because of the undemocratic nature in which it went forward. This vote happened today. It was The Left group in the European Parliament, with which Sinn Féin is affiliated, that initiated this proposal to bring this forward. We are now in a position where the Mercosur trade agreement will have to go to the courts and the undemocratic way in which the Commission put this forward will have to be dealt with. However, all is not lost. The cute boyo routine that this Government went into over the past number of months - they were saying at home that they were opposed to it and yet they were doing nothing about it - is now very clear. We are in a position where the Government has an opportunity to support what is going on in the European Parliament and to hold to account the Commission that has done this in an undemocratic way.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): The vote this morning is welcome because it gives a chance for what I call intensive canvassing to take place before the next vote, which is of paramount importance.

One thing I take grave exception to is the comment the Deputy made about the stance of this Government. The stance of this Government over the past 12 months has been clear. It could not be clearer than in writing. In writing it said in the programme for Government that this Government was going to oppose the trade deal as it was presented and work with like-minded countries-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Which it failed to do.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----to try to get a better deal for Ireland. Whether or not the Deputy realises or acknowledges it, that is exactly what happened. The Government voted the way it said it was going to vote.

1 o'clock

It could not have been stronger or clearer. I take grave exception to people who tried to undermine the good work of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, over the past 12 months when he was engaging on an extremely regular basis not just with the ministers for agriculture throughout Europe but also at all levels of officialdom-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: It failed.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----where we worked diligently on this.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It failed totally.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If the Deputy did not know that work was going on, it was his fault.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Timmins.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: If he does not know what is happening-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Healy Rae. I call Deputy Timmins.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----we cannot be responsible for that.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Recently, Ireland was ranked the second most successful economy in the world for 2025 by *The Economist*. This did not warrant a mention in any of our media or here in this House. It shows the extraordinary progress we have made but we cannot take this huge success for granted. One of the main factors in future economic success is economic confidence. We must be careful not to rundown this country, especially with false claims. Of course we have challenges; every country has challenges, and we must deal with them. Confidence and expectations are at the heart of economic outcomes. This leads to investment and success in the future. The challenges we face will not be dealt with by negativity. A successful economy is central to funding the increasing demands on our resources and is especially crucial for our young people.

Finally, does the Minister agree with me that all Members of the House have a duty to speak the truth about the Irish economy and not engage in continually bashing our country?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Timmins for that question. It is important that we acknowledge that reference in a very prestigious magazine such as *The Economist* that Ireland is the second most successful economy in the world. It also has to be acknowledged that did not happen by chance. It happened because of political decisions made by previous governments in this country to adapt our economy to be in such a way that it attracts outside investment while at the same time supporting indigenous industry in the country. Sometimes listening to people in this Chamber one would not think that was the case in respect of the country but it is an extremely successful country. Economic confidence in this country exists inside it and outside it as well. The Deputy makes a point about it being the second most successful economy but it has also been publicly reported in the Global Peacefulness Index that Ireland is the second most peaceful country in the world. That was for 2025. Only Iceland was ahead of us. Sometimes we need to look at how people outside perceive us in order to get an accurate assessment of how successful the country is.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise to Deputy Moynihan, I skipped him by mistake.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I raise the matter of Garda visibility, which the Minister has alluded to in the House already. He has, in tandem with the Garda Commissioner, worked to increase Garda visibility on the streets of Dublin city, and certainly in villages such as Rathcoole and Saggart in my constituency we have seen an increase in Garda visibility. Are there plans to continue the deployment of these high-visibility patrols across the suburbs of Dublin? Villages like Lucan and Clondalkin in my constituency would very much benefit from increased Garda presence and visibility.

In tandem with that, we need to see further rollout of the youth diversion programme. High Garda visibility is important but the youth diversion programme is also very important for engaging with young people and diverting them away from a path in criminality. Particularly in fast-growing areas like Newcastle, Saggart and Rathcoole, where there is no youth diversion programme cover at the moment, I would be very keen to work with the Minister to ensure we up that coverage and prevent this issue rather than have to deal with it in the future.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. Obviously, I agree with him about Garda visibility. That is not happening by accident; it is happening because we are getting the number in An Garda Síochána up and a decision has been made by Government, and implemented by the Commissioner, to have high-visibility policing. I am very pleased to hear there is apparent visibility of gardaí in Rathcoole and Saggart. As I said to Deputy Murphy, the plan is to try to roll it out throughout the country.

The Deputy also mentioned youth diversion programmes. In fact, there is a great link between An Garda Síochána and youth diversion programmes. One of the reasons An Garda Síochána is so popular in this country is that it is not regarded or viewed as a law-enforcement agency. It is part of the community. We now have youth diversion programmes throughout the country. The gardaí play a huge role in them and are hugely supportive of them. We are never going to solve issues in terms of young people involved in crime by incarcerating them

or just bringing them through the criminal justice system. We have to try to divert them as otherwise we are failing in our responsibility to them.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I have been contacted by a very distraught principal of a primary school in County Wexford. The principal has two vulnerable pupils with complex additional needs. Both pupils received confirmation of a diagnosis after the NCSE portal closed on 1 October. Therefore, the pupils have no formal letters for the special educational needs organiser, SENO. I understand this is a position many principals are finding themselves in. They are asking for a definitive response from the Department and the NCSE and an unequivocal confirmation of whether these pupils meet the criteria for admission to autism special classes. If so, can this confirmation immediately be made so they can proceed with admission plans in a timely, lawful and child-centred manner? If not, will the Department outline how the school is expected to meet the level and complexities of need presented in a mainstream setting? This needs immediate ministerial intervention on the assessment timelines which are beyond the control of families or the schools concerned. These must be addressed, extended and made more flexible.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I am aware from my constituency, and throughout the country, the stress it can put on a parent of a child with special needs in terms of trying to get the child admitted into a school, whether primary or secondary. I understand the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, dealt with these issues last week. There were reasons deadlines were put in place. It was to give people some level of certainty. However, my understanding is that applications are now being dealt with on a case-by-case basis. I will raise the issue the Deputy has identified with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: In recent days, sika deer have been declared an alien, invasive species and must be culled. I have been highlighting the damage these deer do for more than 25 years. Every day, they cause carnage on roads. Many people have been killed, injured or maimed and cars have been damaged and broken and are no longer any good. Farmers are adversely affected. Sika deer are spreading TB, damaging and devouring crops and breaking fences. Farmers are being robbed daily by these deer. When will this Government - and the Minister is a part of it - begin the complete cull of the sika deer as has been ordained by the EU? It is our duty. We have to comply with all the other things the EU brings forward and we have to contend with them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is now saying the sika deer will have to be culled. When will the Government begin the cull?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister, Deputy Healy Rae to respond.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Deputy is 100% correct in raising this very serious matter because it is a matter of major concern from the point of view of road safety and the spread of TB, although the Department does not acknowledge it to be the major cause he and I would

agree it is. We have situations where we did not have TB before and we did not have deer. Now we have deer and we have TB.

To answer the Deputy's question, as he knows, the Department has engaged a contract with regard to the culling of deer, which is ongoing. We would like for it to be going ahead at an accelerated rate and quicker than it is at present. We both have our personal views on what the total cull should be because it should be up to 70%. We have a bit of a battle on our hands trying to convince everybody else it should be at that figure. The Deputy's concern is right---
--

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----and it is a matter this Department and Government will continue to keep on top of. If nothing else-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State's time is up. I call Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----in the interests of road safety and the number of accidents we have on our roads every day because of deer straying on to public roads.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: According to the EU-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Last November, Inland Fisheries Ireland appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts. On Friday, members of the committee received a 137-page document from Inland Fisheries Ireland answering queries raised at the meeting. At the meeting, I raised a very serious matter regarding August of 2021. A staff member of Inland Fisheries Ireland was involved in a car crash while driving an IFI car. He produced insurance documentation for the gardaí that he received from the IFI executive. This documentation was false, which the IFI knew officially on 16 November 2021. He was told for more than a year and An Garda Síochána was not informed until it came asking two years later. The former Minister, Eamon Ryan, commissioned a report into this which was presented to the board of the IFI and the audit and risk committee in February 2025. I asked at the Committee of Public Accounts whether the acting CEO and head of finance were aware of the report. They both denied ever seeing the report. I have the minutes of the meeting from February 2025 right here with me. Both officials were at this meeting.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister to respond.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I believe both officials misled the constitutional committee and members of the public. I want to know whether this has been brought to Cabinet-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. The Minister will respond.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: -----and if the Minister believes the deputy CEO and head of finance should step down.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Kenny for his question. I am not aware of the full details he has outlined. I am aware it is an issue that is being considered by Government. I am conscious that what the Deputy said happened did happen at the Committee of Public Accounts when there was an examination of the report. The report provides a detailed assessment of governance and control weaknesses within the IFI over the period 2019 to 2023.

The Government believes that the C and AG findings are entirely unacceptable and it is appropriate that the IFI is subject to rigorous examination on these matters. I cannot answer the specific issue the Deputy raised about a driving licence in respect of an individual but I will raise it with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Timmy Dooley, who has responsibility in this area.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: In 2023, the CSO reported that 52% of women had experienced sexual violence in their lifetime and this figure was increasing year on year. I recently met a fantastic group of women from Wexford who were in visiting the Ceann Comhairle in the Dáil. This group established the Wexford Rape Crisis Centre. I had really good conversations with them but they made it clear to me that there were quite a number of women from Wicklow who were going to Wexford to avail of the services of the rape crisis centre because we did not have one in Wicklow at all. Is the Minister looking to establish a rape crisis centre in Wicklow? How is something like that achieved and how can I go about working with women across the county to ensure that the services they need are available and that they do not have to travel to other counties?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Whitmore for her question. Like her, I also had the pleasure of meeting the women from the Wexford Rape Crisis Centre when the Ceann Comhairle invited them to the Dáil a number of months ago. I will raise within the Department the fact that there is not a rape crisis centre in Wicklow. Obviously, the Department does not directly employ individuals and put rape crisis centres into counties. We are very much dependent upon the courage and diligence of volunteers who come forward and start it as a voluntary enterprise and then can gain access to State supports, but I will raise it in the Department. I certainly will look to see whether we can identify anyone who would be prepared to play that important role. As a representative from Wicklow, Deputy Whitmore would probably have a good indication as well as to whether that can be provided.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Drug-related intimidation is one of the most cruel and controlling crimes operating in all our communities. It does not just target the person with an addiction. It terrorises families. Parents and children are being threatened, coerced and forced into constant fears. We have heard victims say that fear never leaves them. Over the past five years, as the Minister knows, 2,500 cases have been recorded with 150 arson attacks due to drug intimidation. In Dundalk, the Family Addiction Support Network, FASN, is doing critical front-line work with these families. The network provides confidential support, safety planning and practical guidance for people being exploited by drug dealers, who abuse their vulnerability. The network works hand in hand with An Garda and national response agencies,

yet it does so with insecure and limited funding. If we are serious about tackling drug-related intimidation, we must fund the services that families trust. I am asking for sustainable, ring-fenced funding for FASN in Dundalk and other similar organisations, because that is real and effective preventative justice.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy McGreehan for raising this issue. She is correct in stating that drug-related intimidation is a scourge on our society. As the instances of drug taking increase, there is regrettably more drug intimidation. The model behind drug dealing is generation of profits for drug dealers. As a society, we all need to recognise that and people need to understand when they start experimenting with drugs that the consequence of it is that they can expose themselves to this drug-related intimidation. An Garda Síochána is very aware of it and has responded to it in many instances. We saw some horrific arson attacks in recent times. I want to ensure that the services are funded, because the best way of ensuring we do not have drug-related intimidation is if we can get people off drugs and we get people to realise that drugs have a very negative impact on their lives.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: A significant number of children in Longford are on the waiting list in primary care for occupational therapy, OT. The senior OT post has been vacant since January 2025. Despite all the necessary paperwork having been submitted to the integrated healthcare area, IHA, manager who is responsible for approvals, a recent staff grade position has been approved. The complexity of needs of children on the primary care list requires experienced clinicians to support staff grades. When will we be in a position to fill this role, which is needed? As I say, there has been a 12-month delay in the recruitment for this essential post, which is there to address what is a substantial, long waiting list and, indeed, long waiting times for families.

Minister for Health Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising this important issue in relation to Longford. I cannot speak about the individual position because I have only just become aware of it but I will find out for the Deputy. More broadly, it is not acceptable to have vacant positions. We have vacancies in the health service and we need them to be filled. We need that for the supports that children in particular need. However, I would point to the fact that I asked the CEO of the HSE to put specific measures in place to address OT, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy waiting lists and reduce them to less than ten months. We started that initiative in quarter 4 of 2025 and I am pleased to say that the primary care therapies lists declined by approximately 15,000 between September 2025 and November 2025. This is an important reduction but that can only be expedited and augmented if we are recruiting for positions such as the one the Deputy described. I will follow up on it and find out what is happening.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Some 85% of women affected by pregnancy loss before 23 weeks experience difficulty in returning to work. The need for appropriate workplace supports has been well established and a previous Government commissioned the PLACES report, published in 2004, which set out the social, health and employment impacts of early pregnancy loss. The new women and girls strategy committed to advancing reproductive healthcare and related leave entitlements. However, deliberations on two Private Member's Bills in these Houses to provide for that statutory leave have stalled in both Houses. The Government said

that it needed more time to develop its own plans. Will the Minister clarify the current status of Government proposals to introduce statutory leave for pregnancy loss under 23 weeks and when will legislation be expected to be brought forward?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for the important question. I recognise that it is a very different Department in respect of statutory leave but I do want to say how we are looking towards a new maternity strategy and how we are trying to recognise all stages of pregnancy and the impact on women of the different adverse pregnancy outcomes that can happen. I will speak with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Burke, more broadly about what the Deputy has specifically raised.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.17 p.m. and resumed at 2.17 p.m.

International Developments: Statements

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I welcome this opportunity to provide Members with an update on recent developments in international relations at what is an extremely important time. We face an unprecedented and unpredictable geopolitical context. The rules-based order on which our security and our prosperity, and that of our EU partners, depends is increasingly under challenge. Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, in particular, continues to transform the security environment in Europe. The key values and principles that underpin our foreign policy will continue to drive our response across these challenges: our emphasis on dialogue and engagement with partners, first and foremost; the peaceful resolution of conflicts; and our continued support for multilateralism and the application of international law, among others. We must also work to uphold our own interests in this changing geopolitical context to protect our citizens and our economy and to work with partners to ensure our security. Our EU membership in this regard remains critical.

Since becoming Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I have engaged extensively with EU and like-minded partners on a wide range of issues. On Monday just this week, I spoke to High Representative Kaja Kallas and a number of EU colleagues about developments in relation to Greenland, the Middle East and Ukraine. Last week, I travelled to Egypt and Jordan to advance our relations with these key partners and to discuss the ongoing and dire situation in the Middle East, in particular in Gaza. Earlier this month, I took part in a meeting of the coalition of the willing in Paris to discuss efforts to secure a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Preparations for Ireland's Presidency in the second half of this year are well under way. The Presidency will take place in this challenging geopolitical context. I will work closely with my colleagues, the Ministers of State, Thomas Byrne and Neale Richmond, on all these issues.

I will start by addressing the situation with regard to Greenland, which I know is of interest and concern to many in this House and is very much a topic of conversation today again. Ireland is a strong advocate for close transatlantic relations, and we have welcomed the increased engagement between Brussels and Washington in recent months, particularly on trade, the Middle East and Ukraine. This engagement is fundamentally challenged, however, by recent US actions and statements regarding Greenland and tariff threats against a number of

EU member states, the UK and Norway, which are akin to a threat of tariffs against all of us. Our position is clear: the future of Greenland is a matter to be determined by Denmark and by the Greenlandic people in line with well-established democratic principles and international law.

We have also been clear, along with our EU partners, in communicating our commitment to the international legal order. I communicated that to my Danish colleague this morning. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is a fundamental principle of the United Nations Charter. We continue to advocate for the resolution of international disputes through dialogue. The EU and US joint statement that was issued in August last year provided a degree of much-needed certainty and confirmed a single 15% US tariff on EU goods.

Any decision to impose an additional tariff only serves to undermine transatlantic relations and would be utterly incompatible with the EU-US trade agreement that was reached last year.

We are co-ordinating closely with our EU and wider European partners in response to this overall announcement. I reiterated my position in my call with Kaja Kallas on Monday. Yesterday, I updated the Government on the situation. Tomorrow, the Taoiseach will attend an extraordinary European Council, where these issues will be discussed. We have been clear that the only way forward is through dialogue and engagement, in keeping with the long-standing tradition of transatlantic co-operation. We will work to maintain that co-operation during our EU Presidency this year, where it is appropriate and valuable to do so. In the meantime, Ireland will continue to co-ordinate closely with EU partners and consider all potential courses of action for the transatlantic relationship, guided by what will best serve Irish and European citizens.

After almost four years of brutal Russian aggression, Ireland remains unequivocal in our solidarity and support for Ukraine. The recent visit to Ireland by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy brought into focus what the stakes were, not just for Ukraine, but for Ireland and Europe as a whole. Addressing the Houses of the Oireachtas, he delivered a message of courage and hope, stating that Ukraine was closer to peace than ever before, but warned that grasping it would require the enduring unity of all its allies. Russian attacks on Ukrainian cities and energy infrastructure continue to increase in severity and scale, killing civilians and depriving millions of Ukrainians of electricity, heating and water in the depths of winter. There are quite literally thousands of people dying every month. The bombardment of civilian infrastructure, including the reported use of the Oreshnik hypersonic missile, is beyond concerning. The deliberate targeting of civilians is clearly a war crime. These are not the actions of a country interested in peace. In response, we must keep up pressure on Russia. Ireland fully supports sanctions on Russia. We support the Commission, which is working on proposals for the 20th package, which we expect will focus further on the energy sector and the shadow fleet.

We must also step up our support for Ukraine to put it in the strongest possible position in peace negotiations. This was a key focus of the December European Council, where a €90 billion loan for Ukraine for 2026 and 2027 was agreed. It will be based on EU borrowing on the capital markets backed by the EU budget headroom. Ireland welcomes this decision, which ensures Ukraine has the finance it needs over the coming two years. We know that the longer this goes on, the more it will need. Ireland and its EU partners continue to provide Ukraine with the support necessary to exercise its right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN

Charter. We continue to support the use of the European peace facility, EPF, to provide military support for Ukraine. In Ireland's case, this support is non-lethal in nature. Regrettably, Hungary continues to block use of the EPF for this purpose. Last year, the Government provided €200 million in bilateral, non-lethal military support for Ukraine. The bulk of this has been provided through procurement partnerships with Denmark and Lithuania. This is to provide elements of air defence purchased from Ukraine's defence industries. This support will help Ukraine to defend its towns, cities and energy infrastructure from Russia's brutal air and drone attacks. Last month, the Government announced a contribution of €25 million in energy support.

We will continue our support for Ukraine's pathway to membership of the EU. I welcome the ongoing efforts of the United States and others to achieve a just and lasting peace that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and independence. We welcome progress made at meetings between the US and Ukraine to date. We welcome the progress that was made at the coalition of the willing, but we need to do more. Ireland will continue to support these efforts as part of the EU and through our membership of the coalition of the willing. The Paris declaration that was published after the meeting is a strong signal of support for Ukraine. It recognises that a lasting peace agreement will require robust security guarantees for Ukraine. This is not just vital for Ukraine. It is vital for European and Irish security. Ultimately, there is only one party that can end this war immediately, and that is Russia. As colleagues have, I call on Russia to end this brutal war and these brutal attacks, to agree to a ceasefire, and to engage meaningfully in talks with the US and Ukraine.

I returned from a visit to the Middle East last week, where Gaza was a central focus. This was my first bilateral visit outside of Europe as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade. There were several strands to this visit, the first of which was to strengthen bilateral relations with two key partners, Egypt and Jordan, which are incredibly strong relations. The second was to discuss efforts to progress implementation of the comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict, and to assess the situation regarding provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza. I have welcomed the announcement of the beginning of the second phase of the comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict. We welcome the US role and contribution, alongside Egypt, Qatar and Türkiye, as mediators for the Gaza peace plan. I have consistently called on all parties to implement fully their commitments and for the international community to support these efforts.

There has been much commentary on the recent US board of peace. The scope of the US proposal would appear to be wider than the Gaza peace plan. We attach the highest importance to the primacy of the UN Charter and the central role of the United Nations as the universal body charged with the maintenance of international peace and security, in accordance with international law. We have received an invitation to join the board of peace, which we will consider in close co-ordination with our partners. More broadly, it is important that work continue to build on the progress that has been made so far on the next phase of the Gaza peace plan. It is important that the board focus on what it was due to be established for, which is making sure that the next stage of the peace plan can be brought into effect. It is clear that the first stage is extremely fragile. More than 400 innocent civilians have been killed since the ceasefire and it is clear that not nearly enough humanitarian aid is getting to those who need it most.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is extremely concerning. The people of Gaza do not have enough to eat, adequate shelter from winter weather, or sufficient access to medicines, healthcare and sanitation. Acute food insecurity is expected to persist for 77% of the population, which is 1.6 million people. During my visit to Rafah last week, I witnessed the range of humanitarian items prohibited by Israel from entering Gaza. It is completely unacceptable that rules would change daily and that life-saving equipment and humanitarian aid is not being let in. On that basis, prior to my visit, I wrote to Kaja Kallas, together with five of my colleagues, calling for renewed focus on the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, because a lot more needs to be done. I will continue to call for action at EU level to ease the immense suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. We need to see safe, rapid and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid at scale. Israel must immediately remove restrictions and facilitate essential supplies and services to reach people across the Gaza Strip. This will be one of my key messages at next week's Foreign Affairs Council.

During my visit, I was pleased to announce €42 million in assistance to the people of Palestine in 2026, including €20 million to support the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA. I take the opportunity to acknowledge, commend and thank the unbelievable men and women who work for so many of the aid organisations and UNRWA, including the many Irish people I met when I was there. They are working in unimaginably difficult circumstances at a time when a significant proportion of the world has supported the work they do, but they are receiving much more push-back and much less funding. That is why our funding is so essential. This will bring Ireland's support to UNRWA to €78 million since January 2023. In Jordan, I visited an UNRWA camp and witnessed the vital services it was providing. UNRWA must be central to any effort to respond to the urgent needs of the Palestinian people.

Ireland is an active member of the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution, which remains our focus and priority for the future of the region. I look forward to hosting a meeting of the alliance next week in Dublin, where we will share elements of our own experience of a successful peace process in Northern Ireland, which came together after many years and which we are still working on. I believe our experience and knowledge in what we have gone through is something that we could provide in support of the next stages in the Middle East.

The Government is deeply concerned about developments in Iran. I am utterly appalled to read, as we have all seen, the emerging reports of the killing of large numbers of civilians. We do not have an actual number of how many people have been killed. Families trying to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones have been subject to further repression and intimidation. I utterly condemn the brutal use of violence by the Iranian authorities against its own population. The killing of civilians is deeply shocking. At my request, senior officials of my Department conveyed our concerns directly to the Iranian ambassador-designate on 12 January. The EU has also condemned these events and is working on further sanctions on those responsible. It seems that protests have significantly lessened, but that underlying issues have not been addressed by the authorities. Iran continues to block communication networks, including the Internet and international phone lines. I know many Iranians in Ireland have been unable to contact their families to find out if they are safe. It is completely unacceptable for any government or regime to cut off such access. What is it hiding? Full access to communications must be restored.

In the circumstances, I have reduced diplomatic staff in Tehran, but the embassy remains open and all our staff, it is important to say, are safe. Ireland has also supported a call for an emergency special session of the UN Human Rights Council. Deputies will be aware that many other aspects of Iran's policies are of great concern. These include the nature of Iran's nuclear programme, Iran's support for militant groups and destabilisation around the Middle East, and Iran's supply of weapons to Russia for its war of aggression on Ukraine. I want to assure those living here, and, in particular, Iranian citizens, that we will do everything we can to hold Iran accountable for its acts of repression and violence and to support the Iranian people at this time.

Recent months have seen other significant developments in the Middle East demanding our attention and engagement. Lebanon continues its efforts to rebuild from the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel while also managing challenging political and economic reform needs. Even if the conflict were to end tomorrow, Lebanon faces massive physical reconstruction needs, estimated at \$11 billion, while continuing to support the largest population of refugees *per capita* in the world. We have entered the final year of the UNIFIL mandate in Lebanon. We are all extremely proud of the contribution our peacekeepers have made and will continue to make in fulfilling their duties. Ireland remains committed to the future of Lebanon and we believe that it must be allowed the space to recover from past conflicts.

Just over a year on from the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, it is clear that the new transitional government has many challenges to overcome. While huge strides and progress have been made, there are many challenges to overcome. Most recently, Syria witnessed another outbreak of localised violence in Aleppo, where government-aligned forces clashed with Kurdish fighters. While a ceasefire has since been agreed, it reminds us of the importance of supporting the new transitional government's work towards creating unity and common systems that reflect a Syria that all Syrians can be a part of. The people of Yemen must also be free to safely choose their political future without negative external influence. Ireland has always stood for a political pathway to peace across the Middle East. It is clear that developments in the region will continue to command my attention and that of the Government, and this House, as we continue to witness the dynamics and the needs of change. I will continue to engage with my colleagues I met last week, understanding the huge, challenging and difficult environment they are in with so many conflicts and ongoing situations happening around them.

The situation in Venezuela remains delicate and uncertain. The principles of international law and the UN Charter must be fully respected and upheld in all circumstances. Ireland, together with our EU partners, has been clear in this regard. We have also made clear that Nicolás Maduro lacked any democratic legitimacy. Ireland has long advocated for a peaceful and negotiated transition to democracy in Venezuela. Respecting the will, in particular, of the Venezuelan people remains the only way for a restoration of democracy. We welcome news of the release of several political prisoners over the past few days. We continue to call for the unconditional release of all political prisoners and for the full respect of human rights and international law by all actors. Ireland will continue to provide humanitarian support to the people of Venezuela and to Venezuelan refugees through the Venezuela Humanitarian Fund and the UNHCR regional migrant and refugee plan for Venezuela. Together with our international partners, Ireland remains committed to supporting all efforts to facilitate a democratic, peaceful and inclusive solution to the crisis, led by Venezuelans.

Ireland's foreign policy choices have been guided by our commitment always to multilateralism and the international legal order. This has been the case for the past seven decades, since Ireland joined the UN in 1955. It will remain the case, irrespective of the challenges we face, and we know there are many. Peace and security depend on all UN member states abiding by the fundamental principles of the UN Charter. We have seen the consequences when states do not do so. What is very clear is that all member states, large and small, must abide by the fundamental principles. The UN has a unique mandate to maintain international peace and security, and the legitimacy to bring nations together to find common solutions to shared challenges. While it may be imperfect, the UN and the primacy of international law is more important now than ever. Ireland's commitment to the United Nations and the primacy of the UN Charter is without question.

As I have outlined, we are facing into a range of significant foreign policy challenges in 2026. In fact, I think this month, in particular, has seen more challenges than we might see in any other given year. These challenges will have implications for Ireland, the EU, and our global partners. We will need to find innovative and effective solutions to the challenges we face, while being firm in ensuring we uphold our values and uphold our interests at international level. Working alongside our EU and like-minded partners will be essential, including during Ireland's Presidency of the EU in the second half of this year. Of course, I welcome the opportunity to engage with all colleagues on these issues and many others today, but also over the coming year as we face them together. I thank the House.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the opportunity to speak about this issue. I am sure we are sitting here and an interesting or noteworthy speech - I am not sure which it is being called - is happening as we speak but I am unlikely to be the last person to reference Mark Carney's speech at Davos yesterday. It certainly caught the attention and perhaps a certain spirit of the time. Time will tell whether his perspective and strategy will be vindicated. There was much that sounded familiar to me. Much of the speech underlined points that Sinn Féin, among others, has been making for a long time, including the admission that, in truth, international law was more honoured in the breach than in the rule. He stated:

We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false. That the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient. That trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim.

That rings very true to me. That is precisely what we talk about when we talk about the impunity with which Israel has prosecuted genocide against Palestine or the manner in which the US has trampled over international law in recent months. The phrase, "Saying the quiet bit out loud", comes to mind. It was also a very interesting contribution on the economic future of countries, whether middle powers or smaller countries such as ours, in a world dominated by two or three major powers, depending on how you see it. Mr. Carney further stated:

... recently, great powers have begun using economic integration as weapons. Tariffs as leverage. Financial infrastructure as coercion. Supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited.

He spoke about his approach, and, to state the obvious, Ireland is not Canada. The same strategies and perspective do not apply. It is, though, a clear-eyed assessment of the world in

which we now live, and we must acknowledge it may not be an aberration. This may not be a pause and we may not return to the phase that existed before. President Trump threatens tariffs on European countries. He is currently in Davos. He is rhetorically tilting at windmills, a bit more like Don Quixote than Donald Trump. I have to say that, before I came into the Chamber, some of the language and rhetoric being used was remarkable and appears to resemble very little of reality. It has to be clear that bully-boy tactics can never be accepted from the United States or any international actors. They cannot be normalised. Threats to impose tariffs against European countries that would thwart his acquisition, and it is very much driven by him and his personal obsession, are scandalous.

Trade wars are bad for all, and, of course, if de-escalation is possible, we should grasp the opportunity. It is important to say that this could and should never become appeasement because clearly that will not work. Sovereignty has to be a red line. If the US is successful in these attempts, it will be a further and enormous blow to the concept of sovereignty, already very much undermined by recent actions, not to mention international law. European countries should be prepared to respond with resolve.

To be clear, the future of Greenland and its sovereignty must only be decided through the fulfilment of national self-determination by its people. This is a crucial test of respect for sovereignty. If it is conceded here, then it will become all the weaker elsewhere. Whatever transpires, it does seem that tariffs and trade wars may very much be back on the agenda. I have said it previously, and it underlines all the further something Sinn Féin has been saying for many years, that there is no question but that Ireland is disproportionately vulnerable in the context of an escalating trade war between the United States and the European Union. The fact is that the industrial policy of recent, successive Governments and our failure to develop a strong enough indigenous sector to complement our strong foreign direct investment sector, as well as diversifying in terms of markets and exports, has left us uniquely vulnerable. This has not been helped by reliance on taxation incentives and various taxation loopholes that have in the past allowed some commentators to portray us a tax haven.

Successive Governments have failed to build the infrastructure we need to attract and hold on to foreign direct investment without relying on tax incentives. It is evident that the position of the US Government is liable to change at various times and threats may or may not come to pass. Clearly, Europe should not give in to bully-boy tactics. It is high time that Ireland consider more broadly its place in the world's economy. It must find its insurance and mitigate risk.

A number of things are required from the Irish Government. The Government must begin a plan for diversifying in terms of markets we trade with, with a view to future trade missions. The United States, Britain and Europe will always be crucial trading partners for reasons of language, culture and long ad deep relationships but there is a potential to deepen trade with other countries in southeast Asia, emerging markets and other countries that have faced challenges in terms of tariffs such as Canada and Mexico. The Government must prepare and immediately begin preparation for supports for our businesses in the event of tariffs coming into place, whether this resembles some of the supports that took place for Brexit or building on the learnings of it. It needs to be developed. We need to make sure it is easily accessible and widely promoted. This needs to involve education, training support, marketing support

and, potentially, grant aid. The development of this programme needs to begin now so that it is ready to roll out in the event that it is required.

The Government also needs to prioritise investment in our infrastructure. The reality is that one of the reasons we are so vulnerable is because of the huge gaps in our infrastructure. Our housing system is in crisis. We do not have a motorway between the second and third largest cities in the State. Public transport is inadequate and our electric grid is so inadequate that we are losing potential investment. Trade wars are bad for everyone but nothing can be taken for granted. In my view, successive Governments have left us uniquely vulnerable.

There is an Administration in the United States that has totally departed from the norms of international politics and shaken up its relationships with its allies. I want to again make the point that we extend our solidarity with the people of Ukraine who have stood courageously against a brutal Russian onslaught and criminal invasion by Vladimir Putin. It must be the case that any negotiations regarding the future of Ukraine should have Ukraine at the table. That is the only way that we will see a meaningful, successful and viable peaceful settlement for the people of Ukraine and for humanity.

I was really surprised and extremely disappointed that the Minister had 20 minutes to speak but did not use all of it and that not once was the situation in Sudan mentioned. It is the largest humanitarian situation in the world. A total of 33 million people may potentially be in a situation facing deprivation and hunger. There was potentially one of the largest slaughters we have seen in this century in El Fasher. Some estimates are suggesting that maybe as many as 100,000 were killed. It is certainly in the tens of thousands. This is a kind of scale of killing that we have not seen in many years in such a short period. There are 4 million Sudanese refugees in Chad and South Sudan. It is a conflict that has been going on for many years but certainly in this period for the past three years.

I am concerned that a bit like other conflicts, Europe and, to some extent, Ireland are not speaking out forcefully enough. They do have leverage. One of the key actors in this is the United Arab Emirates, which is facilitating a flow of large-scale and sophisticated weaponry. Because of the close relations that Ireland and the European Union have with the United Arab Emirates, it is not being called out. This Government will hold the EU Presidency in the next six months. It needs to take every opportunity. In my view, this conflict is going to continue to escalate until the United States and the European Union make it enough of a priority. Both parties to the conflict believe they can win. I know that Ireland, in relative terms, is a small country but this is an appalling scale of slaughter, a humanitarian situation of displacement that needs to be addressed. The Government and Ireland need to take every opportunity it can.

A recent piece in *The New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof stated that Nathaniel Raymond's estimation that the number of people killed in six weeks of fighting, amounted to "a pace of killing [that] would be unrivaled since the Rwanda genocide of 1994", adding that "death toll in El Fasher in less than two months may be comparable to that in Gaza [in] two years".

In the time I have left, I acknowledge the situation in Palestine. The killings and attacks by settlers on people in the West Bank continues apace. Again, it comes back to international law. If international law is going to be applied selectively, people such as the Palestinians too often are forgotten. I raise the proposed peace plan. The Minister has acknowledged it. To say it is a flawed peace plan is to say the least but even what the US has been talking about goes far

beyond that. The space for self-determination for the Palestinian people is narrowing. Ireland needs to take the actions that it can and use what leverage it has, including the occupied territories Bill, to increase pressure. The fundamental basis of that legislation is about respect for international law.

I condemn the violence and repression we have seen against protestors in Iran. The reports of thousands of deaths during these protests are absolutely shocking. We express our condemnation of violence, whether against protestors or others, and call on the Iranian Government to respect the rights of protestors to demonstrate for their fundamental rights.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Crowe, I welcome all those in the Public Gallery. I am sure they are interested in the debate. Some are here at the invitation of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy. There is a group that represents Down's syndrome families in Kilkenny. It includes Ciara Hayes, Danny Roche, John Barry, Mary Barry and Sean Manicle, and the two leaders of that group who are central to it, Cormac and Holly. They are all very welcome. I thank them for coming along. I hope they enjoy their time in Leinster House.

Deputy Seán Crowe: International developments is such a vague concept that it is hard to know where to start. The world is becoming increasingly chaotic and divided, with American strikes in Nigeria; the UAE arming both sides in Sudan; the shambolic ceasefire in Gaza that means that Palestinians are still dying; the ongoing conflict between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo that has displaced over a hundred thousand people into Burundi in just the past few weeks; and the ongoing war in Ukraine that grinds on. Reassuringly for Palestinians, we heard that Benjamin Netanyahu, who is responsible for the ongoing genocide in Gaza, is to join Trump's board of peace.

The current US Administration sees Europe as a punching bag and as a people that can be bullied and threatened. This is endorsed by some member states with High Representative Kallas's comments somehow blaming others for the very real threats by the US on European sovereignty. Her comments on China are of particular interest given that the Taoiseach is only back from a trade mission to the country. It is a stark reminder that in an increasingly federalised Europe, Ireland's views would be represented less and less and our ability to advocate for peace and conflict resolution would be greatly diminished. Ireland has so much to contribute on the world stage and that would be lessened if our course was determined solely by those in Europe like von der Leyen and Kallas who have done nothing to rein in Israel or the increasingly erratic USA.

Our over-reliance on American foreign direct investment places us on very shaky ground. Pulled on either side, east and west, the foundation of our economy is built on sand that shakes when Trump comes up with his latest schemes. We cannot derisk our economy any time soon but we must recognise that the rules based order that has existed since the end of the Cold War, and in many ways since the end of the Second World War, have been thrown out by the Americans. Greenland is only the thin end of the wedge. The US ambassador to Iceland has joked publicly that Iceland would be next after Greenland. For an ambassador to even say such things in private would have been unthinkable before Trump was President.

Appeasement has never been a successful policy. At best, it only buys you time. We appease and try to please and do not seem to grasp that we are living in a new age of imperialism. We

need to finally accept that the rules by which we think the world is run are increasingly disregarded. Might makes it right, and the strongest can annex and vassalise whomever they wish.

Whether from east or west, international co-operation is at an all-time low. Multilateralism is becoming an endangered species. This is happening at a crucial time in the fight against climate change and for conflict resolution. Countries that try to stand in the way of war and genocide are excluded and even punished. They are often branded as terrorist sympathisers. Rather than looking to the future and how we divest from oil, conflicts are becoming increasingly bitter about the last of the great oil reserves. Look at Venezuela where Trump's intervention was seemingly based entirely on the principle of seizing the country's oil, only for the oil companies to embarrass him by deeming the venture not profitable enough.

The struggle for resources is only going to get worse and worse. Wars will be fought over them with increasingly regularity as they run out. We must ramp up our renewable energy programmes in Ireland. Renewable energy is energy security with solar and wind to replace oil and gas. Backed up by the Celtic interconnector, we can break free of a reliance on dwindling fuel supplies that come from the most exploited parts of the planet. We must also avoid putting money into the hands of oppressors such as Russia, the UAE and the US. All are bad actors and increasingly all fund their imperialist exploits through oil and gas.

Deputy Duncan Smith: To pick up on what Deputy Crowe said, even naming these statements seemed quite difficult. Statements on international development does not quite do it justice. Statements on international conflict would probably be closer to the mark. What or who has motivated these statements today? We know the answer. It is the change in the world that has been brought predominantly and almost exclusively by Donald Trump and his administration. If it was not clear before, it is certainly clear now and will continue to be made clear as a rambling speech is being made in Switzerland as we speak, that the United States is no longer a trusted ally of the European Union. The way in which the current administration is acting in the United States is increasingly imperialistic, autocratic, and indeed, fascist. These are big words, strong words and words we do not use lightly but they are backed up with what we are seeing with our own eyes on the streets of the United States and in countries around the world.

Perhaps, we would do well to heed the words of Prime Minister Carney when he said yesterday that we are "in the midst of a rupture, not a transition". While this is regrettable in a way, he said that it leaves the world in a more precarious place than ever and that there is a chance to build something better from the ashes of a partnership with an economic bully that is being led by a tyrant. Prime Minister Carney maybe captured a moment. An awful lot of people outside of politics have listened to what he said and have been taken by it, including the question of move of the middle powers and what the middle powers need to do. They are big questions. Canada is going to lean into trade agreements like Mercosur and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA. These are trade agreements that have been hugely problematic and in the case of Mercosur have been opposed in this country. He is also leaning into security and investment in security. Canada is the only non-EU country to have partnered up on the SAFE defence spending initiative. It is a €150 billion partnership. Again, as the world is changing rapidly and rupturing rapidly, these are huge questions that smaller nations, whatever about middle nations, are going to have to grapple with. Europe's historic partnership

with the US was always built on shared values of democracy and human rights and respect for international law in the system of the United Nations. Those values are no longer shared with the United States. The new US national security strategy breaks with decades of American-led multilateralism. What it is doing in relation to Greenland, Venezuela, Gaza with this abhorrent "board of peace", which Ireland should have nothing whatsoever to do with, and Ukraine. It is viewing all of these as opportunities for profit or natural resource extraction rather than opportunities to sow peace and to deliver true security for individuals and communities. It is an indictment of the rot that has set in in Washington.

We cannot be complacent to think that Donald Trump and his administration are an aberration. This movement could continue beyond Trump. We need to plan for that, which is why the Labour Party and I have been saying over the past number of weeks that we need to plan for a hard divorce. We need to look at the anti-coercion instrument within the European Union. We need to stand up to Trump and the United States. It means no longer allowing ourselves to be vassals to Trump or the US. It means nurturing innovation at home. If we look at the announcement of EU Inc, a title I am not entirely happy with, but it is calling for investment in innovation within the European Union. This is what we need. It means recognising the world that faces us with our over-reliance on American payment systems, American software and everything. Microsoft, Visa and Mastercard are all American. We need to look at our resilience. We cannot do it on our own in Ireland. We must do it with our European partners.

The age of pragmatism demands that we in Europe realign ourselves and recommit ourselves and ensure that our sovereignty as a regional grouping, including protecting our own individual sovereignty in Ireland, is something that we must strive for. Europe must again find a backbone. We oppose the Mercosur deal because it currently goes against values we hold dear in relation to workers' rights and climate. The CETA deal needs to remove the investor courts. Canada has removed them from its agreement with the United States and Mexico. There is no reason Canada demands and Europe is allowing the investor courts to remain in the CETA agreement. If it wants movement on that, remove the investor courts.

Our economy is uniquely open to turmoil. A trade war will damage all and will likely damage Ireland more than others as we have an over-reliance on American foreign direct investment. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has been calling for a number of years to instil more resilience and diversification into our economy and move away from our reliance on American FDI. That is not easy and will not be quick. Going back to Prime Minister Carney's speech, this is something that other states and other power blocs and regional blocs are doing. Ireland must do the same.

Trump and his allies have made it abundantly clear that any nation's sovereignty is up for debate and will be disrespected if Trump views it in his interest. For example, what are we going to do if Trump looks at the long runway of Shannon Airport and says, "I need that not just to refuel US troops, but I need it for more strategic purposes?" What will Ireland do in that scenario? That is not a fantastical one. A couple of months ago, we could not seriously contemplate what is happening in Greenland. In the past half an hour, Trump has said that he will not use force, but again he caveated that in the midst of his rambling speech. God knows what he said in the past ten minutes.

Europe need to look seriously at the anti-coercion instrument. The instrument, which would allow the EU to take measures, such as import and export restrictions on goods and services in the Single Market and to limit the access of American companies to public procurement contracts in Europe, should only ever be used as a last resort. The reason it should only ever be used as a last resort is this is not an instrument that is without consequence. If this is used, it will hurt people. It will hurt individuals and workers in Europe, America and elsewhere. However, it is an instrument that unfortunately needs to be considered at this time. This so-called trade bazooka is again language that we do not want to be used. It has been framed, and can and will deliver a clear message to those who are taking Europe on and show that Europe is not meek.

It was one thing when Trump was elected president in 2016. We all could pretend that this was an aberration and that he said more than he did. We can no longer believe that is the case. Unfortunately, in the year and a day that Trump has been president, he has done more than he has said. The lies that spew from his mouth and the reckless actions that actually increase conflict and spread war rather than spreading peace as he so arrogantly and egotistically states have ruptured the world order.

In a number of weeks, this Government may be asked to America to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. This invitation, if it comes, will be a dangerous and volatile ask. The decision can no longer be about extending the hand of friendship through a bowl of shamrock. Instead, if the Government chooses to accept it, it should be about delivering a message. We must work with our European allies. If we are in the midst of a trade war, it might be an opportunity to engage and de-escalate.

3 o'clock

Of course we may be in a position in which to boycott that meeting is the right course of action. All options should be on the table. We are not in normal times but we need to be strong in whatever action we choose to take. Last year seemed like a structural insult imposed upon Ireland by Trump and his Administration and we cannot allow that to happen again. If the United States does indeed move towards Greenland we in this Chamber, and Ireland as a whole, need to decide what part we will play in responding to the consequences of this decision. There are an awful lot of complexities in international conflict at present and we cannot be reductive or simplistic about it. It is not just about whether the Taoiseach will go to the White House. There are more complicated questions and ever more complicated answers, and we need to ensure we do what is best for Ireland and Europe.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: With the permission of the House I will call on the Social Democrats and Deputy Sinéad Gibney, and come back to the other speakers who are listed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I do not understand.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Some of the speakers are not available yet.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If they are not here, we should move on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will give them an opportunity. We are ahead of time.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will spend my time speaking about international law and global order, which has been the focus of some of the Minister's comments. Increasingly the talk we hear from leaders in our Government and from other European leaders is about the global order and the rules-based order. I am so frustrated with people essentially speaking out of both sides of their mouths. We cannot speak about global order without recognising that we are the global order. It does not just sit over there. It is us. We live and breathe it. We are the member states of the European Union and the nation states of our globe that make this order happen and maintain it through our actions. We need to wake up and realise the global order exists only when we enforce the standards of international law mar is é sin bunchloch na Náisiún Aontaithe, bunchloch an oird dhomhanda agus bunchloch na síochána.

I would say this also relates, for example, to how we sign UN treaties. When we sign them they mean more than just pretty paperwork. They are what we sign up to and what we want to support and see maintained across our globe. All nations are responsible for international law and global order. International law exists because under the banner of the United Nations we have made it exist and it is crumbling because we have abandoned the universal standards of international law in Palestine, America and elsewhere because it was inconvenient, essentially.

We are right back where we were 12 months ago with Trump and the threat of tariffs. At the time we warned about bullies and insulating the Irish economy and about Trump only respecting strength. We were warned about these things and we have seen and we saw a capitulating trade deal from the EU and months of humiliation of our leaders and diplomats, including on St. Patrick's Day when in the Oval Office in the White House our Taoiseach failed to call out the President of the United States when he said the European Union had been founded to attack the US. Our Taoiseach said nothing at that point. This is where we are ten months later because we are not upholding global law and we are not respecting international law. It seems we will simply bend over backwards to please him.

I want to touch on some of the international developments that have been spoken about today, starting with Ukraine. I want to speak not only about the impact on civilians and Ukrainians here in Ireland. I welcome and commend the Government and the State for the incredible work being done. We also need to look at the humanitarian issues that people are facing within Ukraine. Humanitarian aid needs to increase to assist with this and make better the lives of the people who are living this war.

In terms of Greenland I absolutely welcome that the EU is rallying around but it is another example of where international law seems to be applied when it is convenient. Where was the same outcry with Venezuela or Gaza and Trump's actions there, and the actions of despots across the globe who are breaking this law and flouting it consistently?

In Palestine we have this so-called ceasefire under which people continue to die, the promises of aid that have not happened, the continued killings, the apartheid, the annexation of the West Bank, the banning of groups such as Doctors Without Borders and the destroying of UNRWA resources while we all look away. We speak about an age of impunity as if this impunity just happened one day. We created it by deciding the rules do not apply to our allies, our trade partners and our fellow Western countries. I know many others have referenced Mark Carney's remarks today and they are incredibly prescient.

Here is what I think we need to do. I have a few suggestions that I think the Government needs to consider in international developments. I was so disappointed and gutted to see Ireland become a signatory to the letter recently asking for rollbacks on the ECHR. We have just criticised the UK for doing exactly this. We know how crucial the ECHR is to our Good Friday Agreement and to peace on this island yet we chose under the banner of migration, on which the Government is absolutely hell bent on being strong, to undermine the ECHR and join a group of European nations in doing so when others did not. Only 26 out of 46 are signatories to it did so. This is something I really want to see the Government move back on and stop attacking the ECHR under any banner.

Do not abandon the triple lock. Do not push through the defence (amendment) Bill. Right now the triple lock is our connection to multilateralism, global order and the UN. I fully appreciate that the UN has issues and the UN Security Council has issues but the triple lock could be satisfied by the General Assembly and no effort has been made to do this. We must maintain this global order because us walking away and removing the triple lock is sending a very clear signal, not only to the UN but to all of the states across the globe, including small states that look to us for leadership and look to us for our leveraging in the United Nations and within the Security Council.

We need to pass the occupied territories Bill in full, including services, now. It is long past the promise that it was supposed to be. We must reposition our relationship with the Trump Administration. I am not anti-American. I appreciate that our ties with America are crucial, and that we have diaspora there and trade links there, but the Trump Administration is going about its business, particularly in relation to foreign affairs but really in domestic affairs as well, in a way that we cannot support. We have to ask the difficult questions whereby we seriously consider who our allies are going forward. This is not business as usual. I do not accept it when Government spokespeople say they make no apology for protecting jobs. They should make an apology for protecting jobs when it is to support an Administration that is proving itself to be in the kind of mindset that Trump has, whereby he decides he wants to acquire something and goes after it. Essentially his support for peace in Ukraine has nothing to do with peace but is to do with the rare earth minerals he wants to get his paws on. Taking Maduro out of Venezuela is not about the regime that he is running but the oil that Venezuela holds. In Palestine he is still hell bent on developing a dystopian riviera. These are not things that can be considered business as usual. We have to start saying that the emperor has no clothes.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I want to use my time today to express my deep respect and admiration for the peaceful protesters who took to the streets in Iran in recent weeks. They are ordinary citizens who have shown remarkable courage in standing up to tyranny, repression and extreme state violence. These are people who protested knowing the cost. They protested facing a terrifyingly high risk of imprisonment, torture and death. Yet they persisted with dignity and an unyielding demand for freedom, equality and basic human rights. Their struggle is a rejection of tyranny and of a system of entrenched patriarchal oppression that has for decades denied women autonomy over their bodies or access to basic freedoms, and has persecuted and murdered people from the LGBT community just for who they are.

The response of the Iranian regime to peaceful dissent has been a savage campaign of state terror and a bloodbath designed to quell any further appetite for protest. Demonstrations have

been met with arbitrary detentions, torture and mass killing. Judicial proceedings have taken place which are, essentially, a wholesale denial of due process. We also cannot forget the many people who have been abducted and detained for years in appalling nightmarish conditions by the Iranian state, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other western nationals who have been held as political hostages and used as leverage in international disputes.

Nazanin was only released in 2022 after almost six years of agonising separation from her young daughter and husband. Her detention became emblematic of a system in which human beings are treated as bargaining chips, with her freedom finally secured only after a long-standing £400 million UK-Iran debt being resolved. Other detainees have never re-emerged from the regime's squalid and brutal prison system. Their plight, without due process, transparency or contact with loved ones, lays bare the regime's profound contempt for human dignity, the rule of law and international norms.

It is also important to acknowledge the role played and the responsibility borne by international actors. The US President, Donald Trump, publicly encouraged Iranian protesters to come out onto the street, assuring them of international support. Those words carried weight. They no doubt raised expectations and they increased risk yet when the crackdown continued, that show of solidarity failed to materialise in any meaningful way and that failure amounted to reckless neglect, leaving peaceful protesters exposed to extreme violence after being urged forward without protection, backing or consequence for those responsible.

In international debates we must be crystal clear and morally consistent. We must always stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people and defend their rights under international law. They have been subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing and ever escalating cycles of state terror by the Israeli regime. However, support by the Iranian state for Palestinian causes does not absolve it of any responsibility for its actions against its own citizens. Tyranny does not become acceptable because it cloaks itself in the language of resistance.

Deputy John McGuinness: I want to pick up on a phrase used by Deputy Gibney. It cannot be business as usual. Deputy Gibney is absolutely correct. The world is in a crisis, changing every single day with the usual norms not being acknowledged or adhered to. Countries are having to reshape or reset their policies in order to deal with the daily changes that are being brought on us, mainly by the US President, Donald Trump, and by others.

I urge the Government to respect the democracy of this Parliament and to have the debates that are being asked for so we can have an input, whether that is the triple lock or any other measure that is going to be discussed by the European Union in terms of policy. We should have our say. If we look across the European Union, we will see lots of countries protesting. People are feeling disenfranchised. The citizens of the European Union are certainly feeling that they are not heard. On lots of issues, people in Ireland feel they are not being heard. Policy in the past was shaped by democratically elected Members of Parliament. That is not happening at the moment. Policy is being changed and rammed down the throats of many countries and through parliaments. Some of the changes we do not even know about because we do not get a chance to debate them here.

If we are going to have meaningful change, I suggest Ireland needs to play a significant, central role in Europe in shaping policy around the proper language in dealing with all of the issues and, indeed, in informing the policy about the positions that the citizens of Europe want

to take relative to their lives and their future. Peace is what Europe should be about. That is the emphasis we need to go back to as a country. I encourage the Minister to have those debates that are necessary and that we shape our policy on those grounds.

Deputy Barry Ward: This is a very wide topic for debate. It covers a multitude. I have listened to what other speakers have said.

First, I will address Ireland's role in the European Union. I have always seen the European Union as a body which was all about the rule of law, respecting the rule of law and ensuring that the rule of law is the means by which we do business. That is hugely important. I have said publicly before that I am actually very disappointed with the manner in which the European Union leadership has approached the rule of law internationally. I can start with Gaza and the attitude of some in the Commission. What happened with Hamas over three years ago was appalling but it does not justify what has happened. However, there has been a very weak response from Europe collectively, although I recognise what our Government has done, how strong a voice our Government has been and how we built a coalition to support that position. The reality is that as a collective Europe has not really delivered in relation to that.

One could make similar comments around Venezuela. There has been an incredibly weak response from European leaders in respect of what Donald Trump did in Venezuela. It was an illegal invasion of another country. Yes, Maduro was a tyrant and an autocrat and somebody who did not deserve to be in office but that is true of many people around the world and yet they are not taken out by another country, particularly by a so-called western member of the global community the way America is. Essentially, that went uncriticised by European governments. I hope we now take a strong line in relation to Greenland and that Europe does stand on its own two feet instead of always backing down and appeasing because it does nothing to achieve what we would all like to see achieved.

I will mention two specific instances that relate to international affairs. Iran is one. It has gotten a lot of play in the media recently because of the appalling events that have occurred there, the thousands of people who have been killed and the many thousands more who have been arrested by their Government for simply disagreeing with the Government. It may have been precipitated by economic difficulties and a collapse in the value of the rial and all the other inflationary pressures that have been on those people but we know before the current regime in Iran there was actually a functional, free society. It has been gone since the 1970s. I am not saying the Shah was a great fellow either but there has been an oppressive regime there all that time. Hopefully, we see that coming to a head now but the ordinary people of Iran who are raising their voices, having their voices heard and who are being suppressed by their own government need to be recognised and assisted by Ireland in whatever way it can.

The other instance I want to raise is Sudan. The war in Sudan has been going on now since April 2023. An estimated 150,000 people have died in the context of that internal conflict which is more than the estimated number of people who have died in Gaza. I know Ireland has given aid. I have heard what the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, has said in terms of that aid to date and the continuation of that aid this year. I welcome that decision. We have a Sudanese Embassy in Dublin. I do not know how many Members of this House have interacted with the ambassador. I do not know if the Minister has had that opportunity. How are we ensuring that the aid we are putting on the ground in Sudan is actually helping the people on

the ground, the people who are suffering, the ordinary civilians and particularly those outside Khartoum in the areas in the west of the country who are really at risk in the context of this civil war? How are we helping them? Equally, what are we doing in relation to the United Arab Emirates and what it is doing in assisting this conflict and fostering this conflict to continue? Are we taking steps? Are we raising it with them at diplomatic level in terms of asking them to exit it? Are we talking about this issue generally because it is a huge conflict?

As we look at conflicts around the world, it is so often the case that Sub-Saharan Africa does not garner the attention that other conflicts around the world do in the media. They do not get the attention they need from the western world and from the countries which support the rule of law and say we need to be doing more to ensure the human rights of these individuals and to ensure they have a chance to live their lives in a way that all of us in this country get to. They should too. I recognise there is a limited extent to which we can intervene in Sudan or Iran or in any of the other long list of unfair or illegal conflicts around the world but we must do what we can.

Deputy Paula Butterly: As my colleague, Deputy Barry Ward, said, this is a very wide-ranging debate but I would like to focus on international aid. In 2024, the US made \$82 billion in contribution under USAID. In 2025, it was just under \$20 billion. Other European countries and Great Britain also announced major cuts in their contribution which means it is estimated that only 29% of global humanitarian funding needs are being met. In a world that is changing before our eyes, how are we even going to possibly believe we will be in a position to meet the vast humanitarian needs that require increased, not decreased, funding? The Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, have said that providing aid to these countries is not just beneficial, it is not something that just soothes our souls, but it is a practical and common-sense approach as it will bear fruit in the long term as the goal is that these countries will in time be operating as sustainable and growing economies.

Insufficient humanitarian aid costs lives. If the Ceann Comhairle will permit me, I would like to drive home this point with a few numbers. The Impact Counter estimates that over 750,000 deaths have arisen as a result in cuts to USAID alone. An estimated 16,000 children are dead due to lack of HIV-AIDS funding; 160,000 children are dead as a result of pneumonia; 150,000 children are dead because of malnutrition; 52,000 children are dead as a result of malaria; and, extraordinarily, 125,000 children are dead as a result of diarrhoea.

The sad reality is that we may never know the true cost of human life as a result of these cuts, as many of the systems that once tracked deaths and diseases in developing countries have simply ceased to exist.

The Minister should think of the ramifications, not only for the people of these countries but what it could mean for us here at home. If these systems no longer exist, how can we track and trace current or future diseases? What impact could that have on us here at home in Ireland?

To return to my initial point, in these times of turmoil and uncertainty how will international aid be affected in the coming 12 months or the 12 months beyond that? While some countries may choose to turn their backs on countries like Sudan and Ukraine, others may feel paralysed to act or intimidated by bigger players. Ireland must stand strong on its humanitarian principles. We must continue to increase funding to those that have a greater need. Ireland

must use its voice at all costs to call out the wrongful actions and unlawful actions of all those that perpetrate them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This debate is happening in parallel with the World Economic Forum - a get-together where the political elite meet with billionaires in the Swiss Alps. Far removed from the lives of ordinary people, they meet to discuss the world's problems. Billionaires solving the world's problems is like Jack the Ripper trying to solve crime.

Trump, another billionaire, spoke at Davos earlier today. Let us be clear: the US has been an aggressive international actor for decades. That is a fact. There have been covert operations, direct military intervention and support for violent regimes. The trail of destruction did not begin with Trump. The US has projected economic and military power for as long as I can remember, but now that greedy eye has turned on an EU member state and Greenland. Now Europe is at the sharp end of US economic coercion.

This needs to be a wake-up call across Europe and here at home in Ireland. The job of government is always to stand up for Ireland's interests. Our interests lie in a world where national sovereignty is respected, whether that is in the Middle East, South America or Europe. Our interest lies in a world where international law is adhered to. It is hard to have any hope for international law after we witnessed what happened in Gaza. Now the perpetrator of that genocide, Netanyahu, is being invited to join the so-called "Board of Peace". That is the warped world view we are dealing with when we are negotiating with the US. Diplomacy is always the answer, but diplomacy does not mean appeasement.

While power politics is making a return, this Government is pressing ahead with dismantling the triple lock, the core safeguard that anchors Irish neutrality, democratic oversight and United Nations authority. The triple lock is not an inconvenience; it is the clearest expression of Ireland's belief that small states rely on law, not force, and that Irish troops are deployed overseas only when democratic consent and clear UN authorisation exists. At the very moment when the UN is being sidelined, ignored or bypassed across the globe, this Government's response is not to defend it, but to weaken Ireland's reliance on it. In a world that is fundamentally changed, this is not realism. It is an outdated and dangerously complacent foreign policy mindset rooted in the belief that Ireland's safest course is silence, compliance and never saying "No" to Washington. That way of operating was never a good idea, but now it is completely untenable.

I will finish on this point, a Cheann Comhairle. Since the financial crisis we have seen and witnessed a decade of austerity - the lost decade. Now we are halfway through the squandered decade, with all the money and nothing to show for it. Our destiny is in our own hands. International turmoil should be a warning to get our house in order, not another excuse for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to hide behind.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: One hundred and seven years ago today, in 1919, this House - Dáil Éireann - sat for the very first time. It did so at a time of conflict. There was more conflict to come with a brutal Civil War. This country has moved significantly from war - the War of Independence, the Civil War and the Troubles in the North - to peace. There are lessons to be learned internationally about our own process and how we have developed as a nation, but what stands at the front of my mind every single day is that there are conflicts throughout the

world - in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Nigeria and what looks like more conflict starting up on what seems almost a daily basis. Sovereignty, particularly for ourselves in Ireland but also internationally, is something that is exercised and not just declared.

Our transformation - our journey from poverty to a modern state - is something that many people look upon as a good example. Notwithstanding what we have achieved in education, health and the transparency of government, as well as the long-term stability built over decades at this stage, there are still issues that we all try to address here on a daily basis. The European Union, or the EEC as it was when we joined initially, has been at the core of our development as a country. The collective decision-making of the European Union has allowed us to prosper in ways many people before us did not think we would. We moved from a primarily agricultural society to one that is far more modern. It still has large elements of agriculture, but has become a shining example of a modern democracy in a modern country.

However, the European Union has felt weak in the past decade or two when it comes to exerting its influence - "dominance" is the wrong word - throughout the world. There are positive examples, particularly in trade deals, although there have been significant issues with Mercosur, especially from an agricultural perspective, in particular for beef farmers but there are huge opportunities there as well. We need to acknowledge the opportunities of CETA, Mercosur and further trade agreements that will come down the line with countries in Oceania and Asia, and looking to Australia, New Zealand, Japan and indeed China, because there are huge opportunities there for us. We should not allow ourselves as Europeans to be dictated to or bullied by partners or indeed as Irish people. Our reliance on international co-operation should not be seen as a weak point in any way, shape or form, particularly from those we consider allies.

That leads into the political volatility in the US. We hear consistently about President Trump speaking of Greenland, and acting in Venezuela. To be honest, this is one of the most authoritarian approaches I have ever seen in my lifetime from a political leader. What gives me some heart is that if we look at the polls in the US in relation to Trump's proposal to take over Greenland by force or by a deal, as he would like to call it, we see that the vast majority of Americans are against it. It is important to recognise that while Trump is the President of the United States, he does not necessarily speak for the majority of Americans. It is clear that the vast majority of the American people are not in favour of any type of aggressive behaviour towards Greenland or indeed Denmark and its allies.

Mark Carney gave a speech at the World Economic Forum in which he spoke about prosperity being rooted in trust, institutions, and co-operation and the rejection of chaos and unilateralism. It is by working together that we have developed not only as a country, but indeed within the European Union, and internationally as well. By standing together rather than standing alone, we can increase and improve the livelihoods of Irish people and those throughout the European Union and worldwide.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There is an absolute misunderstanding in relation to Donald Trump.

I am delighted to hear him say he wants a piece of ice for world protection, saying it as it is. Donald Trump obviously sees himself somewhat differently from how the rest of us see him. All he is missing is a Marvel superhero cape. That is where we are.

I concur with what some of my colleagues said earlier. It is an incredibly scary world we are now in but we have to adhere to our belief in the importance of national sovereignty, of being able to stand against might and of the righteousness and necessity of international law and multilateralism. Despite the weaknesses of the United Nations and all that has been done to it, it remains necessary and cannot be replaced with a board of peace. It is like something straight out of 1984. We have all seen the characters involved. It is easy enough to become involved and cheap at the price. It is \$1 billion to buy yourself in.

We are looking at nothing but conflict and instability. I am talking about the genocide in Palestine and the so-called peace at the minute. In this peace, we do not see any justice for the Palestinian people. I am also talking about the brutal conflict in Ukraine instigated by the Russians and about the abject savagery and destruction in Sudan. We have seen draconian actions in Iran.

We have seen an American President who is out of control. I am talking about Venezuela and the threat to Greenland. We all heard about this threat a year ago but we did not take it in any way seriously. Donald Trump believes he has a right to an empire. I am certainly not going to defend America's history of involvement internationally or the wrongs done in the Middle East, across south and central America or in Africa but there was an element of understanding that it had a *nouveau* empire, it maintained that empire and there was a cost to that. Donald Trump now wants to screw over his allies. There will be a need to stand up to him. It is all well and good to say that he does not necessarily have the support of the American people but we have not seen any checks and balances being able to rein him in.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are in a very dangerous place. We all want to see something different happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: However, at this point, there is a threat to Greenland and to the European Union. I am very worried about tariffs and the economic destruction that is going to happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú, it is now the other Deputy Murphy's time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Donald Trump is a monster. The one good thing about him is that he exposes the monstrous reality of the imperialist and capitalist world system we live in. It is a system that is ugly, bloody and brutal and in which might is right, profits matter for all and people matter for nothing. He has done away with the fig leaf of international law and exposed the US's naked and violent imperialism for everyone to see.

One of the things exposed by Trump is the subordinate position of the European Union. In Davos yesterday, the Prime Minister of Belgium, Bart De Wever is reported as saying:

Until now, we tried to appease the new president in the White House.... But now so many red lines are being crossed ... Being a happy vassal is one thing. Being a miserable slave is something else.

There we have it. The highest aspiration of European leaders is to be a "happy vassal" to the US. Is the Minister of State a happy vassal or is he a miserable slave? Despite all the evidence of the results of appeasement, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry group continue with their boot-licking and their attempts at appeasement. After the US funding, arming and supporting the genocide in Gaza for over two years and the apartheid state of Israel for decades, the Government is still appeasing Trump. It is scandalously breaking the promise it made to the electorate on the occupied territories Bill. It was practically silent when it came to the kidnapping of President Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, the killing of dozens of Venezuelans and Cubans and the injuring of over 100. The Government now says it will give consideration to the board of peace plans. It says it attaches the highest importance to the UN Charter but, in reality, it is part of the process of tearing up that charter. That is what getting rid of the triple lock is about. It is now in a bind because of the threats to Greenland. Ordinary people want the Government to stand up, not to give the President the shamrock on St. Patrick's Day. and to stop the US's use of Shannon Airport.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The title of this business, "International Developments: Statements", has the capacity to include many things. It could include the Irish Iranians whom I joined in demonstrating outside the Dáil earlier. They were protesting the bloody and brutal repression of protests on the part of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It could include the Palestinian protestors on the other side of the road, who were highlighting the ongoing killing of civilians in Gaza and the West Bank despite the existence of a ceasefire and the ongoing threat to the potential of a two-state solution created by the expansion of settlements. We can do something small but meaningful in that regard by passing Senator Frances Black's occupied territories Bill, including services, in full.

I will use the short amount of time I have today to speak about the situation in Greenland. We cannot overstate how serious the current situation is. The sabre rattling we are hearing from President Trump is very reminiscent of what we heard from Vladimir Putin in 2020 and 2021 in advance of the invasion of Ukraine. If the United States attempts to take Greenland against the stated wishes of the people of Greenland, it will shatter the relationship between Europe and the United States. It will spark an economic conflict that will leave both the US and the EU worse off. Greenland is not a piece of ice, as President Trump has described it. It is a sovereign territory with a long and proud history. It is important to say that history has involved working closely with the United States for many years.

On Monday, I wrote to the Taoiseach to ask that he, the Minister and Ministers of State in Deputy Byrne's Department brief Opposition leaders on the EU's response, the suspension of the EU-US trade deal, the threat of tariffs on eight countries and the potential use of the anti-coercion instrument. The Taoiseach has said he will do that. It would be useful for those briefings to take place so that we can understand. The Opposition was generally supportive during the tariffs crisis last year. People would like to understand the approach being adopted. Ireland has to use every relationship with the United States below Cabinet level to make changes to the US approach.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The double standards, the hypocrisy, the soft pedalling and the bending of the knee to Trump's bullying and imperialism have now come back to bite European governments, including our own. It does not matter how much you bend the knee. What is worse is that governments have gone along with his horrific policies. Most notable among these are European governments, who are now horrified at the threats to Greenland or, more accurately, Nunarput, which is what the people of Greenland call it. Last night, I spoke alongside an Inuit person from the capital, Nuuk, who pointed out that they were also the victims of Danish colonialism. Now, the Irish Government has suddenly taken to referring to "the Kingdom of Denmark". Since when are we trumpeters for kingdoms?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Each to their own.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We stand with the people of Nunarput and the Inuit people's right to self-determination. They certainly do not want to be invaded or taken over by Donald Trump but neither do they want their future controlled by the Kingdom of Denmark. This is the problem.

Yesterday, along with Deputy Duncan Smith of the Labour Party, I met with the German ambassador to discuss Daniel Tatlow-Devally.

He is an Irish citizen who is languishing in a German prison since August because he protested against Elbit Systems, which has armed Israel's genocide. Germany is one of the biggest exporters of weapons and one of the biggest supporters of the Israeli State, despite the genocidal massacre, years of apartheid, the siege of Gaza and so on. Daniel is languishing in a prison, 23 hours a day. He is allowed two half-hour visits a month. He is not even allowed hug his parents. He is screened off. His books are vetted so he cannot get his own books. He is going to be in prison until at least the middle of the year. He is being held under legislation for organised crime. They did engage in civil disobedience against Elbit Systems but Elbit Systems is providing the weapons to slaughter the people of Gaza in a genocidal massacre. He was acting in good faith and now he is languishing in a German prison.

That speaks to the Government's allies, its partners, the coalition of the willing, who are now angry because the interests of Europe have been infringed. They are quite happy when Venezuela is attacked and when their partners in Europe continue to provide the weapons for Israel to commit the genocide. They continue to have normal relationships with the United Arab Emirates as they provide the weapons to the RSF to commit a genocide in Sudan which has killed 150,000 people, or the Saudi dictatorship. We have the justified criticism of the Iranian regime for brutal repression of its own people, which should be condemned, but at the same time we go on trade missions to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are even more brutal dictatorships. I refer also to the Egyptian regime, which is backing another faction in Sudan and is also guilty of complicity with the horrors that have displaced 12 million people there and led to 150,000 deaths. Surely this should prompt an end to the double standards of European governments and actual action against the bullying of Trump and his imperialism.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for being here for this very important debate. As others have said, we could touch on any number of topics from Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing horrors we are seeing in the Middle East to what has been happening in Sudan. I think what is important in this House is that Ireland reasserts our values, the things that have always been important to us when it comes to dealing with conflict and with international relations. That is a commitment to multilateralism, to the values of human rights, to the rule of law and democracy, and to a commitment to free and fair trade. Trade is one of those things that ensures we lift people out of poverty. When nations interact and depend on each other, the opportunities for conflict diminish. Unfortunately, we are seeing the concept of investment in free and fair trade attacked as we are seeing human rights, the rule of law and democracy attacked. It is important that we call out those values, whether it is in the case of allies in the United States. I do believe that in the case of Venezuela it was a breach of international law taking out Maduro but I believe also, in respect of Maduro's regime in Venezuela, which led to systematic repression and oppression and arbitrary detention and where nearly 8 million refugees fled that country, that those actions need to be called to account. I find it somewhat odd hearing certain people calling on representatives of the Government not to attend the White House on St. Patrick's Day although they felt it perfectly acceptably to attend the Maduro presidential inauguration. I do believe that has to be called out.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I did not, just to be clear.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I do want to refer to Greenland and the threats we are seeing there. I am possibly one of the few Members, if not the only Member of this House, who has actually been to Greenland.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Nunarput.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I would share Deputy Boyd Barrett's view that the Inuit people are a wonderful and friendly people. It is one of the challenges in this debate. A lot of the discussion is rightly around geopolitics and security but we do need to think about the 57,000 people who live there. It is for the people of Greenland to determine their future. They have made very clear that at present they want to remain as part of Denmark. We need to show solidarity with them. Mark Carney summed it up very well this week. It is time for those of us in those countries that believe in the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law to stand up to bullying tactics, as President Macron referred to.

I would also say, and this is important, the United States has been a long friend of Ireland. Regardless of the politics we have many family, trade, educational and cultural links. I know the United States. It is a wonderful place. Americans are friendly and welcoming and want to develop those friendships. I hope we can use whatever channels we have to continue to encourage partnership between Ireland, Europe and the United States to de-escalate the current tensions we are seeing.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on international developments. I will use my time to speak about Greenland. I know I am not alone in wishing that questions of territorial integrity and respect for national sovereignty were

a thing of the past. When it comes to Greenland, there is no question but that the future of the island lies solely in the hands of its people and the kingdom of Denmark, and it always will. Events in Greenland over recent weeks have moved at breakneck speed. Amidst a flurry of threats, insults and uncertainty, I am heartened by the calm, measured and firm response provided by our Government and by the European Union. Global peace and security rest on the foundation of international law and the principles of the UN Charter. They are principles I have served overseas to uphold. I did not wear the United Nations blue beret in Lebanon alongside my Irish Defence Forces colleagues so that we could consign these principles to history. When we discuss international law, we do not discuss an abstract, empty concept but a real and vital safeguard that protects and preserves a peaceful world. International law affords the same status and protections to countries big and small. As a result, it is of crucial importance to small nations like our own and Denmark also. It is also our sole protection, alongside the principles of the UN Charter, from a world where small nations are disregarded, where force is the only common language and where might makes right.

In response to recent tariff announcements from the United States, I welcome our Government's commitment to and close co-ordination with our EU partners. The solidarity shown by EU ambassadors at their recent meeting, at which Denmark and Greenland received the full backing of those in attendance, is testament to the fact that Europe will not yield to bullying and intimidation. In recent history, our open, dynamic economy has been fuelled by stable trading relationships with reliable partners in Europe and overseas, to an enormous degree of success. Tariffs play no role in this success. The threatened tariffs against six EU partners would undermine transatlantic relations and are completely incompatible with the EU and US trade agreement. The only way forward to resolve issues of concern to the US is through dialogue and engagement. It has to be said that Denmark and Greenland have confirmed on multiple occasions that they are open to proactive, constructive dialogue on all issues.

I am encouraged to see Ireland as an active and constructive partner to these discussions. I know our Government will do everything it can to protect international law and the UN Charter in the coming weeks. I welcome the leadership shown by An Tánaiste and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, who are consistently doing everything in their power to facilitate a space where common sense can prevail. Europe and the United States have deep and historic ties, which no single person can derail. During an unprecedented period of tension in this relationship, I am glad that Ireland has chosen to meet heated rhetoric with cool composure.

Deputy John Connolly: I share the sentiment of many Members as to how depressing the situation the world finds itself in at the moment is. Having endured the depth of international conflict and war that was witnessed during the 20th century, we find that leaders of major international powers could make decisions that could bring us back to a point of significant tension again. This could undo the great work that was done by many of the institutions formed following the Second World War which have set about trying to maintain international law.

Today I will use my time to raise with the Minister of State the circumstances one Irish citizen finds himself in as a result of the increasingly hostile international environment.

Mr. Dmitry Simbaev is an Irish citizen who has been living here for in the region of 25 years. He resides in Claregalway, County Galway, and is a valued employee of PennEngineering

there. Dmitry was visiting family in Russia last August when he was arrested and detained in a detention centre at Chelyabinsk in Russia. Since that time, his wife Daria has had no direct contact. His family in Russia has had only limited opportunity for updates on his well-being. Dmitry's wife believes his detention is due to her Ukrainian citizenship and the fact she made commentary on social media criticising the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On his arrival in Russia, Dmitry's phone was taken by the Russian authorities. It is believed they encountered these messages or contributions by Daria on social media. Dmitry was arrested as a result and was charged. He is facing two charges in the Russian detention centre. One relates to online commentary and, I suppose, his propensity to ignite terrorism. I am no expert on Russian law, but the second charge is cited under Article 330.2 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation, which is that he has failed to file a timely notification about acquiring foreign citizenship or a residence permit. That essentially reads to me like he is being tried with gaining Irish citizenship and not informing the Russian Federation of that. We should take some offence to that.

Obviously, there are many concerns about the situation, most notably the uncertainty about how long Dmitry will be in the detention centre, but also his treatment there. We have no sense of how he is being treated. I know that the Minister of State, through his good offices, previously got in touch with the Irish Embassy in Moscow on my behalf and some consular assistance is being provided to Dmitry's family, but we do not know how he is being treated. It is of great concern to Daria, his family and his many friends in Galway.

I know that we do not enjoy a very positive relationship with the Russian Federation at the moment and there are strained relationships between the two nations, but we both maintain embassies in each other's country. I urge the Department, the Minister of State, the Minister and perhaps the Taoiseach to make some effort to raise the case of Dmitry with the appropriate authorities in Europe and Russia to try to make sure he is being well-treated and can come home.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In the face of an ever more uncertain global environment, is it right that Ireland considers both how best we can be a constructive force for good as well as what is required in terms of our own security? At a time when the multilateral system is under attack from those who seek to discredit, dismantle or even supplant it entirely, Ireland should come to its defence. It is both the right thing to do and best serves Ireland's interest. The multilateral system and international law are the best protection that small nations such as Ireland can avail of.

Our history of colonialism, our peace process, our experience and who we are are crucial to Ireland's credibility and have been central to the many positive contributions Ireland has made to global peace efforts. Our neutrality has been central to our credibility. The triple lock neutrality protection has been a cornerstone. The Minister of State does not have to take my word for it. His own Department's website states that our EU partners understand our policy of neutrality through a protocol of the Lisbon treaty. That protocol outlines the triple lock.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It does not.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: What message is the Government sending to EU partners on our neutrality when, to remove the provision, it is citing that protocol as informing it? If the Government wishes to undo the solemn commitment it made to the Irish people during the second Lisbon referendum, it should place its proposals before the people through a referendum. It would have the opportunity to cite others as having abandoned neutrality.

There are those who bang the drums for war, act as mouthpieces for the armaments industry and decry Ireland as a defence freeloader. They are the same parties that have overseen what has happened to our Defence Forces and that now, through seeking to gut neutrality, are attempting to grant themselves the authority to deploy Irish soldiers abroad without UN mandate. I recall the famous banner outside Liberty Hall that stated: "We serve neither king nor kaiser but Ireland".

In the interim, I will pose this question. If the Taoiseach is so willing to cast aside his previous Government's solemn national declaration to the Irish people on the triple lock, is his Government not the last you would wish to give this power to?

Deputy Michael Collins: The international situation is changing by the minute. These developments are a cause of huge concern to the Irish people and are causing huge concern across the world. Threats are being made to innocent people, which is something we as a neutral country must always condemn. We must always support those who are in great difficulty and continue to do that.

There are a lot of calls for the Taoiseach not to go to Washington. I do not agree with that. It is a hugely important moment and if we break that, we could break it for the future. That is something this country cannot afford to do. We certainly have to raise concerns. In fact, those concerns have to be raised; there is no issue about that. Staying outside the door is a bad and negative move. I would never approve of that.

The problem we have is that a lot of international decisions can be made in a very soft and easier way initially, for example, the Mercosur deal and the appalling carry-on that is going on there. The Minister of State will know that Ciaran Mullooly has been out there fighting, nearly single-handedly, to swing this decision around. Thankfully, the challenge through the European courts will go ahead. Will the Minister of State get the Taoiseach and Tánaiste involved to go out to Europe? I invite him to recognise the democratic decision of the European Parliament because the German leader decided today that it was not democracy at all. We are talking about democracy being thrown in the bin, but that is a true challenge to our democracy. I invite the Minister of State to recognise the democratic decision of the European Parliament today to refer the EU Mercosur deal to the European courts for legal analysis. Our MEP, Ciaran Mullooly, and his team will now work with fellow MEPs to ensure that the targets set out in the programme for Government can be delivered and that our Government will continue to work with like-minded countries to oppose the Mercosur trade deal.

We are concerned about reports from Strasbourg this afternoon, which I have talked to Ciaran Mullooly about, about how the European Commission may now decide to attempt some form of provisional implementation of the deal before it returns to the European courts, despite clear parameters and guidelines about such a scenario. The comments made specifically by the German prime minister, Mr. Merz, are:

The European Parliament's decision on the Mercosur Agreement is regrettable. It misjudges the geopolitical situation. We are convinced of the agreement's legality. No more delays. The agreement must now be applied provisionally.

It is now time to get our Taoiseach and Tánaiste going. This is no disrespect to the Minister of State. He is doing his part and doing it as best he can, but it is an astonishing situation that the German leader has decided that he will not agree to this. He thinks he is not going to agree to this, but it is up to the leaders of our country to say this is a red-line issue. He has no choice but to agree to it. A clear and unequivocal statement by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste on the validity and standing of the European Parliament vote today and the objection of Ireland to any provisional implementation is needed. There should be a clear and unequivocal statement at the next European Council meeting that any move to bring forward a provisional implementation of the EU-Mercosur trade deal will now be a red-line issue for this State, and a move to seek support from all other member states in the enforcement of the correct procedures, with direct meetings in member states, attended and verified by all Irish MEPs.

Our MEP is out there single-handedly tearing this apart. He has written to every Spanish and Italian MEP, in their language, to tell them what a crisis this will bring to Europe, but some of our European leaders are going to defy the reality of the deal. Sadly, we come back to our own MEPs. What happened to Maria Walsh today? Did she get stung in the finger? She voted against this legal challenge today. We have Fine Gael all over the bloody place on this deal. Regina Doherty and Sean Kelly backed the German leader today. They backed an Ursula von der Leyen deal against the Irish people.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Backing their constituents.

Deputy Michael Collins: Good God, this is not good enough. We have a Fianna Fáil MEP, Barry Andrews, who is after doing the same. Has the Government any Whip or any control over them? Are they out of control in Europe? Ming Flanagan failed to turn up today to vote for the people, despite all the owl social media nonsense he has every day of the week telling us what he is doing for the people. He forgot to turn up today to vote for the Irish people. These MEPs are becoming traitors to our own country.

4 o'clock

The Government has to stand up to them. The Government parties are afraid of them. It is going on long enough. They are afraid of them.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Tell that to the workers in Eli Lilly. Tell that to the farmers working in your own constituency. You know what you are doing with your language.

Deputy Michael Collins: They have had ample opportunity. It is my turn to talk. The Minister of State can talk after. They have had ample opportunity to take them and sit down with them and talk to those MEPs and they have not done that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: They have not got them to change their mind.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, language is important and the word "traitor"-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Sorry, but it is hugely important.

An Ceann Comhairle: -----is not really a word that is appropriate. I ask you to withdraw that word.

Deputy Michael Collins: I respect that and I apologise. I withdraw that. I am sorry, but I am very annoyed and frustrated.

An Ceann Comhairle: And your time is up.

Deputy Michael Collins: The bottom line is here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We now have to move to Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I am just off a plane from Strasbourg. Over the past number of days, I met many MEPs who were wavering and on the fence in relation to this issue, who abstained in the previous vote and who said "I hear your prime minister is against Mercosur, but where is he? How come he never reached out to us?" How is it the case that the programme for Government explicitly states that the Government will work proactively. It took the Opposition, smaller parties and Independents to lead the charge on this, not the Government with all of its power, with the apparatus of the State and the Department of foreign affairs, etc. It is incredibly disappointing. I heard the Minister of State's comment in reply to Deputy Collins and would like to make this point to him.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Go down to Valeo in Tuam and give that speech.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I will not interrupt the Minister of State.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: You will not go to Tuam and give that speech-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is unacceptable, Deputy Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----to the car factory.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The fact is that farmers are bound to the land. In other circumstances, larger corporations, etc., where regulatory burdens become significant, can migrate and relocate. They can create shell companies. Farmers are bound to the land. A farmer in Ballyhaunis, Castlebar, Louisburgh or anywhere across the country is farming that land. The Government is putting him at a significant disadvantage. It is a significant anti-competitive practice to allow a product with an inferior standard to compete in the same marketplace. The

Government has done this to the tillage sector. Irish native grain growers are competing against genetically modified produce that is coming in from outside this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I ask the Minister of State. If a small party like Aontú can do it-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are in your colleague's time.

Deputy Paul Lawless: When is the Government going to get off the fence and come out against this Mercosur deal-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----and not just in relation to the programme for Government but actually-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless, respect the time.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----proactively oppose this deal?

Deputy Neale Richmond: We voted against it.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the opportunity-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: Your MEPs did not vote against it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Because some of them spoke to workers.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Where are your MEPs?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: They were discussing with your constituents who work in factories in your area. That is probably why they had a different view.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy Lawless. Have respect for the Chair please. Excuse me, we will have respectful discourse. If I say, "Stop", that is when you stop, thank you.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on international events, however brief my time. The Government has quite a bit of input from the European Union perspective. We have President Donald Trump addressing the World Economic Forum. He said he is not going to use military force today, but he is putting pressure. As the Tánaiste said, we have some aces up our sleeves as well. The Government are dealing with a narcissist and a big baby supported by a vice president who is worthy of less admiration because he lambasted the current US President and then when he got into office, he acted like a coward. The current

administration will hopefully be out of office in a while, but we have to keep our links with our friends in the US because there is sanity in that country among the vast majority of the population but we have to get through these troubled times in the meantime. All we can do is speak softly and act with one united European Union voice. Unfortunately, many times we do not have that united voice, but I urge the Minister of State, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste to use whatever influence they have, not just in relation to the Greenland issue but the ongoing issues in Israel and Gaza, as well as Iran, something I will return to during Leaders' Questions tomorrow.

Deputy Martin Daly: As a small country we are living in a time of flux and realignment. Because of our size and open trading economy we have to, as we have in the past, be prepared to navigate uncertain times. If we ever needed reminding, we need to use our position in the European Union to negotiate with a block that has heft and power in an age where it appears might equals right and supersedes international law. Those who say our foreign policy should be solely values driven are out of touch. As a small trading nation, we need to prosecute a foreign policy that is in our national interests if we are to maintain living standards and services. In a world where large political blocs seem determined to carve up spheres of influence and control we have to operate through the European Union. To do anything else would be foolhardy in the extreme. Canadian Prime Minister Carney has identified and pointed the way in this regard. He has alluded to the weaponisation of coercive economic integration, tariffs, financial services and supply chains. Canada is not Ireland. It is bigger, richer and has natural resources, but it has depended on the benign integration of the majority of its trade with its southern neighbour. Since that threat came 12 months ago, Prime Minister Carney has responded deftly with a committed 1 trillion Canadian dollars in trade diversification and resilience measures like new east-west ports, new east-west rail infrastructure and the purchase of defence technology from Sweden that gives them control and autonomy over its use rather than continued dependence on the US. It is prepared to develop new markets in Europe and Asia. We have to learn from this example. We have been talking for years about developing indigenous industry, and this Government has been investing in research and development. That is not say we should not continue to keep our communications to our allies and friends in the US open when productive and in the event of change of policy after the mid-term elections. However, it appears the world has changed, and we should not depend on it going back to the way it was. We have seen the supply chain disruptions caused by Russia's aggressive war in Ukraine and a sense that the US has disengaged from its long-standing commitment to the security of Europe. While Europe has already woken from that complacency we in Ireland will have to re-evaluate our own commitment to our own security, irrespective of our military neutrality. We have been supported from the EU in the development of a modern, sophisticated State with full employment, and during the financial crash and Brexit. We owe solidarity to the smaller countries of the Union that, like ourselves, depend on operating through a large bloc.

Deputy John Lahart: Never before have we more needed adults in the room than at this time in our history, and in what the Taoiseach has described as uncharted territory. We also need to not lose sight during this debate, which I welcome, that the greatest threat to the Union we are part of is Russia. Military neutrality has been raised here and I am a stout defender at every opportunity I get internationally as chair of the foreign affairs and trade committee, or

here at home talking to anybody prepared to listen in any forum. I support military neutrality, but never before has it become more obvious to me that Ireland needs to be in a position to protect its neutrality, to defend itself, and particularly to offer itself as a country that is in a position to protect the quite considerable business assets that other countries invest here. We will have investment in perpetuity if we can show the rest of the world that we are prepared to invest in our security and in protecting our neutral status. We must be prepared to defend and protect our neutrality. That means adult conversations. There are structures in place in other countries such as the UK. They may call it the privy council, where a prime minister can call in the leaders of the opposition parties to show them latest intelligence they are privy to have from the highest reliable sources in the country. It is what they have been told and is what is informing their policy. If the opposition parties were sitting in that chair, it is what they would be informed of too. This is confidential information. Every country has confidential information it has to protect, and it can trust in that kind of source and structure to ensure people will not abuse that kind of information.

Regarding our trade with the USA, we are in a delicate situation. Some \$1 billion worth of trade comes across the Atlantic every six hours into the European Union. Much of that travels through our country through data and services. The need to pivot and not be completely reliant on the US is something the previous speaker adverted to in the case of Canada.

We do not want to have all our eggs in the US basket either but we have a unique relationship with the United States of America. There are 900 US companies based here, with a number of very significant companies headquartered here. Some 300,000 people are employed by Irish companies in America. More than 200,000 people are employed by American companies here. Little Ireland is the fifth largest foreign direct investor in the USA. It is a relationship we have to cultivate and ensure is maintained, while at the same time standing shoulder to shoulder with our European Union partners. To repeat what I said at the beginning, Ireland needs mature leadership now more than ever, calm engagement and dialogue, no drama, and none of the soundbites that are easy to throw from the Opposition benches. It needs mature, considered leadership.

Deputy Brian Brennan: In relation to the very fluid situation that is playing out between the United States and Greenland, can the Minister of State give me an update on what plans are in place in the event of the impending threat of an increase in tariffs for all countries that do not support America's desire to take over Greenland?

When it comes to tariffs, there are absolutely no winners. We understand the EU is a very powerful bloc and the US needs access to our 400 million residents. However, these tariffs could, in the words of our own Tánaiste, have a spiralling effect and will have significant financial consequences for many of our industries. I totally agree with the previous speaker about the need for cool heads, but we also need to show a strong backbone in our negotiations. I know the Minister of State is in agreement with me that the powerful Irish diaspora must play a part in this. That includes many prominent Irish business leaders. We must use these key persons in an effort to address our concerns. If we do not meet this head on and demonstrate strength at this stage, there is no telling who, or where, the next target will be for the American Administration.

While Gaza may be gone from the headlines, we are supposedly moving into the second phase of a very fragile ceasefire. We cannot forget that we have witnessed the genocide of more than 70,000 people, many of them young children. While I warmly welcome the national committee of Gaza management that was set up to manage the day-to-day affairs of Gaza, we must question what powers it actually has. I question moving on to the next phase when we have five key issues that were meant to be addressed in phase 1. The halt of attacks is simply not happening. The bombs continue. We had 449 deaths this morning since the ceasefire started, and more than 1,200 injuries. The return of Israeli captives has happened, bar one. Israeli armed withdrawal is simply not happening from defined areas of Gaza. As regards full humanitarian aid, Israel continues to ban many international agencies from providing food and medical aid. A key issue is the Rafah crossing. This is a key lifeline and it remains closed for aid, food and medical evacuations. I am of the strong opinion that we have no ceasefire in Gaza. I ask the Government to make a strong statement on this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is Deputy Ó Laoghaire stepping in for Deputy Kenny?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have already spoken.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move for a concluding statement from the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond. He is sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I greatly welcome the opportunity to briefly respond on aspects of this debate. It is a vitally important debate at, to be quite frank, an extremely delicate time in international politics, one that many people, in particular our Taoiseach have said, requires cool heads and very clear thought. It is also an opportunity to reassert absolutely and unconditionally Ireland's commitment to the global rules-based order, multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, and of course the European Union, to which the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, will speak in more detail.

I absolutely echo the comments by Deputy O'Callaghan in relation to our respect for international law. Ireland made it clear in relation to Venezuela and the actions there, that while Maduro was a dictator, his removal completely lacked any legitimacy and there are very serious concerns about how it was carried out. The way we respond to that is through the multilateral system.

Points were made by Deputy Butterly in terms of the complete hollowing out of USA identity over the past 12 months and going on to the next 12 months, and the contagion of that being felt around the developing world, given the abandonment of that development system. We see that in effect in particular in Sudan, which Deputy Ward alluded to. Ireland is contributing €14 million through UN agencies, ensuring that aid gets to where it needs to. I will be quite frank, as Deputy Ward raised the question of whether aid is getting through. It is an extremely difficult and indeed volatile place.

Deputy Brennan spoke about a number of areas, one being the ongoing situation in the Middle East. This has disappeared from the headlines, but was raised by a number of Deputies. Ireland continues to provide support, particularly for a number of UN agencies such as

UNRWA. The Minister, Deputy McEntee was at the border crossing in Rafah just last week to announce greater commitments to the World Food Programme and others.

Ireland has received an invitation from President Trump to join the board of peace. Only one country has turned down that invitation in Europe but it is something that requires reflection. We can all agree that as delicate as the ceasefire or lack thereof in Gaza is, and away from headlines, it is still crucially important.

This gives me the opportunity to speak to two points. The first is trade diversification, which was raised by Deputy Ó Laoghaire, who, to his credit as ever, is still here. He raised this from a thoughtful point of view regarding how we look at opportunities afforded to us. This year, we hope to see the EU conclude trade deals with places like the United Arab Emirates and Indonesia. We will see increased opportunities in places like Australia and other countries, all of particular interest to Irish exporters in the agrifood sector, but also in the tech and life sciences sectors and beyond.

We are a Government that believes in rules-based international trade and in free and fair trade. I completely reject the assertions and some of the hyperbole from some of the Deputies present who if you were to listen to them, are running the European Parliament in their own sense, but I am not too sure if they could make their way to Strasbourg ordinarily. One point that was raised was that Ireland and the Taoiseach for some reason should not participate in the annual invitation to visit the White House or indeed engage in a full programme of the United States. This is an opportunity. As others have said, we have heard very important interventions from the Prime Minister of Canada and the President of Finland in relation to a values-based system that Ireland has signed up to. There is also the sheer fact, to paraphrase Prime Minister Carney, that if you are not at the table, you are on the menu. Ireland has the responsibility to make itself present at the table and take every opportunity through European institutions and former Minister Byrne, multilateral institutions and on a bilateral level.

Deputy Brennan is correct that we have a strong Irish diaspora in the United States. Next week, the Government will announce a full suite of St. Patrick's Day trade missions involving Government Ministers and Oireachtas representatives and office holders like the Ceann Comhairle. Now is exactly the time when our Taoiseach should go to the White House and maintain that constant invitation. We do not just go when times are easy; we go when times are difficult too. Equally, we will see up to nine or ten Ministers go to 15 other US states and that ability to build relationships at a political and economic level is important. That is the responsibility we have now.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I regret the term “traitors” being used in relation to MEPs who take their own democratic decision and who have taken into account their constituents and broad interests. There are two sides to this story. The Government did oppose Mercosur at the Council of the European Union, but it is also the case that the Government has acknowledged that certain sectors would benefit from it. MEPs are entitled to vote and make their own decision without pressure from us or the Opposition.

Today's debate comes at a time when our foreign policy faces grave challenges and peace and security are being threatened. Ireland is committed to the international rule of law. The UN is at the heart of the maintenance of international peace and security. We have a strong

commitment to multilateralism. We exercise multilateralism every day of the week. We heard from the Opposition the importance of multilateralism. We work those systems to everybody's benefit.

Our EU membership is central to how we ensure Ireland's place in the world and how we amplify our voice and support our values and the interests of our citizens. I will join the Taoiseach in Brussels tomorrow as he meets his fellow leaders for an emergency meeting of the European Council. We will work closely with our European partners.

The situation in Greenland is of great concern to Ireland and to EU partners and to Members all around this House. Last week I spoke to the Danish Minister for European Affairs, Marie Bjerre, and I assured her that Ireland stands fully behind Denmark on this issue. The EU and its member states have been clear that the future of Greenland is a matter for the Danish people and the Greenlandic people, together with their governments. We have made this clear publicly and privately and these statements have been welcomed by Denmark. The European Union is united in its view that the fundamental principles of international law, territorial sovereignty and integrity must be observed. This is a position that will not change. Sovereignty is not a commodity to be bought and sold. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is non-negotiable. This is a fundamental principle of the UN Charter and of international law. It is what keeps all countries, large or small, militarily aligned or neutral, safe and secure. I was intrigued to hear a Sinn Féin Member talk about the protocol to the Lisbon treaty and making all sorts of suggestions about it. If they actually take the time to read the protocol, it directly refutes many of the allegations that Sinn Féin make here week in and week out about a European army and conscription. It specifically states that those things are not happening, so Sinn Féin would do well to read the protocol to the Lisbon treaty rather than just mention it and misdescribe it.

The US announcement at the weekend regarding the potential imposition of tariffs on a number of member states and other European partners undermines transatlantic relations. It is incompatible with the trade agreement we signed last summer. This gave certainty for businesses and investments. We need to find a way forward on these issues and this is our priority. When we go to Brussels tomorrow the Taoiseach will emphasise and prioritise the protection of Irish jobs, Irish households and Irish interests. We will work with our European colleagues to meet these challenges and to consider the next steps. Dialogue is still key, and we will continue to engage with the US to convey our clear position on this issue.

We must ensure, of course, that Russia's brutal and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine remains at the forefront of our efforts. Ireland's consistent position has been that it is for the government and the people of Ukraine to determine their future and to agree the terms of any peace agreement. It is crucial that any agreement upholds Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, based on respect for the principles of the UN Charter. A just and lasting peace in this conflict is the end objective. It is evident, however, that Russia continues to actively engage in escalatory tactics. Putin's drones and missiles continue to attack innocent civilians and critical energy infrastructure. The attacks have left millions without electricity during harsh winter months that are without comparison to Ireland. We cannot imagine the coldness of people's apartments and houses in many parts of Ukraine at the moment. Ukraine has been forced to declare a state of emergency in the energy sector. I am very conscious as well of the

small Irish community in Ukraine and our ambassador in Ukraine, Jonathan Conlon. He and his embassy team continue to carry out exemplary work in the face of unbelievable challenges.

We remain committed to supporting Ukraine. Since the start of the war nearly four years ago, we have contributed extensive political, humanitarian, military and economic support to Ukraine. Ukraine must be supported to defend itself against this continued aggression to deter future aggression. Ireland has provided €138 million in humanitarian assistance and stabilisation supports and, in 2025, we announced a further funding package of €35.4 million in September and €25 million for restoring energy infrastructure in December. I saw an example of the funding last year when I visited an underground school shelter in Odessa, co-funded by Ireland and Lithuania. We also allocated €200 million in non-lethal military support to Ukraine. We have welcomed over 120,000 Ukrainians under the temporary protection directive. Looking ahead to our Presidency of the EU, we support Ukraine's EU accession, which we believe to be a crucial element in securing Ukraine's long-term peace and security and the long-term peace and security of the Union. Now is a time for cool heads. We can achieve a lot more through co-operation rather than conflict, and Ireland will continue to work in that manner around the European table and in our engagements around the world.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.30 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.24 p.m. and resumed at 4.30 p.m.

Water: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister is sharing time with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I welcome the opportunity to speak about water. Water is a precious resource. It is critical to our health, our environment and our economy. Access to safe and clean drinking water for everyone is a top priority for the Government. We know it is essential.

The Government's water policies are centred on what is called the EU water framework directive. This directive requires all member states to protect and to improve water quality in our rivers, lakes, groundwater and transitional coastal waters. This is done through river basin management plans and water action plans, which my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will address in further detail.

A secure, safe and reliable water service and supply and the provision of quality wastewater treatment are a priority. Crucially, this also facilitates the development of homes in all parts of our country. As Minister for housing, I believe that the delivery of quality water must be hand in glove with the acceleration in our delivery of homes across all tenures and all parts of this country, from our islands to our villages, and from our provincial towns to our cities.

I want to speak about water service delivery. It plays an essential role in enabling economic growth, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and the delivery of our housing need. Uisce Éireann supplies drinking water to over 80% of the population, with two thirds of households connected to public wastewater services. The Uisce Éireann network consists of

tens of thousands of kilometres of pipelines, along with thousands of treatment plants and pumping stations. Simply keeping our water infrastructure running every day is an enormous task.

The process of establishing Uisce Éireann as a stand-alone public utility continues to be a work in progress. There is no doubt about that. It is only at the end of this year that the link with local authorities will finally be broken, and that has been necessary, even if it has taken time. The motivation for a stand-alone utility stems from the inherent inefficiencies of the fragmented network that was operated by 31 local authorities. It has been stated and acknowledged many times in this House that a legacy of underinvestment in our water infrastructure by the local authorities means there are many challenges that Uisce Éireann is now seeking to address.

Uisce Éireann is also providing for significantly increased capacity for future business and population growth. We all see the evidence of the challenges in our constituencies linked to creaking infrastructure or the demands of growth. The scale of the remedial work on the vast network is extensive and will take years to fully resolve.

That is why the Government has committed unprecedented funding to Uisce Éireann as part of the national development plan. This investment in our water services will cover every part of our water infrastructure and every community, from the smallest to the largest, both urban and rural. All Exchequer investment needs to occur in a timely and efficient manner with proper evaluation to ensure value for money. In this regard Uisce Éireann is subject to rigorous financial scrutiny by way of dual audit from the Comptroller and Auditor General and by a commercial auditor along with being accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts. Uisce Éireann is also subject to economic regulation by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. The CRU provides a constraint over Uisce Éireann revenue, approving investment plans while monitoring performance and ensuring it runs efficiently. The economic regulatory process involves extensive public consultation on Uisce Éireann funding, investment plans and performance. In fact, the CRU has an open public consultation on Uisce Éireann's plans for 2025 to 2029, which is due to close on Tuesday, 27 January. I encourage a broad base of the public to engage with this consultation call. The CRU also has a role in protecting domestic and non-domestic customers by approving service standards, handling complaints and dispute resolution for customer complaints that cannot be resolved with Uisce Éireann.

Uisce Éireann communicates with a diverse and large group of customers, communities and stakeholders through multiple channels daily. These include online, digital and social media channels along with a free text alert service providing water supply updates and information to customers across 1.6 million households and businesses. Uisce Éireann has been proactive in establishing a local authority liaison office, which meets with councils across the country. This provides a dedicated service for elected representatives and deals with tens of thousands of queries each year from all elected representatives, including Members of the Oireachtas. I certainly want to see this improved as we go forward.

Transformation is ongoing. It is important to remind ourselves that Uisce Éireann and the public water sector are still going through a significant transformation process. This year is a pivotal one as the transfer deadline for local water services staff fast approaches. Next year will see Uisce Éireann reach its end-state structure and settle into being Ireland's single public water utility. However, and as we heard in the House last week, there are concerns around the

effectiveness of the communication from Uisce Éireann to elected representatives. This is something I have directly spoken to the chairperson of the Uisce Éireann board about. I am assured the organisation recognises that work needs to be done to improve this. Therefore, I have asked Uisce Éireann to review its approach to communications and engagement, in particular with Members of this House, as a matter of priority.

In terms of national development plan, NDP, funding, Uisce Éireann has allocated €1.7 billion for a new additional growth programme that will support accelerated housing delivery. Uisce Éireann has identified 72 strategic settlements through reviews of the national planning framework; regional spatial and economic strategies; and county development plans and local area plans. These include Ireland's key towns, regional growth centres and cities, in addition to other large towns with considerable forecasted housing growth. My Department has engaged with Uisce Éireann, and Uisce Éireann will shortly write to the CEOs of Ireland's 31 local authorities, outlining its plans to support new housing delivery and achieve the national housing target of 300,000 new homes by 2030. This is part of Uisce Éireann's aim of sharing as much detail as possible with local authorities and local planning authorities to inform local planning decisions over the coming years.

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

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

Just yesterday the Government approved in principle a major upgrade for the wastewater treatment plant at Bunlicky, serving Limerick city. This major project represents a major investment in the mid-west and is just one of many that Uisce Éireann will progress this year. Macroom, Ballyconneely, Claremorris and Clonmel, among others, will also see major upgrades to their water infrastructure this year, with more such projects to come over the lifetime of the NDP. These projects will benefit all our communities, both urban and rural.

Rural communities that are not served by Uisce Éireann also depend on safe and reliable water and wastewater services, and this Government is committed to sustaining these services for the future. My Department, through the rural water programme, supports these households

and communities by ensuring access to safe, reliable and sustainable drinking water and wastewater services in rural areas. Around 180,000 households are supplied through group water schemes, while many other rural homes rely on private wells and on-site wastewater systems, predominately septic tanks. These households and communities are a central focus of Government investment and policy. Under the NDP, €230 million is being invested in rural water services out to 2030 through a comprehensive package of supports. This includes significant capital investment in group water schemes and local water infrastructure, operational funding for schemes, targeted household grants, and support for the National Federation of Group Water Schemes to strengthen governance and capacity. I have already approved funding for hundreds of rural water projects across the country. These range from large-scale treatment upgrades serving entire communities to smaller, but vital, works that improve water quality, security of supply and environmental compliance at local level. These investments are delivering safer, more reliable water services and greater resilience for rural communities. They also demonstrate the Government's strong and ongoing commitment to supporting rural households and improving rural water services.

The developer-led infrastructure initiative, which was approved by the Government in late 2025, represents a further important step. It provides a new approach to supporting new housing delivery in areas not served by Uisce Éireann by increasing private sector involvement in appropriate wastewater solutions. Uisce Éireann, as the national water supplier, is now in a position to engage with developers on this initiative, and I expect it to be rolled out in locations across the country during 2026.

This approach will support the delivery of new housing in rural areas while ensuring that environmental and public health standards are maintained. It will deliver tangible benefits for rural communities. The Government is committed to making sure that all areas of water policy and water services are strengthened with regard to environmental compliance and water and wastewater infrastructure, so that all our communities feel the benefits of the unprecedented NDP investment in the water sector.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Minister for bringing us through the progress that has been made on water service delivery, including the record levels of investment in the water sector. I welcome the opportunity to speak on water again this week. I will focus on water quality and policies. Water is our most valuable resource. It is vital to our health, our economy and our environment. Securing a safe and reliable water supply is a top priority for the Government. Access to healthy rivers and lakes, groundwater and bathing waters is essential for citizens, nature and industries. Ireland has an abundance of natural water resources. However, freshwater for human use is a relatively scarce and limited resource that needs protection. The Government's water services policy statement sets out the high-level policy framework relating to the provision of water services generally out to 2030. It defines the Government's three strategic policy objectives and priorities that must be pursued in delivering and improving water and wastewater services.

The first objective is availability and reliability, whereby water services will support balanced regional development by improving public and private water services through continued investment in infrastructure. The second objective is safety and quality, whereby water services will be safe and protect human health. The third objective is sustainability,

whereby water services will be efficient, resilient and sustainable in the long term. The Minister, Deputy Browne, addressed how the first two objectives are being delivered through the delivery of water services for urban and rural communities. The third objective is addressed through the water sector adaptation plan, which was launched by my Department last November, and the water action plan, which was launched in November 2024. The adaptation plan outlines strategies to build a resilient water system against climate change impacts, focusing on improving water quality, securing infrastructure and managing resources through integrated catchment management, infrastructure upgrades, conservation and nature-based solutions like sustainable urban drainage systems. The overarching legislation on water quality is the EU water framework directive, which requires all member states to protect and improve water quality in all our water bodies. The Irish river basin district covers an area of over 70,000 sq. km, with 4,842 water bodies.

The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, oversees and implements the national water quality monitoring programme, which is designed to assess the overall condition of our rivers, lakes, canals, estuaries, coastal waters and groundwaters. The latest EPA report on water quality for the period from 2019 to 2024 shows that 52% of Irish surface waters are achieving at least good status, compared with 54% for the previous reporting period from 2016 to 2021. Excess nutrients remain the largest threat to water quality, and this is impacted by urban wastewater, agriculture and legacy forestry. However, notwithstanding the deterioration over the period, the EPA report shows that surface water nutrient concentrations from agriculture have reduced overall since the peak in 2018-19. I thank and acknowledge all our farming communities for the significant progress that is being made in that respect. The EPA report also shows that where actions are being targeted in priority areas for action, there is a statistically significant improvement in phosphorus concentrations.

In accordance with the water framework directive, Ireland has implemented a series of river basin management plans, which are specific programmes of environmental measures to protect and restore water quality. To protect natural waters from the negative impact of human activities, many such activities are controlled through environmental authorisation, enforcement and compliance. This ensures that activities are safe and sustainable. These types of control systems include, for example, wastewater discharge licensing by the EPA and local authorities, the agricultural nitrates regulations, and environmental regulations through the planning system. Controls also include a range of other binding codes of practice for the purpose of protecting waters including, for example, domestic wastewater treatment systems and pesticides use. Most activities posing a risk to water quality must be carried out in a way that is compatible with good water quality. Comprehensive water quality standards have been established for the purpose of protecting water quality.

While most activities posing a risk to water quality are regulated in some way or other, it remains a challenge to enforce environmental regulations and achieve full compliance. We also continue to pursue those activities that are not adequately controlled at present, strengthening controls and filling regulatory gaps. Our most recent plan, the Water Action Plan 2024: A River Basin Management Plan for Ireland, is derived from the water framework directive and outlines the additional measures that we will take to protect and restore our natural water resources, including rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters. These measures include ongoing actions and investment across critical sectors, such as agriculture, forestry and water service provision, that bear the greatest burden in tackling pollution.

The NDP funding provides for €306 million in investment to support additional targeted measures to restore and improve water quality in rural and urban settings, as well as improving river habitats. This funding will support a wide range of capital investment in water protection initiatives operated by the local authorities, by the EPA, by Inland Fisheries Ireland, and directly by my Department. This will include the development of specific, evidence-based, targeted programmes to drive water quality improvement. Firstly, the farming for water European investment partnership, EIP, that was launched in March 2024 aims to support farmers in the implementation of supplementary measures on farmland where agricultural activities can impact water quality. Secondly, a scheme which will fund urban nature-based solution projects will be undertaken by local authorities to manage surface water drainage and rainfall. Finally, a national river barrier mitigation programme will fund the removal of barriers in our rivers or the mitigation of their impacts.

I recognise the role of local authorities in protecting our waters. Co-operation with and support of local authorities is at the core of all our work in this area. The local authority waters programme office is a local authority shared service provided jointly by Tipperary and Kilkenny local authorities and funded by my Department. It works on behalf of Ireland's 31 local authorities to protect and restore good water quality in our rivers, lakes, estuaries, groundwater and coastal water through catchment science and local community engagement. The local authority waters programme office will have responsibility for delivery of the programmes relating to farming and urban drainage that I mentioned earlier. One example of the work undertaken by the office is the River Nore catchment. The office has focused on community engagement, as protecting our rivers is a shared responsibility. This includes facilitating water quality training through the local biodiversity officer, and heritage week events. In addition, the office's catchment scientists will carry out local catchment assessments in 13 priority areas for action in the Nore catchment. These assessments will work to identify reasons for declined water quality and the actions needed to secure improvements. This is just one example of the work being carried out around the country that is supported and funded by my Department. This local level work complements our continued and increasing investments in upgrading our water infrastructure. It also complements the funding for innovative new approaches such as nature-based solutions, and the direct engagement with farmers that my Department is also supporting.

Finally, I acknowledge the strong co-operation across Government Departments, State agencies, non-government organisations and communities in the development and implementation of these water quality programmes and initiatives. One example I have seen that is an excellent case in point is the ecopark that has been established in Dunhill. It is a nature-based solution which services the community in the area. It has been highlighted many times before and has created a real sense of community that has been added to and which also serves a function. We will continue as a Government to invest in water because of its importance. The co-operation of all stakeholders plays a key part in that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Pa Daly has requested copies of the speeches of the Minister and Minister of State. I think we have an agreement that opening statements will be provided. Maybe we could get them before the end of the debate.

Deputy John Cummins: I will have my office circulate them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thanks. I appreciate that.

We have a number of Members missing. We will stick to the time. If someone does not turn up, the benefit will go to whoever is left in the group. I call Deputy Conway-Walsh to begin the Sinn Féin slot.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is really good because it is unusual for Mayo to be first. I wish to talk about the situation with water in County Mayo and, in particular, with group water schemes. Let me be very clear: the people in Mayo are just as important as the people living anywhere else in this State. I know the Minister and the Minister of State will agree with that. They have a right to water, a right to clear running water, and a right to access water 24-7.

I want to talk first about homes in areas like Glensaul in Toormakeady, in Craggagh near Balla and in parts of north Mayo where there are clusters of fewer than 25 houses. The rules for funding exclude them from getting a water supply. That is just not right. This is a weakness in the system and the criteria must be relaxed. Funding must be provided so that Mayo County Council can get on with the work and the households can get on with their lives. I ask the Minister and Minister of State to listen to what I am saying because I am providing them with solutions. I do not want to be standing up here again in front of them speaking about water in Mayo.

The second thing I want addressed is the eight schemes in Mayo that are waiting at the moment - there are others in the pipeline - to be taken in charge by Uisce Éireann. Six of them have not been taken in charge because of debt. Some of them have been with Uisce Éireann for the past seven years. Uisce Éireann will not take over one of these schemes because it is being fed by another scheme with leak issues. Debts on these schemes have mounted up over the years, through nobody's fault. With the pipes deteriorating and leaks happening, the volunteers and the households in the scheme cannot be held to ransom over these leaks. Can the Minister get Uisce Éireann to write off the debts, take over the schemes and just get on with it? These debts are going to be there for 100 years. They are not going to be paid by anyone; they cannot be paid by anyone.

We need flexibility between the local authority and the Department to find and execute solutions. I commend the rural water section in Mayo County Council on its work. Indeed, Michael McDermott, who has just left that division, did excellent work too. There are just not enough of staff members to do what needs to be done for the delivery of water in the county. I know there is an emergency staffing request in and I am absolutely certain that every elected representative in the county will support this request. It would be unthinkable that unspent money would be clawed back by the Department at the end of the year just because we do not have sufficient staff in the water section to deliver the projects. I welcome that Mayo County Council has been selected as the pilot county for the new-look multi-annual rural water programme, MARWP, which starts in June next year, but without the necessary staff, this work cannot be done. Has the Minister done comparisons between the counties to ascertain how many schemes have been taken in charge in each county? I think he will find that Mayo is hovering the bottom there, so that needs to be looked at.

I will sum up my requests for today. I ask the Minister to allow flexibility in the funding criteria to allow for all households to have a water supply, get Irish Water to formally take over the schemes presented by Mayo County Council, get Irish Water to write off the debts run up because of neglected infrastructure-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. She is now in Deputy Doherty's time.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: -----and please let me not be standing here again on this issue.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are told time and time again by this Government that water services have been improving, that everything is now under control and that Uisce Éireann is fit for purpose. In fact, Uisce Éireann is so content with the job it is doing that it gave €21,000 in bonuses for good performances, no less, in 2024 to hundreds of its highest paid executives, some already earning over €200,000 a year. If Uisce Éireann or indeed the Minister or Minister of State were to come to County Donegal, they would see the reality of a litany of failure and a total lack of accountability. In particular, they should come to Glenfin. I invite the Minister and Minister of State, in particular, to come to Glenfin. It is a beautiful area of Donegal, but the issue there is that there is no running water for the households. There are 40 households there, including families, elderly people and children, and they have no running water at all. They rely on wells to bring water to their homes. There is no public water in that community. That is 40 homes left without basic public services in 2026, despite me repeatedly raising it here in the Dáil with the Minister, the Minister of State and with Irish Water-Uisce Éireann over the years. It is a scandal.

If we look at our island communities, and I raised this point last week, they are treated as second-class citizens. The water quality on Arranmore and on Tory Island is regularly extremely poor. On the island of Gabhla, off the coast of Donegal from my own community of Gaoth Dobhair, there is no running water at all. The pipe burst six months ago. The Minister knows about this. I spoke to him about it and to the Minister for the Gaeltacht. I wrote to both of them over six months ago, and still there are no plans - nothing, nada, zilch. There is no idea and no timeframe for when water will be restored to that community. I took the State to court, through the European courts, as a result of its failure in the Gaoth Dobhair sewage scheme. It connected 50 houses, and then it said there were no plans to do the rest of the scheme. It is simply unacceptable.

Social housing, private housing, businesses and hotels cannot progress as a result of Uisce Éireann saying it does not have a timeframe for it. It is a complete lack of accountability. It is not acceptable in this day and age. I invite the Minister and the Minister of State to come to Donegal, to go to Glenfin, to go out to Gabhla to talk to the people in that area who rely on the tourism product there, and to come to Gaoth Dobhair and look at the projects that are stalled because Uisce Éireann is not making the investment in rural areas. It is time this ended. We need accountability and investment in rural areas and basic infrastructure in the year of 2026.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Can the Minister imagine if the water he and his family were drinking was poisonous or if the water was poisonous for their families and children and he found out this had been going on for three years? This is the situation on the north side of Cork city. It is actually unbelievable that the manganese levels are so dangerous. This is not me

saying this; it is Uisce Éireann-Irish Water itself, based on testing it has done which we have got through freedom of information. This proves the manganese level is not fit for human consumption, but still there have been no "Do Not Consume" notices put out. No warnings have been given to the public. This is a fact. I have raised this issue here with the Minister, in the housing committee and with Irish Water. We have all the information that proves water in Cork can be toxic and dangerous to human beings when consumed. How could this be allowed anywhere? I know some people might not have water and some might have bad quality water, but I am talking about water that is poison. This is not according to Thomas Gould or Sinn Féin, but according to the World Health Organization, the European Union, Uisce Éireann, the HSE and the EPA, and no one is doing anything. It is like Pontius Pilate; everyone is washing their hands, and they will not protect the people of Cork North-Central.

If this was happening in a leafy suburb where the Minister for Health comes from or where some of the other Ministers, the Tánaiste or the Taoiseach come from, it would not be accepted. This would not be accepted anywhere. There seems to be an attitude that does not worry about them fellows on the north side of Cork at all. Well, I am worried about them because they elect me to come up here and to stand up for them. The water has been poisoned for three years in Cork and still we do not have an investigation. Where is the EPA? Its job is to protect the people. Where is the HSE? Do you know what it is telling me? It is saying that it is getting its results from Irish Water. We have the results and they show that the water is not drinkable. Sometimes, when you run the tap and the water is brown and dirty, you say, "Well, I will not drink it then". The most dangerous part of the situation here is that even when the water runs clean, it is tested and is not fit for human consumption. We have the reports. We have them. Just to let the Minister know, I want to say a major "thank you" to Fred Logue and the Friends of the Irish Environment and the residents of Mount Farran and The Glen who are taking Irish Water to court. Court cases are ongoing at the moment. I want to send a special "thank you" to Gabriel Scally-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. That is his time.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There might be a small bit more time because of the absent Members. I will just mention that Gabriel Scally was instrumental in exposing CervicalCheck. They are exposing Irish Water and what it is doing to the people of Cork. These court cases will be coming up in the new year and people will have to answer the question of how this has been allowed to happen.

Deputy Pa Daly: The first thing I wish to speak about are the ancient wastewater systems in parts of County Kerry. I could list six or seven villages, such as Ballyduff, Fenit, Glenbeigh, Kilcummin, Abbeydorney and Castlegregory in particular, where, in effect, although some progress has been made in Kilcummin, we have a hole in the ground.

5 o'clock

In Castlegregory, it is within 40 yd of a school building. In Fenit and Castlegregory, it is within 100 yd or so of a Blue Flag beach. The wastewater from those villages is pouring out into a hole. There is an overflow tank dug into the ground which has been there for decades. I do not see anything in the national development plan. I do not see anything in any of the

programmes that is going to address the needs of the places like Ballyduff and Duagh, where this system has to be upgraded in a hurry.

It is also affecting the rights of people to build and construct housing and be close to their own villages. Over the past 20 or 25 years in particular, there has been an emphasis from planners to make it more difficult to live in one-off houses and to cluster them in villages. In places like Fenit and Abbeydorney, you cannot build more than two houses together because the wastewater treatment system is not even in place. There have been proposals to construct facilities which would benefit the community in those places but they have not been able to proceed with them because the infrastructure is not there to take any additional wastewater. That is something that needs to be addressed.

I also want to address the Minister about water quality in the rivers, particularly in the catchment area or the upriver of the Feale. We all saw what happened with the flood just before the last general election. There is a problem in the Smearlagh and Awbeg Rivers because there have been a lot of plantations of forestry with vertical drainage. After a flood, it used to take two to three days to fill up, and the anglers would look for that. Now it is two to three hours. It is coming down in a flood and is scouring the banks. We saw the catastrophic effects near the town of Listowel in Killacrim after the flood 16 months ago. That is something which has not been taken into account at all in the OPW's analysis of what happened. It must be looked at. Not only is it affecting those communities but it is wiping out stocks of brown trout and salmon in those tributaries. I am asking the Minister to have a look at that in the programmes he is announcing.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I asked some of my councillor colleagues in Donegal to give me feedback about their involvement with Uisce Éireann and their perspectives. I have been speaking to quite a lot of people in Donegal since statements on the issues with Uisce Éireann last week. This issue of communication is universal. As I said to the Minister last week, and he must agree with this, it is absolutely unacceptable that there is not a list of phone numbers that a public representative can ring. If you are dealing with any other State agency, there are senior people you can call and have a conversation with offline to understand what is going on and to properly communicate for your constituents. We continue to have to work with emails. The problem with that is it takes days to respond. Sometimes you need a response quickly and you cannot wait days. The Minister knows that as a long-standing public representative. This issue has to be sorted out. It is at the core of the culture that is there.

I raise the lack of accountability. It is a culture of arrogance. There are so many concerns. Staff used to be in the local authorities across the State. Now there is this centralisation and outsourcing to huge numbers of companies. There are big concerns about the efficiencies of that, of whether there is a much bigger cost now to do work that used to cost a lot less when it was under the control of the local authorities with dedicated staff. There are big concerns.

I meet with the HSE about health matters. I meet Donegal County Council regularly. I can lift the phone to anybody - the hospitals, the schools and every single public service I can think of. However, here we have this crucial service of water and sewerage and you cannot get answers and accountability in a timely fashion. You can send an email and get a response in due course. Often that is not good enough. It does not work and is not sustainable.

I want to talk about the Eddie Fullerton Dam. It is named after my late and great colleague, Councillor Eddie Fullerton, who fought for that for years. It is a massive project based just outside Buncrana on the Inishowen peninsula. It was always understood that this water would also be used to help other communities in Donegal. The water is being directed up to Letterkenny, our major county town. That is fine with me but two other things have to happen in tandem with that. It should not be going past houses that are being left behind on the Inishowen peninsula. It should benefit the Inishowen peninsula. It should benefit Letterkenny but there should also be other infrastructure plans other than Letterkenny. I said this last week and will say it again but if Uisce Éireann was around then, I do not think it would have happened. That is the way it was then. It happened and the project drove on. Uisce Éireann has inherited this fantastic dam, reservoir, project and water supply. It is an absolute blessing but it is not developing around the hills of Letterkenny and it is bypassing homes in Inishowen. It is causing friction and concern.

If I could get speaking to senior officials in Irish Water, I would not have to make this speech. My final appeal to the Minister is to please make it clear that it is time for respect for public representatives and communities. It is time for answers and accountability from Uisce Éireann. It is time for an end to the culture of arrogance.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak today. Priority or urgent areas of focus for me include the need for new water mains in Dunboyne and Duleek but with the limited time available to me, I will restrict my comments to the urgent need for investment in surface water and wastewater infrastructure in Kells, County Meath. These issues are long identified but the responsible authorities from top to bottom and bottom to top have failed to address them. As confirmed to my council colleague, Councillor Michael Gallagher, at a recent council meeting, specific local failures during storms include the culvert in Riverside estate, the pipe crossing on the R147 at the local graveyard, the gully on the R164 Athboy road and those in the back lanes at Headfort Grove. These are not isolated problems but symptoms of a failing decades-old infrastructure. While the promised remedial works at these four locations are urgently needed, they are only a start. We need a full town audit of the antiquated network in Kells. This is essential for future-proofing the town against increasingly frequent deluges, like today, and for supporting responsible development.

We cannot look at surface water in isolation. The wastewater infrastructure in Kells is also under severe strain, as detailed in the Kells sewerage scheme network upgrade report from January 2020. The report makes clear that approximately 13 km of our existing sewer network requires intervention to meet modern standards. In its recommendation, it recommends decommissioning and removal of the Blackwater flow combined sewer overflow, CSO, and conveyance of flows downstream to the wastewater treatment plant. It calls for significant investment in the wastewater treatment plant itself, including by constructing a new storm tank. There is a number of other significant proposals that have not been actioned six years later. These are not minor projects. We must have a twin track investment strategy that addresses both our surface water and wastewater systems in an integrated way. The solutions are there. What we need is the commitment and funding from the Government to implement them.

Deputy Martin Kenny: One of the big issues we have as parliamentarians is when we write to the Minister, he writes back to us and says he cannot talk to us and to talk to Irish Water.

That is one of the big problems that an awful lot of Members of this Dáil have. Continuously, I have written to various Ministers, the Minister and the Ministers of State about issues about water.

The can is always kicked to Irish Water. All we get from Irish Water is a very curt reply if we get any at all. That is a problem. Irish Water is not a private company. I need to repeat that; it is not a private company.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is a public company and, therefore, it has a public responsibility to answer public representatives and it does not do that. The Minister cannot also abdicate his responsibilities around that. That is the first point I want to make, and I hope the Minister hears that point very clearly. We will no longer accept this notion that the Minister - water and local government are covered in his brief - is not going answer questions around Uisce Éireann. Please, make sure that that practice ends in his Department and Ministry.

The issues have been well aired regarding various problems in different parts of country. They are no different in my area. They are no different, particularly in parts of County Leitrim, where there are towns where the wastewater system is at maximum capacity already. Even if planning permission is given to build 50 houses in places like Mohill, Drumshanbo or other towns, they cannot get a letter from Uisce Éireann saying that they can go ahead with that because the capacity is not there to do it. That is the same in an awful lot of areas. At the moment, for the whole of south Leitrim, water that is treated comes from the River Shannon, outside of Carrick-on-Shannon. There is a big treatment facility there. That treatment facility is at 120% capacity. It is producing more water than it was designed to produce. If there is a burst or problem, we all have a serious issue.

That brings me to the example I have written to the Minister about and he has kicked back the letter saying to talk to Uisce Éireann regarding it. There is a group scheme in an area outside of Drumshanbo, which is up on the mountain. This group scheme takes its water from a set of spring wells in the mountains. There are thousands of acres. It is a clear open mountain. The water is of the highest quality. Naturally, to meet the requirements, it has to get a small level of treatment. It applied to Uisce Éireann to get the grants to upgrade its treatment facilities. It will not give them the grants. It says, "No. We want to take over your supply." It wants to take it in charge. That is fine. However, when it talked about taking it in charge, it said that if takes it in charge, it will no longer use that water. It will pump the water from Carrick-on-Shannon up the top of the mountain, even though at the moment it cannot supply enough of it for everywhere else. This particular group scheme has not got one pump because all houses on it are kilometres below and with gravity it flows to everybody. The running costs of it are negligible. Yet, Uisce Éireann refuses to give the scheme the small grant its needs to provide the practices that need to be in place to keep the water clean.

There is a big problem here. The problem is that nobody wants to think outside of the box. When you create Uisce Éireann or projects like that, it simply closes down everything and no project can go ahead because it has to have its rules and regulations in place. I ask the Minister to keep those points in mind.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Communities across the State, particularly rural communities, are paying the price for decades of underinvestment in our water and wastewater infrastructure. This leads to issues in terms of public health, the environment and particularly housing. A total of 70% of the land that is zoned for housing in County Galway cannot be built on because of infrastructural deficits, including water and wastewater. We see big announcements in terms of funding but we do not see delivery on the ground. Funding was announced three years ago for the provision of wastewater infrastructure in Clarinbridge and Craughwell in County Galway. Since then, these projects have been at a standstill. The costs have gone up. Before Christmas, we saw Government TDs welcoming an increase of funding for the project. However, the Government still has not addressed the main barrier to delivering these projects, which is a requirement that Galway County Council provides matched funding of several million euro. If the project goes over budget, the local authority would have to cover the costs. Galway County Council does not have this money. It has not budgeted for it. The investment will not generate any financial return for the council either. It will be handed over to Uisce Éireann once the project is completed. How can the county council be expected to foot this bill for millions?

I have raised this matched funding requirement with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, a number of times. I still have not received an answer on it. It seems like penny pinching by the Government. This needs to be sorted because it is holding up these projects which are so badly needed. This is having such an impact on the people of Craughwell and Clarinbridge, the local environment and housing. How are we going to solve the housing crisis if we cannot get basic things like this right? I ask the Minister to address this. We need this cofunding requirement to be taken away to ensure that these projects can finally get moving. Not to mention the dozens of other towns and villages across County Galway where there is the same lack of adequate wastewater infrastructure but no funding has been forthcoming, which I have raised here on a number of occasions. This includes the likes of Corofin, Abbeyknockmoy, Ardrahan and Monivea. We are still waiting for the Mountbellew scheme to progress. We need to see funding forthcoming. We need to get delivery of these projects right too.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister for his speech. To try to be somewhat constructive, we had good news from the Government this week with the €250 million announcement in my constituency into water treatment in Bunlicky near Mungret, County Limerick. That is important because once the work is done the capacity of that plant will be able to serve 285,000 people. This is more than double what it can do at the moment. This is vital because the population of Limerick is going to go up by 50% under the targets that are there.

As a country, we are in a sense fundamentally not serious about the way we treat water and the way we treat Uisce Éireann as a utility that provides critical infrastructure. The issues Deputies have had around the country have been well aired at this stage. The fact of the matter is that Uisce Éireann should have a multi-annual funding settlement. Every year, it has to enter the budgetary process in the same way as social protection, education, justice and so on and, essentially, bid for its fair share. This creates an uncertainty and hinders its ability to plan and deliver the long-term infrastructure projects that we need. Some of these projects can take five or ten years.

As we emerge from what is essentially a lost decade when it comes to infrastructure, one of the results of that is poor water services and high leakage rates. We need to learn the lessons that come with that. One of the lessons is to provide utilities like Uisce Éireann with a multi-annual funding settlement. The funding uncertainty that comes from the failure to provide it and other utilities with the certainty that comes with multi-annual funding is a huge threat to our ability to deliver housing at scale.

It is fashionable and it might sound good to come in here and have a right go at Irish Water. It is far from perfect. I have had huge issues with it. It is doing its best to operate within the constraints that this Government and previous Governments have placed on it. It is supposed to be a single national utility. It needs to be properly considered as such as opposed to the old system of the local authorities and the local authorities coming together. It needs €100 billion of funding up to 2050. That is the true scale of underinvestment that we have had in water services in this country. In fairness to the Government, it has allocated €12 billion over the next four years. It is only after a very successful public lobbying and I would argue shaming campaign in respect of Uisce Éireann.

We need to recalibrate how we consider, think about and deliver water infrastructure. We need to stop thinking of Uisce Éireann just as this utility to help us to fulfil our environmental compliance obligations. We need to start to consider it, fund it and think about it as a vital utility to allow us to reach our housing targets. What I mean by this is to commit it the funding to deliver on the housing targets beyond 2029 on an ongoing multi-annual basis.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I welcome these statements. I have said it on the floor of the Dáil before that the water in my hometown of Mallow is destroying every single washing machine, kettle and shower head in every single house in Mallow because it is hard water. What I always get back from the Government is that it is not bad for you.

That is fine but it is bad for the pocket and that is a fact. I am no expert on this, and I ask the Minister to go away and find out from Irish Water whether it is possible to put in a water softener at source to prevent hard water destroying these utensils in homes. Do not tell people to put a water softener into their houses because it costs about €3,000. The average working family of a mother, father and a couple of kids cannot afford this €3,000 for a water softener but every single year or two they have to buy a new showerhead, a new kettle and a new washing machine. It is simply not good enough.

The lack of sustainable good water on the north side of Cork city is an absolute shambles. At the public accounts committee recently I was informed that complaints have gone down. Is it any wonder complaints have gone down? Complaints have gone down because people are sick and tired of ringing and complaining. This is why complaints have gone down. Do not take it as any sort of evidence that good work is being done because it is not. People are sick of ringing and giving out about it. People wake up in the morning and they do not know whether they will have brown water coming out of the tap or the shower. Some people have had to bathe their children in brown water. It is simply not good enough.

I want to focus on council staff who are now employed by Irish Water. This is something that has come up on the doorsteps on a number of occasions with employees themselves and with their family members. I do not understand it. They have the local knowledge. In some instances, it has been referred to me that Irish Water has sent out engineers who then ring local

staff who have worked with the local authority to try to get the work done. There are a number of issues and I ask the Minister to go away and work on them.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The planning permission for the project in Clonshaugh has gone through and the judicial review has been withdrawn. We need to ensure there is no impediment to the development of this vital project for the north side of Dublin, particularly for the 6,000 houses in my constituency of Dublin Central that rely on the development of this wastewater project.

The issue I want to raise today is with regard to lead in our pipes. It is a significant issue in Dublin and in other parts of the country. The reality is that we have a water directive from 2020, and arguably the Government is taking a very pedestrian pace with regard to its transposition. It will be 2036 when we will see the legal limit go from ten units per litre to five units per litre. I believe the Government needs to show leadership and move much more speedily on this.

Another key issue is that in 2023 the Environmental Protection Agency flagged very serious issues with regard to the pace at which Irish Water is replacing individual lead pipe connections across Dublin. At that stage only 35% of connections were done. We need to see a much greater increase in this. This comes back to funding. Issues in my community in Phibsborough and in other communities have been detected because of academics testing in our communities and finding extraordinarily high levels of lead. We are not quite clear on why this is happening and whether it is the public system or the connections in people's households. We have asked Irish Water to undertake comprehensive testing of the area and it has come back to say it will do spot checks in particular areas, which is welcome, but it is not comprehensive. We need to give certainty because of the impact of lead on people. We know it causes huge damage in particular to infants, young people and older people. People need to be given this information. My clear call to the Minister is to make sure Uisce Éireann is properly resourced and financed to get on with the job of replacing lead connections in Dublin and give an assurance to everybody out there that they have little or no lead in their systems.

Deputy George Lawlor: The issue of unfinished estates is something the Minister is familiar with. It is taking an inordinate amount of time for estates to be taken in charge, particularly some of the older ones where I appreciate there are some difficulties. Mostly the hold-up is down to Uisce Éireann. County councils, unusually, have come to the table on this and have said they are anxious to take estates in charge, yet Irish Water seems very reluctant to allow this to happen. It wants to engage with developers and companies but some of the developers have, sadly, passed away. Some of the companies involved in the development of these estates are gone. Who are we waiting for? Who are we going to be able to call? We cannot call the developers who have passed away or the companies that have gone. Still Uisce Éireann will not agree to allow or facilitate the taking in charge of these estates.

With regard to new connections, I have spoken to a number of developers who, when they look to develop new homes, and I know this is a key tenet of the Minister's campaign on the housing issue, often hit brick walls when it comes to accessing the network or infrastructure. I spoke to one developer who had to invest €1.4 million to upgrade Uisce Éireann facilities or else wait three years before he could build 180 houses. Another developer had to invest €1.3 million as Uisce Éireann would not intervene, and there were 500 houses involved. Luckily

these developers went ahead and invested the money but, unfortunately, it was the new home owners who had to foot the bill. This is happening across the country in county after county. All the big Irish civil engineering companies have reported that they are in the UK operating and building the water infrastructure there because there is no, for want of a better word, pipeline of work here for them to depend on. I ask the Minister to look at these two issues of unfinished estates and new connections.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the chance to speak to the Minister on this issue. I want to raise a number of local issues in my area of south Kildare. In recent years there has been very welcome development in the Allenwood and Kilmeague area, after long representations by many public representatives. We are having continuous problems during this work with outages and a lot of businesses and homes are suffering. Will the Minister look at this and give an update to the locals in the area?

Not for the first time, I want to raise the issue of the Curragh Camp. In recent days the water has been out there. The Minister is familiar, I am sure, with the fact there are a number of schools and the Army facilities on the Curragh Camp. A school has had to close because of the lack of water facilities. I ask the Minister to look at what is going on in the Curragh Camp at present and to assist through Irish Water in every way that we can.

I also want to raise Ballymany Manor in Newbridge, which is a new estate on the edge of the town. Unfortunately, this particular estate has been subject to water problems every evening since it was built. Young children who come home from school and people who come home from work are unable to take showers because the water has been reduced to a dribble. I have engaged with Irish Water on this on a number of occasions and it tells me that work is under way or is promised. Unfortunately, this work has not yet happened. I ask the Minister to look at the particular areas I have highlighted this evening.

I want to speak about developer infrastructure. In his speech the Minister said Uisce Éireann, as the national water authority, is now in a position to engage with developers on this initiative. I have been contacted by some developers who want to build houses that are badly needed in a housing emergency. Do they contact Uisce Éireann, the Department or the local authority? How quickly will this be up and running? Perhaps the Minister will give us some information on this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I made a number of points in last week's debate, which I will not repeat except for one. Once again I want to raise the issue of the connection of newly built homes in Knocksedan in Swords. These are not homes that are planned, in the pipeline or which might come. These are homes that have been built. I first spoke to Irish Water about this issue on 21 March 2025. I received a full answer to that question only on 30 October 2025, six months later. However, it was not satisfactory in terms of rectifying the problem. The people who have scrimped and saved and worked hard to purchase these homes have been told time and again that the date for this to be resolved keeps getting pushed back. The most recent date they have been given is March 2026. During all this time they have not been allowed in to view the property they have bought. It is absolutely outrageous. Can we have clarity? Have contracts been signed on this? When will the connections be made? Will these people, who have done so much to buy these homes, be able to move in as soon as possible? It is pathetic that this carry-on has been happening for so long.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I will start with accountability in Irish Water. As the Minister knows, Members of the House have the right to ask parliamentary questions to various Ministers, including to him.

If I want to help someone with a driving test, I can write a parliamentary question to the Minister for Transport, and he will refer it to the RSA. With regard to health, if I am trying to help someone on a waiting list for cataracts, I can write a parliamentary question for the Minister for Health, and she will refer it to the HSE. When I write a parliamentary question to Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage asking about Irish Water and when it is going to invest in a certain plant or when it is going to do certain works, I get an answer back from the Ceann Comhairle's office saying that under Standing Order 44, this is not a matter for the Minister to respond to and that it is a matter for Uisce Éireann and that I can email Uisce Éireann at oireachtasmembers@water.ie.

I am not going to get into that representative's email address today because I do not have the time and, to be honest, my blood pressure cannot deal with trying to explain just how frustrating that is. However, as a Member of this House I am entitled to answers, and I cannot get them. That is not the Minister's fault. It is not because he is not refusing to answer and the Ceann Comhairle is not preventing him from answering it, but it is the way Irish Water was established. It will not answer parliamentary questions. Those who established Irish Water in that Government and those who held those positions should answer why that is the case and why I cannot hold them to account.

If I want to ask about water outages in Rathcabbín or previously if I wanted to ask about Gortnahoe, Glengoose or Ballysloe, I will be told Irish Water will not answer a parliamentary question or the Minister cannot answer one through Irish Water. If I want to ask about the wastewater treatment plants in Cloughjordan or Ballycommon, Irish Water cannot answer a parliamentary question on it. If I want to ask how much money Irish Water has spent trucking sewage out of Ballycommon and into another plant because the plant there does not work, I cannot get that answer either. As a Member of Dáil Éireann sent here by the people of Tipperary North and north-west Kilkenny that is absolutely ridiculous. When asking for updates on the very welcome €50 million being spent in Nenagh at the moment on a wastewater treatment plant, I cannot get a parliamentary question response. I avoid writing to Irish Water as often as I can and try to find another avenue because of the absolute shambolic answers we get back from the Oireachtas Members email address time and time again.

By 2030, this Government is going to have spent €12.2 billion on water and wastewater infrastructure in this country. That is phenomenal, historic and unprecedented, and it is fantastic, but if I want to submit a parliamentary question asking for accountability, I cannot get an answer to it. I want accountability in this House. The people who put me here want accountability in this House and I should be able to expect and, indeed, demand parliamentary question responses from Irish Water. That Standing Order needs to change for the functioning of democracy in this country.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I will follow on from Deputy O'Meara, with whom I entirely agree on the accountability of Uisce Éireann. Last July I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister around the question of accountability of Uisce Éireann to these Houses. While his office responded that he does not have a say in the operational matters, it was indicated that

Uisce Éireann could be called before some of the parliamentary committees. That is not good enough. In terms of the response we get as elected TDs, we should be treated with more courtesy. Not so long ago I had a situation in Gorey where I had facilitated meetings with two development groups. One was from the Ferns-Camolin area, which the Minister knows very well, and the other from Aughrim, County Wicklow. In that case, officials from Uisce Éireann agreed to meet with me as an elected representative but were not happy to meet with the groups I had brought to meet with them. We must have a situation whereby a State utility is accountable to elected Members.

I commend the Minister on all the work he is doing, particularly in terms of the announcements regarding housing activation and so on this week. The biggest domestic challenge is the construction of housing. Water and wastewater infrastructure is critical to that but I am not convinced that Uisce Éireann sees that as part of its core mission. The chief executive and senior personnel in Uisce Éireann should be waking up every morning and asking the question: "What are we doing to try to help in the construction of homes in Ireland?" The Minister and I both know from listening to developers that Uisce Éireann is one of the biggest barriers to home construction at the moment. We need to be more demanding of Uisce Éireann in terms of its responsibilities to us as democratically elected Members. I ask the Minister to look again at the Uisce Éireann legislation in terms of ensuring that Uisce Éireann becomes more accountable.

Regarding the two specific schemes and the groups I brought in, these communities have been waiting for a long time for water and wastewater facilities. Aughrim is a beautiful village that cannot grow. We have been told if we allow a private developer to build its own treatment plant in the community, it will ultimately be taken over by Uisce Éireann provided it is up to spec. I welcome the Minister's reforms in that regard. It is absolutely critical if those planning applications go in, that the developers are supported both by Uisce Éireann and Wicklow County Council to ensure we can see homes built in a village like Aughrim.

Similarly, the Minister will be very familiar with Camolin and Ferns and the requirements there. Those communities cannot expand because of the lack of water and wastewater capacity. One of the challenges in Camolin we know is that we have problems around pollution of the River Bann running right through Camolin village. Complaints have been made to the EPA about the need to address the problem of pollution of that river. We need to see a wastewater treatment plant put in place for Ferns and Camolin. Those communities have been waiting over 20 years. While it is great for some of the larger urban centres where water and wastewater treatment plants are built, it is also critical, even if it is only two or three projects every year, that in a number of villages, including those my colleague and friend Deputy O'Meara mentioned and the one's the Minister will be familiar with in counties Wexford and Wicklow, a scheme is put in place. The Minister knows, if those villages with no capacity currently have the capacity to build 20 to 30 homes every year, not alone will it help to address the housing crisis, it will also help to make those villages sustainable in terms of shops, schools, post offices and other facilities.

I commend what the Minister is doing on housing, but it is not just about getting the developers building the houses. Housing depends essentially on electricity and crucially on water and wastewater connections. The Minister needs to be asking the chief executive and the board of Uisce Éireann whether their first question every morning is: "How are we helping

people to build homes?" I do not believe it is. If we need to amend the legislation to ensure Uisce Éireann sees itself as part of that ecosystem and that we can expect more accountability as elected Members, we need to do it as soon as possible.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The announcement earlier this week by the Minister that the Bunlicky wastewater treatment plant is to be upgraded with construction commencing in 2028 is very welcome news. The population of Limerick and its surrounds is increasing at a very fast rate and this upgrade should help, should the Government deliver on its planned housing targets. While based on the performance in previous years, I doubt it can deliver the projected housing targets, preparatory work like this is to be welcomed. We remain in a very difficult situation when it comes to water infrastructure across Ireland.

In July last year, the Committee on Budgetary Oversight stated the water infrastructure deficit is limiting the supply of housing and other infrastructure. Significant issues remain from the so-called Celtic tiger period, with significant leakage remaining in our infrastructure and I fear there is not sufficient funding to local authorities and Uisce Éireann to address this.

When there are deficits in water infrastructure often houses cannot be developed, homes cannot be built, businesses cannot expand, and environmental protections are often compromised. Uisce Éireann is trying to address the issues of leakage through the national leakage reduction plan. It has completed works in areas of Limerick to address some of the leakage and, again, this is to be welcomed. It is high time, however, that these leaks and wastage be addressed properly.

I regret that its level of communication both with elected Members and the general public can be absolutely appalling. The public are resilient; they can handle interruptions to the supply once they are kept informed of developments, but this simply does not happen with Uisce Éireann. In December 2025, areas of Limerick were left without access to water for six days. The Irish Water text alert system notified people of the outage, but what is frustrating is that the system and the email correspondence offered no information whatsoever to customers as to when the outage would finish.

Families and businesses rely on accurate information so they can plan for necessary interruptions to the water supply. In some instances, the failure of communication is even more profound, in particular when it comes to boil notices. In May last year, boil notices were issued in areas of Limerick city, including Moyross, Corbally and the Mill Road. However, if people visited the Uisce Éireann website at the time and entered their eircode from another part of the city, they were told a boil notice was in operation across the whole city, but there was not. The maps, press notices and website offered contrary information to each other. This led to utter confusion across Limerick for most of the day and stress and concern for thousands of residents who thought they had to boil their water when they did not. I received reports of supermarkets running out of bottled water. The excuses offered at the time, which included a computer glitch, are simply not acceptable. As an elected Member for Limerick, if I contact Irish Water about an issue, there is a failure to adequately respond. That needs to be addressed. This is simply not good enough.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I really welcome the opportunity to speak about Uisce Éireann because we are at a serious crisis point in terms of infrastructure in this country. For years,

underinvestment by successive Fianna Fáil- and Fine Gael-led Governments has put us in the situation in which we now find ourselves.

In my constituency of Kildare North, water supply and infrastructure are under severe pressure. I have heard from constituents about the low water pressure in parts of Hazelhatch and Celbridge without any warning. Those in the upper floors of apartments had no water at all for years. Since the improvements were made, the upper floors of apartments do not have the proper water pressure. They face particular difficulties at the weekend due to the high demand. This is a result of the lack of investment from the Government and Uisce Éireann in our water structure. We have ageing pipes that cannot stand the continuous demand for water in large parts of the constituency. We have ended up in this situation while the Government has ignored our repeated calls to invest in this rotting infrastructure and to provide quality water services to those who need it. However, that has not been the case in so many other parts of my constituency. We have had repeated outages in Leixlip and Maynooth as well, on the Celbridge Road, where the pipe constantly bursts, which is hampering the ability of residents to go about their daily lives. It interferes with cooking, cleaning and other daily essentials. This has repeatedly left people frustrated with the lack of action from the Government. People are really frustrated about this. The quality of life around the country is decreasing, between low water pressure, frequent blackouts and unreliable transport.

What will happen to our water infrastructure when the population of Kildare North explodes in the coming years, as it is expected to do? The Government has failed massively to properly plan in areas of north Kildare. Massive property developments are going up with no supporting infrastructure. The pipes are already breaking at the seams according to the reports of repeated leaks, as the population expands. How will our creaking water infrastructure survive the population boom in Kildare North? We need immediate, planned multi-annual investment in our water supply and water infrastructure to ensure that not only will homes be built, but they will be accompanied by the necessary infrastructure.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister knows water is a human right. While it is good that the Government is committed to support Uisce Éireann as a public utility, there are still significant issues in relation to water and wastewater across this country. There are also significant issues in Dublin where there are still major issues with leakages from pipes. A significant amount of clean, treated water is escaping from pipes and being lost. That is a loss of a natural resource and the investment that has gone into treating it. What is the Minister going to do to improve the significant leakage from old pipes in Dublin, which are losing a huge amount of our water? That is linked directly to what we are inevitably going to see again this summer in terms of water shortages. Dublin's water infrastructure is in a serious crisis, but that is also the case with its wastewater infrastructure. This connects directly to the need to develop housing, which we know is significant across Dublin city. We need to expand and increase the number of homes that are going to be built, but that is all going to put significant pressure on the existing water and wastewater infrastructure. I do not believe that Uisce Éireann, as it currently operates, is set up to meet that capacity and deliver the water and wastewater infrastructure to the extent to, which it is required and to bring it up to the standards that are needed so as to avoid us facing situations of water shortages and also the huge loss of water that is happening.

We still face a problem with the Ringsend treatment plant where wastewater is being discharged into Dublin Bay at various points when there is a severe overload due to excessive

rainwater. That happens, as we are seeing right now. Many people in my constituency use Dublin Bay. They swim in various parts of it, on the north side of it or on the south side. They use Dollymount Strand. For many people, Dublin Bay is one of the key spaces in which they can engage in leisure time and connect with nature. It is unacceptable that at many points throughout the year Dublin Bay is not usable because of poor water quality. While Uisce Éireann says that the Government has given it extra funding, it is not sufficient from the point of view of my constituents and the public to address the issues that are there.

I also want to address an issue I previously raised when I spoke on this matter. While I welcome the commitment to Uisce Éireann as a public utility, we cannot get away from the reality, which is that for many decades since the 1970s, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been following the policies of privatisation and outsourcing of various public services. Within the set-up of Uisce Éireann, there was an intention to privatise it. That is why there is still a need to hold a referendum to enshrine water as a human right and as a public good. We need that guarantee. One of the things that has given me significant concern is the Minister's proposal to allow private developers to provide wastewater infrastructure. I understand that he is saying it is in order to accelerate the delivery of housing infrastructure, but I have a concern about it. What this shows is that despite the claims that Uisce Éireann is sufficiently funded, it is clearly not. If the Minister has to rely on private developers to provide wastewater infrastructure, clearly Uisce Éireann does not have that capacity. What he needs to do is to accept that Uisce Éireann does not have the capacity to develop the water and wastewater infrastructure that is needed to develop the homes, and he is relying on private developers to fill the gap. Why is that problematic? It is problematic because we have seen the issues with private development when they cut corners. They are doing it for profit. They are not doing it as a charity. I am concerned that we are going to be dealing with substandard water and wastewater infrastructure put in by private developers because of the Government's failure to ensure that Uisce Éireann is delivering and has the capacity and funding to deliver what is needed.

I want to ask the Minister about the infrastructure fund that was announced today, which includes a reference to water. He said it is a €1 billion fund. Is the fund going to be used, for example, to deliver water and wastewater infrastructure? Is this additional funding on top of what was announced already or is it an announcement of the funding that was set out in the housing plan?

Will the Minister clarify that? Is it funding that was already allocated within the housing budget and essentially an announcement of something that existed? Will the Minister clarify how much funding this scheme is going to give out each year? Will he clarify how much of it he expects to be given to private developers and the private market, which he mentioned in his press release today? Does he have any concern about additional public funding being given to private developers? We could actually see private developers being given public money to develop wastewater and water infrastructure for housing projects when Irish Water, the public utility, should be getting that funding to do it. Does the Minister see why, as a result, we might be concerned that Government still holds to the idea that the market should ultimately deliver these things rather than our public services? Of course, it is part of the playbook of neoliberalism to run down public services so they can then be privatised.

Deputy Liam Quaide: We could spend all day every day discussing the dysfunction of Uisce Éireann and the many forms it takes. In the brief time I have, I will share a vignette of that

dysfunction and its impact on people with reference to Knockane, Castlemartyr, County Cork. It is a townland in east Cork in my own constituency where there was an outage over Christmas that affected just eight households. This situation is replicated throughout the country. A small number of families was involved but the impact at that time of year was prolonged and severe. This outage occurred on 19 December and lasted until 28 December. The residents had no running water at all during that time. I am informed the problem relates to an antiquated pipe that needs replacement. Outages were occurring frequently in this townland as far back as September.

One family was in a very vulnerable situation. They have a young child with a medical condition who was recently discharged from hospital. They were left stranded throughout that time. Over those ten days or so, my office was calling on Uisce Éireann to supply water tankers and to give clear updates on the state of repairs. I am sure other local public representatives were also advocating for the families affected. Despite that level of representation, the family I mentioned had to take to the airwaves six days into the outage, on Christmas Eve, to highlight their situation.

The family were at pains to emphasise that the ground workers with Uisce Éireann were working very hard to resolve the issue and were compassionate and very receptive to them. However, no water tanker was supplied at any stage during that ten-day period. This was despite residents receiving many reference numbers for requests they made to Uisce Éireann's Kafkaesque online system for tankers. There were two days on which bottled water was not supplied to homes. Some of the considerable distress this caused could easily have been addressed even if the repairs were always going to take as long as they did.

Knockane, Castlemartyr is one of many examples from around the country where Uisce Éireann's cold faceless bureaucracy is failing people at the most basic level. Its problems are not the fault of its ground workers. There is a dramatic gap in accountability, transparency, accessibility and basic functioning in Uisce Éireann that the Government needs to address urgently.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Fintan O'Toole wrote a piece in the *Irish Times* this week about why Ireland is, in his opinion, governed so badly. One of the points he raised was that elected representatives of all parties and none spend so much time making representations to various services and bodies on behalf of constituents when our priority should be policy-making and developing legislation, whether nationally, regionally or locally. Water is one of the services public representatives make the most representations and raise the most cases about throughout the country. I have listened to much of this evening's debate with great interest arising from my time as a councillor and my time here in Leinster House. We have heard that, in every county, every constituency, every town, every village and every parish, there are significant problems with our water infrastructure. The Minister of State captured it quite succinctly in his opening statement. I support the investment this Government intends to make and the investment the previous Government made. It is certainly making a difference.

The population of County Kildare has increased from 120,000 to over 250,000 in 30 years. It has more than doubled in a very short span. Infrastructure development has not nearly kept pace. I could list off what that means for the people of Kildare. There are tankers going into Allenwood every day to empty sewage tanks because the system simply cannot keep up with

demand. Schools throughout the constituency are trying to get new systems set up but they cannot get the services. There are consistent outages in Leixlip. The Dunboyne Road in Maynooth has been left in ruins by Irish Water contractors. There are a catalogue of issues.

In stark contrast, information Uisce Éireann provided to the Committee of Public Accounts last week shows that nearly 50 of the highest earners in that body, whose salaries are between €122,000 and €225,000, are getting an average bonus of nearly €22,000 a year. Is this Government willing to stand over that approach? We are seeing comprehensive failures from a strategic perspective. Let me be very clear about the people on the ground in this utility. God knows they have been tested in Kildare. When they are called upon, they do incredible work. The problem is that, when they fix a hole, another hole arises down the road. The overall strategic development of our utility and water infrastructure is not fit for purpose in a county that continues to grow unsustainably. During that meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts last week, I asked the Comptroller and Auditor General whether there was any comparable utility in which bonuses like this are paid. In 2024, 93.5% of the utility's staff got their full bonus. This led me to think about what targets are being set for senior management within the utility. Is there governmental oversight of those? This does not happen in the ESB, CRU, EirGrid or anywhere else. Such lucrative bonuses are not paid while consistent systemic failures continue. That is my question for the Minister of State. He will not have time to come back to me on it but perhaps we can discuss it again. This financial model really needs re-evaluation. I implore the Government to take this matter quite seriously.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will make a point about services in this country and the general bureaucracy that holds up every single development that is undertaken. I should not say "every single development" but it is an issue for some major developments. We do not seem to be capable of empowering local authorities or Government agencies to deliver efficiently and well. If that was done, we would not have the same number of TDs, councillors and Senators making representations. When a service does not function, the general public has nowhere to turn other than to us. I attended a public meeting in Inistioge about the development of the village and a neighbouring area called The Rower. At one stage, this area was second on the list to have facilities provided by the council or Irish Water. Now, it is fifth on the list and no one can explain why. We cannot have a system that randomly picks one place over another. Huge investment must be made through Irish Water and directed towards villages and towns that want to develop, that have areas to develop and where people want to live. I will say another thing about Irish Water.

6 o'clock

The Greenfields housing estate in Kilkenny is serviced by an antiquated system that is just completely broken down. Irish Water will not provide the turn-off valves that are necessary to control the water should there be a burst pipe. Very recently, there was a burst pipe. A house gets flooded and who do the people turn to? Their local public representative or TD. What we get from Irish Water is just static. There is no sense of urgency about delivering the corrective measures that are necessary to make sure those households do not flood any more. There is not an understanding from Irish Water about local issues, either. In Inistioge, they were not aware of the fact that very close to the outflow pipe from a treatment system was an area where people got into the water and swam. They did not see it. We have lost a lot of local knowledge as we move towards the bigger entity of Irish Water. That could be said about the HSE as well.

We need to debate it much more here in the Chamber so we get to the point where we are creating the policy and driving it to deliver for the people we represent. Irish Water needs to do much more in the small villages throughout County Kilkenny and indeed Carlow to make it effective in terms of allowing local populations to grow and people to live and work in their own communities.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, for the excellent work he has been doing, in a very practical, down to earth and sensible way, in trying to help the housing situation. By his initiatives and his control of the situation, along with the senior Minister, Deputy Browne, whom I also thank publicly, he is certainly introducing changes that will be felt up and down the length and breadth of this country. They will help our planning authorities by giving clear direction with regard to subdivision, exemptions, modular homes, and the subdivision of properties into houses and apartments. That is all to be welcomed. I hope that initiative of the Minister of State's will be a help in this plague we all have as public representatives in every village and town of derelict, defunct buildings that are lying there for years and years. People were afraid of the planning system. Developers and investors were afraid of it. The Minister of State's initiative will give surety to the planners and people who might buy a property, and to the homeowners themselves. I want to welcome that.

With regard to water and wastewater, I want to thank Irish Water for the work and help they are trying to do in this situation. Infrastructure is the biggest barrier to housing. For example, in places like Kenmare in County Kerry, the lack of mains water is a big hindrance at the moment to development. The recent developer-led infrastructure, DPI, initiative, whereby a developer can come along and provide services that will then be taken over by Irish Water, is to be welcomed. It is an initiative of this Government, of the Minister of State and of the senior Minister and I thank them for that. We have situations in places like Beaufort and I welcome that we have a plan in place for that, but we could be looking at another seven years of a wait. That is too long for the people of Beaufort. There are areas that cannot be developed and cannot grow due to a lack of wastewater facilities, such as Currow, Scartaglin, Caherdaniel and Castlegregory. These are places that are held up at present.

Another thing I want to highlight is where Irish Water is holding up the taking in charge of housing estates. We could have an estate that was developed in the early 2000s, for instance. The standards and regulations that existed at that time, that was the standard. Those housing estates have not been taken over since. Now, if those estates are to be taken over, the answer is that there is massive investment needed to bring them up to the standards of today, but who is going to pay for that? The developer might be gone. We cannot ask the property owners there to pay for it. The bonds are gone back. These people are really held up. I am sorry for going on. I thank the Minister of State for the work he is doing and urge him to keep at it.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I am going to raise the matter of constructed wetlands again. I have been hammering this issue for quite some time now as a member of Kerry County Council and since I have been elected to Dáil Éireann. We have numerous estates all over Kerry that have huge problems with wastewater treatment. We have over 40 villages in Kerry that are unsewered. We have many more that are at capacity, including my own one in Glenbeigh. The south Kerry greenway received €9.2 million the other day to progress the works there. We

opened the first completed section on 19 December last, bringing crowds from everywhere. I have had two separate inquiries in regards to consortiums that want to build hotels in the area. We cannot progress them because there is no sewerage scheme, or the sewerage scheme is at capacity. Many villages, such as Castlegregory, Fenit, Beaufort as the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, mentioned, Cromane, Portmagee, Ballyduff, Duagh and Scartaglin, are affected. I wish to mention in regard to Beaufort that the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, is correct. Irish Water told me last year that it will take another seven years. Some €6 million was announced over two years ago for that scheme, which was increased to €7 million recently. We are talking about ten years to get a scheme completed from start to finish. That is too long. Constructed wetlands are the way forward, especially for the smaller populated areas including all the villages I have mentioned. If there is a bigger population, why not put in two constructed wetlands, or three, indeed? They are much cheaper and faster and they are environmentally friendly.

On drinking water and water quality, there is still a large amount of asbestos pipes bringing water to people's homes in Kerry. It is about time they were replaced. Deputy O'Meara referred earlier to parliamentary questions for Uisce Éireann. We should be getting replies. We should be entitled to ask and get an answer on any specific sewerage scheme. I also want to ask about Fenit.

Finally, regarding constructed wetlands, is it a matter for Kerry County Council to apply for them or do we have to wait for Uisce Éireann to announce a scheme? Is there a process there? When will we know exactly? I know money is there now going forward and that is very welcome but we need action. We need to start building these schemes to address the housing crisis.

Deputy Barry Ward: If I were from Kerry and, between the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, and Deputy Cahill, I had not had my village or townland mentioned, I wonder how I would feel. I understand and agree with many of the issues they have raised.

The issue I want to raise is along the same lines, as it relates primarily to wastewater treatment. In Dublin we have a Victorian wastewater system. It is not fit for purpose any more. The extent of development of building in Dublin, while welcome from the point of view of providing housing that is much needed, means there is absolutely unbearable pressure on that system now. One of the great and easily solved problems is that when it rains heavily, all the run-off from the roads that flows into the gullies at the sides of roads goes into the sewerage system, into the same pipes where toilets are emptied and domestic sewage is emptied. In the case of my own area, it goes down to the West Pier pumping station at Dún Laoghaire and is pumped in an under-seabed pipe to Poolbeg for treatment, before the treatment water is discharged into the sea. That is all very well but because the system is over capacity, the volume of water that is now arriving at the West Pier pumping station is vastly in excess of the capacity of the pipe to pump it into Poolbeg, and vastly in excess of the capacity of Poolbeg to treat the water. What happens on a day like today when it has been lashing rain all day and we have had a lot of water accumulating on the roads and going into those gullies and into the sewerage system?

An excess of water arrives at the West Pier pumping station. In fairness, before Irish Water was there, what is called an attenuation tank was built. It is an overflow tank of 70,000 cu. m

that is there to take that water and hold it until after the rain stops and there is capacity within the pipe once again to pump it to Poolbeg. However, when there is a lot of heavy rain, as there is today, that tank gets full. If you simply hold that water, the tank gets full, the pumping station is beyond capacity and the water backs up. It then comes up through toilets and drains all the way through the areas of south Dublin that are closest to the sea at the bottom of the hills. That is not acceptable. What is done instead is it is dumped into the sea. All of this water that has accumulated at the West Pier pumping station gets put directly into Dublin Bay contributing to E. coli, poor water quality and places where it is unsafe to swim, or even for animals to run around. It is totally unacceptable.

Nobody can tell me in this House how many times that happens per year. We know it will happen several times this week, but nobody could tell me in 2024 or 2025 how many times it happens. The people who live in the area will not know about it until a few days afterwards when the council has tested the water and puts up a no bathing notice. That is not on either. What can we do about it when nobody has any plan to solve it? There is a raft of possible measures, however. The simplest and perhaps the quickest one is to build a second attenuation tank at the West Pier. That would be another 70,000 cu. m that could accommodate the overflow from the overflow, but we have to deal with the underlying problem as well, solve it in quick order and not wait for it to get worse.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I will start by speaking about the basics. When I say "basics", I am talking about water pressure. For the people I represent in Gurteen, Cloonsheecahill and east Galway, there are many places where there is low water pressure. During the summer, it has a detrimental impact on their quality of life and ability to live. In the capital plan developed by Uisce Éireann, there are many references to pumping stations, particularly a pumping station on the mid-Galway water scheme. Will the Minister of State's office undertake to follow up on that? A pumping station should not be something that takes many years. It should be rapid infrastructure that gets delivered to the people who need it because they have to live their lives without that water pressure.

Many estates in east Galway are left in limbo, as they are right across the country. They cannot be taken in charge by the local authority and, simultaneously, they do not have the funds to upgrade infrastructure. What needs to happen first and foremost is that the Department needs to allow local authorities draw down funding whereby footpaths, lights and green areas in unserviced estates within villages can be taken in charge. This would lower the cost burden on homes currently servicing the wastewater and would allow us to plan for the future.

Focusing on Uisce Éireann, I will make a critical point. I have seen the best of Uisce Éireann. I have seen it at Athenry, where €13 million was spent delivering a fantastic upgrade to our sewerage network that will allow us to go from a 5,000-person town to a 9,000-person town. I am glad to report that before Christmas over 180 homes commenced in Athenry. We have 300 homes being built right now, which is really exciting for a town that has so much going for it. I have also seen the worst of Uisce Éireann. When I send a representation, I get a reference number and that is where the representation dies. Nothing comes back to me. It is absolutely vital that if we as public representatives have a query, we can get back to people so they can trust in Uisce Éireann and we can hold it to account.

On that, will the Minister of State follow up on the Eyrecourt sewerage network upgrade that is required? Eyrecourt is a beautiful village in east Galway. It has a fine community hall, which it has invested in over the past two years. It has a shop, pub, primary school and library. It has so much going for it and such wide beautiful streets, but the reality is that it has a population crisis. Until that sewerage network is upgraded, we will not see any improvement for villages like Eyrecourt. Will the Minister of State's office undertake to follow that up?

Deputy Paula Butterly: We have water, water everywhere, except flowing through the pipes and down through the taps in County Louth. I fear I will be very repetitive, like many of my colleagues. As Deputy Barry Ward said about previous speakers, I am about to take the Minister of State on a whistle-stop tour, this time of County Louth. While I recognise that Uisce Éireann committed €28 million to Drogheda last year, the problems are so long and so vast that three minutes is not enough.

I will point out the housing growth pressure issue. County Louth is ahead of its social housing targets and the number of private houses is growing at a rapid rate throughout the county. Yet, we see that the infrastructure is not keeping pace with the growth of houses in the county. Constituents' concerns in Dundalk have been treated with what I can only describe as disdain. Following a recent meeting with constituents, serious concerns were again raised about the pump station and the treatment plant. Mount Avenue, Dundalk and Blackrock residents have continuously been in contact with Uisce Éireann and my office to talk about the capacity, or rather the lack of capacity. They do not believe the new developments will be fit for purpose as a result of the service failures.

There are chronic failures and delays. Communities across the county continue to face repeated water outages, bursts and wastewater contamination incidents. Without any binding repair timelines, these failures are undermining the confidence in new housing delivery and public services. Worst of all, perhaps, are the prolonged discharges of raw and partially treated wastewater into rivers and coastal waters. The Glyde, the Fane and the Boyne are just a few of the rivers, not to mention the streams, that continue to pose a serious risk to public health and environmental quality.

I have raised this issue again and again. As Deputy Barry Ward said of his constituency, when it rains today, tomorrow and the following week, we will see dirty water overflowing and coming down through our rivers and out to the sea. Blackrock residents will not be able to bathe there. We continue to raise these issues but we are not being listened to.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: We have had years of underinvestment in water, electricity and public transport. One thing annoys people no end: listening to Government Ministers boast about how well the economy is doing when basic services that should be world-class are in a state of despair. On the broader issues of water and repairs, I will give Irish Water some credit. Its communications for upcoming planned works have improved but in terms of outages, problems with supplies and identifying where repairs need to happen, the delays are just unacceptable.

I could stand here like other Deputies and give the Minister of State loads of examples from my constituency, but I have decided to give just one. At Charlemont Lane in Clontarf, residents have had an issue with discolouration in their water since last October. Irish Water did the

testing. There were high levels of metals in the water and some do-not-consume notices were issued. Irish Water, in fairness, did communicate with residents and myself, but the issue is that the actual problem still has not been fixed. Residents are understandably frustrated because they cannot get a timeline for when this work will be done. I understand it can take time to identify the source of a problem, but we are now three months on and this is just a small street.

Expanding and repairing water infrastructure and the sewerage system needs to be a top priority if we want to be able to address the challenges we are facing in this State, but I warn the Government against using these problems with our water infrastructure to try to reintroduce water charges by the back door with an excessive use charge. If it wants to deal with water being wasted, it should fix the pipes because a third of the water goes into the ground before it even hits the tap.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Data from the EPA makes for frightening reading in terms of the quality of our water and the need for proper wastewater and water treatment plants. Avoca, in my local area, is one of 15 locations in Ireland where raw sewage is still being discharged every day, as identified by the EPA. Avoca must be prioritised as a village for upgrading. We were also promised progress with the long-awaited new state-of-the-art treatment plant in Arklow, yet it has now emerged that part of Arklow Harbour is not connected to this new plant. As a result, high levels of E. coli are still being detected in the river, so raw sewage continues to flow directly into the harbour and the River Avoca at Arklow.

I have contacted Uisce Éireann on three separate occasions seeking answers, but a satisfactory reply has yet to come. Connecting the remaining areas to the system must be a priority for Arklow. The Arklow community groups, watersports clubs and young people who use it deserve to have clean, safe water and not sewage.

Meanwhile, the beautiful village of Aughrim has long needed a new wastewater treatment plant to support future development in housing. I have been working with some local business owners for some time on the issue and thankfully there is progress. Uisce Éireann has confirmed to me that the Aughrim project is moving forward to a final design with a planning application expected within the year. Following this positive news, we had the recent purchase of the historic but derelict Lawless' Hotel, which once redeveloped will breathe new life back into the village as well as the wider community of south-west Wicklow.

In County Wexford, both Ferns and Camolin urgently need new wastewater treatment facilities. Existing plants are at capacity, blocking desperately needed housing developments and also affecting local school numbers in Camolin National School and putting additional pressure on the River Bann and local waterways. Camolin residents have spent more than 20 years waiting for proper wastewater treatment infrastructure. A new plant in Ferns with increased capacity to serve Camolin must be a priority for the Minister of State, so I hope he will take note of that.

We cannot ignore the growing pressure on our rivers and estuaries such as the River Cloghoge at upper Avonmore, and the Avoca river estuary, which continues to have excessive levels of copper, zinc and cadmium. These are all affecting the environment. Water is so crucial. It is the source of all life. Our communities depend on crystal clear, clean water, and not heavily fluoridated, heavily chlorinated, cloudy, terrible tasting liquid. Protecting our waterways is not optional; it is an absolute necessity.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Senior executives of Irish Water got bonuses of up to €32,000 in 2024. This was on top of six-figure salaries ranging from €122,000 to €255,000. Some 47 people got bonuses of between €6,600 and €32,500. Over 560 staff on salaries of between €83,000 and €154,000 got bonuses of between €1,000 and €22,000. There are no bonuses paid to workers who are out at all hours of the day and night fixing bursts or working on boil water notices. This is an insult to lower paid staff and to consumers, who are suffering the absolute failures of Irish Water. Irish Water is another quango paid for by PAYE taxpayers. It is antidemocratic, anti-consumer and anti-public representative and that is the culture of Irish Water. It believes it is not answerable to anybody. It is hiding from the public. It has no public offices. It refuses to meet public representatives in open democratic forums like county council meetings. Consumers cannot meet an Irish Water official face to face. Yes, you can report a problem to a call centre. You might get a report back in a week, or maybe a month or maybe not at all. I believe it has contempt for the public and councillors alike and it refuses to notify planned outages to consumers. Other utilities like the ESB have no problem doing that. Irish Water refuses to do it.

Boil water notices are almost endemic in the system. In the past 12 months there have been continuous boil water notices across south Tipperary affecting the towns of Ardfinnan, Tipperary town, Cahir, Cashel, Clonmel and Carrick-on-Suir, and lasting two, three and even six months on occasion. As we speak there is a boil water notice on the Ironmills supply and a major outage in the town of Clonmel. This is due to Irish Water's failure to have full-time caretakers at treatment plants, the lack of maintenance at those plants and the failure to have alarm systems on plants. There are also huge delays in dealing with burst water mains, particularly at weekends when Irish Water is reluctant to call out staff and leaves consumers without water for days on end. Irish Water should be abolished, and the responsibility transferred back to local authorities like county councils, giving them responsibility for water and wastewater services.

I raise another issue, which is the question of sewerage blockages in single houses and on combined drains. These blockages are a health hazard and Irish Water refuses to deal with them, claiming they are private issues, even though before the establishment of Irish Water these blockages were always dealt with by local authority staff. A blockage at a single location arising from old pipework can affect anything up to 50 households. It is simply impossible, impractical and unfair that individual householders should have to bear the significant costs involved. Irish Water should free these blockages in the same way as they were done in the past. I raise the question of the promised referendum to prevent the privatisation of water services and take them into public ownership. That was promised as far back as 2016. We want to see that referendum brought forward immediately.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate. The provision of water supply and wastewater infrastructure is critical for sustainable development. With housing being our number one priority, we must have the infrastructure to go with it. In County Laois, despite the best efforts of Laois County Council, there are major shortcomings that will hold back developments. The county is undergoing significant population expansion, but there are huge gaps in infrastructure. That is according to Irish Water's own documents, which I have scrutinised. There are water pressure issues and there is going to be a shortage of water supply in towns and villages like Portarlinton, Mountrath, Stradbally, Rathdowney, Ballylinan,

Durrow, Killenard, Borris-in-Ossory, Ballinakill, Castletown, Ballybrittas, Doonane and The Swan. They are all listed as red according to Irish Water. In terms of wastewater, Graiguecullen, Borris-in-Ossory, Ballinakill and The Swan are in need of upgrade. All of those towns and villages need infrastructure to meet housing demand. We cannot just keep putting all the housing in Portlaoise. It is good that there is housing being built, but the town of Portlaoise is absolutely gridlocked with traffic most week days and even on weekends. The roads around the town are chock-a-block. GP surgeries are booked out. Schools are full and services are under huge pressure.

Let me say this about the issue of connection costs. The connection costs since Uisce Éireann took over have skyrocketed. They have gone way ahead of where they were with the local authorities. One couple in Laois was asked for in excess of €20,000 to provide a water connection quite a short distance. That is completely over the top. It is €6,200 for the first 10 m, and €800 per metre after that. Do the sums on that and you will not be long clocking up between €20,000, €30,000 or €40,000. That needs to be revised.

I argued with then Minister Phil Hogan on the floor of this House on the issue of Uisce Éireann and the creation of it 13 years or 14 years ago. We had many a head-to-head over it. I was not in favour of it, and I am still not in favour of the creation of it. We are stuck with it, but as has been said already, it took away local democracy. Local knowledge of the network and services was lost. Local engineers were lost. Local water keepers, who are essential, were lost. Local-based staff to deal with issues and a forum for local councillors, democratically elected and accountable to their electorate, was taken away. Uisce Éireann promised to provide local contacts. It promised to provide local engineers. If anybody can find them, they should show them to me because I have difficulty and I know other public representatives have difficulties finding them. That has been one of the huge gaps along with the local knowledge being lost. As the existing county council workers go, this is going to be a problem. The simple fact is that these services should have been left with local authorities. Where there is a need for cross-county infrastructure such as the Shannon pipeline, that can be done in the same way that the National Roads Authority builds roads across counties. The towns and villages of County Laois need infrastructure upgrades.

Uisce Éireann must put locally-based engineers and contacts in place for county councillors and TDs and reduce exorbitant costs for the connections.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister must bring forward the referendum to make sure it is put into the Constitution that water services cannot be privatised.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We urgently need to invest in our decrepit water infrastructure. It is totally inadequate to deal with the housing needs we have, with almost half of the water leaking out of the pipes because of Victorian and decrepit infrastructure. We need a water system that is responsive to the needs of people rather than one that refuses to get back to or talk to the public or its representatives.

Instead of doing what is necessary to address this, the Government is essentially engaged in a stealth privatisation of the water infrastructure to facilitate private, for-profit interests. Where is the evidence to back that up? The most recently available annual statement of Irish Water is for 2024. The single biggest item in operating costs in Irish water for that year, and I presume it is the same in more recent years, at a cost of €335 million, was hired and contracted services. It lists the companies, private builders and contractors within that.

We have had a stealth privatisation through the back door. That, of course, is why the Government does not want to have the referendum it promised after we successfully defeated the attempt to introduce domestic water charges through mass mobilisation and resistance. We won a commitment which has been reneged on, to have a referendum to ensure that the water infrastructure would stay in public ownership. The reason Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have not wanted to do that is because they are representing these builders and contractors who want to loot the Irish water infrastructure and are progressively privatising Irish Water through the back door.

What is the cost of all of this in terms of the quality of water services? We are told the Minister, Deputy James Browne's officials told him at the beginning of this year that Irish Water is having to clean up the mess left by small, private contractors doing wastewater infrastructure projects around the country. They are making a bags of them in a huge number of cases because we do not have the local authority workers who are actually experts, who were working directly for and accountable to the public. They were redeployed and all of that expertise was lost. It has been handed over to private contractors profiteering from our water infrastructure. In many cases, as the Minister has been told, they cannot even do the job properly.

There is also the lack of funding, which is part of a deliberate strategy to run down our publicly-run water infrastructure. We have been told we need 60,000 houses a year but Irish Water has only been given the money for infrastructure for 30,000 houses a year. Then, of course, there is the creaming off of the top for the big salaries Deputy Healy talked about. That is something that would not be happening if it was with the local authorities for which we argued at the time Irish Water was set up.

Let us have the referendum that was promised and give the whole thing back to the local authorities, the people who have the expertise and will run it on a not-for-profit basis. Let us put in the investment necessary to deliver the housing and deal with the decrepit water and wastewater infrastructure.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Minister. We have challenges and we are very aware of that. Building houses is a priority for this Government. The more houses we deliver the better. This is about the families, communities and people who need housing. In my area of Carlow, for example, through our local authority, we are looking at land that has been serviced. We need to look at serviced sites. That is really important.

I am going to raise a few issues I am very mindful of within my area. There was to be the extension of the wastewater treatment system from Grange to Tullow in County Carlow. The funding was allocated to this project two years ago but we have not yet even started the work. The issue is that Grange is a small area. It is a lovely area to live in. There is a primary school there with a large number of children. The council has to go out there regularly and empty the

septic tanks. This is in 2026. My concern is that we are always announcing the funding is coming. As I said, this project was announced two years ago and we are still in the same position.

Another area that has been very much highlighted to me is the wastewater treatment in Ballinabrannagh, County Carlow. It was the same in Ballinabrannagh. Announcements were made but we still have not got the go-ahead for a certain amount of the work there. These are challenges we really need to look at. The programme for Government is about delivery and we cannot do that if we do not have the proper services there.

Another issue I was very much working on about two or three years ago was the case of Ardattin, County Carlow. I am raising the rural places because rural Ireland is so important. I know the Minister is working on this and that is why it is important we are looking at the wraparound services. The council was going to build houses in Ardattin because there was the need. It was going to look at local authority and private homes but it could not get the wastewater treatment and what it needed to build houses.

We have to make sure, through Irish Water, that when we give a commitment to delivering these services, we do it. We cannot just announce them, in particular in the case of Grange. The council is emptying septic tanks in Grange and it is unacceptable. There are a lot more projects in Carlow town. We really need to see how we can progress this and work together to get the services to make sure we have the delivery. Rural Ireland is really important. When announcements are made, I ask that commitments, dates and funding are given and that we work on them as soon as possible. I thank the Minister for all of his work.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It feels a bit like Groundhog Day here today. In February of last year, in one of my first contributions to this House, I spoke about water outages in Kildare North. Indeed, I had a Topical Issue on the very same issue in June of last year. I hate to admit the greater Dublin area, in relation to Kildare, is growing. Maynooth, Leixlip, Celbridge, Kilcock and Clane are under severe pressure when it comes to electricity, connections of new estates and water infrastructure. In particular with the water infrastructure for those people living in those towns at the moment, it is extremely common to have outages. In my time as a county councillor - I was a county councillor for ten and a half years - it felt like it was my job to communicate with the public that there was a water outage. I would turn up on a site at two o'clock in the morning with water bursting out of a main road. I would get on to the fire service, the council and Uisce Éireann to try to get it resolved. That was not my role as a county councillor, and it is certainly not my role as a TD either. I am more than happy to step into the breach and help the public as much as possible but Uisce Éireann is failing in its duty to communicate with the public. We see this time and again.

For example, Carton Grove, an estate in Maynooth, lost water two days ago. I communicated with Uisce Éireann that we needed action on the ground and it told me there were teams on site. There were no teams on site. It took more than 24 hours to get the issue resolved. What we are dealing with here, with housing estates in particular, are young families and people with disabilities who need access to water. Having certainty of access to water is critical. If there are planned outages, people can live with that but what we are not seeing from Irish Water and what we need to see more of, is how it communicates with the public. I ask

that Irish Water improves its public communications, particularly in isolated areas where there are outages, planned and unplanned.

I give credit to Irish Water for some of the schemes it is doing, such as the water supply project in the eastern midlands region, the Crodaun wastewater network upgrade in Celbridge, and the Maynooth water main replacement leakage reduction programme focused particularly on Old Greenfield and that side of the town.

What needs to happen here is real-time communication and also clear restoration timelines. People need to have an idea how much water to buy when they go to the supermarket because the supply is going to be gone for a particular amount of time. People need that certainty and I ask the Minister of State to bring it back to Irish Water that we actually communicate more effectively with the public.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Continuing to grow investment in water service infrastructure is absolutely essential to keep up with and adapt to change and to ensure Ireland meets its economic, social and environmental obligations. I am passionate about rural Ireland. I come from a small place called Skeoughvosteen in the parish of Graiguenamanagh on the Kilkenny-Carlow border. In particular, I want to welcome the new initiative that will allow private sector involvement in developing wastewater systems for smaller housing developments of up to 40 homes. This initiative is a crucial step towards addressing the infrastructure deficit in rural areas, particularly in Carlow-Kilkenny, where housing development has long been restricted by a lack of adequate wastewater facilities. By enabling developers to collaborate with Uisce Éireann on low-volume wastewater systems, the Government is providing a much needed solution that will accelerate housing delivery in areas that are currently stifled by infrastructure bottlenecks. It will help to alleviate some of the pressure on our smaller towns and villages where housing demand has far outpaced the availability of wastewater treatment options. However, this does not mean that Uisce Éireann is off the hook. For instance, in communities where water infrastructure has reached its limit, new housing development stalls, forcing locals to relocate. It creates ripple effects on our schools, shops and GAA clubs as families move and demographics shift.

There are so many issues in my constituency that need to be resolved. We have 14 wastewater treatment plants that need to be upgraded at the moment, in Kilmanagh, Glenmore, Freshford, Dungarvan, Ballyhale, Kells, Fiddown, Piltown, Paulstown, Graiguenamanagh, Bennettsbridge and Windgap, to name but a few. We have a situation in Bennettsbridge right now where they have been waiting years for an upgrade. They have been approved but the works will not be completed until 2030. It is not good enough and it is not acceptable. We have a situation in Inistioge, a village right beside me, where raw sewage is entering the River Nore and nothing has been done about it.

In Mullinavat in south Kilkenny the treatment plant is at full capacity. It urgently needs to be upgraded to allow housing and commercial interests to thrive in the area. Irish Water has been adequately funded over the next number of years with record investment but we need to see more and we need to see delivery now. Housing is the number one social issue and crisis facing the country. Enabling infrastructure such as water will enable us to get more houses built quicker and evenly across the country. We will get a lot more done. While it is so important that we get that increased and record-level investment, delivery is key. That is where

the big challenge is. Those in Uisce Éireann need to make sure they are going to deliver these projects on time and with a sense of urgency, which has been lacking up to this particular point.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Everybody here knows that water is the most precious of our natural resources, and how the State manages it plays a crucial role in delivering on any number of policy plans for the future. Whether it be housing, education, or immigration, no policy can be fully formed without considering the water infrastructure that is available to support it. The Government has shown consistently that it is willing to act boldly to preserve and protect our water infrastructure and to boost it where possible.

Last November, I warmly welcomed the announcement by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage that a developer-led approach would be adopted when it comes to progressing wastewater treatment plants, particularly in rural areas. As a rural TD, I say that is very welcome. Councillors on the ground in Carlow and Kilkenny have been calling for this for quite some time and I am heartened by the Government's readiness to act in lockstep with local representatives. Of course, even with this approach, challenges remain. A wastewater treatment plant for Castlecomer, which regularly faces severe water disruption is not due for completion until 2029. The community in Castlecomer who have turned their town into a thriving regional tourist hub cannot and indeed should not have to wait that long.

In Carlow town there is also a pressing need to expand. We know Carlow is a growing student hub that must be supported by the provision of adequate student accommodation and this relies on our wastewater infrastructure. Delays in the schedule to upgrade works for Mortarstown wastewater treatment plant only add to this frustration. We cannot allow the growth of our towns and villages to be undermined by cumbersome developments.

To grow rural Ireland we must not only identify the problems but also the solutions. It is my firm belief that the processes outlined in the accelerating infrastructure report and action plan will go an enormous distance in boosting our delivery of vital wastewater infrastructure. This belief is bolstered by the ceaseless work that has been completed on the ground across Carlow and Kilkenny over recent months. In November, vital water network upgrades were completed in Tullow town centre. These works replaced more than 2.1 km of old and damaged pipes which will reduce water loss, enhance pressure and ensure a more reliable supply for all schools and businesses in Tullow. Last summer, works costing almost €10 million were completed in Bagenalstown's wastewater treatment plant, bringing the population capacity of the plant from 4,500 to 9,800. Works such as these are being carried out on the ground, and it is important that we get balance. Obviously, we need more to be done but, on average, Uisce Éireann is at present fixing 2,000 leaks every month.

Deputy John Connolly: I noted yesterday a substantial announcement on wastewater investment for Limerick. I compliment Limerick, the local authorities there and the Minister in the Department for developing that work. Like Limerick, Galway is a city the national planning framework plans for growth over the coming decade or decade and a half, in terms of counterbalancing the development of the country between the east coast and the west coast. Galway needs a similar commitment on wastewater investment to what was given to Limerick yesterday.

The network in Galway city is in need of significant upgrades. In 2023, the EPA claimed that there were overflows of diluted effluent on 70 dates from a holding tank on the Galway network and that on most of these dates we had less than 10 mm of rain. That is an unlicensed discharge. The EPA said the duration and the quantities of the overflow are not known and they have the potential to pollute Galway Bay. That alone should be reason for us to say we need to intervene here quickly and make sure we do the work on the Galway network to prevent that.

The other reason is that the lack of appropriate wastewater treatment in Galway city is preventing residential development, particularly in the east of the city. In fairness and to its credit, Uisce Éireann did apply for planning permission to upgrade a pumping station in Merlin Park. However, there has been no commitment since the granting of permission for that to develop it. We need to see that commitment.

I should point out that there are two beaches in Galway city where the water sampling has not met the standards to be awarded the blue flag. It is impossible to say that this is a direct consequence of the issues with the network but one can gather this may have something to do with it. Those two reasons, the environmental impact and the inability to develop further in the east of the city, are reasons we should be urging Uisce Éireann, at the earliest opportunity, to proceed with the work on the pumping station at Merlin Park.

I want to briefly address water supply. My predecessor for Galway West, Éamon Ó Cuív, in an era when you could get answers to questions on water supply in this House was advised in 2022 that there were approximately 172,000 or 10% of households depending on private sources of water supply. These are rarely tested, they are not monitored and they could potentially be a cause of illness. They are also quite unreliable for the households involved.

It is ironic, to some degree, that the State has embarked on, and given a commitment, that we were going to roll out broadband to every home in the country but yet there are 172,000 households for which we have not provided a public or a group water supply. We should look at that. There were schemes in the past such as the CLÁR programme which funded and supported the funding of water installation in those remote, rural locations. We need to look at something like that again.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Last week I outlined how several contractors being used by Irish Water are operating in a cartel-like fashion to drive up the cost of public works. This is being done to ensure that every possible cent of public funds ends up in their pockets. While local media have been covering this scandal there has still been no comment from the Department or Irish Water.

How much longer will they bury their heads in the sand and hide from this scandal? The harsh reality is that the ordinary people of Carlow and Kilkenny are paying the price for this corruption. Instead of getting their water supply fixed on time, people are getting boil water notices slapped on. Instead of leaks being fixed, valves are being installed to reduce water pressure and output, giving the impression that leaks have been reduced when, in fact, all that has been done is that the water supply has been turned down. Bennettsbridge is one of these places where huge funds are after being pumped in to fix old pipes. Now Irish Water has fecked up, so it turns down the water pressure to make it look like there is not as much leakage whereas now the question is how it will go back in there. Just a few days ago they had another burst

pipe there without water or with low pressure. This is just not good enough. Just look at Castlecomer, in Kilkenny. It has rolling water restrictions all year round. It is something they have become immune to. This is a community of over 2,000 taxpaying citizens, and what do they get in return? Substandard water and second-class treatment. Then there is the community of Inistioge, where the Government's failure to invest in water facilities has brought a complete halt to new builds and is destroying local waterways due to raw sewage being discharged into the rivers.

How much longer will the Government allow this failing system to punish the public, wasting public money and neglecting people's basic right to clean water and safe infrastructure? What is going on in a lot of these situations is stuff that should be on "Prime Time". Somebody needs to investigate because the money is being wasted on contractors for them to sit in a van getting huge money and hiding rather than looking for work. It needs to be looked into.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Areas in my Dublin constituency are regularly without water for hours and days on end. Last year, in Knocklyon, over a bank holiday weekend, some areas did not have water for up to six days. Our water infrastructure simply is not up to scratch and it is down to a lack of investment. From an inability to provide water to existing homes or to provide for the thousands of future homes we desperately need, I think we all agree that the network is antiquated and dilapidated. Improvements in supply are coming too slowly and it is having a knock-on effect down the line, preventing new housing from being built. Our waterways are increasingly being polluted with urban wastewater being pumped directly into the rivers that we rely on for our drinking water. Both sides of the water infrastructure, water and wastewater, are the responsibility of Irish Water and both are being let fall apart. Since Irish Water was formed, the quality of our rivers and lakes has got worse, not better. We have not a hope of reaching our EU targets for surface quality by 2027, and we are further away than when we started. Irish Water must be more proactive in protecting our waterways rather than just a few targeted actions. It must be empowered and resourced to dictate the protection of our rivers, lakes and coastal lagoons. Forestry and farming have serious impacts on our water quality, and Irish Water cannot limit itself to simply picking up the pieces after the fact.

There is a huge job of work to be done and it is required in our water services. From communications to policy to infrastructure, there is nowhere they cannot have an improvement. People in Knocklyon and hundreds of other communities that face outrageous services or boil water notices each year deserve a lot better than they are getting. My message tonight is that we need to do a lot more. Collectively, I think we all agree that we want to see it being done. It is not being done. It was a mistake to take this away from the local authorities. The challenge now is that while people talk about rural areas and what is happening there, even in urban areas, including Dublin, this is happening too.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: As every Deputy knows, if we put down a question in this House about Irish Water now, we will get a message back from the Ceann Comhairle's office telling us we are not entitled to an answer. Who, then, is responsible for Irish Water? Does the buck stop with the Minister or a State body? That is the first question that needs to be addressed in this House, and it needs to be sorted because somebody needs to take charge of Irish Water.

I want to touch on the magnesium problem in Irish Water that the EPA and the WHO have highlighted. There is poisonous water, drinking water, in Cork city at the moment, with nobody

being held accountable for it. The Minister is not investigating it and we are waiting for long-winded replies from the EPA. I have to be honest with the Minister of State. If any private chemical company in west Cork or Ringaskiddy or anywhere that direction were to carry out that type of work, there would be chief executives in the criminal courts. That is what would happen and that it is not happening. How people are not being held responsible in Irish Water for not telling the public about poisoned Irish water, poisoned drinking water, in our city is totally unacceptable.

The Minister addressed the river basins. The Government is an absolute disgrace when it comes to the River Blackwater. It has found nobody responsible for the River Blackwater and the killing of 2,000 fish and it has let it go away and forgotten about it but the people of Mallow have not forgotten about it. The people of Mallow who are dealing every day with hard water and having to replace units, kettles, showers and everything else in their homes on a regular basis or having to spend €1,000 to €2,000 on water softeners have not forgotten it. The people with no infrastructure in Cork North-Central have not forgotten about it. We have been told straight out that we need a €1 billion investment on the north side of Cork. By God, if this were in the Taoiseach's area on the south side of Cork, the €1 billion would be found for it but it is not being found for Cork North-Central. That is an absolute disgrace, and the Minister of State sits there jerking his shoulders saying, "What can we do about it? Tough luck, lads. The buck does not stop with the Minister any more." I find it unbelievable that we are having this conversation day in, day out.

We in Independent Ireland have brought this up in the House and we are doing so again. Everyone from every side of the House is saying the same thing: Irish Water is not fit for purpose. At least you had a city manager or a county manager to go to at one stage to talk about what was going on in water infrastructure and you got replies. Now you get an email address and are asked, "Can you provide me with your details?" and ten days later you might get a response.

Deputy Michael Collins: We had a motion here last week in relation to Irish Water. Anyone who looked seriously at the motion would see it was simply put: accountability and timelines. The Minister of State's side refused to agree to that motion. It was very simple. They could have made an adjustment, they could have done something about it but they did not want to because the Government does not want accountability. It is aiding and abetting Uisce Éireann from avoiding accountability. The Minister of State knows this as well as I do. He is from the same constituency as me. Talk to the people of Shannonvale, Rosscarbery, Dunmanway, Ballydehob and Goleen. I joined the community council in Goleen in 1999. I am still on the community council. We brought people from all over the world who had property and who would have worked with the local authority at that time to try to see if we could put in place a new wastewater treatment plant and we were not able to do so. There is raw sewage still pouring into the tide in Goleen - imagine that - since 1999. It is astonishing. The EPA is asleep at the wheel. It is quite happy to accept all of what goes on because it is like a scam. That is all you can call it. I keep saying that. If a farmer's house is not in order and his cattle house is leaking raw slurry into the river, he is put out of business, he is closed down and he moves on. There is no acceptability on it, and there probably should not be, but it seems to be a law for one and not for another.

We did succeed, and there is no point in my being critical here, in relation to Adrigole. I know there is no bucket on the ground yet but we have to look at the positive side of the messages being sent. However, it is hard to get that message. Lord God, it is like squeezing blood out of a turnip, and none of us can do that, to get a straight answer from Uisce Éireann. If the Minister of State were to see some of the nonsensical, generic answers I am getting, it is not good enough. The Government is pumping the billions into this so it will have to sit down and get answers, get accountability, get a timeline, and the people of Shannonvale, Rosscarbery, Dunmanway, Ballydehob and Goleen might have something to look forward to rather than an endless disgrace.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The bottom line is that the Government should never have taken this off the local authorities. Uisce Éireann should never have been set up. We would have accountability then because, first, the councils could keep a good eye on what needs to be done with infrastructure and within the areas. The Deputies of this House could also keep in line with that and let the Government know where the money was being sent. The other thing was that they were actually getting in contractors to do the work under their remit, under their designs, on budget, on time. The contractor was making a few pounds but he was being overseen by the local authorities. It was being done.

Now we have Uisce Éireann, Irish Water or whatever you want to call it these days. Let us audit its books. How much is going into the top-end salaries and how much is going into the ground in replacing infrastructure? The EPA came out first saying, and all governments were coming out saying, "Farmers are the biggest polluters in Ireland."

7 o'clock

The Government is the biggest polluter in Ireland in the statistics, because all the raw sewage is going into the rivers, which people are drinking. The Government is treating it and people are drinking it. The farmers are being shown that they are the only ones who are improving the network, with all that they are doing, keeping within the criteria and all the regulations, and upgrading their systems week on week and month on month. They are making changes, but the same Government that is over them is not. How can the Government go to people, tell them they are the polluters and fine them when, if it looks at anything that is being done at the moment, we have defunct systems all over the country? I have always said and I will say again that there are people building houses. They are designing and delivering them. Let them build the infrastructure for it within the criteria of what the Government wants. They can make money on delivering it, yet the Government cannot actually deliver something that has been fully paid for by the State. There is no accountability, which is why there is no delivery. That is why we do not get any messages back from Uisce Éireann. It is unaccountable.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise an important issue that does not relate to Uisce Éireann or group water schemes. It is about houses that are not supplied on the public system or group water schemes. There are quite a number of such houses around the country. I believe there are around 100,000. In the valley of Glensaul in Tourmakeady, County Mayo, are 15 houses. I have been working with this community to try to get water into their homes. One man in that valley has a makeshift water connection from the local stream and on a stormy night the flow of the river washes that pipe away. He is an elderly man and it is a health hazard because reassembling this water pipe is becoming a frequent task. I have done much work on this

matter and I have spoken to Uisce Éireann and officials in the local authority, but it seems there is no way that we can help him because he does not fall within the criteria of the multi-annual rural water scheme due to the number of houses. I would like the Minister of State's help with this. It is in very close proximity to the public water supply on the Lough Mask system. It is a major issue for this community. I am at a dead end with it. This is a basic need. There are elderly people in the community and significant difficulties as a result. Will the Minister of State meet me and work on this issue with me?

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the opportunity to talk about water again. We talked about it six months ago. I note that the Government has announced additional funding but if you look at the amount that is proposed in the programme, it is still wholly inadequate compared with what is required. The Uisce Éireann strategic plan is looking for over €16 billion up to 2029, and it has been estimated that, up to 2050, we need to spend over €60 billion on our water and waterways. That level of investment is a wartime investment, similar to what I have raised, along with Deputy Heneghan, as regards the grid. If you are going to have the potential to get revenue from AI companies down the line to build houses, you have to have water infrastructure and grid infrastructure. We are nowhere near to making those types of investment. Even if it means breaching the EU Stability and Growth Pact, we may need to borrow for it. We have to build the capacity ourselves. We have to think much bigger. We are still importing massive amounts of fossil fuels into this country to meet our energy requirements when we could be net exporters of renewable energy, with stored renewables such as hydrogen, but we are not putting in that investment.

Regarding the water grid, if you will pardon the pun, it is a drop in the ocean. That is the problem. We need to get serious. A number of my colleagues previously referred to the issue of blaming farmers and agriculture for water. According to the EPA, that most of the at-risk water bodies - 62% - are at risk is related to agriculture and agricultural run-offs. Although I supported motions against the Mercosur agreement because it does not exactly ring-fence the environmental concerns that we have about the rainforest or market access for farmers, it is hypocritical of us to try to get a nitrates directive derogation so that we can pump more animal excrement into our waterways. On one hand, we are touting what a great Government we have for putting further investment into water, even if it is not enough. On the other hand, our waterways are being diminished. There is still an increase in the amount of less than satisfactory waterways, according to the most recent figures. It was at 52% satisfactory. Now it has come down to about 49% or 50%. If it is going at that rate, the pollution of our waterways will always increase faster than the money.

We need to tackle the grid head-on as a strategic project and front-load that money, even if we have to borrow it and go into debt. Remember that, during Covid, we spent money like there was no tomorrow. I am well aware of and have mentioned the advice from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council that we should not be spending beyond our means and depending on untenable pharmaceutical revenue, but when you are looking at strategic investment that would pay us back in the medium to long term, we need to invest in water sooner rather than later.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister of State may be surprised because I am going to start by saying something positive. I commend the Minister, Deputy Browne, who has listened to people from the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael backbenches since coming to office, particularly

about initiating developer-led infrastructure and facilitating future housing development. It is a no-brainer that many of us have called for for many years. Once in a while, it is good to be listened to, so I hope that listening continues. I think it is the only way to get us out of the malaise we are currently in. I welcome that initiative.

That said, I will revert to my typical character. Basic communication between Uisce Éireann and others, whether county councillors or TDs, is an issue. I do not expect any special treatment. I expect that when I put in a query, I get a response. I expect to be able to meet an engineer now and again if I request it. That is not being facilitated. It is refusing outright to meet local authorities. Luckily, we meet Uisce Éireann two or three times a year. We talk about wider, broader things. I want to talk about wastewater treatment plants in individual villages. Unfortunately, the current system of communications is not good. I have often received email responses three or four months after the query initially went in to say the ticket had now been closed. I know the ticket has been closed and have known about it for weeks or months in that case.

I would like to mention the Carrignavar wastewater treatment plant, because I have mentioned it about ten times since being re-elected. It is a perfect example of the lack of joined-up thinking by Uisce Éireann. I have often listened to Senator Pat Casey talk about the Arklow wastewater treatment plant, which was built for €130 million or something like that to build a couple of hundred houses a year, whereas we are looking for a treatment plant in a village that is a seven-minute drive from the city centre and has the potential to deliver hundreds of houses. It is on the new BusConnects route. It has everything going for it but we have been told it is likely to be seven years until we get that wastewater treatment plant, by the time we go through the various permissions and so on.

I would also like to make a parting comment, which is about the people who primarily sit over in the corner of the Chamber allocated to Members of the Independent Technical Group. They are gone now so maybe I should not individualise them. If this was an easy fix, this would have been done a long time ago. If anybody actually talks to Uisce Éireann and is sincere in discussions with it, particularly in the northside of Cork, they will know we are talking about decades of work that need to happen, particularly with the replacement of pipes, including cast iron pipes and lead pipes. For people over there to constantly come in and suggest it is as easy as clicking fingers, writing cheques and doing the whole thing overnight is disingenuous and they need to be called out for it.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I start by agreeing with Deputy O'Sullivan about developer-led infrastructure. That is a good, positive development by the Minister, Deputy Browne, which is to be welcomed. More of that, please.

There are two important projects on the northside of Dublin coming down the line, which are really important for infrastructure and the development of the wider region. The first is the Shannon to Dublin water project, which shows the scale of the challenge and what ambition is needed now. It is a pipeline over 170 km long, costing a minimum of €5 billion, but it has the potential to meet up to half of Ireland's overall water needs to 2050 and beyond for the next generation and generation after that.

In the greater Dublin region, not just the city, 85% of the water comes from the River Liffey. This is a huge number by international standards. One big incident in the Liffey and our raw

water supply would be knocked out, with potentially catastrophic consequences for Dublin and the wider region. It is a huge risk and one we have to grapple with.

Uisce Éireann has been clear in recent years that the delivery of new homes and businesses is already being delayed and is at serious risk of even being abandoned at this stage. The company projects that we require 34% more uisce in the eastern and midlands region by 2044 than is available today. This speaks volumes about the growth expected in the region and the importance of continuing to support and invest in Uisce Éireann.

Hand in hand with that, we have sewage treatment. It is great to see that the legal challenge to the greater Dublin drainage project has been withdrawn. I hope that project can now progress. It is in Clonsaugh in my constituency and it is vital for dealing with sewage for at least 300,000 new houses, again, not just in the city but in the greater Dublin region, including Meath and other counties. Its importance to the region is vital to getting sewage treatment transformed.

As I said, these projects are vital. We cannot afford a repeat of the delays of the past. If we fail to deliver these projects, the two big ones I mentioned in particular, we risk jeopardising housing delivery and economic growth in this region for generations to come.

Deputy Joe Neville: I will follow up on many of the themes raised by many of my colleagues on this side of the House. I welcome the level of investment to go into Uisce Éireann over the next few years. From meeting the Uisce Éireann team at the infrastructure committee, I know the company is very positive about having the funds in place, not only to do the work it wants to do to repair water lines but also to help as regards the housing needed over the coming years. Uisce Éireann is very positive that the funding it is getting from the Government puts it in a strong position. As much as we hear about the negative things happening in the country, the fact that this country is being run so well gives us a financial capability that is very positive, as we are seeing with Uisce Éireann. Notwithstanding that, it is also very positive that the Government is prepared to have developer-led innovations. Deputy Ó Muirí alluded to the Shannon-to-Dublin scheme and it is very important that we are able to do that.

I raise the issue of communication, which Deputy O'Sullivan also referred to. If there is one thing we need to fix, this is it. As I said, from my work on the infrastructure committee, I can see it works well at the top, but at councillor level and in local communities, we can do things better. In Celbridge, for example, a new programme of works is being planned for the next nine months. It is hugely significant work on the main artery into Celbridge. I attended a communication evening - I think I was one of the few public representatives who did - and I learned a huge amount. I will not say it was not advertised enough, but I am not sure the people of Celbridge are fully aware of what is planned in respect of the work coming downstream. I put it to the county council that I do not think the plan in place is good enough. I am working with Kildare County Council and Uisce Éireann to fix that ahead of the problem coming. We have also had huge traffic issues with the works being done on the Maynooth transfer pipeline. People were caught on the hop by that project.

Uisce Éireann is doing a lot of work. The Government is prepared to innovate and Ministers are ready to listen to our ideas on this side of the bench. As part of my role on the infrastructure committee, I will continue to liaise with Uisce Éireann. I commend the company on the work

it is doing. As with everything, we can do better and get more things in the capital plan, including in local areas, for example, getting water bursts in Leixlip resolved too.

Deputy Peter Roche: I welcome the opportunity to speak on water infrastructure, in particular, the role of private group water schemes, which remain essential in rural communities. Many of these schemes have benefited from grant assistance over the years, and that investment is clearly delivering results. Many are operating at an exceptionally high standard, with regular testing, ongoing monitoring and strong local management.

What concerns me, however, is the increasing and, in some cases, disproportionate pressure and threats now being placed on certain group water schemes by water services authorities. We are seeing cases where extremely low coliform readings, in fact close to zero, are being used to justify demands for full-scale treatment. The treatment includes mandatory chlorination. Any balanced and professional assessment would recognise that a marginal reading does not automatically indicate a public health risk, particularly where repeated results are satisfactory. In these cases, UV treatment is in place and no *E. coli* is detected.

There is a real opportunity for local authorities and private group water schemes to work together constructively, with a focus on guidance, reassurance and continuous improvement. Many of those involved in running these schemes do so on a voluntary basis and are deeply committed to maintaining safe, reliable water supplies. Protecting water quality is essential and everyone involved shares the same objective. What matters is that regulation is applied in a way that is evidence-based, proportionate and practical and that reflects the realities of how the schemes operate on the ground.

Private group water schemes have consistently shown that where they are supported and engaged with constructively, they respond positively and also responsibly. Strengthening that collaborative model is in the best interests of rural communities and water security across the country. We should spare a thought for the many villages that do not have an Irish Water supply or group water scheme. I can speak about two or three in my constituency of Galway East, particularly areas in Dunmore, that are crying out for a connection to a group water scheme or an Irish Water supply. There are being told little or nothing by the local authority.

My bottom line is that when we have exceptionally run group water schemes, which, as I mentioned, have no coliforms and close to zero readings, it is an insult for the local authority to apply undue pressure by suggesting these schemes be taken over by Irish Water.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I acknowledge the significant work being delivered by the Minister, Deputy Browne, the Minister of State and the accelerated infrastructure programme brought forward by the Minister, Deputy Chambers. That programme is about unlocking funding, removing bottlenecks and clearing whatever is holding up progress on critical infrastructure projects. This work is welcome and necessary. However, the reality on the ground in County Offaly tells a very different story.

Across our towns and villages, expansion is effectively frozen. Homes cannot be built because communities are waiting years, and sometimes decades, for water treatment plants. This has left developers, local authorities and approved housing bodies unable to meet housing demand. In the middle of a housing crisis, that is simply unacceptable.

In other areas, the situation is even more serious. We have raw sewage coming up through manholes, destroying roads and footpaths and flowing directly into the canal. If this were a private company, the State would be all over it, using every environmental regulation available. It would be shut down until the problem was solved, yet Irish Water has been allowed to get away with this year after year. Recently, during very heavy rainfall, sewage again surged up through the manholes and reached as far as people's front doors. Residents were left distressed and angry, and rightly so. Irish Water has failed to give proper assurances to residents or councillors that the system will be actively monitored during periods of heavy rainfall, pipes will be kept clear or meaningful temporary measures will be put in place to protect homes.

Irish Water says it has completed a survey in Tullamore and will put in over 3 km of wastewater piping, starting in the fourth quarter of this year. I want the Minister of State and the Minister to make sure this happens and that Irish Water cannot put it on the long finger. As we know, Irish Water is very good at that. What about Birr, Cloghan, Banagher, Ferbane, Kilcormac, Rhode and Edenderry? When are we going to get help to allow these towns to grow? Even where temporary measures have worked so far, they are exactly that - temporary.

At some point they will fail and we will be back to square one. That is not good enough. The people of Tyrells Road and Tullamore deserve better. The message is simple: stop managing the problem - get it fixed and get the work done now.

I want to address the Shannon water supply project. This is a vital national project, currently projected to begin in 2028 and conclude in 2032, all going to plan. If our country is to grow and develop sustainably, it is essential that this project happens. As part of this project, there are proposed spurs for Tullamore and Mullingar and a connection to Nenagh. That is under phase 2. I am asking clearly and firmly that these spurs be delivered as part of phase 1. We have all seen what happens with so-called phase 2 projects. They are delayed by maybe 20, 30 or even 40 years or never happen at all. These spurs are not optional extras; they are vital to the future growth of Tullamore, Mullingar and Nenagh and to achieve balanced regional growth. We cannot afford more delays, more broken promises or more communities left behind. Infrastructure must lead development, not block it.

Deputy Ann Graves: Households pay for their water. It is not free. It is an essential service covered by general taxation, which funds Uisce Éireann. Uisce Éireann was dressed up as a solution to all our water problems, but for the people in Dublin Fingal East whom I represent, this is not the case. Uisce Éireann is a major obstacle to the progress on building houses and getting them out for sale to new families. We have a phase of new homes in Knocksedan, a housing development that has been delayed because Uisce Éireann would not give the go-ahead to the developer for a new pumping station. This was only resolved in January of this year, following 18 emails from myself and phone calls to Uisce Éireann. In the meantime, the developer was also contacting Uisce Éireann, but nothing happened. Each communication was assigned a new ticket which further delayed the resolution and caused further frustration for new residents. Initially, it was a planning issue. Then it was permission from a landowner, then it was a riser and then the planning went out of date and new drawings had to be done. This was all at the cost of the developer and home buyers. Some of them who had given up rental properties had to move back in with their families. Some of them have had to go for new mortgage reapproval and some people are sofa surfing while they wait for these houses to be delivered. They expected them in the summer of last year. In June last year, I contacted the

Minister to intervene to ensure that the connections would be carried out as a matter of urgency, allowing families to move in as soon as possible. This is in the middle of a housing crisis. This has caused huge hardship, stress and expense to these families.

In another case, a woman living in Donabate contacted me regarding asbestos pipes in her home and garden. The water for new development in Donabate is being forced through the old pipes, causing leaks. The water floods her garden and her septic tank and this requires huge clean-up which is extremely costly and a health and safety risk. The last flood came right up to her front door. Unfortunately, Uisce Éireann has no plans to replace the pipes, so this issue will be ongoing for some time until the replacements can be added to the schedule of works for Uisce Éireann. This is unacceptable. These are just two examples of cases that are affecting people's homes, not even touching on the infrastructural problems that we have. Uisce Éireann is a public utility funded by the public. It is about time it serves the public.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I was in the Chamber earlier and one speaker after another got up and slammed corporate communications from Uisce Éireann. That is fair to say. Any of us, who, at this point, have decent enough communications, it is usually on the ground and it relates to engineers and those who work for Uisce Éireann and would have previously worked for the council and some who still do. This is not good enough when you want to get information on the major operations. If somebody landed from Mars, the one thing they would understand is that we have clean water and wastewater infrastructure that is not fit for purpose and is posing huge issues in relation to the delivery of housing, but also to industry. I get it. This is not the starting point you would want, but we are where we are.

Dundalk, similar to an awful lot of places, has had an issue with water discolouration that is caused by increased amounts of manganese that was reacting with chlorine and causing rotten, brown gunk water. Obviously, no matter how many times Uisce Éireann or anybody else said it was drinkable and safe, people refused to believe that. Many will talk about the damage that has been done, whether it is to clothes, utensils, washing machines, dishwashers, etc. The only good news in the last period is that there has been some element of success, in the sense of a system that works, with a number of the operations that were being tested and filter systems in Cavan Hill, which deals with the majority of Dundalk. The press release spoke about great strides to be taken in 2026, but I do not see a completion date. I have been in here many times before and spoken about the issue over years.

At times, I have had decent contact with Irish Water, but then the person changes and you do not get it and no elected representative can get the sort of representation or connection that they want. That is something I would like the Government to bring up with Irish Water, another agency or scenario set up to be at an arm's length from the Government. For wastewater, clean water and treatment plants, we are talking about 2029 or 2033. None of this is good enough. We need real action.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Bhí mé ag éisteacht le gach duine sa Teach seo. Táim i gcónaí ag tabhairt amach le daoine atá sa Civil Service. Sometimes it is warranted. I heard Deputy Ó Murchú mention that sometimes you do get that rare gem. I thank Keith Conmy from Uisce Éireann for all that the work he helped me with for the residents of Mask Avenue. We give out enough about civil servants. It is only fair to we clap for them when they do their job. He was sending me updates at 11.30 p.m., constantly keeping residents informed. That is the kind of

civil servant I would love to see across the board in all of our Departments, but it is not there sometimes. When it comes to bonuses, I heard people giving out and it is fair enough. If there were targeted bonuses for people, he deserves one. I hope he got one. If civil servants in Uisce Éireann and the ESB had clear targets, it would be understandable for them to get bonuses. They are being given bonuses for clear water when that is what they do. If they had clear targets on how many emails or reps they are doing, that would be beneficial.

To be clear, when we talk about Uisce Éireann, I have given out about Dublin Bay and people literally swimming in human waste. I have given out about the current flood defence. Sometimes there is not joined-up thinking when it comes to Uisce Éireann and active travel. Roads have had cycleways put in and then been torn up a month later to put in a pipe. There needs to be a bit more communication in that sense. Speaking of communication, I know - and I have heard other Deputies from north Dublin speak about this - that we are going to have a pipe along the promenade at Clontarf seafront, one of the great amenities of north Dublin. It would be great for the flood defence to be done at the same time while the plant hire is down there. It makes no sense to dig up the whole thing, put in traffic restrictions and disrupt the entire of north Dublin and then six months later put in a flood defence. It should be done at the same time. There needs to be practical, logical thinking.

I was endorsed by Seán Dublin Bay Loftus, a former Independent TD. When he was running for this House, he was trying to save Dublin Bay. Now, Dublin Bay still needs protection. We see oysters are being introduced at Howth. I would love to see some at the entrance where the River Tolka goes into the bay. They are natural filters. There is a clear issue with water pollution. Sometimes there are e. coli levels of 3,000 parts per million in Dublin Bay. That is six times the safe amount. That is not six times what should be there. People are getting ear infections and going to the doctor for swimming, getting out and socialising. That needs to be looked at.

I hear Deputy Ó Muirí discuss the Shannon to Dublin project. I am delighted to see how much it would be doing. I heard Deputy Gogarty talk about me with private wires and energy. I will not go into that. We are discussing Uisce Éireann. Water infrastructure and housing need to go hand in hand. I am delighted to see the great work of the engineers on the Shannon project.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I am thankful for the opportunity this evening. I commend the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Browne, in particular for the initiative to work with developers on wastewater and to accelerate the delivery of housing. That is something that we would have raised in Meath in various meetings with Uisce Éireann over the years. I also commend the water caretakers in Meath County Council, who have done sterling work, often bridging the gap in terms of communication with residents.

I wish to flag a couple of points in relation to communication.

We have some serious water issues in Dunboyne and Trim in County Meath at the moment. I refer in particular to one housing estate in Dunshaughlin called the Willows. Communication on the part of Uisce Éireann is absolutely key. I remind consumers to sign up for the text alert scheme. That would be very timely and welcome. The wastewater piece for infrastructure delivery is in train. Perhaps something in connection with the development companies and the delivery of water in the first instance is going to be looked at.

Another matter I wish to flag is the emerging area of energy hubs and the colocation of battery storage, solar farms, gas peaking plants, etc. Given that this may be coming down the line, there will be a need to estimate water requirements in advance. There are quite a number of data centres in County Meath. I am of the view that rainwater harvesting should be looked at, particularly as conditions of planning, either current or retrospective, would be a high priority. This is linked to the issue of judicial reviews. There have been many submissions to the Department in relation to the Aarhus Convention. There are genuine and legitimate concerns on the part of residents who want the infrastructure to be put in place first. We need housing delivery, but the concerns of existing residents in areas that are under pressure in the context of water infrastructure need to be listened to.

On farming, the nitrates derogation, etc., I draw the Minister of State's attention to a Facebook page called Fighting Dirty. It is based in County Louth and provides evidence-based information on wastewater outlets.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about water, water treatment plants and sewage treatment plants. Many of our towns and villages do not have either adequate water or sufficient capacity in their treatment plants. There are many villages and settlements that do not have wastewater treatment plants. I wish to focus my attention on two estates at the top of Aghadoe where the outfall is down into the lakes of Killarney. I have raised this numerous times, including with the Taoiseach and as a Topical Issue. It is still going on. The matter has not been resolved. There are two treatment plants there that are completely outdated. Sewage from them is spilling over. This time the last year during the storm and the flooding that followed, it flowed down the road. Where did it finish up? We all know where it had to finish up. The outfall is into the lakes of Killarney, so that is where it eventually finished up.

There is a problem here. Irish Water has taken responsibility for the duties relating to this matter. A total of €998,000 was allocated to Kerry County Council. The council could not get Irish Water to work with it in order to do the necessary work. It cannot deal with the matter at all now because it does not have responsibility for it. I am asking the Minister of State and the Taoiseach to get involved. The people in the village have waited seven years for action. There is an environmental hazard. It is not fair on the town of Killarney to allow this. It is also not fair on the estates in question. I ask Irish Water, Kerry County Council's environmental section and the engineers who were involved in the water services and sewerage services previously to work together to resolve this. A sum of €998,000 was made available by the Department. The residents have collected €74,000. There is a shortfall of about €400,000. Wherever it comes from, that money will have to be got. Irish Water will have to be deployed. This is an emergency. The tourist season is approaching. In Killarney, tourism is the prime income for many people.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know, Deputy. We hear all your points. I have no doubt.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have raised this matter several times before. I am asking now, and I am getting very impatient about it-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am depending on the Minister of State to deliver the message that this has to be sorted out.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy and call on the Minister of State to conclude.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Healy-Rae. I am sure he will be heard loud and clear. There is no fear about that.

I thank all Deputies for their contributions. There are clear messages and themes coming across. It is around timelines of delivery of much-needed infrastructure. It is around communication, which is obviously coming across quite clearly. It is also around the fact that so many of our towns and villages remain without adequate wastewater treatment or even water supplies. I was glad to hear that some Deputies mentioned the issue of biodiversity and habitats and the impact it is having in that regard. That will have to be fed back. We are at a point here where we either get behind this utility company, support it in any way we can and give it the necessary resources to deliver or we do not. The Government is clear that it is going to back it in terms of addressing the huge scale of what is out there to address.

I acknowledge the important work the Government is doing on water quality by means of the water action plan, which is derived from the water framework directive and outlines the additional measures we will take to protect and restore our natural water resources, including rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters. These measures include ongoing actions and investment across critical sectors, such as agriculture, forestry and water service provision, that bear the greatest burden in tackling pollution. The national development plan funding provides €306 million investment to support additional targeted measures to restore and improve water quality in rural and urban settings, as well as improving river habitats. This funding will support a wide range of capital investment in water protection initiatives operated by local authorities, the Environmental Protection Agency, Inland Fisheries Ireland and directly by my Department. This will include the development of specific evidence-based targeted programmes to drive water quality improvement. First, the farming for water European investment partnership, EIP, was launched in March 2024. The aim of this partnership is to support farmers in the implementation of supplementary measures on farmlands where agricultural activities are impacting water quality. Second, a scheme which will fund urban nature-based solution projects will be undertaken by local authorities to manage surface water, drainage and rainfall. Third, the national river barrier mitigation programme will fund the removal of or the mitigation of impacts of barriers in our rivers. These are all very important measures in terms of biodiversity and habitats. I acknowledge the strong co-operation across Departments, State agencies, non-Government organisations and communities in the development and implementation of these water quality programmes and initiatives.

Work relating to water quality can get lost in the focus on water service delivery by Uisce Éireann, as evidenced in the contributions of Members this evening. The Government is fully behind Uisce Éireann. This is reflected in the record national development plan allocation of €11.7 billion over the next five years. This funding will support the delivery of a wide range of projects in our cities and regions required for housing delivery, safeguarding public health and the environment. It is worth reflecting on the increased scale of investment in Uisce

Éireann. It has had a fourfold increase in investment on water services and infrastructure, rising from €300 million in 2014 to €1.4 billion this year.

The transfer of operation and control of public water services from local authorities to direct Uisce Éireann responsibility represents one of the largest public sector reform programmes in recent years and involves numerous facilities around the country and over 3,000 full-time and part-time local authority workers. Significant progress has been made in transforming the water sector. This transformation is due to be completed at the end of this year in a safe and co-ordinated manner without compromising service continuity. It has also been stated and acknowledged many times in this House that a legacy of underinvestment in our water infrastructure by local authorities means that there are many challenges that Uisce Éireann is seeking to address, while also providing for significant increased capacity for future businesses and population growth. The scale of the remedial work necessary in our waters and wastewater systems will, however, take a number of years and investment cycles to resolve fully.

Where new treatment plants or significant upgrades of existing plans are required, the design planning, procurement, construction and commissioning process can take five to ten years. I know this is very frustrating. Having a single water authority allows for the co-ordinated delivery of water services to enable housing capacity. For example, Uisce Éireann's new growth investment programme will target 72 settlements across Ireland where the existing wastewater infrastructure can support significant housing development quickly. With the additional investment in operating in tandem with an enhanced small towns and village growth programme, this programme targets wastewater treatment plants serving populations of under 2,000 people that are either non-compliant, overloaded or projected to become so in the next five to ten years.

Over 300 candidate sites have been identified and ranked by local authorities based on housing pressures and to ensure that investment is directed where it can unlock the greatest potential.

I want to emphasise the benefits of Uisce Éireann's national-level projects. The water supply project for the eastern and midlands region is a generational project to supply water from the Shannon to the east of the country. The project will have capacity for off-takes in counties Tipperary, Offaly and Westmeath, thereby benefiting local communities along the route. Crucially, it also will enable supply serving Dublin to be redirected back locally into counties Carlow, Wicklow, Meath and Louth. The benefits of this project, which only a national utility can deliver, are spread far beyond the greater Dublin area.

In tandem with the water supply project, the greater Dublin drainage project, GDD, is critical to facilitate growth in the greater Dublin area. The new wastewater treatment plant will be situated in the southern fringes of Fingal immediately outside the M50 motorway in County Dublin, and will serve north Dublin and parts of the surrounding counties of Kildare and Meath. The GDD will provide additional treatment and network capacity to support long-term sustainable growth for the greater Dublin region and to ensure Ireland continues to meet our objectives under European law. Just yesterday, the Government approved the upgrade to the wastewater treatment plant and a new bioresource centre for Limerick city. This represents an investment of over €250 million in the mid-west and follows similar large-scale projects in Arklow and Athlone delivered last year, with further planned investment in Waterford and elsewhere.

As we have heard quite regularly in the House throughout the day, communication is an area that Uisce Éireann clearly needs to improve on. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has asked Uisce Éireann to review its approach to communications and engagement, particularly with Members of the House, as a matter of priority. As my colleagues have outlined, beyond Uisce Éireann the Government is supporting a wide range of measures to support rural water services, protect our rivers and meet our international obligations. These also form part of our overall approach to water and they are benefiting from the record funding allocated to the water sector under the NDP.

There is much that has been accomplished and even more that will be accomplished in the coming years. The Government is delivering a sustainable funding path to further enhance the ongoing significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services. The Government is committed to making sure that all areas of our water services infrastructure and water quality are strengthened and that all our communities feel the benefits of this unprecedented investment in water.

Clearly there has been an emphasis on Uisce Éireann today in terms of delivery but I really think it is important that we do not lose the focus on water quality. This comes in many forms and not just drinking water, which of course is essential, but also habitats and the stunning rivers, lakes, streams and estuaries that support so much life. There really is an onus on us to emphasise and support addressing issues with these habitats also. It is happening and there are some incredible schemes out there nationally that focus on these habitats. Lady's Island Lake is a stunning lagoon that is unique. As the Ceann Comhairle knows well, through co-operation with the farming community, Wexford County Council, the local authorities waters programme, LAWPRO, and many other organisations we are formulating a plan to ensure the lake can be restored to its former glory and will continue to support its habitat. This is being done through the farming for water EIP, which I mentioned earlier. This supports farmers who introduce and implement additional measures.

We are going to have to have serious conversations about the pressures on our water systems and various uses and land uses, whether it is development, farming or drainage. There are things we can do before our water gets to the different treatment systems. I commend the work of LAWPRO, the local authorities water programme. It is doing incredible work with local authorities and communities on the ground to ensure many of these ecosystems are protected.

Coming back to the main theme of today's conservation, we realise that Uisce Éireann certainly has not got everything right. We realise there is a necessity to focus on wastewater projects and water supply. The Minister and Ministers of State in the Department know there are towns, villages, cities and urban areas where improvements are needed or where basic infrastructure is needed. We know that some of these timelines are very hard to stomach and very frustrating but when we think about the various licences and permits that are needed, we can understand. There is now a focus on reducing a lot of the red tape and on allowing us to deliver at scale. More than anything, what has come across today is that we have to get the message to Uisce Éireann that communication is important. We will support Uisce Éireann and give it the resources to ensure we scale up the delivery of wastewater treatment.

Copyright and Related Rights (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are related and will be discussed together.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

"Amendment of section 38 of Principal Act

2. In subsection 1(b)(i) of section 38 of the Principal Act, to insert the following after "programme service to a licensing body":

"for the purpose of remunerating jointly the copyright owner in the sound recording and the performer(s) whose performance(s) are incorporated in the sound recording, in respect of such playing or inclusion".

These amendments relate to issues that were previously raised on Committee Stage. I and some of the organisations involved had written to the Minister of State in the hope that during the gap between Committee Stage and Report Stage, she would take the time to consider and address the issues with her own amendments on Report Stage. There is not a huge number of issues but they are very pertinent to those who are performers. We did not see ministerial amendments so we have gone ahead and tabled amendments reflecting the work done by Recorded Artists Actors Performers, RAAP, and AEPO-ARTIS, the Association of European Performers' Organisations, which represents more than 500,000 performers across Europe. Both organisations made submissions to the Minister.

RAAP has been a lot more concise in this submission because we teased out a lot of the issues on Committee Stage. RAAP sent its submission to the Minister and it had hoped there would be an answer at the very least. A more affirmative answer would have been in the form of amendments to address the clear problems that are still in the Bill. In fairness to both organisations, they offered constructive proposals to improve the wording. The key is to ensure full compliance with the European law. The only reason we are here is because the courts have found that we were not in compliance. We believe that a few minor changes will put us in compliance and I will come back to this.

In the amendments I tabled I have echoed the requests of both organisations. We believe there is gravity in this and some of those from RAAP have joined us in the Gallery tonight. They are disappointed that the debate has been guillotined to one hour. Perhaps it will be enough and perhaps the Minister will accept the amendments and we will all be happy with the hour. At the very least, we want to get on the record what the amendments seek to achieve and to make sure, if they are not accepted tonight, that the debate will continue. Perhaps the Minister can look at them again before the Bill goes to the Seanad.

I thank RAAP and its legal adviser for the amendments and for the comprehensive notes supplied with the proposed amendments. I will concentrate a lot on this today. Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 deal with two substantial points. Amendment No. 2 proposes to delete words from section 208 of the principal Act and amendment No. 1 proposes to insert wording in section 38 of the principal Act. These are to clarify the revenues collected by the licensing body acting on behalf of the recordings and by the performers whose performances are being incorporated therein. The change proposes to make explicit the effect that the existing provisions of the Act, namely, the payments made under section 38, represent payments for

both the copyright owner of the sound recording and the performers whose performances are incorporated in it. It is useful to remove doubt at this point, should any exist, to facilitate simple and efficient collection and the sharing of that right.

The amendment expresses what is required under Article 8(2) of Directive 2006/115/EC, namely, the payment of a single, equitable remuneration to be shared.

The additional wording proposed in amendment No. 2 bookends the proper transposition of the right to be shared in providing that performers have the right to a share of all payments collected under section 38. The correction of the qualification criteria to provide a common qualification for the right means that there would be no distinction between the sums paid and payable under section 38 and the sums from which the performers' share gets paid. The condition as to the justifiable nature of the costs of collection and their documentation needs to be introduced to avoid any possibility that these protections provided for in section 10(3) of the collective rights management, CRM, regulations might be argued not to apply in circumstances where the collective management organisation, CMO, is collecting licence revenues for rights holders that are not its members. If the Bill puts the producer's CMO in a position of collector of revenues for rights holders that are not its members, then the attendant requirement of transparency and reasonableness of the cost of collection should follow.

It is in some ways a bit convoluted but the key is to ensure that we are transposing legislation in the proper fashion, that we do not fall foul of it, and that it is very clear to ensure there is no doubt and to prevent any arguments in the future that would require the Controller of Intellectual Property or, if the Minister of State gets her way, the Circuit Court to deal with them.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I want to support these amendments. We have had a lot of discussions at the introductory stage in the committee. The Minister has been engaging with the representative bodies and I take that on board. However, there are still issues in relation to what should be taken on board and what should not be. This being the Report Stage before the Bill goes to the Seanad, maybe the Minister of State would give her final and absolute legal advice, because I do not see what would be wrong with putting these amendments in. If something else is highlighted in the Seanad, it can be amended at that stage. What is proposed is reasonable unless there is some absolute legal barrier. That is my tuppence worth.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank all the Deputies on the committee because we had some robust debates on this matter, which I appreciate. I welcome the representatives of RAAP, who are in the Gallery. I thank them for the engagement they have had with the officials in my Department on this. I know they were sincerely meant and very meaningful.

I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for these amendments. The sharing of equitable remuneration or royalties between producers and performers, when music is played or performed in public, is required by international, EU and national copyright law. This Bill clarifies how this sharing takes place in the case of disputes. It also grants the role of the final arbiter to the Circuit Court rather than the Controller of Intellectual Property Office of Ireland.

The purpose of the Bill is to address the findings of the Court of Justice in its judgment of September 2020 with respect to deficiencies in Ireland's transposition of Article 8(2) of the rental and lending directive. The manner in which these licence fees are collected does not fall within the scope of the judgment nor of the Bill. It is already clearly set out in Irish law in the collective rights management regulations, which transpose the EU directive on collective rights management, that any deductions made by collective management organisations must be justified and documented. This wording is already contained in those regulations. These deductions are subject to further scrutiny by the competent authority within the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland. Inclusion of this wording is, therefore, not necessary. Rights holders have the freedom to choose their collective management organisations and to assign rights to them.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am disappointed that the Minister of State has not seen the need to adopt these amendments, which are clarifying a situation that she says does not need to be clarified because it is already in law. Obviously, it is not in law and it is not clear if two different organisations with their legal teams had a look at this. My own legal advisers had a look at this and they all said that, to avoid doubt in any way, these amendments were required. Separate to that, they are required to ensure that there is no undermining of the position of the collective management organisations on both sides. RAAP would be one in this case or Phonographic Performance Ireland, PPI, would be the one on the producers side. It is to make sure that there is no doubt as to their role and their ability to collect revenues. Most of these amendments are tied together in some ways to make sure there is fair and equitable distribution of that based on what was fully intended in the EU directive. Avoiding doubt would ensure that we are not back here again in the future with other legislation to plug a hole that we have identified here and that we can take the opportunity to address it now rather than wait until another judgment in the future finds that we are still in breach of the directive.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I have listened to Deputy Ó Snodaigh's arguments but, on this occasion, I cannot accept the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 3, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

“(a) in subsection (1), by the substitution of “which is comprised of a share of any and all payments collected or collectable by or on behalf of the copyright owner under section 38(1) after deduction of justifiable and documented costs of collection” for “where the sound recording of the whole or any substantial part of a qualifying performance which has been made available to the public for commercial purposes is—

(a) played in public, or

(b) included in a broadcast or cable programme service”.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 3 to 5, inclusive, and 7 are related and will be discussed together. Amendment No. 4 is a physical alternative to amendment No. 3.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 3, to delete lines 16 to 32, and in page 4, to delete lines 1 to 14 and substitute the following:

“(a) by the substitution of the following subsections for subsections (4), (5) and (6):

“(4) Subject to subsections (5) to (9), and unless otherwise agreed by or on behalf of the persons by and to whom it is payable the amount of equitable remuneration payable under this section to the performers on a sound recording is equal 50 per cent share of the payments referred to in subsection (1), which shall be referred to in this Part as the Statutory Share.

(5) The person by or to whom it equitable remuneration is payable may apply to the Controller for an order under subsection (8) to vary the Statutory Share. Where there are numerous persons having the same interest in the subject matter of any such application, one or more of such persons may apply to the Controller under this subsection on behalf of all persons so interested. Representation by the same licensing body for the same rights shall be taken as proof of persons having the same interest in the subject matter of the application for the purposes of this section. A licensing body which represents persons making an application under this section may also be a party to an application made by any person or persons whom it represents.

(6) Subject to subsection (7), a person or persons by or to whom equitable remuneration is payable having the right to apply to the Controller under subsection (5) may also apply to the Controller—

(a) to vary any agreement as to the amount payable, or

(b) to vary any previous determination of the Controller as to the amount payable.”,”.

Amendment No. 3 seeks to delete paragraphs (a) and (b) of section 2 as proposed in the Bill, which intends to replace subsections (4) to (9) of section 208 in the Act and to insert new subsections (3A) to (3E), doing away with the right to recourse to the Controller of Intellectual Property. Amendment No. 7 deletes section 3, which also transfers the controller functions to the Circuit Court. While the Minister of State's amendments Nos. 4 and 5, which she will move herself, will bring clarity as to how the Circuit Court will deal with subsequent requests to change as an order under the proposed new system, we ask that the Minister of State reconsider entirely the transfer of functions from the Controller of Intellectual Property.

The Association of European Performers' Organisations, AEPO-ARTIS, made it very clear in its submission to the Minister of State that transferring this function to the Circuit Court, thus necessitating costly litigation, is tantamount to depriving performers of any redress or dispute resolution mechanism. It also pointed out that it was a fundamental principle of EU law that rights must be effective in practice. The European Commission has explicitly stated that legislative wording that does not achieve its objective is not only not fit for purpose, but is

not compliant with EU law. In other words, as RAAP has outlined, if the Government passes legislation that ticks the box with the legal provisions but is of no practical help to the artist seeking to get their royalties, then it has not achieved compliance with the EU directive. At the end of the day, this is about ensuring full compliance but also ensuring that artists and producers get their equitable share and that the artists and performers get their royalties.

8 o'clock

Therefore, once again, we ask the Minister of State to delete these sections. Instead, we propose to retain and amend the existing subsections. The change proposed to subsection (4) is intended to adjust and augment what was intended to be provided for in section 3A of this Bill. Insofar as the right to a particular percentage share is to be provided for, it must be provided for, as between the performers on a sound recording and the producer as distinct from "a performer", where there may be several performances comprised on the sound recording. In other jurisdictions, a statutory or prescribed split is typically made, subject to an alternative agreement between the interested parties, and we have made provisions for that in the amendments. This is distinguishable from an ability to set aside the statutory share on the basis of one of the beneficiaries being unhappy with it - that is currently provided for in section 3B of the Bill — which would set at naught the protection entailed in the provision for a statutory share.

The amendment to subsection (5) would replace section 3B of the Bill and enables an application for dispute resolution. Such an application would require the applicant to set forth evidence to establish the case and would not provide a mechanism to otherwise seek to avoid the application of the statutory share or other agreement between the parties.

The amendment would also retain application to the controller as the dispute resolution mechanism for such disputes on the basis set out in the following paragraphs. Insofar as a dispute arises in respect of the methodology and payment of performers, and indeed in respect of any other dispute arising under section 208, this is suitable for expert assessment or arbitration - that is a point that was made in the committee - both of which can be appointed by the controller. Sections 365 and 367 of the Act allow for that.

Insofar therefore as there was a concern in the Department that the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland lacked capacity to determine such disputes, that concern is unfounded. That is no more the case than in the Circuit Court, which in the future will have to rely on bringing in outside expertise because there will not be the expertise sitting around waiting on these cases. The Intellectual Property Office can ensure that expert assessments would be got for the arbitration of cases. Why get rid of something that has worked - or rather it has not worked because there have not been cases before it? I think there was one case. Why end a system that works or at least can work to effect the EU directive?

Our understanding of the difficulty that the controller experienced in receiving applications for dispute resolution from RAAP was not a lack of capacity to determine them, but the extent to which issues affecting the legal basis for determination of the dispute was still pending before the High Court in the actions taken by RAAP against PPI.

If a role in resolving licensing disputes concerning the right to equitable remuneration was now given to the Circuit Court, it would be the only role allocated to the Circuit Court by the Act. I find it strange that we are trying to burden the Circuit Court with additional work. The

threshold in the Circuit Court in most regards is for cases over €15,000. It ensures that anybody going to the Circuit Court will require a solicitor and in most cases a barrister also, which adds to the costs. I still believe the Minister of State should take the opportunity to withdraw this change and revert to the role of the controller. She should ensure it is enhanced rather than taking away from it.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I have more experience of dealing with issues related to family courts where I have been chasing up issues relating to the *in camera* rule. It does not necessarily relate to this legislation but it does on one fundamental point, which is that sometimes, it is apparent that the judges rely on so-called experts because they are familiar with them but they are not necessarily the experts in their field. What could happen here by bringing it to the Circuit Court is that it would delay the process and make it unaffordable. Basically, while we may end up with a resolution, it is going to be a half-baked one further down the line when it could have been preferable to fix the existing system. That question has still not been answered, as to why the Minister of State believes that the Circuit Court would have the knowledge, expertise, inclination or resources to deal with this area. I am not saying there is going to be an avalanche of cases but if there were a number coming, would the Circuit Court have the capacity or the ability to get those experts in good time?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for his amendments - amendments Nos. 3 and 7 to which I will speak, as well as to the Government amendments Nos. 4 and 5. I also thank Deputy Gogarty for his contribution. Amendments Nos. 3 and 7 were discussed at length during Committee Stage. I do not support them.

The Bill sets out a new process to decide how equitable remuneration is shared if this cannot be agreed between those involved, as is required by the EU rental and lending directive. The Bill therefore introduces a backstop, namely, a default 50:50 split between performers and producers. We expect this will mean that it is extremely unlikely that questions on what is equitable remuneration will be referred to court.

As discussed during Committee Stage, an individual may take a case, or a licensing body or collective management organisation, CMO, may take a case on behalf of their named member or members.

We discussed in great detail the role of the controller as compared to the court as final arbiter of such disputes and the rationale for this change. The Bill removes this function from the controller, in favour of the Circuit Court. The adjudication of such matters extends into a judicial remit, and therefore the courts are best placed to decide on these matters. I do not accept that this will negatively impact on performers and producers in Ireland. To date, there were no referrals to the controller, until a dispute arose between two CMOs, which remains ongoing before the courts.

With this Bill, there is a clear process. Agreement should be reached through negotiation between producers and performers, and a default 50:50 split applies. Circumstances where there is a deviation from this default split would be extremely unusual.

I will now turn to the two Government amendments, Nos. 4 and 5, which I flagged during Committee Stage. These ensure that the amended Copyright and Related Rights Act will

provide the same right of appeal as before. This will mean that if an adjudication is made by the Circuit Court, and the circumstances change, there is the possibility for either party to return to the court for another hearing once a year has passed since the original ruling.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The likelihood of somebody returning a year later is as unlikely as somebody taking a case in the first place, unless they have money behind them. That is one of the issues when we resort to the courts. It is not as simple as that. I accept that an individual can take a case but even if a person represents himself or herself where there is a grievance, he or she usually requires legal advice. Legal advice at different levels is expected for different courts. That is one of the reasons we must try to avoid pushing citizens towards courts at different levels. If at all possible, we must try to settle grievances or disputes through arbitration or, in this instance, the role of the controller. It has not been shown that the controller has failed. Given that, why fix something that is not broken? We could enhance the role of the controller.

You can add time limits if things are running on. As the Minister of State was just saying, people still have the right to go back for another adjudication. If people are not happy with the controller, they can go to the courts. That is always your right as an individual, as a collective management organisation, CMO, or as any organisation in the State. You have recourse to the courts but most people do not make use of this if they respect the role of the controller's office. That is why we have argued, both today and in the past, that we should retain the role of controller. If someone can show me where it is failing, I will consider that.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The music industry has changed over the years. The revenue from streaming is minuscule so a lot of artists are trying to get their stuff onto the likes of TikTok and are trying to get airplay on radio, where you still get a certain amount of royalties. They usually try to get to a point where they can tour. Touring can be hit and miss for a lot of artists. They do not necessarily make a lot of money. The very successful ones do. That is why the previous Government's introduction of the stipend for artists was so beneficial. We hope that will continue. This is a long-winded way of saying that, while some people may occasionally hit pay dirt and get some of their works licensed, if you are a contributor to someone else's work, your income is going to vary from year to year and will often be quite low. If you want to bring a dispute to court, even the hourly cost for a solicitor is quite onerous. You are talking about €200 or €300 multiplied by the number of hours. It is not worth it to fork out €1,000 or €2,000 on a case that might only be worth €4,000 or €5,000 to you. The principle of justice remains, however. That is why having it sorted out outside the courts would have been cheaper and more efficient. While we hope there will not be many cases, where they do arise, they are going to be quite onerous. As Deputy Ó Snodaigh said, people are going to have deeper pockets. The people who are trying to scrape a living will not be able to sort out their grievances if the 50-50 split is not as it should be.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank both gentlemen for their contributions. To reiterate the point, there had been no referrals to the controller before the most recent dispute arose. The adjudication of such matters does extend into the judicial remit. The courts are therefore best placed to deal with this. I take on board the point that it is certainly not pleasant and not a

financial direction anyone wants to take but, if the matter extends into the judicial remit, the courts need to be involved.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is just strange. All of the other disputes concerning licensing arrangements under the Act will continue to be dealt with by the controller. That also seems to stray into adjudication. That is the concern. Only one part of dispute resolution is being shifted from the controller to the courts. Disputes under section 38 will still be dealt with by the controller. A difficulty arises under the doctrines of *res judicata* and issue estoppel in cases where repeated disputes as to the valuation of rights arise between different rights holders or classes of rights holders. An issue has arisen from the provisions of the Act in respect of the controller's ability to determine disputes between classes of rights holders as distinct from disputes between individual rights holders. It is an extremely unlikely scenario in the rights management environment but my amendment No. 3 deals with that issue. We are trying to predict eventualities. The amendments try to ensure there are no cases in which the controller will not have the necessary powers. As I have said, if the controller finds one way or another, the aggrieved party, if not satisfied, would still have the right to go to the courts. Rather than going first to the courts, which are already full, which cost money and which make awards, we should try to use the mechanisms that are already there. The fact they are there might be a reason not to go to a court but the controller now will not deal with these issues and people will probably go to the courts. There is a cost to the courts because they have to get in the expert advice required to adjudicate cases such as these.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 4, line 13, to delete “reasonable.”,” and substitute the following:

“reasonable.

(3F) Subject to subsection (3G), a party to an order under subsection (3E) or (3H) may apply to the Circuit Court to vary that order where a change in circumstances has occurred since the order was made, relevant to the particulars of that order.

(3G) An application under subsection (3F) may not be made within 12 months from the date on which the order in respect of the application was made except with the leave of the Circuit Court.

(3H) The Circuit Court, on application to it in that behalf under subsection (3F), having regard, inter alia, to the importance of the performer's contribution to a sound recording which is the subject of the order concerned and, in particular, the change in circumstances that has occurred since the order was made relevant to the particulars of that order, may—

(a) confirm the order, or

(b) make such order varying the order as the Circuit Court determines to be just and reasonable.”.”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 4, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

“(i) in paragraph (a), by the substitution of “this section, or” for “this section,”.”.

Amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 6, 8 and 9 are related and may be discussed together by agreement.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 4, between lines 18 and 19, to insert the following:

“(d) by the insertion of a new subsection (11):

“(11) The calculation of equitable remuneration due to each individual performer shall be carried out in accordance with subsection (4) by a licensing body for performers’ rights registered under section 280 in respect of a scheme that includes management of the right to equitable remuneration. Where there is more than one such licensing body and in default of agreement as to which licensing body should undertake the calculation, any such licensing body may apply to the Controller for an order determining the question. In making this determination, the Controller shall take all relevant matters into account including in particular:

- (a) the relative capacity of each licensing body to discharge this function accurately and efficiently;
- (b) the scope and extent of rightsowner mandates held by each licensing body;
- (c) the scope and extent of the data available to each licensing body in respect of the performers making or contributing to the performances in respect of which equitable remuneration is payable;
- (d) protections under Data Protection legislation with respect to the data referred to in subsection (c);
- (e) rights in the database or databases in which the data referred to in subsection (c) are comprised; and
- (f) any matter relevant to each licensing body’s compliance with the provisions of the European Union (Collective Rights Management) (Directive 2014/26/EU) Regulations.”.”.

Amendment No. 6 proposes a new subsection to section 208 to enable performer CMOs to manage the calculation of performers' dues in an orderly way if more than one performer CMO is operating in the State. It is a process that, of necessity, must be carried out by a performer CMO with the necessary information and ability to do so.

Amendment No. 8 amends section 280 to provide for extended collective licensing for performer CMOs and to bring an end to extended representation of unrepresented performers by producers’ CMOs in breach of the DSM directive. The proposed amendment to section 280

gives effect to EU law on extended representation and would bring an end to the unlawful extended representation currently arising under the Act. A small additional amendment, No. 9, proposes to change section 281 in consequence of this proposal, if accepted.

In brief, before the passing of the DSM directive, EU law was agnostic on whether member states made provision for mandatory or extended representation rights for CMOs. It permitted but did not mandate the administration of rights of unrepresented rights holders to protect their interests pending the appointment of a CMO or a decision to self-represent. It ensured everyone was represented or allowed to self-represent if they wished. The collective rights management directive prescribed the nature and effects of the authorisation to be obtained from rights holders by the CMOs in circumstances where national law did not provide for mandatory, extended or presumptive authorisation. The regulations implementing the CRM directive gave effect to those provisions. However, the directive left it open to member states to make provision for mandatory, extended or presumptive authorisation of representation by operation of law.

A detailed explanation of the law in this regard is set out by Ms Justice Costello in her judgment for the Court of Appeal in *Recorded Artists Actors Performers Limited v. Phonographic Performance (Ireland) Limited* in 2023. In the hearing of certain preliminary legal issues only, the judge rejected RAAP's argument in that case to the effect that section 281 of the Act provided for a presumptive right to act on behalf of unrepresented performers. She said "if the legislature had intended to impose upon those performers representation which they had not sought nor consented to, one would expect this to have been clearly stated".

RAAP has now specifically asked that this amendment be made to ensure such a facility is clearly stated, not only on the basis that it is necessary to make the Article 8(2) right to equitable remuneration effective for performers as I have outlined, but also to bring an end to the contravention of the directive which arises under the current provisions of the Act and the absence of extended collective representation for performers.

In that regard, the DSM directive represents a move from an agnostic position of EU legislation regarding extended licensing of intellectual property rights and refers to the usefulness, and sometimes necessity, of such provision. The focus of the DSM directive is the digital environment but the provisions for extended collective licensing are general in nature. We refer the Department to recitals 44 to 50 of the DSM directive. In recital 44, reference is made to collective licensing involving legal mandates or presumptions of representation as "a well-established practice in several Member States". As outlined in RAAP's July memorandum to the Department, such arrangements exist in at least 20 member states of the EU. Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain all provide for mandatory collective management of this right, while Finland and Slovakia make use of a government-appointed entity to manage the rights. Recital 45 of the DSM directive reads:

Extended collective licensing by collective management organisations and similar mechanisms can make it possible to conclude agreements in those areas where collective licensing based on an authorisation by rightholders does not provide an exhaustive solution for covering all works or other subject matter to be used. Such mechanisms complement collective management of rights based on individual authorisation by rightholders, by

providing full legal certainty to users in certain cases. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to rightholders to benefit from the legitimate use of their works.

Collective licensing based on authorisation by rights-holders does not provide an exhaustive solution for covering the rights of all performers to equitable remuneration for the reasons outlined in my introduction to these amendments. Article 12 of the DSM directive makes provision for member states to provide for extended collective representation. It does so conditional on the following safeguards: that the CMO is sufficiently representative, on the basis of its mandates, for the rights under management; rights-holders are guaranteed equal treatment under the scheme; rights-holders who have not given explicit authorisation may quickly and easily opt out of collective management; and effective publicity efforts are undertaken by the CMO to inform rights-holders of their rights, the default administration of them and their right to opt out of the scheme. As the Act is currently structured, a producers' CMO is put in control of the collection of licence fees to be shared with performers, not all of whom will be represented.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for these amendments; however, they go beyond the scope of this Bill. They seek to amend the Copyright and Related Rights Act to state which collective management organisation has the ultimate decision-making authority as to how equitable remuneration is divided among either performers or producers. This extends beyond the scope of the Bill. This matter was the subject of a long, but now concluded, court case, and the Bill does not seek to address this.

The amendments make reference to the collective rights management directive. I assure the Deputy that this directive applies in Ireland. It was transposed by the CRM regulations of 2016. These regulations set out the rules that must be followed by collective management organisations registered with the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland, IPOI. These rules are not optional; they are the law. Each year, every CMO must submit a detailed dossier on its membership, finances, rules of procedure and so on, and these are examined by the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland. The regulations also establish clear rules on transparency of any deductions made.

The CRM directive already requires CMOs to take steps to ensure that rights-holders who do not come forward to collect their remuneration are sought out, and the information on unclaimed amounts is made publicly available. Where there is any doubt on this, the IPOI has powers to request further information. The Copyright and Related Rights Act provides the IPOI with power to deregister any CMO that is found to be non-compliant. As I have stated previously, the law is clear that it is up to an individual rights-holder to choose to assign their rights to a CMO of their choice, or not to, as the case may be.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister of State said these amendments are outside the scope of the Bill. Obviously they are not because they have not been ruled out of order. They have been found to be in order. The matter is within the scope of the Bill because we are talking about CMOs representing both the producers and the performers. Part of this has to do with who represents the unrepresented, those who have opted out of the CMOs and who are not tied in. As it currently stands, they are represented by the producers. That is like the employer representing the employee in a labour dispute. It is in some ways bonkers.

The amendment is to set out quite clearly that the CMOs represent the performers in this instance. The reason is tied to the judgment from Ms Justice Costello in which she indicated that the reason she found against RAAP at that stage was that it had not been clearly stated in law. I cited this finding before. It states: "If the legislature had intended to impose upon those performers representation which they had not sought nor consented to, one would expect this to have been clearly stated". This is trying to ensure that it is clearly stated so there is no confusion and it is not the employer representing both sides in disputes. In this case, it ensures that the correct remuneration is given to both sides. We cannot ensure that happens if we have both sides represented by the same person.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Minister of State wish to respond? No. Deputy Ó Snodaigh has a further two minutes, if he wishes.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I could go on and on.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Deputy does not have to.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am trying not to delay. As the Act is currently structured, a producers' CMO is put in control of the collection of licence fees to be shared with performers, not all of whom will be represented. In circumstances where the Act does not give performers' CMOs an ability to carry out extended collective licensing, and in the absence of an arrangement between the producers' CMO and the performers' CMO, the producers' CMO conducts extended collective licensing of the rights of unrepresented performers without authorisation and without being in a position to satisfy any or most of the preconditions laid down in the directive for extended collective licensing. This situation contravenes the directive and the Act does not currently facilitate a performers' CMO to step in to cure the contravention unless the producers' CMO makes a contractual arrangement to that effect. That breach of EU law must be brought to an end by the Bill. That is why the amendments were set down.

A performers' CMO can satisfy the safeguards conditioning the grant of extended licensing rights for performers. The amendment provides for the grant of registration of a licensing body in respect of a scheme providing for extended licensing rights on the basis of evidence demonstrating compliance with the required safeguards. The controller remains in the role of supervisor of a CMO's compliance with its statutory requirements under Article 33 of the CRM regulations.

Insofar as a concern has been expressed by the Department as to the right of dissociation correlative with the constitutional right of association, no such concern can arise in circumstances where exercise of extended collective licensing obtains unless and until such a performer grants explicit authorisation to the CMO, to a different CMO or opts out of collective management altogether. It is an entirely protective, non-coercive power which is necessary to properly protect and administer performers' rights to equitable remuneration.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 4, to delete lines 19 to 36.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 4, between lines 36 and 37, to insert the following:

“Amendment of section 280 of Principal Act

4.Section 280 of the Principal Act is amended by—

(a) the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (g) of subsection (6):

“and

(h) where the scheme is intended to include and to be operated not only on behalf of rightsowners who have authorised the applicant to manage the kind of rights intended to be covered by the scheme and that are conferred by this Act, but also on behalf of rightsowners who are unrepresented by any licensing body, information sufficient to satisfy the Controller that:

(i) the applicant is, on the basis of its mandates, sufficiently representative of rightsholders in the relevant type of works or other subject matter and of the rights which are the subject of the scheme, in the State;

(ii) all rightsholders are guaranteed equal treatment, including in relation to the terms of the licence;

(iii) rightsholders who have not authorised the applicant may at any time easily and effectively exclude their works or other subject matter from the scheme;

(iv) appropriate publicity measures have been taken, starting from a reasonable period before the works or other subject matter are to be used under the scheme, to inform rightsholders about the ability of the applicant to license works or other subject matter, about the licensing taking place under the scheme and about the options available to rightsholders as referred to in subparagraph (iii); and

(v) procedures exist for the negotiation of an equitable split of the cost and any benefit of representing rightsholders who have not authorised any licensing body to manage the rights referred to in this subsection (f) with any other licensing body which applies for registration under this section and which satisfies the conditions of subsection (f)(i) to (iv).”,

and

(b) the insertion of the following new subsection after subsection (6):

“(6A) On the registration or renewal of a registration of as a licensing body:

(a) the applicant shall not only have the right to manage the rights of the rightsowners who have authorised it to so act but shall have the right to manage

the rights of unrepresented rightsowners in accordance with the scheme in so far as such rights are covered by the scheme as registered by the Controller;

(b) the Controller shall issue to the applicant a certificate of registration in such form as the Controller shall determine.”.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 9:

In page 4, between lines 36 and 37, to insert the following:

“Amendment of section 281 of Principal Act

4. Section 281 of the Principal Act is amended by the substitution of “otherwise authorised it, as specified in that certificate” for “exclusively licensed it, as specified in that certificate”.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move amendment No. 10:

In page 5, between lines 8 and 9, to insert the following:

“Amendment of section 288 of Principal Act

5. Section 288 of the Principal Act is amended by the insertion of “, or, it is incorporated in a sound recording which qualifies for copyright protection under Part II of this Act” after “this Chapter”.”.

This discrete additional amendment to section 281 is to address the way the Bill, as proposed, is not yet compliant with EU law on the shared right to equitable remuneration under Article 8(2) of Directive No. 2006/115 as declared by the court in *RAAP v. PPI and Ireland*. As stated in the case, Article 8(2) of the directive, which provides for the right to equitable remuneration, must be interpreted consistently with the provisions of the WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty, WPPT, to which the EU is a party, and which, under Article 216 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, TFEU, has primacy over secondary legislation, such as directives.

The court went on to construe that the provisions of the WPPT in light of the directive falls to be interpreted. It held that the qualification criteria for the right provided in the WPPT are imported from the Rome Convention, which in turn provides for the right to attach to all performances incorporated on a sound recording that is protected by copyright in a contracting state. Irrespective of the place of residence or domicile of the performer or the place where the performance takes place therefore, a performance attracts a right to equitable remuneration for the performer who gave it, once it is incorporated on a protected sound recording. Accordingly, the connecting factor for qualification of performers for the right to equitable remuneration is the incorporation of the performance in question in a qualifying sound recording.

An amendment giving effect to this criterion of qualification for the right of performers to equitable remuneration is not only required to implement Article 8(2), when it is properly construed in light of the WPPT, but it is the only way in which the Bill can be brought into

compliance with the court's second basis for finding the current qualification provisions are inconsistent with the requirements of the directive. That second basis is that the fundamental characteristic of Article 8(2) is that it is a shared right, which does not admit of being enjoyed, in any circumstances, only by phonogram producers.

The change proposed to section 288, if made, would achieve a common basis for qualification for both sets of rights, namely, qualification of the sound recording for copyright protection as required by EU law. Apart from bringing the section into complete compliance with the law as it has been declared by the CJEU to be, bringing the qualification for the right into complete alignment as between performers and producers would obviate any concern that might otherwise remain on the producer side that they need to police performer qualification for the right. That in turn would militate towards a right, more simplified and more efficient process.

At the end of the day, we are trying to ensure that in recordings and performance, both sides get what is due to them in a 50-50 split in total and that there is no deviation from that. It is a recognition that exercising the right to remuneration sometimes has to be qualified, protected and clearly stated in law, so there is no attempt by anybody to enrich themselves and bypass the order of things. We have already seen that both performers and producers have been under severe strain in recent years because of the change in the way people listen to their music and the way copyright has been flouted around the world on media channels.

In some ways, this is the clear-up. It is a way to ensure there is a stream of funding for those who are the artists and creatives and are ensuring we can enjoy different music, sounds and expressions. It is also a recognition that those who produce the music also have rights. It is not just one side. I might have come across as reflecting the rights on one side, but the rights of performers are usually the ones that are eroded. They are usually the ones who suffer in the relationships where the greater portion of what is due to them seems to go missing or is reallocated elsewhere rather than being a straight 50-50 split, as it should be.

The intention of all ten amendments is to clarify in law. It is a pity that the Minister of State, thus far, has not been willing to take them on board. I hope she will reconsider and take at least this one amendment. It would send a useful message in itself that would address some of the concerns that are out there.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for his amendment and for raising this point. It has been raised with my officials by RAAP, an organisation that represents performers, in a submission and in a meeting with it. The Government attaches great importance to ensuring Ireland's national copyright law is in line with our obligations under international and EU law. This is a point which, to my knowledge, has been raised before. It is also not clear what, if any, impact it may be having. However, it certainly merits further detailed examination, which is now under way. I assure the Deputy that if there is a finding that there is any inconsistency between the Bill and international law, this will be addressed through a further amendment.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the fact that the Minister of State is taking on board that there may be a need for further examination. In some ways, when you put amendments, you hope you are proven right but you are also hoping you are proven wrong because that means the officials and those who are better at drawing up legislation have covered the angles

where, on this side of the House, we sometimes see an issue, and have tried to plug a hole that has been exposed.

In this instance, I am more confident in these amendments than some of the amendments I tabled in the past over the vast time I have spent here. I was not always as confident as I should have been in tabling those amendments but, in this case, the amendments have been well-crafted and well-considered. They are coming from practitioners, such as the collective management organisations, CMOs, which understand the intricacies of copyright, some of which is very intricate. It is not for you or me. Maybe that is one of the reasons there have not been as many referrals to the controller. Maybe it is because people have not been able to understand the full effect of the failure to get the proper remuneration and income they are due.

I hope that before this goes any further than the Dáil and into the Seanad that further examination and additional stress tests are done on the legislation the Minister of State is proposing. Maybe in the Seanad they will take on board some of the proposals I have put here.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Given the already considerable delays in getting this small but complex Bill to this stage, it cannot be further delayed. It is a complex point on the interplay between national, EU and international copyright law and international conventions. It requires careful consideration if required, to ensure no unintended consequences arise from any amendments.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I admit like everybody else it is a complex area in some ways. That is why some of the explanations to the amendments can sometimes be a bit convoluted because it is a difficult area of law. As the Minister of State pointed out, it is trying to ensure that we transpose into law the full effects of an EU directive and that we get it right. In this instance, I do not think we have got it right. We did not get it right in the past. That is why we are at this stage. We are addressing failures in the past. We may be back here again. While I firmly believe the intention is correct, the full effect of it will not be. I am still gobsmacked at the referral of anybody to court when there is an alternative mechanism available, which does not fall foul of the EU directives.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Bill, as amended, received for final consideration and passed.

Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2022: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Derelict Sites (Amendment) Bill 2022, taken on Thursday, 15 January 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 66; Níl, 81; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	

Bennett, Cathy.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butler, Mary.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cahill, Michael.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gannon, Gary.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Clendennen, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Connolly, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Cooney, Joe.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Currie, Emer.	
Healy, Seamus.	Daly, Martin.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dolan, Albert.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Lawlor, George.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Fleming, Sean.	
McDonald, Mary Lou.	Foley, Norma.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Geoghegan, James.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Grealish, Noel.	
Murphy, Paul.	Harkin, Marian.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Nash, Ged.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heydon, Martin.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Higgins, Emer.	
Nolan, Carol.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lahart, John.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McConalogue, Charlie.	

O'Reilly, Louise.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McEntee, Helen.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Neville, Joe.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Ward, Charles.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

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

The following motion was moved by Deputy Mark Ward on 20 January 2026: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

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

(Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the ministerial amendment to the Second Reading motion on the Sale of Nitrous Oxide and Related Products Bill 2025. On the question, "The amendment be made", a division was claimed. That division must now be taken.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Calleary, Dara.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	

Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nash, Ged.	
Heydon, Martin.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Flexible Work and Commuter Delays: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Ciarán Ahern on Wednesday, 21 January 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- employees in Ireland have no right to flexible and remote work, only a right to request it from their employer;
- more workers are being forced back to the office, with some large employers, including in the public sector, moving to increase the number of days per week that must be spent in the workplace;
- in a recent study by INRIX, Dublin ranked as the 11th most congested city in the world, and the third worst in Europe;
- commuters and drivers now experience significant traffic delays, whether through cities like Galway, on roads like the N40 and N25 in Cork, or on arterial routes into Dublin, such as the M1, M4, M7/N7 and M11;
- Transport Infrastructure Ireland has said there is almost nothing it can do to address traffic gridlock on the M50, and that it is at capacity;
- more frequent Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) services, and increased capacity on existing routes, has been delayed due to supply issues with new battery trains, with a knock-on impact on other planned network improvements;
- public transport projects with planning permission are not progressing due to a lack of political will to provide funds, including DART+ South West, now paused at least four years to beyond 2030, and Luas Finglas delayed until 2029;
- commuters cannot rely on bus services to arrive when scheduled, bus lanes are not properly policed, active travel alternatives are not safe, and congestion is worsening;
- delivery of active travel infrastructure to encourage cycling and walking is too slow and inconsistent, and the level of investment is falling as a proportion of the transport budget;
- traffic congestion leads to increased air pollution and poses a significant public health risk; and
- transport is the biggest source of energy demand and the second largest source of emissions in Ireland, which must halve by 2030, and required a decrease of 12.4 per cent in both 2024 and 2025 to meet the sectoral emission ceiling in the first carbon budget,

which will not be achieved, with projected reductions of only 1.3 per cent and 2 per cent respectively in those years;

recognises that the lack of a right to flexible and remote work, and the failure to provide reliable and accessible active travel alternatives and public transport, particularly in rural Ireland, is forcing more and more workers to rely on private vehicles to reach their place of work, leading to increased congestion and unnecessary carbon emissions; and

calls on the Government to:

- introduce a real right for employees to flexible and remote work, where it is reasonably practicable;
- ensure that the public service leads by example so that workers are not forced back to the office when their work can be carried out remotely;
- launch a new Operation Free Flow to address congestion, that includes:
 - a rapid response team in situ on all arterial routes into the M50, starting with the M7/N7, to respond to road traffic incidents;
 - the immediate progression of the M4 Bus Priority Lane project, and rollout of this initiative to other routes including the M9 and M7;
 - a new campaign to improve driver behaviour on our roads and increased roads policing; and
 - a real time app on traffic updates for commuters, and improved reporting of incidents to local and national media;
- urgently introduce an action plan to improve public transport services over the next 12 months, including measures to:
 - provide more early morning and late-night trains, and increase the frequency of services into Dublin and other cities;
 - introduce additional train carriages, and explore all options to increase public transport capacity;
 - fast track the delivery of park and ride/share facilities in cities and outside the greater Dublin area;
 - introduce automatic number plate recognition cameras, to enforce the rules of the road at junctions and bus gates, and ensure bus lanes are properly policed;
 - improve the reliability of bus timetables, real time information displays, and the Transport for Ireland App; and
 - require the National Transport Authority to introduce contactless payment, and guarantee accessibility for people with disabilities on public transport services within 12 months;
- reverse the decision to delay DART+ South West and Luas Finglas, and prioritise the rollout of public transport projects including additional Local Link services, Bus

Connects, and active travel infrastructure, including quick-build segregated cycle lanes throughout Dublin city and county; and

— prioritise the rollout of new Luas lines in Cork, Galway, and Dublin, and the improvement and development of new regional and suburban rail links, including to transport hubs such as Shannon Airport and Rosslare Europort, on the Western rail corridor, and to towns like Navan.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— the Government is committed to the delivery of major public transport projects, as evidenced by last year's review of the National Development Plan (NDP) allocation of €24.3 billion to transport projects from 2026 to 2030;

— the NDP Sectoral Plan for Transport 2026-2030 involves a funding ratio of at least 2:1 in favour of new public transport over new roads projects, and for the next five years there will be approximately €3.3 billion allocated towards new roads investment and, at a minimum, approximately €7 billion towards new public transport investment;

— while the Government has allocated an unprecedented level of investment in transport, representing an almost 87 per cent increase as compared to the previous five-year period, investment decisions will always require a degree of sequencing and prioritisation of individual projects;

— for public transport infrastructure, there is circa €12.1 billion in funding in the new NDP from 2026 to 2030, and this represents more than double the amount provided in the previous five years;

— the funding in the new NDP will provide for the progression of a number of major public transport projects over this period, including the commencement of construction of MetroLink, Luas Finglas, the Dublin Area Rapid Transport (DART)+ programme, and the Western Rail Corridor from Athenry to Claremorris, as well as the continued implementation of the Cork Area Commuter Rail programme and the BusConnects programmes across Dublin, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford cities;

— in particular, the funding will allow Luas Finglas to commence construction within the period of this NDP, which is ahead of the post-2030 schedule for the project's construction commencement in the National Transport Authority Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy;

— furthermore, funding secured under this NDP review will see construction start before 2030 on the DART+ programme, beginning with DART+ West, which is a crucial enabler of the rest of the programme and particularly DART+ South West;

— on public transport services, Public Service Obligation (PSO) journeys have continued to grow steadily, reaching a record 343 million passenger journeys by the end of 2024, and this represents an increase of 32 million journeys compared with

2023, and exceeds prepandemic levels, and a significant milestone was reached in October 2024, when PSO services recorded one million journeys in a single day, and although the full year figures are not yet available for 2025, early indicators show continued growth, with Dublin Bus recording 164 million journeys in 2025, an increase of 5 million on 2024 and the highest annual total on record;

— Connecting Ireland is another strong example of progress, delivering exponential growth in rural transport since its launch in 2022, with 185 new and enhanced services having been introduced, resulting in almost 8 million passenger journeys in 2024, and where Connecting Ireland services have been implemented, patronage rose by 38 per cent from 2023 to 2024, and is up by 165 per cent compared to early 2019; and

— in addition, €360 million has been allocated to Active Travel and Greenway Programmes in 2026, continuing the high level of funding which has seen €1 billion invested in walking and cycling infrastructure projects since the start of the decade, and over 1,000 kilometres of active travel infrastructure has been constructed since 2021, with networks of walking and cycling infrastructure beginning to emerge in our towns and cities, allowing commuters to choose active transport modes to travel to work and school; and

affirms Government efforts to:

- deliver public transport projects;
- support households and businesses through addressing congestion; and
- work to address Ireland's climate targets."

-(Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Jerry Buttimer)

An Ceann Comhairle: I now deal with the deferred division relating to the ministerial amendment to the motion regarding flexible work and commuter delays. Earlier today on the question, "That the amendment be made", a division was claimed and that division must now be taken.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 67; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	

Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Calleary, Dara.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nash, Ged.	
Heydon, Martin.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	

Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Mark Wall and Duncan Smith.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 67; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Doherty, Pearse.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Calleary, Dara.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nash, Ged.	
Heydon, Martin.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Higgins, Emer.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	

O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Mark Wall and Duncan Smith.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.15 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 22 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.15 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 22 January 2026.