



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 27 Eanáir 2026

Tuesday, 27 January 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome all of those in the Gallery, which is full. We will proceed to Leaders' Question under Standing Order 38. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: For Grace Lynch, last Sunday began like any other. Spending time with her family, having breakfast, talking about her plans for the day, texting friends and having the craic with her sisters and baby brother. Later, on Sunday afternoon, Grace went to meet her boyfriend. She never came home. As she crossed the Ratoath Road a short distance from her home, Grace was mowed down by a scrambler bike. Hit at full speed and with full force, her body was thrown across the road. She was rushed to Connolly Hospital where doctors desperately treated her catastrophic injuries, but it was not enough. Grace Lynch died that evening. She was 16. A young woman with her whole life ahead of her. The apple of her father's eye and her mother's pride and joy, she was killed on the road in her community as she went about her everyday 16-year-old life. What happened is every parent's, every family's and every young person's worst nightmare. Now, instead of preparing her for school, her heartbroken parents prepare to bury their lovely daughter.

Grace Lynch was failed catastrophically. Scrambler bikes have been the scourge of working-class communities in Dublin and beyond for years. Neighbourhoods being terrorised by antisocial behaviour involving these bikes is nothing new, with gangs driving scramblers dangerously, harassing and intimidating people and delivering drugs. There have been countless accidents and there is a constant sense of menace, but the Government failed to listen to communities and take them seriously. It was, in reality, only a matter of time before somebody was killed. Now that somebody has a name. Her name is Grace Lynch.

For more than a decade, we pushed the Government to crack down and introduce stronger laws to get these scramblers off our streets. When the Government would not act, we did. In 2021, we brought forward legislation to take this on, but the Government amended and blocked

it and dragged its heels. In 2023, it brought forward legislation but it did not go far enough. As we meet here today, this legislation has not been enacted fully. Only today, when a child is dead, the Government is talking about moving quickly, tightening things up and taking action.

The absence of any Government urgency in tackling the menace of scramblers is frightening. This has to change fast.

Éilíonn bás Grace Lynch gníomh ón Rialtas chun dul i ngleic leis na rothair streachailte. Tá ár bpobail cráite acu. Grace's mother, Siobhán, spoke at a vigil in Finglas last night. She said watching Grace take her last breath was the worst pain imaginable. She vowed to fight to get these scramblers off our streets, but this is not a fight she should have to take on. It is the Government's job to act now to ensure that another life is not lost. The Taoiseach owes it to Grace's heartbroken parents to set out what the Government will do now to get scramblers off our roads and streets and out of our communities, where they have wreaked havoc for years.

I spoke with Grace's mam, Siobhán, last night. She told me that Grace was a happy girl and a kind girl. She loved her family. She loved her friends. She loved the colour red. She loved life, and she should still be here. Her death cannot be in vain, because Grace Lynch matters. What happened to her matters. What happens next really matters. The Government must act.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before the Taoiseach responds, I ask everybody to please be responsible in their commentary. There will be a criminal investigation and prosecution.

The Taoiseach: I want to express my deepest sympathies to the family of Grace Lynch who was mowed down by a scambler and who died as a result. No words can console the family. Nothing that I can say can in any way ease the devastation, the pain, the hurt and the anger that Grace's family feels right now. I understand that anger, and I understand the devastation that they are going through. They have lost a beautiful daughter who should be going to school and who should be with her friends today. There is an investigation under way.

We did act at the time in respect of legislation. I recall that Deputies across the House – including, on our side, Deputy Paul McAuliffe, in particular, and Deputy John Lahart – pressed for legislation to deal with the scourge of scramblers in our communities. As a result of that and of work involving the then Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, legislative changes were brought through the House to tackle the scourge of dangerous driving and the antisocial use of scramblers and quad bikes. Those changes were introduced by means of the Road Traffic Act 2023, which dealt with dangerous driving becoming an offence everywhere not just in public places. It is difficult to comprehend that was not the state of play before that. An Garda Síochána has been granted new powers of seizure. There is also a power in that legislation to provide for the prohibition or the restriction of use of classes of vehicles in particular places. As a result of that legislation, in 2024 and 2025 about 300 scramblers and quad bikes were seized by the Garda. That is not enough.

There is a third aspect to this. I am convening an immediate meeting of the Departments of Transport and justice. I had to convene a meeting in 2020 or 2021 to start the ball rolling and

get the legislation to which I refer done. There was a degree of resistance at the time and claims to the effect that it could not be done and so on. It was done. However, the final regulations need to be dealt with. They should already have been. I am very clear about it. In my view, it will happen. It should have happened in terms of the formulation and dealing with of those regulations. I understand fully the anger of people in working-class areas, particularly Finglas. There is no need for and there should be no scramblers on public roads. We have it within our power to make that happen, and it will happen.

That said, nothing can ever ease the devastation the Lynch family have experienced as a result of the loss of Grace from that collision the other night. The Deputy can rest assured we are. I have spoken to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, this morning. That work needs to be completed. Progress was made on a number of fronts but that needs to be completed.

Is uafás den scoth é seo. Tá sé uafásach ar fad. Is olc an scéal an méid atá tar éis tarlú i mbás Grace Lynch. Déanaimid comhbhrón lena clann ach ní leor é sin. Caithfimid an reachtaíocht a chur i bhfeidhm ina iomláine.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Of course, there are no words of consolation that can in any way reflect the loss of Siobhán and Martin, Grace's wider family, her community and her friends too. Of course, that is the case. Her life was lost needlessly and, as I said, it was predictable. It was predictable that a life would be lost and yet the law dragged its feet. I hope the Taoiseach hears that anger from Finglas. The people in that community have their arms around Grace's family and they will mind them but, no more than the communities in Ballymun, Ballyfermot, Clondalkin, Tallaght or parts of Limerick, they will not tolerate any more that people are allowed to run a monk in working-class communities, putting people's very lives in danger. With a 16-year-old life taken, no words of consolation can ever meet the pain of Grace's family but Siobhán, her mother, told me that action would be some consolation. We need swift action not words. Take these bikes off our streets and make our kids and our communities safe at last.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I do hear the anger from the community and we are going to act. Also, I know that the Minister for justice has spoken with the Garda Commissioner. He is attending to this immediately and treating this with the upmost priority in terms of the enforcement side of it. On the legislation in terms of seizures and so on, the Garda did act in a number of areas and despite what one hears, it was in a position to seize many of these. In terms of pursuing scramblers, there is a pursuit policy. I believe the Commissioner is going to review that with a view to taking a more intensive approach in relation to it. The more fundamental point is that the remaining part of this legislation has to be enacted and commenced to take these scramblers off our roads as is provided for, despite what gets said, in the primary legislation this House passed on 2023.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I express my deepest condolences to the family and friends of Grace Lynch, the 16-year-old girl who tragically died, killed in that horrific scambler collision on Sunday. We have all seen the heartbreaking footage of Grace's mother Siobhán addressing a vigil last night as she described the unimaginable pain of watching her young daughter take her last breath. I pay tribute to Siobhán Lynch for showing such courage in the face of such outright grief and for calling for changes to the law so that no other family has to endure that trauma.

As a parent, I can only imagine the horror of their ordeal on losing their beautiful daughter in this way.

It is not just Finglas; the entire country is shaken by Grace's death. I know we are all conscious the criminal justice process must be allowed to take its course but the misuse of scramblers, quad bikes and e-scooters is a nationwide problem, a scourge across so many communities. We have seen a failure of enforcement, a failure of regulation, a failure of political will and a lack of urgency from Government in tackling this. I welcome the Taoiseach's robust comments that our roads must be safe and that everything must be done to remove scramblers from our roads but we need action. This is not a new issue. The catastrophic injuries caused to Ilabek Avetian by a scrambler bike in a Dublin park back in 2018 should have been the wake-up call.

It is not just scramblers; we know that e-scooter-related brain injuries now account for over a quarter of paediatric neurosurgical admissions in Temple Street hospital.

Families are burying their children. We need to band together on this in this House. Let us resolve to expedite the solution. The Taoiseach will have Labour's full support in facilitating any necessary law or policy change to address this scourge but we have to see urgent action from him.

Scramblers are not toys; they are powerful machines. They are being used to intimidate on our streets. They are lethal weapons. They are often unregistered and used illegally by inexperienced riders in public spaces, parks, estates and streets. They are sitting in storage right now around the country, being sold and loaned out by individuals who know they will be misused. Some are adapted to break speed limits, endangering not just the riders, but everyone around them.

We need enforcement that is visible, consistent and effective. We welcome new Garda powers but we need to see more. Four years on, the specialist Garda drone unit set up to tackle scramblers is still not being used due to delays in establishing a clear legal framework. The Minister for justice has said work is ongoing on a code of practice for using the drones but we need far greater urgency.

The Minister of State with responsibility for road safety, speaking on the radio this morning, gave little reassurance and no sense of urgency. How will the Government move beyond sympathy and robust words? What action will it take to remove scramblers from our streets and public spaces? Will it consider an immediate freeze on the use of all scrambler bikes until the necessary enforcement mechanisms - robust enforcement mechanisms - are put in place urgently?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I fully agree with what she said on the courage of Siobhán Lynch in respect of the loss of her daughter Grace and pursuing with great clarity the need for absolute change.

The legislation has been passed by this House. I convened a meeting a number of years ago to set that in train and the legislation was passed. Additional powers have been given to the Garda and additional laws have been passed as a result of that. In particular, dangerous driving has become an offence everywhere, not just in public places. An Garda Síochána has been granted new powers of seizure and has used those powers. Close to 300 scramblers and quads

have been seized as a result of that. The third element is that the Department of Transport has been working with the Garda to finalise a straightforward ban in areas where they are being used. I am convening an immediate meeting between the relevant Departments to get this done. My view, and the advice from the Attorney General is very clear, is that it does not need additional laws to do this. It will be done. I have made that very clear to all Ministers and officials. There are significant powers in place to intervene, confiscate and prohibit such vehicles on our public roads.

Related to that, we have to move with speed on e-scooters. The level of injuries being reported from consultants in emergency medicine, particularly brain injuries as well as physical injuries, is far too high. People might have welcomed them some years ago, thinking they were a new mode of transport, but they are now a very significant danger to the public and to those using them. They have to be regulated. We have to take a really hard look at this because of the level of injuries to young people, in particular, who use such vehicles.

The scrambler issue, for me, is very straightforward. Scramblers have no place on our roads. There is a lot of other activity related to them, as someone referenced during the day, in terms of illegal activity, perhaps, in some cases and the utilisation of scramblers in particular.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome the Taoiseach's commitment to taking urgent action to remove scramblers from our roads and to address illegal usage of e-scooters and quads, but we need action. I am grateful to my colleagues, Deputies Sherlock and Ahern, who point out practical things that could be done now. We were promised 150 additional road traffic gardaí. Let us see those gardaí in place because this is about enforcement.

Let us see the sort of actions that have been taken elsewhere. In Manchester, drone units have been deployed to track illegal use of scramblers. In the Netherlands, authorities are seizing imported vehicles that do not meet regulations. I have spoken about, and we all know about, e-scooters that are modified so that they break speed limits that have been set in law. This is about enforcement. I say again let us have an immediate freeze on the use of scramblers in any public spaces while we ensure there is a robust enforcement mechanism in place. Clearly, it is not in place now and we are all seeing it. I have given that one example of the code of practice on drone usage. There is one very practical thing that can and should be done urgently. What about mass confiscations of vehicles that do not meet regulations?

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Garda does not need additional powers. Let us get additional gardaí to do this. This must be a watershed moment.

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy and I appreciate her offer of engagement and co-operation. The code of practice will be finalised and I know the Minister has spoken to the Garda Commissioner in relation to this. The newly appointed Garda Commissioner is very clear on the prioritisation we attach to this issue. That code of practice in respect of drones and their utilisation in detection and so on will be done now. Also, the commencement of the regulations on that last aspect of the 2023 Act, most of which has been commenced, will also happen.

Deputy Holly Cairns: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I express our deepest sympathies to Grace Lynch's family. Our thoughts are with her family, friends, boyfriend and extended community today.

This Government was elected on promises that it was addressing the housing disaster. Many people struggling to buy and rent a home believed it. They took the Taoiseach at his word, they trusted him and many of them voted for him. Those people have been looking on as promise after promise that was made to them have turned to dust. The legislation the Cabinet signed off on today is the latest betrayal of these people. Between tenancies, landlords will be allowed to hike up rents to match the market rate. Just to be clear, the market rate is effectively a rate that is set by landlords. Every expert before the housing committee said this would result in higher rents. Ireland already has some of the highest rents in Europe. Incredibly, today's decision will drive them even higher. Why is the focus of this Government constantly on the protection of landlords' profits? When we consider the context, we are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, rents have already doubled over the last ten years and there are 16,000 homeless people, of whom nearly 5,000 are children. It says a lot that this Government's legislation today is not directly focused on urgently helping them.

I have to wonder if the Government is even aware of how high rents are at the moment and what new tenants could be forced to pay under market rent. Today, a two-bedroom apartment in Dublin is going for €3,400 per month. In Cork, it is €2,250, in Galway, it is €3,000, and in Limerick, it is €2,800. All of these prices are from *daft.ie* today and they are only going in one direction - up. Does the Taoiseach believe these rents are acceptable and affordable? Does he think they should go up? The Government can dress this up whatever way it wants and can try its level best to spin this Bill as protection for renters, but no one is going to buy it. This Government has not just failed to deliver on housing; it has repeatedly misled people about that failure. The reality is, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have spent a decade turning a housing crisis into more and more of a disaster. Now, instead of admitting this and changing its approach, it is doubling down, making renters pay the price of Government failure again by using them as sacrificial lambs and bleeding them dry in the hope of boosting supply. It is not too late to change course. The Government could increase protections for renters instead of stripping them away. It could introduce a three-year rent freeze and use that time to boost supply of affordable homes using a State construction company and modular home factories. How can the Taoiseach stand over a plan that will drive record-high rents even higher?

The Taoiseach: First, I reject the spin the Deputy has put on the legislation the Cabinet approved today in respect of rent. Fundamentally, to summarise, what we are now looking at is national rent regulation and national rent control across the entire country.

That is an outcome of this Bill. There will be strengthened protection for renters through the introduction of tenancies of minimum duration. That has not happened before. There is an effective end to no-fault evictions. It includes the establishment of a rent price register, which brings much needed transparency, and arrangements to reset rent to market rate only every six years. That is part of a wider set of measures the Government announced over the past 12 months, which have laid the foundations for significant movement and progress on the housing front.

The Deputy forgot to say that the tenancies of the over 240,000 people who are currently renting will not be impacted in any way by this legislation. Deputy Cairns just ignored that and spun it differently. She deliberately misled people by saying what she said, in terms of the spinning of it and so on. The measures are only for new tenancies that start from 1 March. That is very clear. In our view - Deputy Cairns may differ - this is the most significant improvement in rental protection in the history of the State. From now on, when tenants sign a lease, they can have far more confidence in terms of where they are living. They will be there for a minimum of six years. The restrictions are much more significant now than they would have been on landlords in terms of eviction.

I make the wider point that the Housing Commission recommended that we reform the rent pressure zones, RPZs. That was a very clear recommendation from the Housing Commission. Yes, we are balancing but there is very strong protective regulation here. We must also increase supply. I argue that what Deputy Cairns and her party have proposed for the past two or three years would dampen supply and disincentivise investment and would not have any significant impact in terms of reducing rent. That is inescapable in terms of the Deputy's idea of a rent freeze. It is all very popular but it would undermine the rental market very significantly and to such an extent that you would have a depression in supply. We want more supply and we need more supply, obviously. Already, the indications are quite positive in respect of both the budgetary measures on VAT and these particular reforms.

It is also interesting in terms of a fairer system. Dr. Michael Byrne from the school of social policy, social work and social justice in University College Dublin has made the point that what is being missed in the current discussion is that the new legislation is designed, once established, to reduce the level of notices of termination.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Taoiseach saying that this is the most significant improvement for renters shows how low the bar is for renters in terms of improvements. Listening to him, it is easy to understand why people feel such despair about housing. The Government is out of ideas. We need a radical reset on housing and this Government just will not deliver that because that would mean admitting failure, and the Taoiseach does not seem capable of that.

Rents are at record levels and this legislation will drive them even higher. The Taoiseach can criticise the Social Democrats all he likes with his usual, baseless attacks, but the housing disaster is getting worse on his watch. It does not have to be like this. He could take radical action and prioritise renters and those who want to own their own home. He chooses not to.

The Taoiseach did not answer the question, so I will ask it again. How can he stand over a plan that will drive rents even higher?

The Taoiseach: I did but I noticed the Deputy's supplementary question was pre-scripted. I have no issue discussing with the Deputy. Let us put the scripts away and let us debate it. Let us talk. I do not use scripts all the time. I am just saying that I made a few points-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: What is the point in that? Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: No, the point is this. It is clear the Deputy was not listening to what I was saying. She just has empty soundbites that she just pronounces. They are good. They sound

well but there is a desperate lack of substance in what the Deputy is saying about housing. I equally argue the Social Democrats have not come up with solutions.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There is record homelessness.

The Taoiseach: Earlier, the Deputy spoke about a construction company. How long does she think that will take to set up?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: How long has the Taoiseach been in Government?

The Taoiseach: That is why those kind of policies do not resonate with people because they do not see solutions there either. I acknowledge housing is a huge issue. It is an enormous issue. It is the number one issue facing our society. We are throwing the kitchen sink at it in terms of public sector investment. We are trying to get additional private sector investment in because we must. Deputy Cairns does not want to tolerate private sector investment and she is against it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: We need €20 billion a year to get to 50,000 to 60,000 houses a year.

Let us put aside the soundbites and ask ourselves a question. How do we get to 50,000 or 60,000 houses per year because that is what is required?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Get you out of Government.

Deputy Rory Hearne: What is the policy on rents?

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Less developer-led policies; that is what-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. The time is up. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Everywhere is going up.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gogarty, please.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: We have seen too many tragic cases across the country where a parent or family member has taken the lives of their loved ones, including one in my constituency weeks ago. My thoughts are first and foremost with every family who has suffered such unimaginable loss and also, of course, the family of the late Grace Lynch.

How the State handles these cases is a matter of public interest. There is one case in particular, again in my constituency, that demands answers. This week five years ago, three innocent children - Conor, aged 9, Darragh, aged 7, and Carla, just three years old - were killed by their mother, Deirdre Morley. She was later found not guilty of murder by reason of insanity,

a verdict that has left more questions than answers. Their father, Andrew McGinley, who is in the Gallery today, has fought tirelessly to have the full circumstances leading up to their deaths properly investigated. He sought detailed fact-finding processes at their inquest, including the examination of the treatment Ms Morley received in the two years before the children died. However, the coroner has limited the scope of the inquest. This followed correspondence with the HSE and from consultants in St. Patrick's Mental Health Services requesting such a limitation.

I fully respect the independence of the Coroner's Court but when the HSE asks for a limited scope, that request carries weight, and if the effect is to restrict the facts that can be examined, then the public is entitled to ask why. Barristers for the HSE argued that a full investigation would examine not only the treatment provided but also a "consideration and determination as to its adequacy". Yes, the Coroners Act does prevent a finding of civil or criminal liability but the legislation does not prevent the coroner from establishing plain facts, including whether protocols were followed, whether procedures failed or whether systemic gaps existed. Those factual findings are essential if we are serious about preventing more such tragedies.

Under the European Convention on Human Rights, the State has a duty to conduct an effective investigation where systemic failures may have contributed to a death. That requires looking beyond the immediate medical causes to the wider circumstances. Our Supreme Court has also been clear that coroners have a public duty to allay rumours or suspicion and to highlight circumstances which, if unaddressed, could lead to further deaths.

I am, therefore, asking for a clear commitment today in the case from McGinley children. Further information must be brought into the public domain that may require widening the remit of coroners or require the Attorney General to reconfirm that such scope in the public interest already exists. It certainly requires an examination as to why the HSE sought to limit this inquest and whether that constitutes undue interference contrary to the public interest. Families who lose loved ones in these horrific circumstances must be able to trust that every single relevant fact will be examined because transparency and accountability are about learning lessons and maybe, just maybe, that will save lives in the future.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising a very grave issue, particularly in the context of the deaths of Conor, Darragh and Carla McGinley. The Minister for justice met with Andrew in late November. We will reflect on what he has articulated very passionately. We are also conscious that this is a very challenging area in respect of the rights of all concerned but also the issues of mental health. I will seek an answer as to why the HSE took the position it did. The coroner has clear powers under the Act in terms of organising the conduct of the inquest and so forth.

I acknowledge that there are issues here in respect of how we, as a society, deal with familicide and how we deal with these issues. In more recent times, we are witnessing parents coming forward or the family coming forward with very serious issues and who feel their concerns and issues are not being listened to by those in authority. On the other hand, there are also very clear issues of an ethical kind that are not immediately reconcilable with the need for 100% transparency.

It is not simple; it is very challenging, but we have an obligation to listen and then to act in the best way we can to try to meet the concerns of those who have lost their children in horrific

and very traumatic circumstances. I am open, and I know the Ministers will be too, to engaging with Mr. McGinley and others in terms of how we can move this forward.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I thank the Taoiseach. Mr. McGinley's stated reason for seeking an unrestricted inquest scope is simple and is grounded in the wider public interest to save lives in the future, enable learning that could improve mental healthcare and treatment, strengthen diagnosis, ensure robust management of prescription medication, reinforce the need for co-parents to be informed and supported, and most importantly, ensure warning signs and risks to children are recognised before lives are lost. I do not believe there is a parent in the whole country who would accept an inquest being limited in its scope. Other, similar cases were not so limited.

The role of the State Claims Agency in overseeing the HSE needs to be fully investigated. The role of the HSE in trying to limit this particular investigation has implications right now. It is current, it is not legacy and it needs to be looked at. Not following up on the process risks the perception of a State body represented at coroner inquests under agreement with the State Claims Agency being accused of deliberately attempting to avoid scrutiny and, in fact, working against the common good and the public interest. This needs follow-up. Will the Taoiseach or his office meet with Mr. McGinley to further pursue this? There are public interest issues that need to be addressed.

The Taoiseach: There are public interest issues and these issues are complex. It is my understanding that the new Mental Health Bill currently before the Seanad will provide for the appointment of a nominated person who can be involved in a person's care. However, I think the Deputy is talking more in terms of the inquest, the nature of that inquest,-----

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I refer to all inquests.

The Taoiseach: -----the level of information that is put forward and the avoidance of any over-restriction in terms of information that may be put forward. I would like to discuss this later with the Ministers for Health and justice and the HSE to get their perspective on it. There clearly are issues here. I readily acknowledge that they need to be pursued and that those who have lost loved ones as a result of horrific events of this kind need to be listened to and heard.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Eighth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Motion re Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024 (without debate)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the exercise by the State of Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union authorising enhanced cooperation on the establishment of a

Loan for Ukraine (to conclude within 60 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (to adjourn after 90 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Emergency Mental Health Services, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on the Infrastructure Plan (to conclude within 2 hours and 25 minutes)

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data*

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data*

*Two separate motions – to commence no earlier than 4.30 p.m.; to be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 1 hour, with questions to be put on each motion separately

- International Protection Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes)

- Revised Estimates for Public Services 2026 [Votes 11, 12, 14, 15 and 17-19] (back from Committee) (without debate and to be moved together and decided by one question; any division claimed to be taken immediately)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Emergency Winter Payment for Disabled People, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage, resumed) (if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 1 hour and 54 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Regulation of Drones Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Roderic O’Gorman.

Proposed Arrangements for this week’s business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members’ business shall be taken following proceedings on the Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

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

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024 shall be decided without debate;

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the exercise by the State of Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union authorising enhanced cooperation on the establishment of a Loan for Ukraine shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;
- speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and
- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

5. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025, shall be interrupted and stand adjourned either after 1 hour and 30 minutes, or where no further member is offering, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) members may share time.

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

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) in the event that the Statements on the Infrastructure Plan conclude before 4.30 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 4.30 p.m., when the order of business shall resume with the Motions on Proposals which recommend

Council Decisions for the conclusion and signing of an agreement with the Swiss Federation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data;

(c) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Second Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026; and

(d) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate;

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

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

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

(c) members may share time;

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

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Signing of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data *and* the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data shall be taken either at 4.30 p.m. or on the conclusion of the Statements on the Infrastructure Plan, whichever is the later and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all proceedings thereon;

(b) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

4. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

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

5. the following arrangements shall apply to the proceedings on the Motions for Revised Estimates for Public Services 2026 [Votes 11, 12, 14, 15 and 17-19]:

(a) the motions shall be moved and decided together by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(b) the proceedings thereon shall be taken without debate; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding, anything in Standing Orders:

(a) topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the River Boyne Task Force Bill 2023, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

(b) the Dáil on its rising today shall adjourn until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 4th February, 2026; and

2. the proceedings on the resumed Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 1 hour and 54 minutes, and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the speaking slots from the arrangements for the resumed first round from Tuesday 27th January, 2026 shall be continued from the point at which they were adjourned;

(b) where speeches conclude before the 1 hour and 54 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and;

(c) members may share time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements agreed to? No, there is dissent.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The chairperson of Bord Bia has to resign. Every single farming organisation in this State has said it has no confidence in him and he has to go. How on earth can we have a chairperson at Bord Bia promoting Irish food abroad when the primary producers have no confidence in him and want him to go? This is a crazy situation. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, needs to sack him, simple as that, as called for by the farming organisations across this State. We need the Minister to come into the Chamber and account for this failure to act on the demands of the farmers across this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Deputies they have 30 seconds each.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We need a serious discussion in here about Garda leadership, the Garda National Bureau of Criminal Investigation and the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, after what happened in Limerick yesterday, where a retired superintendent and four gardaí were found innocent on 39 charges. That took seven years. How much did this bloody well cost the taxpayer, and it is not finished yet? It is not acceptable. We need a debate on this. The Garda Representative Association, GRA, has called it a witch hunt.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has had 30 seconds. I call Deputy Gibney.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We need to discuss in this Chamber how this came about. The public demands answers.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Taoiseach said in 2013 that the triple lock is at the heart of Irish neutrality. The Government proceeds to say it supports neutrality while it advances its plans to abandon the triple lock, even though, in poll after poll, the people say they want to protect Irish neutrality. We need a serious discussion about it this week.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: One of the disastrous consequences of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act is that it will fuel even further homelessness and people being forced into emergency accommodation because they cannot find an affordable rental property.

For weeks now I have been asking at the Business Committee for an emergency debate on the record levels of homelessness and people in emergency accommodation. There was the Simon Community report and I am getting loads of cases.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am getting elderly people as well as families.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes. The time is up. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need an emergency debate on homelessness.

Deputy Michael Collins: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. We had a 70% cut on the mackerel fishing quota and the whitefish - haddock - close to the beginning of December, I think. A task force was meant to be set up but from that day until now, we do not seem to have heard anything. The fishing industry has very serious concerns that it is going to be forgotten yet again.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need a debate on the Dáil this week on where we are at in relation to compensation for fishermen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kenny, do yo have an amendment to move?

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I do. Under Standing Order 35(3) I wish to amend Wednesday's business to include statements on the politicisation of the announcement of special classes, which is causing distress for families and school leaders. I raised this two weeks ago and it has happened again since that. I ask that time be allocated in this week's schedule to debate the issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. The Chief Whip to respond.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I will not be accepting that amendment. In relation to all the issues that were raised by the various spokespersons, we can consider all of them on Thursday. We have a really busy schedule in the next few days. We have the Child Care (Amendment) Bill this afternoon, there are two items of Private Members' business from the Opposition with one on mental health and the other on disability, we have statements on infrastructure and we have the International Protection Bill. The Order of Business stands as discussed last Thursday.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Chief Whip. Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to and the proposed amendment negatived?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed.

Question put: "That the amendment proposed to the arrangements on the Order of Business is hereby negatived and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

Dáil Éireann

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 59; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Stاون
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Daly, Pa.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Chambers, Jack.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heneghan, Barry.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lahart, John.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lawless, James.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Reilly, Louise.	

Martin, Micheál.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McEntee, Helen.	Quaide, Liam.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Wall, Mark.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ward, Charles.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ward, Mark.	
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we proceed, I urge members to stick to the minute allocated to them.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What does the Government have against renters? Its new legislation guts rent pressure zones and allows rents to be reset to full market levels between

tenancies. From 1 March, this will have the effect of driving rents even higher. Who demanded the introduction of the Bill that has been brought forward? It was not renters, who are drowning under record rents, or small or medium-sized landlords. The Bill was written for one group only, namely the vulture funds and corporate landlords that are gouging renters month after month and charging €2,500 or €3,500 for very ordinary homes. From March, new tenants will be hit first. Students will then be hit. Year by year, increasing numbers of renters will be forced into paying uncapped market rents. The Residential Tenancies Board has indicated that one quarter of tenancies turn over every year. This means that means that within a few short years most renters will be paying full market rents and that rents will soar. This is the Government's choice. Can the Taoiseach accept that its legislation will increase rents for new tenants and, over time, for the majority of tenants?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is engaging in polemic and political propaganda. The bottom line is that the legislation will not have any impact on the 240,000 people who are currently renting.

3 o'clock

The bottom line is that for the 240,000 people currently renting, this legislation will not have any impact. It is only for new tenancies that start on 1 March. The core element of this is national rent regulation. What we are talking about is national rent control across the whole country. This will strengthen protections for renters through the introduction of tenancies of minimum duration. It will mean an effective end to no-fault evictions, the establishment of a rent-price register and arrangements to reset rent market rate only every six years. Why is the Deputy against this?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: And new tenancies.

The Taoiseach: Why is she against that level of protection for renters?

A Deputy: Hear hear.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to raise the emergency affecting communities across this island as a result of the fallout from Storm Chandra. A friend sent a photo of a woman's car floating in her driveway in south Dublin. Enniscorthy looks like a lake and the M50 was closed due to flooding earlier. There are power cuts, battered homes, stalled commutes and flooded homes. It is nearly a week to the day since the Government voted down a Labour Party motion on flexible and remote work, one that put forward practical ways of addressing the real difficulties so many people face due to congestion on our roads. Those difficulties were absolutely exacerbated today due to weather. People who are sleeping rough and in tents due to failures in housing are particularly vulnerable in storms and, of course, it is a year since the devastation of Storm Éowyn. Our thanks go to front-line workers fixing the mess. What does the Government have to offer households which will be struggling to meet their bills and to cope with the storm's impact? What urgent support can be given to restore amenities, being conscious that local authorities have seen staff numbers falling and therefore have a shortage of staff to deal with the fallout?

The Taoiseach: Storm Chandra has had very severe impacts. High winds and heavy rain are being experienced across the country, with very significant impacts in the areas the Deputy has outlined. That is fully understood. It is why the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage's national directorate of fire and emergency management met with all of the local authorities and the other key response agencies in advance of Storm Chandra to ensure preparation ahead of the storm. Dublin, Wicklow, Wexford and Cork were significantly impacted, but it is fair to say that flooding impacts are across the country. Bunclody and Enniscorthy in particular have experienced severe flooding to homes and businesses. Local authority teams are on the ground assisting. The Department of Social Protection will assist on the ground with households affected by flooding and provide immediate needs payments and other supports, where required. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment will activate the business and community flooding support scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I return to the scourge of scramblers. Despite the assurance the Taoiseach gave earlier, the fact of the matter is it should not have taken as long as it has taken to get to this point. The legislation passed in 2023 to give effect to the control of scramblers and enforcement had provision for a prohibition on the use of scramblers in urban communities. Last night, I watched a person of extraordinary courage, Siobhán Lynch, 24 hours after the death of her daughter, stand in front of her community and family and say she would place her own devastation alongside her courage to campaign to end the scourge of scramblers in our communities. She will need support. Does the Taoiseach have a timeline for enacting a prohibition on the use and, I would argue, the sale of scramblers in our areas?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue, which, as he knows, was raised earlier.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I said-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It does not matter. This is questions on policy and legislation.

The Taoiseach: I fully accept what Deputy Gannon said in relation to the courage, actions and compassion of Siobhán Lynch in terms of looking at the wider situation and making sure this will never happen again, and how devastating the loss of Grace has been for her mother, father and entire family. It is utterly devastating. The legislation passed in 2023 allows for the banning of such vehicles on public roads. That is something that will be done.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did the Cabinet agree this morning to press ahead with abolishing the triple lock without holding a referendum? If it did, why is the Taoiseach reneging on the promises he personally made to the Irish people in order to get the Nice and Lisbon treaties passed?

It now seems crystal clear, despite the Tánaiste promising me just last September that alternative safeguards would be introduced, that there will be no safeguards whatsoever to ensure our soldiers can only be sent on genuine peacekeeping missions. Has the Government rejected the all-party recommendation of the Oireachtas committee for a formal legal review to be carried out before Irish troops are sent into harm's way without UN approval? Under the new laws, the State could have sent troops to fight in Iraq. It would be able to send troops to fight and die for Trump wherever he decides to if it decides to go along with it.

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

Deputy Paul Murphy: Instead of the Taoiseach taking these life-and-death decisions, why does he not allow the people to decide in a referendum?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. If the Deputy goes over the 60 seconds--

Deputy Paul Murphy: He should make his arguments and we will make ours, and let the people decide in a referendum.

The Taoiseach: It is an absolutely ridiculous suggestion. We have a very honourable and proud peacekeeping reputation in this country. All Government parties are absolutely committed to that peacekeeping tradition. It is because of that tradition that we need to change the law. We cannot have Russia dictating when we enter a peacekeeping mission or not. That is the actual truth of it. The Deputy wants Russia, the US, China and the other P5 members to have a veto on when Ireland participates in peacekeeping.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want the people to decide.

The Taoiseach: The Security Council has been paralysed for over two decades now. The situation has changed utterly. Where a country invades a European country, just as Russia has invaded Ukraine, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of young people, the devastation of civilian infrastructure, the destruction of energy infrastructure, and the freezing of the people, the Deputy is saying it should have a veto on where our peacekeepers should go. Cop on.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Michael Collins. The Taoiseach's time is up.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am saying the people should have a right to decide.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is enough, Deputy Murphy. I call Deputy Collins.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why will the Taoiseach not give the people a referendum?

Deputy Michael Collins: This is a straightforward question and Irish farmers deserve a straightforward answer. Did the Taoiseach or any member of his Government give any commitment or assurance, or make any side deal, formal or informal, to the European Commission to support, facilitate or not obstruct the approval of the Mercosur trade agreement? Yes or no? While on an official visit to China, the Taoiseach made statements that were widely understood at EU level as supporting Mercosur. Within 24 hours, that position changed. What exactly happened in that 24-hour period? What information emerged? What decision was taken, or what agreement fell apart that explains the reversal? There are claims circulating in Brussels that Ireland reneged on an understanding with the Commission to back Mercosur. Will the Taoiseach categorically state to this House whether that claim is true or false? If false, will he confirm that no such deal ever existed? Anything less than a clear answer leaves farmers entitled to conclude that something is being withheld.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's assertion about my statement in China is incorrect. He should look at the transcript of it. I said on that occasion that progress had been made on the insertion of safeguards into the Mercosur agreement. Safeguards were introduced by comparison with where things were over a year ago. Significant safeguards were introduced. That is all I said, and that needed to be acknowledged.

I also said we had deep concerns in respect of Mercosur beef standards and referred to looking for further measures. The agriculture meeting was due to be held that day in relation to sanitary and phytosanitary matters and a potential regulation of the Commission in respect of pesticides, standards and so forth. As the Deputy will note if he checks, I finally said the Fine Gael leader and I would meet the leaders of the Independent component of the Government that evening to formalise the Government's position, so there was no change between my statement that morning and our decision later.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I raise again the urgent need to improve services in Cavan and Monaghan for persons with disabilities. The present totally inadequate day activation unit at Rathcorrick, Cavan town, needs to be replaced with a modern facility that caters properly for the needs of service users. A new day activation unit must have the capacity to provide for increased numbers of attendees. The young adults in need of the service have waited for far too long for an appropriate modern unit. I am anxious to have the proposal for substantial investment in Drumlin House day services in Cootehill progressed quickly. New facilities are needed to provide properly for an increasing number of trainees. Day services, provided in an activation unit or training centre, are vital for the well-being of the young people, who, with their complex needs, face particular challenges day in, day out. I continue to support the parents in their efforts to have such proper facilities provided at both sites.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. Clogher House is a day activation unit premises based in Rathcorrick, County Cavan. The HSE advises that there is a comprehensive submission for capital funding for new day services and for premises to replace Clogher House, in line with the national HSE new directions policy for adult day services approved in 2024. HSE disability services and HSE Dublin and North East capital and estates concluded a tender process for a leasehold site in Cavan, which was approved in July of last year. Letters have now been issued to the successful and unsuccessful tenderers

and once all outstanding issues are addressed, the HSE will look at engaging with the preferred provider on milestones and the programme of delivery. I will engage with the Minister, Deputy Foley, directly on the expansion and redevelopment of Drumlin House day services in Cootehill. I understand that an allocation of €7.5 million was provided towards the expansion of Drumlin House in 2024. I will further engage with the Minister in respect of that.

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to shine a light on an anomaly that exists with regard to the eligibility for the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant. I refer to mature students, if you like, who continue to live at home with their parents for obvious reasons because they cannot acquire a property of their own. The parents' income is assessed as part of the eligibility, which is a little bit of a burden on the applicant. The same applies to students returning home from abroad. If they do not have private accommodation, or their own accommodation, they are assessed under the parents' means, which is a little bit unfair.

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): The issue of assessment for SUSI is a complex one in regard to the scenarios the Deputy described - a mature student over 23 years of age or an emigrant returning home. Perhaps it needs some investigation and revisiting. We are preparing budget 2027 at the moment. That work is under way. It will be guided by fairness and getting the most help to the most people. I will take on board the Deputy's comments and feed them into the discussion. If he wants to send me a note afterwards, I would be happy to take it and have a look at any examples the Deputy might want to highlight.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The tragic death of Grace Lynch, a young 16-year-old Finglas girl, has caused consternation and anger in our community. The illegal use of scramblers is a major issue in communities throughout the country. Recent legislation to deal with this, as we warned, did not go far enough. While there have been seizures of scramblers in Finglas and Ballymun, no charges have been brought in regard to their illegal use. The policy of not going after these scramblers gives them *carte blanche* to do what they want on our roads and streets and in our parks and is a recipe for further serious incidents. We need to look at strengthening legislation and giving the Garda the proper resources and training to tackle this scourge.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Ellis and I fully appreciate his anger and that of the community he represents. Other Deputies have communicated that to me as well. First, the existing legislation is strong and needs to be implemented. If there is a need for further legislation, we will gladly work with the Deputy in that respect.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There are no penalties-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. It is not back-and-forth.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We are seizing the vehicles but there are no penalties.

The Taoiseach: We will pursue that. We will work with the Deputy and others in the House-----

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Please.

The Taoiseach: -----if there is a necessity to strengthen the legislation. The new Garda Commissioner spoke to the Minister for justice this morning. The Minister rang him and met him to discuss this. The issue of enforcement will be intensified in respect of scramblers.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: And those wearing masks. We need to deal with them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: There is a pursuit policy there and obviously there are balances in regard to protection of lives and so on. I fully understand where the Deputy is coming from and the anger he has articulated on this.

Deputy John Connolly: Yesterday, I met with a delegation of former employees of CIÉ. They are members of a pension scheme who have not had an increase since 2008. That is 18 years, and we are all conscious of how the cost of living has increased during that period. Furthermore, to compound issues for members, many were paying a class of PRSI that allowed them no access to a contributory pension. They have been campaigning for a long time to have this issue resolved and last May, an agreement was reached between the trade unions and CIÉ management for a 5% increase. However, eight months later, the increase has not been applied. I understand it must go through a somewhat bureaucratic process with the Department of public expenditure and be approved by CIÉ. Could the Taoiseach discuss this with the Ministers, Deputies Chambers and O'Brien, to try to expedite the successful conclusion of the agreement?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue in respect of CIÉ pensions. He is correct; an agreement was arrived at. I have spoken to both Ministers. My understanding is that nothing is holding it up and the Minister for public expenditure is clear that he wants this delivered. I will get full clarity and precision for the Deputy in relation to that but I am pursuing it as well.

Deputy William Aird: First, I thank the Taoiseach for making his very successful trip to China and the rewards we got as a result of it.

I raise the issue of Portarlinton Garda station in County Laois and ask that its operation be restored to a full-time, 24-hour service. Portarlinton is the second-largest town in Laois with a population of 9,000 people. The station serves not only itself but a wider area, including Emo, Killenard and Ballybrittas. It is a significant concern to the local community that this is a large area and served by a part-time Garda station. Residents do not have a nearby front desk and are forced to travel to Portlaoise for passport verification, to report incidents and to get community support. I recognise the work being done to strengthen Garda numbers nationally. However, given Portarlinton's size, growth and location, I strongly believe the town needs a Garda station operating 24 hours a day. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the Minister for justice and An Garda Síochána to make the opening of this station 24-7 a priority.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. It is a very sizeable and important town. Thankfully, we are getting numbers through Templemore with good flow and recruitment. I will talk to the Minister for justice in respect of the presentation the Deputy has made today to see what we can do to get that to a 24-7 service.

Deputy William Aird: The Government has loads of money now.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, it is not back and forth.

Deputy William Aird: The Government has loads of money. It was closed down when there was no money but now the Government has loads of money so I want it opened up again-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, it is not back and forth.

The Taoiseach: We have to spend responsibly but I get the Deputy's point.

Deputy William Aird: I know but you are spending very little. You will not take your hand out of your pocket at all.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Aird. You will not be picked again if you cannot conform to the structure of the debate. I call Deputy Denise Mitchell.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The staff at Northside Home Care Services are back in work today after being on strike last week and they have not ruled out further action. These workers provide supports to some of the most vulnerable in our community. Some of the staff I met on the picket line in Coolock have been doing this job for over 25 years and they were not included in the pay deal for section 39 workers because they were reclassified. Instead of management and the HSE engaging with the union, the HSE threatened their jobs. It warned that it would organise replacement labour from private companies. Now we have the prospect of more industrial action throughout this sector. My question is: when are the workers who do the same work on behalf of the HSE going to receive the same pay for that work? Will the HSE engage with their unions as a matter of urgency?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. At one level it is complex but, at another level, it is straightforward, if that makes sense. There are issues there. We will talk to the Minister and the HSE to see if this issue can be satisfactorily resolved, averting any necessity for further industrial action. We appreciate the work that is being done there.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I have to plead with the Taoiseach to stop the rent reset that is going to be contained in the residential tenancies Bill. Since he made the announcement last year, he has unleashed havoc on thousands of renters out there who are facing a notice to quit this spring. This has been presented as short-term gain in terms of higher rents and evictions in order to get the longer-term gain of greater supply. It is utter nonsense. This is not some sort of diet. These are people's homes and they have nowhere to go. There are people coming through my clinics who are facing notices to quit. They have nowhere to go in the Dublin area,

with rents of over €3,500. They cannot afford it and there is an irony here in regard to what the Government is introducing. The State is going to be on the hook for paying for these higher rents over the long term. My plea to the Taoiseach is to abandon the rent reset. There are other parts of this Bill that are very welcome, such as the rent register and other parts but the Taoiseach has to abandon the rent reset because we are throwing renters to the wolves.

The last thing I want to say is that there are many of us in this House who are safe and secure in our own homes. We are not experiencing what renters are experiencing out there in terms of a precarious future with nowhere to live.

The Taoiseach: Over 240,000 people who are currently renting will not have their tenancies impacted by these measures.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: But there is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: That is an important point. I welcome the fact that the Deputy is at least the first person on the left to welcome the rent price register. Listening to everybody else, you would imagine Armageddon was about to befall us and there was nothing at all to be recommended. This Bill fundamentally strengthens rent protection and protects renters much more effectively than anything that has gone before this legislation.

The catalyst for this was the recommendation by the Housing Commission for the reform of the rent pressure zones because they were a temporary, *ad hoc* solution. They were never going to sustain. We needed clarity for investment into the future. We need investment, so the reset is important. We need investment down the line. We cannot provide the €20 billion per annum. We are doing about €9 billion per annum on housing. The Department of Finance says we need €20 billion between public and private to get 50,000 to 60,000 houses per year. That is the challenge. We need to get the right balance between protection of tenants and facilitating further investment in the market.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: A public building has been vacant in my constituency for several years. I would like to know what the Government is doing to rehabilitate vacancy across public agencies, with value for money at the core of that. In October 2025, I asked Transport Infrastructure Ireland about a 125 sq. m vacant kiosk at the Ranelagh Luas stop in Dublin 6, to which it replied the long-term use was still being considered and it had no timeline for that use. It confirmed to me last week that it was requesting €500,000 from the National Transport Authority to bring it back into use just two years after it was last operational, but the final use was yet to be confirmed. As one commentor on a Reddit thread remarked, it is mad that a little place like that in one of the richest suburbs in the country is vacant. What is the Government's policy on how long public agencies under its remit should take to bring vacant buildings like this one back into use?

The Taoiseach: We want buildings brought back into use as quickly as possible. We have the living city initiative and so on. With the greatest respect, we have given clear policy

directions to public agencies but, as Taoiseach of the country, I cannot start arbitrating on every single building in every single area across the country. I am sure the Deputy will appreciate that. It should get moving on it and get it sorted.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Is two years acceptable?

The Taoiseach: No, of course not. They should get it resolved.

Deputy Charles Ward: I acknowledge that local authorities have autonomy in managing the defective concrete blocks scheme but yesterday homeowners were denied transparency. A decision was made not to livestream defective concrete committee meetings where important decisions are made about people's lives. The councillors who voted against this access represent a deliberate and serious failure to meet acceptable standards of transparency. Homeowners want to know who supports them. The vote yesterday showed who did not support them. They shut people out of decisions that are being made about their lives. The public can and do see this is a betrayal. The country can see what is happening in Donegal. Denying access in these circumstances is unacceptable. These people are victims. What powers or guidance exists around transparency for homeowners? Does the Taoiseach agree that refusal is contrary to public interest, trust and transparency?

The Taoiseach: Refusal of what?

Deputy Charles Ward: This is regarding the defective concrete committee meetings at council level. They were always broadcast live. A vote was taken yesterday to deny that and now they have been cut off.

The Taoiseach: I cannot be interfering in every single local authority in the country in respect of every procedural vote they have. We need to have some degree of balance in the House. I am not in the business of running Donegal County Council.

Deputy Charles Ward: No, but this is the biggest scheme-----

The Taoiseach: I do not mean that in a facetious way but it is a fact. I am not aware of the precise nature of what transpired but the entirety of the council is made up of councillors democratically elected by the people of Donegal. Councillors take decisions on a regular basis, either weekly or whenever they meet. We have to have some balance on the separation of responsibilities - I will not say powers.

Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2020 to prohibit the creation of non-consensual

intimate or harmful imagery; and to increase the timeframe under which summary proceedings for an offence may be instituted.

I welcome Margaret Loftus to the House. On behalf of Deputy Máire Devine and myself, I am pleased to introduce this Bill. Unfortunately, Deputy Devine, who is Sinn Féin's spokesperson on equality, domestic and gender-based violence, cannot be here today but she has been incredibly vocal on this issue. I commend her on her work with me on this legislation.

The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 is also known as Coco's Law. It legislates against the recording, distribution and publication of intimate images. The Act created a criminal offence under which perpetrators can be prosecuted for intimate image sharing and grossly offensive communications offences. A review of the Act carried out in 2024 showed there had been 100 cases prosecuted by the Director of Public Prosecutions between 2021 and 2023. The review also found there had been 1,500 victim reports made in the same time. There is clearly a significant gap between the reports made to the hotline and, ultimately, to prosecutions.

Unquestionably, having the law in place acts as a deterrent against the sharing, recording, distribution and publication of intimate images. However, there is a lack of certainty regarding whether the 2020 Act covers the generation or creation of intimate images. It is not clear in stating that the generation, for example, of a deepfake sexual image of an adult is illegal. There was some discussion in previous legislative debates of deepfakes and the legislation makes reference to an image which purports to be images of intimate body parts, but the law must keep up with technological developments. The failure to give certainty in law that the creation of such imagery is outlawed is a flaw and it has to be fixed without delay.

Over recent weeks, we have seen that this real gap in the law has been exploited by companies such as X and its AI tool, Grok. There has been widespread revulsion at the fact that platforms have allowed the nudification of images, primarily of women and children. X's nudification tool meant that users were able to upload photos or videos of real people and then Grok could remove their clothing, generating and posting these files to the platform for its estimated 650 million monthly active users to view and save. Some 99% of the sexualised AI images and videos produced targeted women and children. Experts at the Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy Institute estimate that 6,700 sexually abusive images, including of children, were being produced every hour. The Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau is conducting an ongoing investigation into 200 child sexual abuse images generated by Grok. Those impacted did not give consent for this but fake depictions of them in degrading or humiliating scenarios were created and published through Grok and released publicly.

There is a sense that many of these platforms believe they are above the law. X initially did not disable Grok's nudification tool. Instead, it placed it behind a paywall, cynically monetising this horrific functionality. Coimisiún na Meán has a job to do when it comes to regulating social media companies operating in this State and ensuring they abide by the law. Laws in relation to AI must be robust to protect the public. Ireland's AI Advisory Council has recommended a specific offence for creating deepfakes without consent in addition to further stand-alone legislation.

This Bill seeks to amend Coco's Law to criminalise the generation of non-consensual intimate images and videos and increase the maximum penalties on conviction. While there

are many priorities in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and lots of legislation is indicated for priority, I believe there needs to be urgency with regard to this particular Bill. It is a straightforward change. It adds the creation and generation of images to the crimes of distributing and sharing those images. I hope all TDs will support the Bill's quick passage through the Dáil. I commend it to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Eighth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 28th January, 2026, approves the Eighth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 23rd January, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024: Motion

Deputy Martin Kenny: I move:

That notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 1st May, 2025, Deputy Martin Kenny be designated the member in charge of the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [66790/25]

2. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [1833/26]

3. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [3747/26]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [3922/26]

5. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [3925/26]

6. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [4037/26]

7. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4087/26]

8. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [5585/26]

9. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [5795/26]

10. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [5810/26]

11. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [5811/26]

12. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the G20 in South Africa. [5814/26]

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

I attended the G20 leaders' summit in Johannesburg, South Africa on 22 and 23 November last. Ireland was among a small number of guest countries invited by South Africa to participate in the G20 during its Presidency, the first time for Ireland to do so. I take the opportunity to again thank the South African Presidency for this invitation and for facilitating our engagement at all levels over the course of its 12 months in office. The G20 brings the world's largest economies together to discuss some of the most significant challenges we collectively face, including sustainable economic growth and development.

Irish Ministers and officials attended over 130 meetings throughout the year, working on a range of issues including sustainability, climate, trade and economic relations, global development and development in Africa. Throughout the year, Ireland sought to make a

positive contribution, based on our strong commitment to multilateralism and global development.

The two-day summit I attended in Johannesburg in November was the culmination of the South African Presidency. It was the first G20 summit held on African soil, a very welcome development. The meeting adopted the Johannesburg G20 leaders' declaration, in which we reiterated our unwavering commitment to act in accordance with international law, including international humanitarian law and the Charter of the United Nations. The declaration focused on important issues considered during the South African Presidency, including disaster resilience, debt sustainability, financing the energy transition, access to critical minerals and securing inclusive economic growth.

At the summit, I formally addressed sessions on inclusive and sustainable economic growth - leaving no one behind, and a resilient world - the G20's contribution. In my contributions I advocated for economic growth to be inclusive, resilient and sustainable, and for support for the most vulnerable communities impacted by climate change.

In the margins, I had several bilateral meetings, including with the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lawrence Wong, the Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Keir Starmer, and the president of the African Development Bank, Sidi Ould Tah.

I also attended a meeting of the coalition of the willing in the margins of the G20 leaders' summit in South Africa. Leaders reiterated our unwavering support for Ukraine and its territorial integrity.

I took part in a Global Citizen NOW event co-hosted by South Africa and the European Union where I announced a pledge of €5 million to the International Energy Agency's clean energy transitions programme.

I also attended the Eighth Replenishment Summit of the Global Fund, co-hosted by the governments of South Africa and the United Kingdom, where I announced increased support to the Global Fund of €72 million over the next three years, underlining Ireland's ongoing support for global health initiatives to combat HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

While in South Africa, I also had a number of economic, community and bilateral meetings and events, including addressing an Enterprise Ireland lunch with Irish business leaders, a community event and a Bord Bia event.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: One of the G20 members, namely, India, and the European Union today announced the progression of a free-trade agreement which has been almost two decades in the making and will impact over 2 billion people. Has the Government assessed any particular issues risks and indeed opportunities for Ireland in the EU-India free trade agreement? Has it assessed what the ratification process will mean for Ireland?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: At the G20 a serious amount of the conversation is on sustainable development. With Storm Chandra, it is fair to say we can see that is not necessarily happening in relation to climate change. We could all come in here and pontificate on the failings of the American President with all the desperate scenarios both domestically in America and

internationally. We hope some chickens are coming home to roost and that some sense will prevail but we just cannot tell at this point.

I have brought up that my own home town is under severe pressure. Not only do we need to make sure we deal with the issue of climate change, we have to be able to provide the mitigations that are necessary. While huge work is being done by Louth County Council and the fire service, we have a huge level of flooding in Bay Estate, Cluan Enda and Castletown Road as well as out by the Carrickdale hotel on the way north. There could be an element of mitigation that we need to look at. An element of that work needs to be done afterwards while hoping nothing worse happens this evening.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Donald Trump and the US Government chose to boycott the G20 in South Africa on the spurious and ridiculous grounds that there was a genocide going on against white people in South Africa. Of course, the real reason he boycotted it is because South Africa has led the charge against the Israeli genocide in Gaza, rightly indicting the criminals who have committed the genocide against Palestinians and because actually it is a place where masses of people rose up internationally against an apartheid racist regime. Of course, the last countries to join the international boycott against apartheid South Africa were Britain and America, which tells us everything really. Given what is happening now in Minneapolis, with the same Trump who boycotted the G20 on those grounds executing protesters and defending and justifying it, I wonder whether the Taoiseach should indicate his support for those protesting on the streets of Minneapolis against these cruel attacks on protesters.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It really says something when the US boycotts the G20 in South Africa on the grounds of the racist conspiracy theory of white genocide. It is a conspiracy theory propagated by those who want South Africa to go back to apartheid. It is illustrative of a regime that is ruled by a monstrous bully who has torn up any semblance of pretending to care about international law, if US imperialism ever did. Since the start of this year the Americans have kidnapped a president and killed over 100 people in that country of Venezuela, they have threatened to annex Greenland, they have invented this Board of Peace made up of war criminals and authoritarians, and now Donald Trump is excusing and lying about the execution of their own citizens on the streets of Minneapolis by ICE, a state authority. Is the Taoiseach seriously still planning to go to give him a bowl of shamrock and allow him to greenwash himself, to present himself as a friend of the Irish when an Irish grandmother was detained for five months by ICE and when undocumented Irish people are afraid to leave their homes? Why not give the shamrock to them instead of Donald Trump?

Deputy Duncan Smith: The US boycotted the G20 in South Africa on these spurious grounds, further isolating itself from traditional allies. The Taoiseach will go to the White House in couple of months; of that there is no doubt. However, considering what is happening on the streets of Minneapolis, considering the large numbers of members of the Irish diaspora in the United States - that is not to make an exceptional case of the Irish; it is all immigrants and indeed all citizens of the United States who are under threat from ICE - will the Taoiseach use his meeting with the US President as an opportunity to raise the huge human rights concerns we have as a civilised nation, a nation that welcomes immigrants and welcomes asylum

seekers, or at least should do, although the Government is rowing back on that? Will he raise that with Donald Trump and ensure, whether it is Irish people living in the United States or other minority groups, that Ireland has their back and we will put pressure on the United States to withdraw its policy in relation to ICE and immigration?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome Margaret Loftus to the Public Gallery. The Taoiseach will know she is a courageous and brave former garda, a survivor of horrific domestic violence whose traumatic experience in seeking justice highlights the urgent need for systemic legislative reform in this country.

I want to ask the Taoiseach about the nature and substance of his engagements at the G20 summit specifically in relation to gender-based violence and domestic violence. Were these issues discussed at leader or ministerial level? Can the Taoiseach report on any progress made, commitments secured or concrete arrangements reached as a result of these discussions? How were Ireland's position and the lived experience of survivors like Margaret represented? How will any outcomes from the G20 translate into tangible protections, accountability and access to justice for victims and survivors here in Ireland? It begs the question as to how we can ever adopt a zero-tolerance approach to domestic violence here when the judicial system and the Garda Síochána do not have adequate checks and balances to ensure people like Margaret do not go through the same thing.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Taoiseach as ucht an nuacht sin a thabhairt don Teach maidir leis an gceirniú G20. Like Deputy Ó Cearúil I welcome that the EU-India free-trade deal has been finalised today, and the excellent opportunities that provides for SMEs and exporters in our country.

What sense did the Taoiseach get from members of the G20 of the importance of continuing to form free-trade deals across the globe and showing multilateralism and free trade is the right approach to take in order to confirm prosperity and peace for everyone?

South Africa is a great friend of Ireland and President Ramaphosa was one of the weapons inspectors during the Northern Ireland peace process. There is a strong voice for Africa in this year's G20 summit, which will be hosted by the United States. Ireland will be making it clear that Africa needs to have a voice at this global table.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for raising these issues. This was the first time ever Ireland was invited to be a participant at the G20. It is interesting some people questioned whether I should attend. We have a strong pro-development agenda in Ireland through our development aid programme across different Departments but mainly delivered through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and through Irish Aid. Within that is a strong financial provision and policy around women and girls in conflict and domestic abuse. Margaret Lotus is in the Gallery and I appreciate her bravery and courage in coming forward to tell her story, so we can continue to improve our legislation and the transparency of our agencies, Garda, Defence Forces and so forth.

Deputy Ó Cearúil referred to diversification of trade. There is a need for global engagement. We need to engage on a global level with as many countries as possible. The world has

dramatically changed since the time of apartheid in South Africa and is a much more interdependent world today than it was back then.

I had some very good meetings with Cyril Ramaphosa. I met him on quite a number of occasions. He remembers fondly the time he spent in Ireland helping to decommission weapons. He has the odd humorous anecdote about where he had to go to find some of those weapons and verify their destruction and decommissioning. What was interesting in the declaration was that he skilfully got an outcome, notwithstanding the fact the US was not formally represented but it was at the negotiations in some respects. Other countries were as well.

On the trade issue, the EU-India trade agreement is positive. I have to go through the details of it. If you take the Europe-Canada trade agreement, Irish trade has exponentially grown as a result of that CETA trade deal. There is a lot of opposition in the House to it, which I find hard to comprehend. Many Irish small and medium-size companies have done well through exporting goods and services. Many of our multinationals do well also, which improves Irish jobs.

India is an important market. It is enormous. This is a historic agreement and it counteracts the push towards protectionism and a tariff-based approach the US has initiated through its policies. Europe is endeavouring to create a counter approach which involves doing trade deals with others and easing trade between different blocs and markets across the world. It is interesting that Canada is pivoting more to Europe as a result of that changed global position in terms of trade.

On my visit to China, not only did we get the beef market reopened but it was interesting the Chinese leadership said it acknowledged the interdependence of the world and wanted smoother trading relationships with Europe. There are issues on both sides there: industrial resilience, strategic autonomy and so forth. This is a significant agreement the Commission has arrived at with India. I will get further clarity on the precise mechanisms for agreement on that. There are various mechanisms through which trade deals or aspects of trade deals can be ratified. CETA, for example, was a provisional agreement. We have yet to ratify it but are bringing legislation to the House to do so. Notwithstanding that fact, it has entered provisionally and we have had tremendous growth.

A very good document was commissioned by our embassy on the impact of CETA on Ireland and Canada's trade. Our embassy has produced that and it is a very good snapshot of the dramatic improvements. I envisage something similar in India. In the early 2000s, we took a trade mission to India to try to create a significant base for the first time. There were about five Ministers and the then Taoiseach. The idea was to open up India. We did similar with China and look what has happened. The trade has exponentially grown both ways and we have a surplus with China. Likewise, there is lots of potential in Europe-India and the impact on Ireland.

Deputy Ó Murchú skilfully wove the G20 and County Louth together in respect of adaptation and mitigation measures.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Irish Water infrastructure as well.

The Taoiseach: It is a fair point. When you attend these meetings, you see the enormous impact of climate on many African countries, resulting in migration, economic disruption and significant disruption of food production systems. The area of mitigation and adaptation is one we need to focus on more urgently, globally and in Ireland. I will talk to the Minister on the specific issues the Deputy raised.

If you look at the weather over the past while, it is changing. Climate is changing. The ground is saturated. It is a serious issue. After Storm Éowyn we did a fundamental review of certain areas - power corridors and so on - and brought in legislation to clarify powers of EirGrid and the ESB *vis-à-vis* landowners and to have a comprehensive solution to that. There were also generators for Irish Water, generators for community hubs and stronger resourcing of community-based organisations to develop greater resilience on the ground, given the severity of storms that have happened and that are coming our way. Storm Chandra is the latest manifestation of that and serious flooding has resulted from it.

The US President did not turn up at G20, although he met with President Ramaphosa earlier in the White House. I had good meetings with President Ramaphosa during our visit to South Africa. There is a degree of self-confidence in the South African approach. South Africa invited Ireland, which speaks volumes for the Irish position on the issues Deputy Boyd Barrett raised. Despite what gets said in the House, South Africa was minded to invite Ireland because of the role we play globally. We are serious. Our officials attended about 130 meetings. Our Ministers did as well. We took it very seriously. We engaged constructively. There is a range of issues like agriculture; anti-corruption; culture; development; digital economy; disaster risk reduction - our officials, the sherpas, were working on that area; education; employment; empowerment of women; energy transitions; environment and climate sustainability; health; research and innovation; tourism; and trade and investment. There is a variety of workshops throughout the year.

The debt burden on developing countries was probably the most critical issue that emerged at the G20 summit. It was raised by a lot of African nations. The G20 leaders' declaration acknowledges that debt vulnerabilities, along with other factors, can constrain countries' fiscal space and undermine their ability to deal with poverty and inequality and their capacity to invest in growth and development. Interest payments on public debt have more than doubled over the past decade for low-income countries. It hampers their capacity to lift people out of poverty. There is a need for multilateral development banks to develop more liberal policies in respect of that. The commitment to empowering women and girls and to urgently removing social and economic barriers to gender equity was reaffirmed by the G20 summit.

Then there is a whole range of other issues in terms of food security.

On the Board of Peace, we met the European Union last week. Obviously, we have very significant concerns in terms of its broad remit. What Europe and Ireland are interested in is the application to Gaza and whether there is a role for the EU in respect of the second phase of the peace process within Gaza. All of the hostages have now been released. I spoke to the Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority last week in Davos and he said the most immediate need is shelter. There is an absolutely urgent need in Gaza for shelter. He believes aid is coming in but it is in a very haphazard way in the sense that a lot of basic vital stuff like proteins and that is not coming in to the degree that is necessary. We need a more comprehensive approach. I had a very brief meeting with Tom Fletcher, and a number of Irish officials are

doing everything they can to contribute and to help. That is an area on which we are very focused in terms of our engagement with the US both at European and Irish level.

Deputy Shane Moynihan again raised the issue of the EU-India trade agreement. Diversification of markets is the key and the opening up of new markets with a view to benefiting world trade more generally, but also our own country. We are a small exporting country. As we export 90% of what we produce, instinctively trade deals are better for us in that scenario. Taking drink products alone, such as whiskey and so on, the tariffs are enormous now. After a trade deal, they come way down. That is very good news for producers of that kind. Obviously, we can go through it sector by sector later, but it will be significant.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We will now move to the next questions. Question Nos. 13 to 23 are grouped.

EU Summits

13. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [68211/25]

14. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [1834/26]

15. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [3748/26]

16. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [4038/26]

17. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [5586/26]

18. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [5796/26]

19. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [5812/26]

20. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [5813/26]

21. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [5815/26]

22. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [6012/26]

23. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the EU-African Union summit. [6015/26]

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

I attended the seventh EU-African Union summit, which took place on 24 and 25 November 2025 in Luanda, Angola. The summit, which took place the day after the G20, was co-chaired by the President of Angola, João Lourenço, and the President of the European Council, António Costa. The summit marked 25 years of strategic partnership between the EU and the African Union. The theme of the summit was Advancing Peace and Prosperity through Effective Multilateralism, underlining the importance of the multilateral system and the centrality of partnership to address the most pressing challenges we face in an interconnected and very uncertain world. Given Ireland's strong support for the United Nations and the principles of the UN Charter, I intervened in a session on multilateralism. I spoke about how multilateralism is core to Ireland's foreign policy and our firm commitment to a strong, rules-based multilateral system with the UN at its heart.

Leaders agreed a joint declaration which reflects the main outcomes of the summit. The European Union and the African Union committed to upholding the rules and principles of the UN Charter, including those of sovereignty and territorial integrity and political independence. Guided by these rules and principles, unwavering support was reiterated for a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in Ukraine, in the occupied Palestinian territory, Sudan, South Sudan, the DRC, the Sahel, Somalia and other wars and conflicts around the globe. The joint declaration also includes a focus on a deepened economic, trade and investment partnership. The European Union is the top trading partner of African countries collectively. African countries together constitute the EU's fourth-largest trading partner.

Significant progress was welcomed in the implementation of the global gateway Africa-Europe investment package in areas of mutual interest, reflecting a shared commitment to inclusive sustainable development. The unwavering commitment of the European Union and the African Union to continued partnership and mutually beneficial investment in green and climate-resilient initiatives in the areas of energy, transport and digital infrastructure was reaffirmed. Leaders further reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening dialogue and enhancing co-operation on peace, security and governance. They also recommitted to working together on supporting democracy, inclusive governance and the rule of law. The joint declaration also reiterates commitments to initiatives that tackle challenges such as terrorism, transnational organised crime, misinformation and disinformation, cybersecurity and hybrid threats. The joint declaration recalls the commitment of both the European Union and the African Union to deepening co-operation and dialogue on migration and mobility in a comprehensive, integrated and balanced manner, and in full respect of international law and human rights.

On the margins of the summit, I met with the President of Sierra Leone, Julius Maada Bio. We reflected on the close partnership between Ireland and Sierra Leone. Ireland is a key development partner for Sierra Leone, working on four main areas, namely, food security, education, governance and human rights, and gender equality. Our close relationship was further underscored by the recent appointment of Sierra Leone's first resident ambassador to Ireland. Ireland will continue to be an advocate for Africa within the European Union. As an

important institution for the promotion of peace, stability and development in Africa, we strongly support the strengthening of the partnership between the EU and the African Union. In that respect, the EU-African Union summit was a very important milestone in this partnership.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: First, I wish to bring up the issue we are again dealing with, that of an incredibly turbulent, chaotic and conflict-ridden world. The Taoiseach spoke about the huge issues in Sudan. Part of Sudan's issue is that outside players are supplying weapons and absolute heartache, death and slaughter on a huge scale. What we need to see throughout the world is a fairer system. We are dealing with the issues of trade energy but I also refer to the debt that holds Africa back, as well as the absolutely necessity of multilateralism. Unfortunately, the might-is-right ethos seems to be causing damage. We obviously have the issue in relation to climate change but it is about how we introduce this fairer system. While we know it is all about trade, there is also the proper use of overseas aid. We have seen USAID being pulled back, while it was not necessarily always-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----coming from an absolutely benign point of view.

Also, regarding climate change and what I said earlier, the problem in Dundalk is that our wastewater system is not up to scratch.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It will be 2033 before there are upgrades and that is impacting and causing flooding today.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In this time of global uncertainty, it is important we diversify and build up relationships with other countries. The Taoiseach's attendance at the EU-African Union summit is one instance of this, as was his visit to Canada to meet Prime Minister Carney. A lot has been made of Prime Minister Carney's speech at Davos last week. While building up relationships is important, it cannot come at the expense of our values. The current CETA trade deal with Canada does so. I am specifically talking about the investor courts aspect of it. The Arbitration (Amendment) Bill will be brought before us in the next couple of months. Canada has removed the investor courts from its renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA. Will the Taoiseach please divert course in terms of Ireland and lobby within the EU to have the investor courts removed from this CETA trade deal? Perhaps the spirit of Carney's speech might be used to negotiate with him in that regard.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Taoiseach for his report on the EU-African Union summit. I raise again the issue in Sudan and the crisis that continues there. Thousands have been killed and 800,000 people face starvation. Of the 17 million school-age children in Sudan, 13 million are not attending school. That is absolutely crazy when we think about it. Hospitals and schools are being incinerated. Now is the time for the African Union to step up and play its leadership role in the region with the support of multilateral actors. This is not only to say

that it lets itself be held by vested interests but to say that it has an interest in the stability and security of the continent itself, that it supports peace and that it will call on the Sudanese authorities to map out a very clear timeline with firm dates for a full transition to democracy. This crisis is happening on our doorsteps. It is estimated that the famine that will ensue in Sudan will outcount what happened in Ethiopia in the 1980s. We cannot stand by any longer. The EU, as a senior multilateral partner, is now required to lead globally and put that pressure on the African Union.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I, too, wish to raise the issue of Sudan and other conflicts in Africa, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and the Sahel.

4 o'clock

Ireland has a proud history of peacekeeping in Africa. Has there been any discussion or consideration about UN peacekeeping troops being deployed to Sudan in the future? Would Ireland consider such a request?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The European Court of Justice nullified a trade agreement between the EU and Western Sahara. The African Union recognises Western Sahara as a place that is sovereign and should have self-determination but it is occupied by Morocco. The European Commission essentially refuses to accept international law and respect the right of self-determination of the Western Saharan people because it is engaged, with Morocco, in plundering the rare earth minerals, such as cobalt, and the fish resources of the occupied people of Western Sahara. They are now trying to get around the European Court of Justice's ruling on this, which was in favour of the occupied Western Sahrawis, by talking about autonomy. This has nothing to do with what international law states, which the Taoiseach said he supports, which is about the right to self-determination of an occupied people and, indeed, the right of an occupied people not to be occupied by Morocco or for the European Union to plunder their resources with the Moroccan regime.

Ryanair has also started to fly into Dakhla in occupied Western Sahara, despite the protests of the representatives of the Western Sahrawi people and to the anger of the people who are occupied. Will the Taoiseach reaffirm his support, when the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara is being undermined by the European Union? Will the Taoiseach condemn what the European Commission is doing and indicate his support for the right to self-determination of the Western Sahrawi people, for an end to their occupation and an end to Ryanair flights into occupied territory?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The EU-African Union summit discussed the European Union's international digital strategy, which includes AI and online platforms. As the host country for so many big tech corporations, does the Taoiseach accept that Ireland has a unique responsibility to hold them to account? It is clear that is not happening. It is clear from the appearance of the Minister of State with responsibility for AI at our committee today that the main approach of the Government appears to be to hide behind the European Union and suggest the European Commission should act in order to shrink from taking action itself and just put it on the long finger.

It also seems the Government approach has been to take the word of unscrupulous big tech bosses like Elon Musk. There was a Government press release after the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, met with X saying that "Grok, as integrated on the X platform, has been disabled from removing or reducing clothing on individuals worldwide." That was not true. I asked the Minister of State whether the Department had checked that out and whether it was true. It had not. In the course of the meeting, I was able to get someone in my office to use a VPN to pretend they were in Paris and, with my consent, create an image which undressed me. They said to the Minister of State not to worry and that this had been turned off worldwide when it has not been turned off worldwide and anyone with a modicum of tech knowledge will know how to get around this and continue to produce abusive materials. What will the Government do about it?

The Taoiseach: I think Deputy Ó Murchú was first into the breach, is that right?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

The Taoiseach: We are in a very turbulent situation. The Deputy referenced Sudan, trade, energy and debt. He is correct on the debt issue. It is a great pity the USA has pulled back significantly. I hope that will be reviewed because it is a significant loss to the world and the developing world, in particular. The Deputy again skilfully brought the EU-African summit back to Dundalk's wastewater treatment plant, which is not quite encompassed by the question but I will talk to the Minister and let him know the Deputy has been raising the issue.

On Deputy Smith's point about Canada and Mark Carney, I met with the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney, when I was at the high level week at the United Nations in New York, which all taoisigh go to on an annual basis. I took the opportunity to fly to Canada for an overnight to meet him the following morning. He wants CETA signed and ratified. We both discussed the benefits of CETA. I do not understand why Deputy Smith cannot endorse it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is just the investor courts.

The Taoiseach: Every trade agreement will have a mediation process and mechanism. Every trade agreement must have a mechanism process. The European courts dealt with that and clarified that significantly some time ago. The bottom line is the enormity of growth in trade speaks for itself, which benefits people in this country. It benefits jobs, it benefits small companies and it benefits big companies. The benefits are there. I really think the ideological straitjackets people have tied themselves into are very difficult to comprehend. Trade is our lifeblood as a small nation. The Canada-Europe trade deal has been effective in growing trade between our two countries - both ways, I add - and equally for our SMEs. We will press ahead with the arbitration Act and get that passed, which enables us to ratify that deal. That is important.

Deputy Moynihan raised the issue of Sudan as did Deputy Ó Cearúil. Deputy Moynihan went to great lengths to point out the enormity of the atrocities that have been carried out and the enormity of the impact of this war on so many millions of people. In many ways, it is the forgotten war. It does not get discussed in this House to the same degree as others. The Deputy is correct that people talk about external actors. The joint declaration of the African-EU summit

condemned the atrocities committed in El Fasher by the Rapid Support Forces. It called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, unhindered humanitarian access throughout the country and reaffirmed the EU and AU support for a political process towards a unified and civilian transition, led by the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.

Ireland has consistently said civil society actors need to be brought into the process, like we experienced in Northern Ireland. That is very important in any mediation efforts. We need a peaceful civilian transition process. There are ongoing negotiations to secure a three-month humanitarian truce. That will require significant and sustained political will from the United States, which is endeavouring to get peace there, along with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates - the so-called quad - and with the support of the European Union and African Union, and to bring the parties to the negotiating tables.

Over three years of conflict has brought the worst humanitarian crisis globally. It is the worst. The Deputy said 30 million were not attending school. That is quite shocking - 30 million children are not attending school. The savagery and destruction of civilians is absolutely shocking. We have made our contributions. Women and girls are particularly at grave risk of sexual and gender-based violence. We try to support programmes to protect women and girls. Last year, we provided about €14.3 million to support people most in need in Sudan and those displaced by the crisis in neighbouring countries. We will increase our funding this year. I accept the sincerity of Deputy Moynihan in highlighting this.

In terms of the Sahel, it was included in the joint declaration. Sometimes I would like the African Union to be more energetic with its interventions. From my perspective, and in respect of the savagery that is taking place, getting this resolved needs far more urgency. I understand and fully respect that it is the domain of the African Union but this is an appalling, shocking situation. A total of 22 million people across the Sahel need humanitarian assistance. There have been a number of *coup d'états*. The Russians have been involved. The Wagner Group has been involved. All sorts of deals have been done with rare earth mining and so on in exchange for security guarantees for the elites who have executed the *coup d'états*. That means that half of the Sahelian population - all of those countries - are now living in poverty and below the poverty line.

The situation gets worse and migration increases as a result of that. The fundamentalists and ISIS then gain traction in the rural parts of the Sahel as a result of all of this. There has been a terrible deterioration over the past number of years. We contributed about €43.8 million between 2021 and 2024 to that region. We have maintained our development and humanitarian funding to the region as well.

We opened our newest embassy in Sub-Saharan Africa and Senegal in January of 2023, anxious to develop our presence in francophone West Africa. It is located in Dakar and supports international development, security and peace in the region, in particular in the Sahel. We are increasing our presence in that part of the world.

We want a just and lasting peace in Somalia, and, again, we acknowledge the efforts of the federal government there to strengthen its institutions and implement legislative reforms. The European Union has been a reliable partner for Somalia for decades. The EU has made significant contributions, mobilised through the African Peace Facility and the European Peace Facility, to the African Union. We are open to participation, but, again, that will happen very

much by invitation. It will be a long time before the Security Council gets around to doing that. We have not been invited to date, but these are issues we keep under review.

Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to Western Sahara. The ECJ judgment is maybe not as straightforward as the Deputy suggested. It is some time since I read the key aspects of the judgment and the legal opinion relating to it. However, we need a peace agreement there. We need mediation and a resolution in terms of Western Sahara and Morocco.

On Deputy Murphy's point regarding digital strategy and unique responsibility, we have the same responsibility as everyone in Europe. The Deputy is wrong to say that we are hiding behind the European Commission. The Digital Markets Act is very clear that very large platforms with over 45 million users per week fall under the remit of the European Commission in the context of enforcement of the law and standards. The European Commission has announced that it is beginning an investigation into Grok and X, which is significant. Meanwhile, An Garda Síochána is pursuing issues relating to domestic law being broken in respect of child abuse images. Coimisiún na Meán is also pursuing this. The latter is working proactively with the European Commission. It is not hiding behind the Commission.

I pay tribute to the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, for her forthright and assertive work in respect of this issue. I met with all the relevant Ministers, including the Minister for justice, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, the Attorney General and others in order to take stock of our existing laws. If our laws need strengthening, the Minister for justice and Attorney General will come back to the Government on that, although the view is that the legislation we have in place, namely the 1998 Act, in terms of child abuse and child protection, and the 2020 Act are actually sufficient. There is a lot in them bar the one issue around the generation of images. Sharing is both outlawed and illegal. The generation of images *per se* is not. There are complications around that, but the Minister and the Attorney General will come back to us in respect of that issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Because the time has elapsed, we will not have time to deal with Questions Nos. 24 to 46, inclusive. I propose that we move on to the next item of business.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Defence and National Security has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 35.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.14 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.17 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.14 p.m. and resumed at 4.17 p.m.

Article 20 of Treaty on European Union Regarding Enhanced Co-operation: Motion

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion to which Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union relating to enhanced co-operation applies to establish enhanced co-operation as described in the draft Council Decision authorising enhanced co-operation on the establishment of a Loan for Ukraine, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 21st January, 2026.

This motions seeks approval from the Dáil for Ireland to exercise the option, in accordance with Article 29.4.7° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, to participate in enhanced co-operation on the establishment of a loan for Ukraine. It is almost four years since Russia's unprovoked, unlawful and unjustifiable attack on Ukraine began. The situation in Ukraine remains grave. Russia's illegal war of aggression has claimed almost 15,000 civilian lives and over 100,000 military casualties. It has forced the migration of 6 million people and caused over €450 billion worth of damage to Ukraine's infrastructure. Recent weeks have seen an escalation in deeply disturbing drone and missile attacks targeting critical infrastructure. These attacks have killed and injured civilians and left millions without power or heating in the depths of winter. Each day that Russia continues its brutal war against Ukraine is another day that Russia continues to violate international law and make the world, in particular Europe, a less secure and more dangerous place.

The war is having a broad impact on the European continent, particularly from an economic, fiscal and security perspective. Uncertainty levels remain elevated, economic momentum has slowed, investment and consumer spending have weakened, inflation has risen and supply disruptions, including to energy supplies, have emerged. Member states have been forced to take action to mitigate these economic impacts and enhance their security and defence infrastructure. How Europe and the international community respond has far-reaching consequences for Ukraine, European security, the European economy and the future of the international rules-based order on which our security and prosperity depend.

Ireland has consistently expressed its unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The people of Ireland feel strong empathy and solidarity with the people of Ukraine. This was recently re-emphasised during President Zelenskyy's visit to Dublin in December and by the Taoiseach at the European Council meeting later that month. Since the onset of the war in February 2022, Ireland's total allocated support to Ukraine amounts to more than €464.4 million. This includes €173.4 million in stabilisation and humanitarian assistance, €200 million in bilateral non-lethal military support for Ukraine, €66 million in non-lethal military support under the European Peace Facility and €25 million specifically aimed at supporting the provision of energy to Ukraine. The latter allocation was announced just last month. Beyond financial support, Ireland has also welcomed over 123,700 people fleeing Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine since that war began.

That is happening under the temporary protection directive.

There has been widespread international support for Ukraine, particularly from the EU. Since the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the EU and its member states have collectively provided €193.3 billion in overall support. This includes, for example, €18 billion under macro-financial assistance, which is the EU's contribution to the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration line, and €50 billion under the EU's Ukraine facility budget, of which €28 billion has already been disbursed.

On 3 December 2025, European Commission President von der Leyen made a statement on Ukraine's financing needs, noting the estimate by the International Monetary Fund, IMF, that Ukraine will need €135 billion for 2026 and 2027. However, that assumes the war will end later this year. The level of uncertainty in this regard remains exceptionally high, not least due to Russia's intensified attacks. The European Commission has advised member states that the financial situation in Ukraine requires a disbursement of EU moneys by April. It is in this context that the new financial support from the EU is urgently needed.

Given the ongoing war and these imminent financing needs, extensive efforts took place within the EU in late 2025 to agree a reparations loan for Ukraine of €210 billion to cover the period up to 2030. It was proposed that this be funded either by borrowing cash balances from banks and other financial companies holding immobilised Russian Central Bank assets or by joint EU borrowing guaranteed by EU budget headroom. Despite intensive discussions, it was, unfortunately, not possible to come to an agreement on this proposed reparations loan at the December European Council, although leaders asked for work to continue on the technical and legal aspects of the loan.

In place of that proposal, leaders agreed the Ukraine support loan of €90 billion for 2026 and 2027 using EU borrowing on capital markets, to be repaid by reparations due by Russia, and backed by the EU budget headroom. The European Commission is currently working with member states on the regulations to underpin this. The €90 billion support package is estimated to cover two thirds of Ukraine's overall financing needs for the next two years but, obviously, more will be needed.

Given its imminent financing needs, it is absolutely critical that European financial supports are disbursed to Ukraine in the second quarter at the latest. These supports will further advance strategic investment in Ukraine and contribute to overall European security, defence and sustainable economic development. Therefore, continued and co-ordinated support from international partners remains essential, including timely delivery and commitments by the G7 for 2026 and beyond.

While the December European Council agreed the €90 billion loan, it was not possible to get agreement by all 27 member states, with Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia opting not to participate. Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union sets out a mechanism of enhanced co-operation that allows a minimum of nine member states to set up advanced co-operation in a particular area. This is provided for when the EU as a whole cannot achieve the goals of such co-operation within a reasonable period. The remaining 24 member states, including Ireland, requested the European Commission to prepare a proposal for a Council decision authorising enhanced co-operation on establishing the loan for Ukraine. Approval to proceed with enhanced co-operation is granted by the Council based on a European Commission proposal and following European Parliament consent.

Agreement in principle to the European Commission proposal on enhanced co-operation was provided at the Committee of Permanent Representatives on 9 January this year. The European Parliament provided its consent on 21 January. The final agreement will be taken by the participating member states at the Council meeting taking place in the coming days. That is why we are having this discussion today. On 20 January, the Government provided its approval, first, to proceed with enhanced co-operation on establishing a loan to Ukraine and,

second, to move today's motion seeking the prior approval of same from both Houses of the Oireachtas.

This is in line with Article 29.4.7° of Bunreacht na hÉireann, which outlines that the State may exercise the options or discretions to which Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union relating to enhanced co-operation applies, but also that the agreement to any such decision, regulation or Act shall be subject to the prior approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas. By opting to participate in enhanced co-operation on the loan to Ukraine, Ireland will provide a clear signal of our continued support for and solidarity with Ukraine and our commitment to the security of our Continent.

Last December, here in the Chamber, we all heard directly from President Zelenskyy about the utter devastation Russia's unprovoked and unjustified full-scale war is having on Ukraine and its people. We cannot and must not stand idly, and we have not stood idly by, in the face of such aggression. Ireland has been, and will continue to be, a strong supporter of Ukraine. There is an onus on us to act and, in this case, to provide our support to help to address Ukraine's financing needs for 2026 and 2027. This is absolutely essential for Ukraine to be able to exercise its inherent right to self-defence, to support microfinance ability and to put in place the strongest position in peace negotiations.

For the reasons I have set out, I urge the House to support the motion seeking approval for Ireland to exercise the option to participate in enhanced co-operation with 23 other EU member states on the establishment of a loan to Ukraine.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes the draft Council Decision authorising enhanced cooperation on the establishment of a Loan for Ukraine, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 21st January, 2026;

recognises that:

— the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation was an act of aggression, which was motivated by expansion and imperialist ambitions;

— the people of Ukraine have shown immense resolve, resilience and determination;

— Irish people have stood in solidarity with the people of Ukraine and share their hope for a just sustainable and lasting peace, which respects the rights of the Ukrainian people;

— Ireland has, and continues to, rightly provide support for the Ukrainian people by way of aid for non-lethal purposes, including infrastructure, energy costs and humanitarian needs;

— the nature of this aid reflects the fact that, while Ireland has a politically clear position in condemning Russian aggression, it is, and remains, the position that Ireland is a militarily neutral state, therefore, does not provide military aid;

— the European Union (EU) was conceived of as an organisation for the promotion of trade, economic integration and peace, and was never intended as a substitute for, or equivalent to, military alliances;

— we respect the prerogative of individual member states to participate in the trade of arms, according to their own policies and priorities, but that this should occur outside of the ambit of EU structures, respecting the need for the EU to respect the neutrality of various member states;

— the enhanced cooperation mechanisms were never envisioned to be used for purposes such as large-scale loans, for purposes including military expenditure, and that some of the checks and balances that would be typically applied have been discarded in this instance;

— there is no obstacle to member states who wish to provide arms to Ukraine in providing loans, either individually or in concert with other countries, outside of EU vehicles; and

— the humanitarian situation in Ukraine remains considerable and civilian assistance remains necessary in sustaining key civilian infrastructure, particularly energy infrastructure, which has been relentlessly attacked; and

therefore, resolves to restrict our participation in lending money to Ukraine under this enhanced cooperation proposal, or otherwise to civilian humanitarian and non-military purposes, and shall not participate in loans which may be used for arms.

This amendment is consistent with our position of supporting humanitarian aid, energy assistance and support for civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. It supports the provision of non-lethal support that saves lives and keeps hospitals open and homes heated. This reflects Ireland's clear political opposition to Russian aggression while remaining consistent with our long-standing policy of military neutrality.

What the Government is proposing is a decisive step away from that position. The proposal before the House is not a peace initiative. It is not primarily humanitarian. It is a proposal for €90 billion in funding, delivered for Ukraine through enhanced co-operation, with the clear intention that the majority of that funding will be used for military purposes. That is why Sinn Féin opposes the motion. This is about underwriting an enormous escalation in military financing, through EU mechanisms, in a war for which there is no credible peace process, no diplomatic roadmap and no political horizon beyond further escalation. Let us be honest - in the absence of diplomacy, negotiation and serious international engagement, the vacuum is being filled with weapons and money from abroad. That is not a strategy for peace. It is a strategy for a war with no end in sight.

For the average person, this is shocking. At a time when families in Ireland are crippled by the cost-of-living crisis and after a budget that gave ordinary workers nothing, the Government is proposing that billions of euro be given to Ukraine for weapons of war. I would rather see that money being invested in public services and cost-of-living supports across the European Union than in buying weapons of war. The European Union was founded as a peace project based on co-operation, reconciliation and shared prosperity. It was never intended to function as a military financing vehicle, nor as a substitute for military alliances.

This is all being done using a workaround that was never intended to be used in this way. Enhanced co-operation was designed as a last resort where unanimity could not be achieved, not as a mechanism to discard checks and balances in order to push through €90 billion in loans primarily for defence expenditure. Yet, that is precisely what is happening. This proposal allows the EU to borrow on capital markets, backed by EU budget headroom, even though not all member states agree to the proposal. It commits participating countries, including Ireland, to billions of euro in debt-servicing costs for years to come, while neutrality concerns are treated as an inconvenience.

We are told these loans will be repaid through future reparations from Russia but that is far from guaranteed. What is guaranteed is that major defence manufacturers, many of them within the European Union, will benefit economically from this arrangement. This cannot be viewed in isolation. The Government has made clear its intention to steadily erode Ireland's military neutrality through abandoning the triple lock, creeping alignment with EU and NATO military structures and now through the normalisation of EU-level military financing. First the Government seeks to ditch the triple lock and now it wants Ireland to underwrite €90 billion in loans primarily for military financing, all without a mandate from the Irish people. Piece by piece, decision by decision, neutrality is being hollowed out.

If individual member states wish to supply arms to Ukraine, that is their sovereign choice. It should not be done through EU structures, not in our name and not by dragging Ireland, a neutral state, into military commitments by the back door. What Ukraine needs, alongside humanitarian support, is a renewed and genuine international push for diplomacy, negotiations and a pathway to peace. Funding of €90 billion primarily for military purposes, with no political strategy beyond escalation, is not solidarity; it is failure.

We will not support the use of EU mechanisms - or Irish resources - to finance war or dismantle our neutrality. That is why we are opposing the motion brought forward by the Government and tabled the amendment to seek the objectives I outlined earlier.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Táimid ag caint go príomha faoin leasú. I speak primarily regarding our amendment to this motion, which sums up our view of this proposition. Almost four years ago Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation engaged in an act of aggression and imperialist expansion against Ukraine and its people. We have since seen appalling atrocities at Bucha, Zaporizhzhia and Mariupol, attacks on civilian infrastructure and the barbaric abduction of children. Sinn Féin and this House have been emphatic in our condemnation. The people have responded commendably in supporting Ukrainian families and through contribution to various charitable causes. The past four years have seen the Ukrainian people suffer many hardships. The situation on the ground remains very severe. Recent weeks have seen reports of Ukrainian energy workers collapsing from exhaustion as they work in incredibly challenging circumstances to keep the Ukrainian energy system going to sustain the economy, ensure healthcare continues to function and serve the needs of the Ukrainian people.

We have supported and continue to support assistance to Ukraine for civilian, humanitarian and non-military purposes. We recognise the need exists to bolster its civilian infrastructure, with a particular emphasis on energy infrastructure. However, the motion before us is a different proposition. The €90 billion loan is for the most part a loan for military purposes.

This is difficult to square with our position as a militarily neutral State. The EU was never meant to be a military alliance. We recognise and accept the right and prerogative of individual EU states to enter military alliances as they see fit but the EU is not that, was never meant to be that and has to respect the rights of neutral countries. The mechanism used here, namely, the accelerated procedure, is not intended for a purpose such as this and unfortunately the EU has discarded the usual checks, balances and safeguards that are meant to be part of this process. There is no obstacle to those countries that are not neutral and wish to provide weaponry doing so outside the EU. Irish finances are, via this mechanism, being used to purchase weaponry via this fund. This creates a serious precedent for future conflicts the EU may wish to influence. We should not be participating in this mechanism to the extent that it is being used for the purpose of purchasing weaponry. Our contribution, whether in this or any other mechanism, should be solely on the basis of civilian, humanitarian and non-military support. If our amendment is not adopted, we will not be in a position to support this motion.

We regret the Government's failure to make the important distinction between civilian and humanitarian support and weaponry. We recognise Ukraine will continue to require support politically and diplomatically and we are clear where the fault lies and who is the aggressor - it is Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation. We should continue to offer that political and diplomatic support and where it is required humanitarian and civilian support in practical ways but it must be in a manner consistent with our neutrality.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We are approaching the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The resilience of the Ukrainian people in the face of that aggression has been a sight to behold. They have managed to hold off the imperialist, criminal advances of the Russian forces and keep going through four long, cold winters as their towns and cities are bombarded. Their bravery and dedication in the face of such devastation has not just kept their own nation's freedom intact but has protected others from Putin's vicious expansionism. We cannot take for granted that Putin would stop at Ukraine. Partner states in the Baltics feel their borders are under constant threat from Putin. We have stood by our values and played our role, whether through financial or humanitarian aid or by opening our doors to the tens of thousands of Ukrainians who have found a safe welcome on our shore. We in the Labour Party have not diminished in our support for those Ukrainian refugees who still arrive. We must continue to remember those values and to deliver upon them.

Ireland is a militarily neutral country. We are deeply proud of that military neutrality and we cherish it but we are not politically neutral in the face of illegal wars, war crimes and aggression and we never have been. We must continue to be clear and steadfast in saying this kind of imperialist invasion can never be accepted. Our history has taught us as much. It is vital that not only do we continue to make that case rhetorically and diplomatically but that we deliver on it and take real action where we can in support of the Ukrainian people. That means continuing to supply non-lethal and humanitarian aid where we can. It means working closely within Europe to co-ordinate supports and it means ensuring Russia is held to account for its aggression. We in the Labour Party welcome the announcement of additional aid from Ireland to Ukraine when President Zelenskyy visited this Chamber in early December.

This motion is asking us to give our approval for Ireland to exercise the option to engage in enhanced co-operation in order to establish a loan of €90 billion to Ukraine. This is following a European Council decision authorising that step earlier this month. The loan, apparently, will

be paid by Ukraine only when it receives reparations from Russia. Until then the Russian central bank assets are to remain immobilised and the EU reserves its right to make use of them to repay the loan. That is a welcome step. We have long argued for the use of sanctioned Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine. That is not what is being proposed here but the underlying rationale is similar, namely, Russia should pay for rebuilding Ukraine.

Ukraine's financial needs have been well-documented. The IMF estimates will need €135 billion to keep afloat through 2026 and 2027 alone. That money is needed to help the state run and to allow for basic services to continue. In the face of those needs, it is essential we do not allow the likes of Viktor Orbán to water down EU support for Ukraine. Of course, Ukraine's military needs are also driving its financial deficit. When providing aid directly to Ukraine, Ireland has been able to carefully ensure alignment with our policy of military neutrality. We provide hundreds of millions of euro of non-lethal and humanitarian aid in line with that policy.

I note the amendment tabled by Sinn Féin to this motion that lays out concerns about how this loan will interact with our military neutrality. I ask the Minister to clarify how the Government will ensure aid provided by Ireland through this mechanism continues to align with the principle of military neutrality. I have received commitments at the defence committee that we have had visibility downstream on how every euro we have given Ukraine has been spent to ensure it has been spent on humanitarian or non-lethal aid. Ireland's provision of non-lethal and humanitarian aid has done much good for Ukraine over the years of war and we heard just that from President Zelenskyy weeks ago in this very Chamber.

Our military neutrality is a cherished pillar of our foreign policy that has allowed us to play a unique role on the world stage. It must always be protected from any dilution even as an inadvertent effect of well-intentioned steps to support a friend such as Ukraine. While we in the Labour Party are proud to stand in support of the measures to support Ukraine in the face of this invasion, we need to hear assurances from the Government that the mechanism we are looking at in this motion will be aligned with our policy of military neutrality.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I express our continued solidarity with the people of Ukraine. The horrific bombardment of civilians and civilian infrastructure by Putin and his forces over the past four years has been utterly reprehensible, as has been the abduction of children. The ordinary people of Ukraine are suffering day by day because of this needless war, whether that is the loss of life, the disruption of lives, the maiming of lives and people being cut off from power and heat in the depths of winter. It is clear Putin and Russia are not just targeting military targets but that this is an ongoing attack against civilians and civilian infrastructure. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people on that. It is clear Putin's aggression has to be stopped. We in the Social Democrats fully support the ordinary people of Ukraine who have suffered horrendously over the past four years of this war. It is clear there needs to be practical support for the Ukrainian people and without that they and the Ukrainian state cannot continue to provide basic services and civilian infrastructure while defending themselves.

The European Union attempt to use the frozen Russian assets could not get over the line at the European Council meeting, which is why we are now in this situation with this loan. It is very clear that if there is a failure to provide practical support and financing for Ukraine, then not only will that lead to a collapse in the services the Ukrainian state provides but it also will

very much play into the hands of Putin, and that would have all sorts of repercussions throughout Europe if it happens.

That said, the loan facility being proposed provides a number of challenges for Ireland as a neutral country. We want to provide practical support to the people of Ukraine. As a neutral country, we do not provide military support. It is the view of the Social Democrats that the loan should have been constructed in such a way as would specifically facilitate neutral countries like Ireland, making it explicitly clear that our contribution is to be used to finance civilian aid only. There is no evidence from the Irish Government to date that any attempt was made to do that or to have two financing streams, one a broader stream that non-neutral countries could back and support and the other a tighter financing stream for neutral countries like Ireland so we could be explicitly sure that every cent we contribute and any guarantees of loans we contribute are entirely in line with our objectives as a neutral country. I ask for that to be addressed by the Minister. I want an explanation for why that did not happen and was not sought.

There are broader issues with this loan facility. There are risks such as whether it will ever be repaid. While it is being backed up with the frozen Russian assets, there are real risks for the repayment of this in terms of any future peace deals and what the arrangements may be with the different international actors brokering them. There is also an issue with the mutualisation of debt. This is a wider issue. We are seeing the European Union going full steam ahead in mutualising debt and taking on these responsibilities. We very much hope there will be a peace deal for Ukraine. If there is, the European Union will take on significant responsibilities in helping Ukraine to get back on its feet and that will involve significant financial commitments. All that is necessary and we will support it. However, what is happening at a European Union level with taking on these additional responsibilities and mutualising debt is that we are not seeing it matched by any plans for revenue raising or funding streams to back it in the long term. In one sense, taking on these additional responsibilities is necessary and the right thing to do. However, if there is no plan for how they will be funded in years to come, we are simply setting up a bigger problem that will have to be faced and that has to be addressed.

Clearly, this is a challenge politically across Europe because there is no appetite among political leaders to do that. That is a clear challenge that needs to be addressed. I recently met the president of the European Court of Auditors who made the point that significant risks are being backed by Europe with the taking on of additional responsibilities without the funding mechanisms being put in place.

We will be supporting the amendment put down by Sinn Féin to this motion. I hope the concerns I raised will be addressed by the Minister of State.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The imperialist aggression of Russia in Ukraine is clear to see and must be absolutely condemned. It involves the killing of tens of thousands of Ukrainians, the destruction of infrastructure, the kidnapping of children, the commission of war crimes and the imperialist arrogance of the Russian empire - Putin's empire - in believing it should control spheres of influence around Russia. There is a long history of Russia being the prison house of nations, as it was called in the days of the tsars, subjugating those in its sphere of influence. That is mirrored by Trump's recently declared national security strategy,

under which he also asserted the right of the United States to control the entire American continent, Greenland and so on. We have had a long history of the United States's military interventions in what it considers its sphere of influence.

We need to condemn absolutely Putin's imperialism and all forms of imperialism, including Trump's imperialist arrogance and aggression and his assertion that he has a right to a sphere of influence. None of these imperial or military powers have a right to spheres of influence or to subjugate the right to self-determination of their neighbouring countries, and we need to stand against it. Therefore, while we absolutely want to support the Ukrainian people's right to self-determination, their attempts to reconstruct their country and giving refuge to people fleeing this horrific war, the question is where does this loan fit into all this and the attempt to bring peace and genuine self-determination and stand up to these imperial powers.

It is clear the EU's motivation has absolutely zero to do with asserting the right to self-determination of anyone. It has no ethics, no principles whatsoever. How do we know that? It is because the EU continues to give favoured trade status to Israel, while it commits, and has committed for the past two years, a genocide. The EU is not motivated by any concern for self-determination, human rights or anything because if it were, it would be consistent; it would oppose a genocide and it does not. Leading EU states continue to arm the genocide being committed. That is Germany most notably, but also other EU states and other people are promoting the escalation of the military conflict with Russia.

In that context, we have to be clear about what is Europe's motivation. It is to militarise Europe, to exploit the tragedy of the Ukrainian people in order to militarise Europe and ratchet up military expenditure. The Irish Government wants to be part of that. That is why it joined the Ukraine contact group, why it goes to NATO meetings and why it is trying to ratchet up military expenditure and undermine our neutrality. It is not possible to separate these things.

It is important to say that all that military expenditure does nothing to prevent the horrors we have seen. NATO's combined military expenditure is €1.5 trillion. Russia's is €150 billion. In other words, NATO spends ten times more than Russia on arms. Did it prevent the tragedy and terrible events in Ukraine? Not at all. Furthermore, Trump is now insisting that we more than double that expenditure in Europe - more than double it. He says we have to go from 2% of GDP expenditure on arms and military to 5%. That is incredible. That is money that should be going to housing, health, education and the humanitarian reconstruction of Ukraine. Instead, it will go to weapons, the arms manufacturers who want to profit from this horror and sell weapons to Israel to kill Palestinians. You can add to that the various hypocrisies, such as Western Sahara, which I mentioned earlier, and the funding of other dictatorial regimes and the selling of weapons to them. The Government and the European Union cannot be trusted with this money. They cannot be trusted not to continue to ratchet up military competition, to escalate or not to be, to some degree, concerned with their own spheres of influence. Certainly, that is true of Germany and other states which want to maintain their spheres of influence.

Sinn Féin is correct to propose the amendment to insist that this money not be used in any way to escalate a military conflict or to undermine our neutrality. The Government cannot be trusted and the EU certainly cannot be trusted in that area. They have no credentials when it comes to consistency in asserting human rights or even self-determination. It is ironic when they talk about this. What did the Minister say? She said, "the inherent right of the Ukrainian people to self defence and self determination". Absolutely. Do the Palestinians have any less

of a right to armed self-defence against an illegal occupier? Legally, absolutely not. They absolutely have the right to armed self-defence.

We know when the Palestinians try to assert that right they are condemned as terrorists, but it is different with Ukraine. Why is it different? Because it is strategically in the self-interest of Europe. It is nothing to do with principles or international law; it is purely to do with strategic self-interest. In other words, it is guilty of the same kind of imperialist arrogance and self-serving logic that Putin and Trump are guilty of.

We should not be underwriting loans for the escalation of military conflict, which has been a disaster. It has not helped the Ukrainian people. What we need is for Ireland to be a voice for peace against war, militarism and empire across the world, to show and demand consistency when it comes to opposing militarism, war and imperialism around the world, from whomever it emanates, whether that is Putin, Trump, China or imperial powers within the European Union.

Deputy Michael Collins: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

A.

To insert the following after "expansion and imperialist ambitions":

", constituting a serious breach of international law and the sovereignty of a United Nations member state;

B.

To insert the following after "rights of the Ukrainian people":

"and is grounded in international law and the protection of civilians;"

C.

To insert the following after "does not provide military aid":

"and cannot be drawn, directly or indirectly, into military financing arrangements;

— Ireland's policy of military neutrality is a core element of our foreign policy and any change to that position requires the consent of the Irish people in a referendum;"

D.

To insert the following after "discarded in this instance;":

“— the use of enhanced cooperation in this manner risks undermining democratic oversight, budgetary scrutiny and the role of national parliaments;”

E.

To delete all words after "relentlessly attacked; and" and substitute the following:

"— Irish taxpayers are facing severe pressures at home in housing, healthcare, infrastructure and cost of living, and overseas financial commitments must be assessed against those realities, and therefore calls on the Government to prepare and lay, before each House of the Oireachtas, a quarterly report outlining the operation and expenditure of the loan facilities

granted under the proposed enhanced cooperation Loan for Ukraine, for the duration of its existence; and

therefore, resolves to restrict our participation in lending money to Ukraine, under this enhanced cooperation proposal, strictly to transparent, civilian humanitarian and non-military purposes only, subject to full Dáil Éireann oversight, value-for-money guarantees, and binding safeguards, to ensure no Irish funds are used directly or indirectly for military or arms-related purposes, and that Ireland shall not participate in this enhanced cooperation where such safeguards cannot be assured."

We can all agree that what Russia did in Ukraine was wrong. It was illegal, it was brutal and innocent people have paid the highest price. Ireland has always supported international law and that should never be in question. However, saying an invasion is wrong does not mean we should sign up to anything and everything that is put in front of us, and it certainly does not mean we should allow our tradition of military neutrality to be chipped away at without people being told what is happening.

The Government is asking this House to approve an EU loan scheme without clear guarantees, proper safeguards or straight answers on where Irish taxpayers' money might end up. That is not good enough. This scheme is not just about humanitarian aid. It opens the door to EU borrowing and systems that could end up supporting military spending, even indirectly. Ireland is a neutral country. That is not a slogan; it is a long-held principle and it belongs to the people, not to any government and not to Brussels. If there is any move to weaken neutrality, sidestep the triple lock or tie Ireland into military financing, the people deserve a say. That means a referendum, and that certainly has not happened here. Using enhanced operation as a way to push through something that does not have full agreement is mission creep. It is a workaround and people can see it.

Families here in Ireland are dealing with housing shortages, hospital waiting lists, rising prices and failing infrastructure but the Government has not explained why we should be taking an open-ended financial commitment overseas when so much needs fixing here at home. Taxpayers deserve transparency, accountability and value for money, none of which are guaranteed in this proposal. That is why it cannot be supported. The amendment we put forward makes sure Ireland's role is strictly limited to humanitarian and civilian support. It rules out any involvement, even indirect, in military funding. It requires full Dáil oversight and strong protection for taxpayers' money. It makes one thing crystal clear: any change to neutrality must be decided by the Irish people. This is about protecting Ireland's independence in foreign policy decisions. It is about standing for peace, humanitarian support and democracy.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. First, what Russia is doing is completely wrong and I do not think anyone would condone it. However, at the end of the day, Europe has come together and decided to give a loan, but a loan to what? How will this be paid back? In the name of God, I do not know why or how we have people who sign up to things they call loans. If you go in for a loan, you have to show credentials, have back-up and show how you will pay for something. It is a charade to call this a loan because the capacity to pay it back is not there, to be very frank about it.

Looking at our own country, there is the number of people who, unfortunately, are homeless. The Irish people have opened their doors to help people from Ukraine, and rightly so. I am all for it. No one has a problem with that. However, what we are signing up to is basically Europe dictating again what it is going to do, with Ursula von der Leyen, and we have to be the noddors at the back of it. That is all I have to say. To put it simply, you cannot sign up to a loan.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Looking at this and how the Minister has explained it, it is slightly incorrect. It is not just a humanitarian support loan, which we have given generously to. This is a loan we are guaranteeing which we are somehow going to have to collect from Russia. Good luck with that and trying to collect something off the Russians if they lose.

The reality here is there is no security. There is a huge problem when it comes to our neutrality. It brings us in the back door, without a shadow of a doubt, of supporting military aid into a country and this undermines our entire neutrality. I have to ask: when is enough enough?

The cost of living in this country is absolutely crazy. We currently have 17,000 men, women and children on the streets of this country without houses. We have USC charges that were brought in and we were told, "Oh yes, we are going to get rid of those in a couple of years" but we are still paying them. Food is up by 7.6% this year. The price of a litre of petrol is €1.70 and the price of diesel is €1.69. Rents are up 97% in Dublin. In parts of Blackpool in Cork, rents have risen by up to 210% in ten years. When is enough enough?

We have given over half a billion euro to Ukraine. We have been very generous and decent, with €173 million in humanitarian aid and €200 million in legal aid, and we have spent €1.8 billion to €1.4 billion on accommodation.

Deputy Paul Lawless: First, this is reckless. This is €90 billion over a two-year period we are going to sign over without any financial oversight or any real guarantees in terms of who is going to spend or pay over this money. It is said the Russians will pay in terms of repatriation. I highly doubt that will ever happen. It will be the Irish taxpayer who will end up footing the bill for this loan. There is also the question of neutrality, which the Irish people support but this Government clearly does not. We know where it stands on the triple lock and we know where it stands on this.

There are no guarantees or certainties in relation to where this money will be spent. Will it be spent on guns, tanks or ammunition? The truth is that the Minister cannot answer that question because this is like a blank cheque. That is what Government is going to do by signing this. I ask the Minister not to support this, to accept the amendment and let us be like the Hungarians and the Czech Republic and so on, and not tie ourselves to a financial loan without the proper scrutiny that is absolutely necessary here.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I reiterate that I fully support the need to help our neighbours in Ukraine. This is part of an EU contribution. It does not alter Ireland's military neutrality or the triple lock. It is purely about enhanced financial co-operation under Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union, TEU. It is nothing to do with defence or security commitments and our neutrality has been respected by our EU partners before.

Obviously, as others have raised in the Dáil, we may not like how some of our EU partners spend their money. That is a fair comment. I note one of the amendments tries to tie in and ring-fence the Irish contribution in terms of where it is spent, and I do believe we need more scrutiny in that regard. However, overall, because Ukraine was invaded by Russia and because Russia is terrorising innocent people every single day of the year, they need weaponry for defence and offence in certain situations. That is something Europe as a whole needs to provide.

We have given commitment for non-military assistance and long may that continue. Obviously, we want to see peace as quickly as possible.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am very concerned about this departure, this loan of €90 billion and that we are going to be tied into it. There are important questions here. We are here at the behest of the people who elected us, to account for their welfare and ensure taxpayers' money is properly spent. We are accountable for it.

I have not been told how much Ireland is committing. How much of the €90 billion are we borrowing? I did not see any speech written out by the Minister. It is hard to take it in as someone is talking but there was no written speech. I went down to look for a copy of the Minister's speech and there was none there.

This is very vague. Like others have asked, will it implicate us in the war and interfere with our neutrality?

5 o'clock

We are only a small country on the edge of Europe. We are facing tough financial times. Every man, woman and child has been put to the pin of their collar trying to survive. The cost of living has become exorbitantly high. There are people on trolleys in our hospitals every day. Our infrastructure is in a terrible way. Many people are getting notices to quit. We do not have the water infrastructure in Kenmare to build 170 houses. There are over 40 settlements that do not have either treatment plants or proper treatment plants.

We gave President Zelenskyy €125 million a couple of weeks ago. I need to know how much Ireland is committing to. Is it a quarter or a third of the €90 billion? It is a serious figure in any event, and we need to be told exactly what it is. We need both a proper debate and an understanding of what is involved. The first time I heard about this was yesterday. We know the Russians have done the people of Ukraine wrong, but we are neutral and cannot do anything about the Russians. We cannot detect them.

There is an addendum here to the effect that they money will be taken out of Russia's funds when the war is over. There was a lot of talk by Ursula von der Leyen over the past number of weeks that she was going to take the money out of Russian funds now. This is the new notion - to get us involved in it. Why does Ms von der Leyen not take the money from those funds now if she is woman enough to do it? Why implicate us?

I am very concerned about where this will lead and about how much we are involving ourselves. We need to know more. I have received many calls since we got notice this morning that this debate was going to take place. We need to be informed a lot more regarding the assurances involved. Will we get our money back? When will we get it back? Will there be

interest paid on the loan? We did not cause the war. When we part with this money or sign our name to this loan, we will have no more to do with it. All we can do is hope that someone will give it back to us. I cannot see that happening. As the days go by and as we move into another spring, I am of the view that this war is going to continue. We may not ever get our money back. We need to debate this far more and we need to know what we are getting into.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I will begin by thanking all Members for their contributions on the motion, the purpose of which is to seek the approval of Dáil Éireann for Ireland to participate in enhanced co-operation on the establishment of a loan for Ukraine. I have heard Members' comments and reactions. I hope to respond to some of the key points that they raised.

We must not lose sight of why we are doing this. Ukraine has experienced almost four years of Russia's illegal aggression against its people and its territory. The brutality of Russia's actions has caused immense suffering and loss for the people of Ukraine, huge economic and fiscal costs and extensive damage to its infrastructure, particularly its energy infrastructure. What we are talking about here is keeping people alive by keeping them warm. It is essential that we do not forget that, Russia in a fundamental violation of the UN Charter and international law, launched an unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine, a European country and a fellow member of the UN. Ireland supports increasing the pressure on Russia to halt its brutal attacks, agree to a ceasefire and seriously engage in peace talks with the US and Ukraine.

Our continued solidarity with and support for Ukraine in conjunction with our international partners is essential. We know that it has significant financial needs and urgently requires the financial assistance to which the motion relates by the second quarter of this year. As the Minister said, since the onset of the war in February 2022, Ireland's total allocated support to Ukraine amounts to over €464 million. This is basically for the purposes of stabilisation, humanitarian assistance and non-lethal military support. The motion is entirely consistent with our ongoing position regarding support for Ukraine, which, to date, has included political, humanitarian, non-lethal military and economic assistance. The loan involved is for Ukraine's immediate needs in 2026 and 2027 and does not even factor in the extensive recovery and reconstruction costs Ukraine will face in the future.

In response to the request from the Labour Party, the Social Democrats and others, the Government will ensure that the funding provided by Ireland is aligned with our well-established policy of military neutrality as has been the case to date. If people want to know what we will do in the future, they should look at what we have done in the past. Most Irish people agree that it is important for us to show our ongoing commitment to and support for Ukraine in light of the Taoiseach's commitment to provide comprehensive financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to it and its people at the December European Council meeting.

I note the comments of those who disagree with this motion regarding Irish neutrality, but I disagree with them. This financial support will not just help Ukraine with its defence capability - and I underline that - it will also help with the continued functioning of the state and its ability to provide basic public services in order that its people can survive. We have all seen the

horrendous pictures of Ukrainians trying to survive in temperatures of -10°C or -15°C following drone attacks by Russia.

Ireland's policy of neutrality means that it does not participate in military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements. I thank Members for their comments, which reflect the importance of these issues to all of us, and ask them to support the motion.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I will repeat the question I asked earlier. How much of the €90 billion are we committing to?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy to resume his seat? We are moving to-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: There is no answer. How are we expected to vote for something like that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I cannot advise the Minister of State to answer that question, but the Deputy asked it.

Amendment to amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 46; Níl, 80; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Stاون
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Aird, William.	
Buckley, Pat.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boland, Grace.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Collins, Michael.	Brennan, Brian.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cullinane, David.	Browne, James.	
Cummins, Jen.	Burke, Colm.	
Daly, Pa.	Burke, Peter.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Butler, Mary.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Butterly, Paula.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cahill, Michael.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Gannon, Gary.	Calleary, Dara.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Canney, Seán.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Hearne, Rory.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Kenny, Martin.	Clendennen, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Collins, Niall.	
Lawless, Paul.	Connolly, John.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cooney, Joe.	

McGettigan, Donna.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Cummins, John.	
Murphy, Paul.	Currie, Emer.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Daly, Martin.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Dillon, Alan.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Dolan, Albert.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Dooley, Timmy.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Feighan, Frankie.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Fleming, Sean.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Foley, Norma.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Harkin, Marian.	
Quaide, Liam.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Heydon, Martin.	
Ward, Charles.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ward, Mark.	Kelly, Alan.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawless, James.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	

	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Wall, Mark.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Michael Collins and Ken O'Flynn; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment to amendment declared lost.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 54; Níl, 71; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cullinane, David.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	
Daly, Pa.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gannon, Gary.	Clendennen, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Connolly, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Cooney, Joe.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hearne, Rory.	Cummins, John.	
Kelly, Alan.	Currie, Emer.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Daly, Martin.	
Kenny, Martin.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dillon, Alan.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dolan, Albert.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Dooley, Timmy.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Fleming, Sean.	

Murphy, Paul.	Foley, Norma.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Geoghegan, James.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Heneghan, Barry.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Maxwell, David.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Smith, Duncan.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Wall, Mark.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Ward, Charles.	Murphy, Michael.	
Ward, Mark.	Naughton, Hildegarde.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Question put: "That the motion be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 92; Níl, 38; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	

Aird, William.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Buckley, Pat.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Boland, Grace.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Brennan, Brian.	Collins, Michael.	
Brennan, Shay.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Brophy, Colm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Browne, James.	Cullinane, David.	
Burke, Colm.	Daly, Pa.	
Burke, Peter.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Butler, Mary.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Butterly, Paula.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Cahill, Michael.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Kenny, Martin.	
Calleary, Dara.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Canney, Seán.	Lawless, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Clendennen, John.	Murphy, Paul.	
Collins, Niall.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Connolly, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Cooney, Joe.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Crowe, Cathal.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Cummins, Jen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Cummins, John.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Currie, Emer.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Daly, Martin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Dillon, Alan.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Dolan, Albert.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Ward, Charles.	
Fleming, Sean.	Ward, Mark.	
Foley, Norma.		
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Gannon, Gary.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Gibney, Sinéad.		
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Hayes, Eoin.		
Healy-Rae, Michael.		
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		

Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kelly, Alan.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawless, James.		
Lawlor, George.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		
McEntee, Helen.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegarde.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to address the House on the Second Stage of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill. The publication of this Bill meets a commitment in the programme for Government 2025 – Securing Ireland’s Future to update the Child Care Act 1991. This is one of a set of Government commitments with a view to strengthening the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, and protecting children in the care system, which includes alternative care. I will set out the broader policy considerations that inform the development of this Bill before outlining the subject matter of the Bill itself and its main provisions.

In its development and on its enactment, the Child Care Act 1991 was transformative legislation. It has provided a statutory framework for child welfare and for promoting the protection of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection and for the responsibilities of the State in that regard, which aim to improve outcomes for children in the care system.

The 1991 Act deals with some of the most important issues that children in our society can face and the powers contained within it can, and do, change children’s lives for the better. Despite having served children well since 1991, it is widely acknowledged that the child protection and welfare landscape in Ireland has changed greatly since the Act’s full commencement. The proposals being brought forward in the Bill have been informed by significant engagement and consultation with stakeholders to collect their views on the legislation. The general scheme of the Bill was examined as part of the pre-legislative scrutiny process in May 2023 by the then Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The joint committee issued its report and recommendations in June 2023. Where matters raised can be addressed in legislation, we have tried to do that, whether by introducing enabling provisions such as those for inter-agency co-operation or by amending existing provisions, such as those related to different case orders, to ensure they remain as useful and fit for purpose as possible.

The Bill provides for several key areas of reform as follows. First, it will promote inter-agency working to help children by establishing new structures to formalise co-operation and co-ordination on child protection at local and national levels between Government Departments, the key State agencies and the Child and Family Agency to allow them to fulfil their mandates under the 1991 Act. Second, the Bill will better protect children from harm through new measures it contains to help children at risk of harm. Third, it will improve stability for children. The Bill will introduce changes aimed at creating stable, long-term care arrangements for children. These include changes to parental consent to voluntary care arrangements and address drift through regular reviews and to court orders that may be made in respect of alternative care for children. Finally, it sets out principles based on children’s rights to guide decision-making for the Child and Family Agency and others to have regard to in carrying out their functions under the Act to better align with the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

It is my intention, as soon as possible, to bring forward amendments to the Bill to enhance the power and status of the national review panel and place it on a statutory footing. The panel conducts reviews of child deaths and serious incidents. It produces reports with recommendations to improve the quality of services provided to children and families.

I now turn to the main provisions of the Bill. The Bill is set out in four Parts. I will provide a section-by-section summary. Part 1 provides for preliminary and general matters. Section 1 is a standard section providing for the Short Title, commencement and collective citation. Section 2 provides the definition of key terms used in the Bill. Section 3 provides for the repeal of section 7 of the 1991 Act that provided for childcare advisory committees, which are no longer in operation, and the repeal of section 8, which is replaced by new reporting arrangements introduced in the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 by section 29 of this Bill.

Part 2 provides for amendment of the 1991 Act to enhance the protection of children. Section 4 provides for the amendment or insertion of definitions in section 2(1) of the 1991 Act which covers definitions more generally. The definition of "child" is amended to remove the exclusion for minors who are, or may have been, married and definitions are given of terms employed in the establishment and operation of an implementation and inter-agency committee and in the introduction of a duty to co-operate on certain bodies. Consequential to section 4, technical amendments are made in sections 19 and 26 to reposition definitions of "special categories of personal data" and "recognised school" to section 2(1) of the 1991 Act.

Section 5 provides for establishing the power of the Child and Family Agency to prepare and publish guidelines to provide practical guidance on the performance of any aspects of its functions under section 3 of the 1991 Act. If requested by the Minister, the agency must prepare such guidelines. This will enable good practice such as the procedure used by the agency to substantiate an allegation of child abuse to be set out on a statutory footing.

Section 6 amends provisions regarding the giving and withdrawal of consent of the child's parent or guardian to a voluntary care arrangement placing a child in the care of the Child and Family Agency and for reviews every six months. Transitional arrangements ensure that these new conditions will apply to arrangements in place when this provision comes into effect.

Sections 7 to 9, inclusive, provide for amendment to section 5 and insertion of new sections 5A and 5B into the 1991 Act. Section 7 amends section 5 providing for the Child and Family Agency to take steps provide suitable accommodation for child who is estranged from, or otherwise out of, the family home where the threshold is take the child into care is not met but the child has no other accommodation they may reasonably occupy. It also provides for regular reviews of the provision of such accommodation and supporting the reunification of the child with their family.

Section 8 establishes a regulation-making power for the Minister to set regulations concerning the accommodation to be provided under section 5. In making regulations, other Ministers may be consulted, where appropriate.

Section 9 provides for the insertion of a new section 5A to replace the existing obligation on the Child and Family Agency under section 4(4) of the 1991 Act to make efforts towards reunification of a child taken into care because they are lost or abandoned.

Section 10 provides for the insertion of sections 6A to 6H into the 1991 Act to provide for the establishment, operation and reporting arrangements of an inter-agency and implementation committee to promote inter-agency co-operation and national co-ordination on child protection matters. The committee must have regard to the principle that the best interest of the child is the primary consideration to guide its work. The membership includes nominees from seven Government Departments, the Child and Family Agency, An Garda Síochána and the Health Service Executive, with the option for the Minister to appoint additional members from outside bodies.

Section 11 provides for the insertion of sections 11A and 11E into the 1991 Act. Section 11A introduces principles to guide the Child and Family Agency in the performance of its obligations under the Child Care Act 1991 and section 8(1) of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013 and include the best interests of the child as the agency's paramount consideration in carrying out these functions.

Sections 11B to 11E introduce a duty to co-operate on all Government Departments, the agency and key State agencies and partners, including the Health Service Executive, An Garda Síochána, local authorities and others. The duty applies to these bodies in the performance of their existing functions when those functions are performed in the planning and delivery of services to, and activities for, children and their families or young adults for whom the Child and Family Agency has prepared an after-care plan. Co-operation includes the sharing of information to an extent that is in accordance with the law and necessary and proportionate for that purpose.

Section 12 provides for amendment of section 12 of the 1991 Act, which provides for the powers of a garda to take a child to safety in an emergency and then deliver the child to the custody of the Child and Family Agency. The child may be delivered directly to the agency or to suitable accommodation under the direction of the agency where the child is deemed to be in the custody of the agency.

Amendment is also made to increase from three days to three working days the time by which an emergency care order is made in respect of the child during which the child remains in the custody of the agency. Where the removal of the child occurs during a holiday or weekend this change enables sufficient time to arrange for a court sitting or to attain a hearing in the next court sitting.

Section 13 provides for amendment of section 13 of the 1991 Act to allow the court discretion to put in place an emergency care order for up to eight days or, where the court is satisfied that the period of time is necessary in the circumstances of the case, for up to 15 days.

Section 14 provides for amendment of section 17 of the Act concerning the making of interim care orders during which a child is placed in care while their circumstances continue to be assessed with a view to returning the child home or, where that is not in the child's best interests, application is made for a full care order. Changes are also made to the permitted duration of an interim care order, the circumstances and periods for which that order may be extended up to a cumulative total of 18 months. An application for a subsequent interim care order may be granted where the court is satisfied that the Child and Family Agency is making progress towards resolving the situation for the child. Where the court is satisfied that an interim care order is not necessary or appropriate, it has the option to put a supervision order

in place. Transitional provisions are included for interim care orders in place when these changes are commenced.

Section 15 provides for amendment of section 19 of the 1991 Act concerning supervision orders to ensure the agency may visit the child at any location including their home or school and speak the child without the parent or guardian present. It also provides for reviews within six months of supervision orders.

Section 16 provides for amendment of section 20 of the 1991 Act. This provision allows a judge to adjourn certain family law proceedings where they consider it may be appropriate for a care order or supervision order to be made in respect of a child concerned in the proceedings and direct the Child and Family Agency to undertake an investigation of the child's circumstances. The amendment is intended to facilitate that investigation by providing that the agency shall be given all relevant documentation necessary to undertake the investigation.

Section 17 provides for amendments to section 25 of the 1991 Act which concerns the powers of the court to join a child as the party to childcare proceedings. The amendment lowers the threshold from one of necessity in the interest of the child to consideration of whether it is in the best interests of the child.

Section 18 provides for the introduction of a new section 25A in the 1991 Act to specify a cohort of bodies which may be requested to provide assistance to the court in childcare proceedings. Should the court make such a request, the body must attend. The body concerned may be asked to give evidence or provide the court with assistance. This applies to a children's detention school, all Government Departments, An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive and all local authorities. The amendment aligns with the provisions of the new duty to co-operate and is intended to be of use to the court in dealing with cases where the child may require support or services within the purview of bodies.

Section 20 provides for amendment of section 32 of the 1991 Act to ensure Ireland is fully aligned with its obligations under Article 18 subsection 3 of directive 2011/93 EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. The amendment concerns the presumption and determination of age in applications for court orders under the 1991 Act in respect of victims or possible victims of relevant offences.

Section 21 provides for amendment of section 35D(3) of the 1991 Act as inserted by the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022. This Act will commence in tandem with the development of the guardian *ad litem* national service. Section 21 provides that the Minister when considering arranging for the provision of legal advice or representation, a guardian *ad litem* may now also consider whether a solicitor has been appointed to represent the child in proceedings and if separate representation is necessary.

Section 22 provides for a minor technical amendment to section 37 of the 1991 Act, consequential to the changes to voluntary care arrangements set out in section 6 of the Bill.

Sections 23 to 25, inclusive, make significant changes to the rules under which a foster carer or relative having care of a child is eligible to apply for like control over the child as they as if they were the child's parent, exercised on behalf the Child and Family Agency.

Section 23 amends section 43A of the 1991 Act to reduce the time, for which the child must be in the care of the foster carer or relative under a voluntary care arrangement or care order before the application can be made from five years to three years. It also clarifies that the application for such enhanced rights for a foster parent or relative may only be made in respect of a child who is currently in care or under a care order. This reflects the revisions to voluntary care arrangements brought forward in section 6 of the Bill.

Section 24 provides for technical changes to section 43B of the 1991 Act which provides for the variation, discharge or cessation of orders made under section 43A to reflect and accommodate changes to eligibility and to the definition of child.

Section 25 is a technical transitional provision. It provides that the changes introduced for sections 23 and 24 shall not affect existing orders for enhanced rights granted to foster parents or relatives under section 43A of the 1991 Act before sections 23 and 24 came into operation and those existing orders will remain in force.

Part 3 provides for miscellaneous amendments of the 1991 Act. Section 27 provides for the insertion of subsections into section 69 of the 1991 Act to provide that the Minister may issue guidelines to the agency concerning the performance of its functions under the Act; that the agency must have regard to any such guidelines; and that any such guidelines the Minister chooses to issue are published.

Part 4 provides for amendment of other Acts. Section 28 provides for the amendment of the First Schedule to the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 to allow for the vetting of the emergency contact person of an early years service provider. It will also allow for the vetting of household members aged 16 and over who live in the premises where a childminding service is being provided.

The final provision at section 29 provides for amendments to the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, completing the amendments to the 1991 Act set out in Part 2. In paragraph (a) the definition of a child in the 2013 Act is also amended to remove the exclusion for minors who are or may have been married. Paragraph B inserts a new subsection 2(a) into section 8 to require the agency to prepare and publish general information on its role and responsibilities regarding childcare proceedings.

Paragraph C provides for new reporting obligations of the Child and Family Agency. Section 46 will require it to produce an annual service performance and activity report. This report replaces the report currently produced under section 8 of the 1991 Act which would be repealed by section 3 of the Bill.

Section 46B will oblige the agency every three years to produce a thematic report on topical topics to be chosen by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality in consultation with the Minister for Education and Youth. This will enable a focus on a topic of interest, particular service or other functions of the agency.

Paragraph D amends section 47 of the 2013 Act to clarify that directions to the agency from the Minister or the Minister for Education and Youth cannot apply to individual cases.

I thank all the stakeholders who have contributed to the development of the Bill. I am pleased to have had the opportunity to outline its provisions and I look forward to hearing Deputies' views on the contents. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am very glad to have the opportunity to speak to this Bill this evening and I welcome many aspects of it. I hope the many amendments to the Act as outlined will be positive and that they will provide greater supports for children who need them when they need those supports. I hope there will also be greater oversight of child protection, particularly in relation to the interagency committee. All of us have a responsibility when it comes to child protection and all of us have to play our part. The recent report into special care was clear that all agencies and not just Tusla need to be involved. There is a job of work within this legislation to build public trust again in Tusla because I think public trust has broken down.

I look forward to seeing the Minister's amendments in relation to the National Review Panel. We saw the recent report in relation to Kyran Durnin. I really would like to see timeframes in place for recommendations particularly when the recommendations are for Tusla, An Garda Síochána and the Data Protection Commissioner. The recommendations that come from the National Review Panel are on really serious cases and I would like to see timeframes.

In the short time I have to speak on the Bill this evening, I want to focus on section 21, the provision of legal advice and legal representation to a guardian *ad litem* who is appointed to a child in childcare proceedings. This is an issue I have raised with the Minister previously. As we all know, at the moment GALs have the right to legal representation and typically they are in the courtroom on behalf of the child with legal representation. Typically, Tusla is also there with legal representation and perhaps the parents are there with legal representation. I am really concerned for the development of the new service. GALs with 20, 25 or 30 years' experience and particularly the Independent Guardian Ad Litem Agency, TIGALA, the organisation that represents the vast majority of practising GALs in the State have raised issue after issue about this service, not for the fun of it. GALs have huge experience and care about what they do. They always have the child's interests at heart and they are not being listened to in relation to the issues they are raising.

6 o'clock

I believe all those issues to be genuine. Legal representation is just one issue they have raised. How can it be in a court of law that a GAL without guaranteed legal representation and acting on behalf of a child would be in such a vulnerable position when Tusla and the parent may have two sets of legal representation? The GAL is the voice of the child but has no legal representation unless the Minister of the day decides otherwise. How does that give the child a voice? How is that acting in the best interests of the child? It is the exact opposite and leaves them in a very vulnerable situation. I am really concerned about that amendment.

Section 21 adds an extra consideration for the Minister in terms of making a decision to allow legal representation in a case where a child has his or her own legal representation, which is extremely rare. In the briefing note to our committee from the Department, the first line states the national service is being established to ensure children's voices are heard and their best interests are independently presented by an appointed GAL in childcare proceedings. It goes on to say the best interests of the child are paramount. If the GAL whose sole responsibility is to be the voice for the child is standing with no legal representation against up to two sets of legal representation in a courtroom, that is not in the best interests of that child. That is diminishing the child's voice. GALs are crying out in relation to this issue. AGALI has looked to meet the Minister and I asked her last November to meet it. I impress upon her

that we are coming with genuine concerns. I ask her to pause the new national service, meet with AGALI and listen to its concerns. It has a wealth of experience. The Minister would not set up a new An Garda Síochána tomorrow without listening to, engaging with and meeting the gardaí. It makes no sense and I cannot fathom why it is being done.

The other issue they have raised persistently relates to independence. Tusla and the new national service will come under the Minister's Department. GALs, who are supposed to be independent, will be in a court advocating for a child who is in the care of Tusla. This places limitations on them and the position it puts them in is not independent.

Questions have been raised by AGALI and by GALs with decades of experience and have not been answered. I appeal to the Minister to sit down and meet them. If she meets them, sits down and listens to them and decides to proceed, then in some respects that is fair enough, if she has heard them out. I ask her to please meet and engage with them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Bill before us makes a number of important changes agus is maith an rud go bhfuil sé sin ag tarlú. Táimid ag caint sa Bhille seo ar pháistí atá i ndeacracht, go leor acu páistí atá gan dídean, agus an dóigh atá Tusla ag caitheamh leo. Mar atá ráite ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Kerrane, tá píosáí den reachtaíocht seo a chaithfí moill a chur orthu, go háirithe mír 21 mar a luaigh sí, ach tá rudaí eile fosta. Rinne an coiste scrúdú air seo agus rinne siad moltaí nach bhfuil le feiceáil sa Bhille.

I welcome the Bill. It makes a series of important changes, including the guiding principles for Tusla. My colleague, Deputy Kerrane, outlined in the brief time available to her a number of issues that need to be addressed in the Bill. Our party will engage extensively on this as the Bill passes through the different Stages.

This Bill deals with children who are very vulnerable and who need the support of the State and the apparatus of the State. I raise the issue of other vulnerable children in my county and elsewhere who also depend on support from the State through childcare. I have raised this numerous times and it would be wrong for me not to raise it again when we are talking about legislation to support and protect vulnerable children.

Vulnerable children are asked to go into childcare settings in my county with defective blocks. In some cases, they have been ordered to stop attending the facilities because it is dangerous to the children, yet there is still nothing from the Minister's Department - absolutely zero, zilch - on what will happen to those community childcare facilities. I am talking about buildings in my county - three in particular that are public. There are others that may not have gone public yet. Those three house over 300 children. The buildings they are asked to attend every single day are crumbling. Those children know the cracks in the walls mean the buildings are crumbling. Does the Minister know what that does to the psychology of a child? We have talked to parents. The children are coming home worried the building could fall in. This is wrong.

Different groups have invited the Minister to meet with them. As of yet, I do not understand there has been a positive result from that. I appeal to her again to meet with the groups and engage with this very serious issue. We need a process within the Department to see these buildings demolished and rebuilt so every child, regardless of their circumstances, can be in a place that is safe and sound and can have the support of the early educators that they deserve.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We clearly have a crisis when we are talking about children who are in real danger, particularly regarding Tusla. While legislation is clearly needed and there is work to be done on that, a big issue which does not ever seem to be addressed is in regard to resourcing. We speak to people in Tusla and the workload and number of files involved are practically impossible to properly deal with. That is one of the reasons so many situations have come to light where vulnerable children have been left in dangerous places and ended up in very tragic circumstances. That is only a part of it. There are children in situations where the tragedy may not come to light until later in life when they approach the Garda or someone else and talk about things that happened in their home or in the circumstances they were in and the agencies that were there to look after them but did not have the resources to deal with it. That is a real problem.

Foster care is another element of this. Very often these children are put into foster care. Sometimes it is family foster care. There is an issue with proper oversight to ensure that is done properly. That needs to be examined. Many children are in dangerous situations. Those situations are usually within their own families but we also have children coming into the country alone from other jurisdictions. I do not think there is anything in this legislation to deal with that phenomenon and sort it out.

Clearly, there needs to be additional resourcing as well as additional legislation. Without the level of social work resources and social workers that we need, there will be more and more of these situations as we move into the future. I am aware of and deal with a number of situations in my constituency. Some are people in homes where there are serious mental health problems, addiction problems, etc. The children suffer, number one, and they are the ones who have to be looked after. I have come across situations where reports were put in to Tusla and Tusla made a very brief visit and was gone, saying everything was okay. There will be problems coming down the road if the resources are not in place for Tusla to follow up on a number of occasions and make visits at random and in depth. We cannot allow more of these things to happen in the future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Beimid ag tacú leis an mBille cé go mbeimid ag iarraidh roinnt leasuithe a dhéanamh chuige. Anything that improves the functioning of our care system is to be welcomed, although it is very likely we will table amendments. I echo the call made by Deputy Kerrane on engaging with guardians *ad litem* and their representative organisation. They do a crucial job. A decade ago we had a referendum the purpose of which was to put the child's voice at the heart of things. The guardian *ad litem* is central to that.

I echo the point made on Tusla and the confidence in it that has been lost. There are some really committed social workers out there. I would not want their job for the world. It is incredibly challenging. People are exposed to huge amounts of trauma, challenging circumstances and significant workloads. Unfortunately, at an organisational level, too many children have been failed - failed catastrophically, in many instances. There is a lack of confidence. That needs to be rebuilt. Some of that, I hope, is in terms of the procedure here. Some of it is organisational and some of it is culture.

A lot of these children are some of the most vulnerable in our society. An optimistic view of it is that if we can get this whole area right, the impact it will have on our wider society is enormous. Unfortunately, the sad reality at the minute is that children or adults who have been

in care are far more likely to need additional educational support, special educational support, mental health supports and to have needs potentially into the criminal justice system. Those children are born the same as any other child but unfortunately the reality is that too often they do not get the support they need. However, if we can get it right in terms of giving them the support they need, the impacts right across all those sectors could be enormous. It is all about early intervention.

I will make two final points in relation to this. First, we still seem to have a significant issue with unallocated cases. Too many children who are at risk or who have experienced very difficult circumstances do not have a social worker allocated to their case; certainly no one who can give it the time it requires. That urgently needs to be addressed. The second point is in relation to the office of the Ombudsman for Children and ensuring its eyes can reach everywhere - every location and every centre - a child needs it to reach. That includes IPAS centres and other emergency forms of accommodation. This point was in our proposals in relation to immigration. The system needs to work and decisions need to be made efficiently but we have to make sure every person has decent, humane conditions and that includes children in particular.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome that Tusla is to be assigned guiding principles, particularly in relation to the best interests of the child as a paramount consideration as well as the duty to co-operate between relevant bodies and the establishment of the implementation and the interagency committee. They would seem to be sensible proposals. At this point, people rightly expect more from the Government. While we are 30 years on from the primary legislation, we are nearly three years on from the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Oireachtas committee's consideration of this legislation. It is disappointing that a number of concerns and recommendations of the committee still remain unaddressed. My fear is that it is broadly representative of the lethargic pace at which the Department brings proposals from announcement to implementation. If we take the Garda vetting as an example, this Bill includes related provisions, which I welcome. However, only a fortnight ago, the media was reporting that Tusla had taken over responsibility for Garda vetting applications and issues around registration persist. Some 17 crèches have had registration issues, which, we were told, were mainly due to Garda vetting. In one instance, a crèche operator was told she could keep her crèche open but staffed by others because she had to submit documents already provided. Another woman faced vetting issues, again, not of her own making, who was already in possession of two separate vetting certificates and was told she could not open her crèche. It is another example of childcare policy that is simply not working as it is needed. This is at a time when people struggle to access a crèche and if they can, are left to struggle to pay among the highest childcare costs in Europe. The Tánaiste promised, before the election, an action plan on capping childcare costs at €10 per day within 100 days of Government. Last Friday was 365 days but no plan is yet in sight. It does not seem like much of an action plan to me. Children in Ireland deserve better, especially those for whom the State has an additional responsibility. My appeal to the Minister is also in relation to the price-cap promise and it is to understand and appreciate that Irish families and children require the Government to be more capable of bringing ideas to the table. These need to be not just announcements; they need to come to fruition.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this amendment Bill. It is clear that State protection of children is in serious need of change. There have been too many cases recently that have highlighted Ireland's lack of regard for the rights of children. The HIQA report published in November, in particular, laid bare the alarming failures of basic child protection. There are, of course, so many social workers and social care workers who are overstretched and under huge pressure in so many parts of the State. Clearly, there are serious personnel gaps in these critical services, and the most vulnerable children are suffering as a result. This is wholly unacceptable. We really need to make sure children and families know their social workers so that trust can be build up with them. However, many of the findings in that report paint a very bleak and concerning reality of our child protection services. In some cases, it took over six months before referrals to social workers were reviewed, meaning that immediate safeguarding action could not be undertaken and children being allocated to workers who had no child protection or welfare training, or experience. This must be addressed by this new legislation being brought forward. It is also essential the Government brings together stakeholders on the reform of the legislation. The Association for Guardian ad litem Ireland, a group representing advocates for children in child court proceedings, says the Minister has refused to meet with its representatives, having reduced their numbers by a third. These are court-appointed individuals to represent children in legal proceedings. They are meant to be the independent voice of the child but this new legislation could lead to the children's guardians *ad litem* no longer being independent. The association says this will dilute children's rights and protections and that the Department seems to be unaware of the consequences this may have. The association also says it has not been involved in the shaping of the services for children in any meaningful way and that its main concerns have not been addressed. I ask the Minister to consider these concerns that have been brought forward very capably by our spokesperson on children, Deputy Kerrane, and ensure any reform of the current legislation is robust and includes all stakeholders who have experience in this field. It is essential for the future protection of all the children of the nation. *Caithfimid aire a thabhairt do pháistí.*

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister to this House and the opportunity to discuss the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025. I am very conscious that the main aim of this wide-ranging piece of legislation is to promote the welfare of children who may not receive adequate care and protection. No one in this House could ever disagree with that aim. As the Minister said herself in her opening remarks, this Act has been amended a number of times and it extends over a number of key areas like childcare, foster care, residential care and child protection. I wish to address a number of these areas in the time available to me.

The Minister mentioned in her opening remarks about stakeholder engagement. However, I, too, share the concerns Deputy Kerrane and other members of Sinn Féin have raised about GALs in this country. It is very worrying that they are writing to us all about the lack of consultation in the preparation of this new service. It would seem the experience that these GALs have had over a long period - 15 years plus - is not being taken into consideration in the development of such an important new service. It is being said that one of the most important aspects of a child being in court is that they have representation. Surely, we should be listening to those who have that experience over the last period of time and those years. Again, I support the calls that the Minister would meet with the GALs' representative association in the quickest possible time, and listen to their concerns. Most importantly, we should listen to their

experience of the day-to-day work they do on behalf of so many children while protecting them in this country.

The other area on which I wish to concentrate is the State's provision of residential capacity and the privatisation of residential care of vulnerable children, particularly those who are in special emergency arrangements. The State's provision of residential capacity is continuing to decline. In 2020, the number of Tusla centres was at 127. This is currently only at 114 according to the latest figures, and does not include Tusla special-care centres. The special care centre bed capacity has actually decreased from 17 in 2020 to 16 in 2025. During the same period, privately provided bed capacity has increased from 321 in 2020 to 342 beds.

More worrying are the figures relating to special emergency arrangements, SEAs. These are largely unregulated and private providers and do not meet the care needs of vulnerable young people. The facilities themselves are, in the main, not fit for purpose as they can range in accommodation type from hotel rooms to apartments. This point has also been made recently by the Ombudsman for Children. The latest figures available to me show the Government paid 31 private providers for special emergency arrangements from 2021 to 2024. One provider received nearly €41 million from the State over this period, including more than €17.5 million in one year alone. The next provider on the list received nearly €24 million during this time frame. So far, the State has nearly €200 million to these private providers, from 2021 to October 2024. Can the Minister explain why the Government seems to be privatising and outsourcing the care of vulnerable young people?

As I mentioned previously, the Ombudsman for Children has also commented on the SEAs, stating they do not meet the needs of the most vulnerable children in this country. I am concerned about these facilities, following reporting from *The Journal* that these young people are facing criminal charges due to damages in some of these facilities. These actions will only further traumatise a young person who is already in a very vulnerable state. Fixing a broken window or door should not be a private provider's main concern. It should be addressing the young person's immediate care needs.

The privatising of the care of vulnerable young people is a growing concern. I would welcome a further debate on this issue in this House. We should be facilitating the development of more public residential care beds to ensure that we can accommodate all children when they are in a crisis. Further investment is then needed in the requirement for more foster carers, which I have mentioned before in this House. Nearly €200 million paid to private providers could have been used to set up nearly 150 new residential centres, accommodating nearly 600 young people. That would reduce the need to rely so heavily on private care, as the Government is doing at the moment.

On childcare, I want to raise the issue of the continual deficiencies in the early years education and school age childcare system. We have one of the lowest spends in the world on childcare, while parents are spending a second mortgage on childcare fees, as has already been stated here tonight. It is a system that is not working. It does not work for parents, it does not work children and it does not work for the sector.

The crisis in the early years sector is having a knock-on effect on working families. Many families coming to me about childcare costs are saying that one parent is looking at leaving work entirely. As we all know, this has the most impact on women and their employment.

They are reducing their hours and giving up their careers because the Government has not got to grips with the crisis in this sector. The Government needs to have the ambition to invest in a publicly funded system of early education. UNICEF has suggested 1% of GNI. This would equate to nearly €3 billion of investment in Ireland. We are currently a laggard in this regard and only invest about 0.4%.

The other issue is in relation to the Minister's announcement about the public childcare models of early education that she will bring forward as a pilot scheme this year. She stated that her Department is investing €135 million to fit out or acquire childcare facilities. I firstly recommend that the Government ensures these new facilities are located in key areas of need, where there is a real lack of childcare facilities in the area. I have highlighted previously to the Minister that in my own county of Kildare, in Kilcullen town for example, many working families are struggling to find childcare due to the shortage of places. These are the areas where the Government must invest first. Likewise, my colleague from Donabate, Councillor Corina Johnson, highlights that Fingal ranks among the highest for childcare costs in the country. She asks that the Government use publicly owned lands across Fingal to build publicly owned facilities that are community-led and not for profit.

I also highlight that overall, the State-led approach, while welcome, is very much light on detail on issues like staffing. What are the plans for the recruitment of educators? Will they be paid at the current rates or higher? Will they be employed by the State or in whose community? These are key questions that we hope the Minister will answer in the very short-term.

We should already have a national childcare agency. I have highlighted before that more than €350,000 has been spent on an agency and we still cannot see whether it actually exists. I also highlight the hypocrisy of the Government investing in State-led childcare facilities when it continues to profit from the current crisis. I have previously highlighted that the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund has invested in an equity firm which made a €10.5 million investment in a private, for-profit provider. I also ask the Minister to make a commitment to the House to divest from such equity firms. There is already a shortage of workers. Without adequately addressing the ongoing workforce challenges, the Government will risk further deepening the recruitment and retention crisis in the sector. I ask the Minister to address that, as I have asked previously in this House.

I will finish on one final point about child protection, one on which there should be no negotiation. We have all been deeply disappointed by rhetoric from some Government Ministers regarding social media companies and the use of AI, comments which parent will find very disappointing. Quite clearly, the use of social media and AI is proving to be a risk to the health and well-being of our young people. This is something on which I am sure everybody in this House can agree. We must put the protection and welfare of Ireland's young people before the profits of profit-driven billionaires. There is no negotiation. There is no discussion. We must always put young people first.

I look forward to working on this, listening and dealing with the Minister's amendments as she brings them forward on the various Stages of this Bill. As I said, we will co-operate and ask questions in every way possible.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Child Care (Amendment) Bill before the House today. This is very important and timely legislation. I commend my colleague the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, for her work in bringing it forward. Her commitment to strengthening the child welfare and protection system has ensured this Bill reflects the realities of modern practice and the needs of children and families in Ireland today. This Bill is a significant revision of the Child Care Act 1991, which has been a key feature of our legislative framework in the child protection area for more than 30 years. A lot has changed since then, as the Minister knows.

We now have a better understanding of our children's needs. Families are different and have different circumstances today. There are changing demands on our services and this Bill ensures our legal framework remains fit for purpose. A very important part of this Bill is the introduction of a statutory duty to co-operate between several State agencies and bodies, including Government Departments and Tusla. This substantial reform reflects the reality that child protection is the responsibility of everyone, whether it is in healthcare, education, justice or community supports. This duty will help ensure everyone works together more proactively. The clear statutory basis for information sharing between agencies is so important. Effective and timely information sharing is essential for robust safeguarding. This Bill provides the clarity needed to support that co-operation.

There are many other parts of this Bill that are very welcome but I particularly welcome the important improvements this Bill brings to foster carers. Foster families play a vital role for children who cannot live at home. They provide stability and compassion during what can be a very challenging time for a child. It affects every member of the family and open and clear communication between all State agencies and families is so important. It is important that all members of the family feel included and are confident. The contribution of foster carers is huge and it is also important that we continue to strengthen the supports that are available to them.

The Bill reduces the time after which foster carers can apply for enhanced parental rights, from five years to three years, where an established and enduring relationship with the child exists. This is a child-centred reform. It will help foster carers when they have to make decisions on everyday matters, such as school tours or doctor's appointments, without unnecessary administration that can be so frustrating for foster parents. Most important, it supports greater stability for children who have formed secure attachment in foster placements.

While these changes are significant, we must also acknowledge that foster carers continue to face considerable pressures. They have a demanding role - emotionally, practically and financially. I know this is not in the Minister's remit and I know she will be working with the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, but we should always be looking for extra supports for foster carers in order to ensure the financial supports, such as the foster carer's allowance, are fit for purpose.

It is important that we continue to ensure that everyone who wants to do this work can do it. Such work is invaluable. The role is invaluable, and we need these people in our society because we just cannot understate the impact of their work and the effect they have on our children.

I again commend the Minister, Deputy Foley, on her leadership in bringing this legislation forward. It will ring-fence the main principle that the best interests of the child must guide every decision we make and acknowledges the critical role played by foster carers and supporters. We appreciate their work.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and to place on record the very real pressures facing families and childcare providers across County Kerry. While affordability is often discussed, the fundamental issue for many families is access. Quite simply, childcare places are not available. Parents contact my office daily to say that they are on multiple waiting lists and that there are no places coming up. This is having a serious knock-on effect. Parents cannot either return to work or increase their hours. They are under significant financial strain as a result.

This is not an abstract policy issue. It is affecting household incomes, workforce participation and family well-being. We have top-class childcare facilities across the county of Kerry, as the Minister is well aware. We have them in Killarney, Rathmore, Cahersiveen, Dingle, Castleisland and Kenmare to mention just a few. However, the issue they all have in common is the lack of places. A major reason for this is the shortage of staff. I want to highlight correspondence I received from Scamps and Scholars in Killorglin, one of the largest childcare centres in Kerry, which has been operating successfully for over 25 years. I was a member of the board of management there for quite a number of years. I know first-hand the tremendous work carried out by the staff and board of management. Despite their experience and commitment, they find themselves in a critical situation. They are struggling to recruit and retain staff. There are only 12 full-time educators. The remainder of the staff are work part-time. This has directly resulted in long waiting lists and huge frustration for parents and for staff and management, not because demand is not there but because the staff simply are not.

At the heart of the problem are pay and conditions. Early years educators play a vital role in children's development and in supporting working families, yet their work continues to be undervalued. The starting rate of pay in many settings is the minimum wage of €13.65 per hour, while the current living wage is €14.75. The gap between the two matters, particularly in the context of the rising cost of living. Skilled and dedicated staff are leaving the sector in growing numbers, often moving to special needs assistant roles or other areas where their qualifications and experience are better recognised and rewarded. The introduction of an employment regulation order has been a step forward in recognising qualifications, but experience must also be valued. Years of experience and service, professional commitment and expertise need to be reflected properly in pay structures if we want to retain staff. If we fail to act, the consequences are clear, namely fewer staff, fewer childcare places, longer waiting lists, greater pressure on families and reduced workforce participation, particularly for women. This is not sustainable.

Childcare providers are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for real sustainable investment, fair pay and professional recognition for the people who educate and care for our youngest children. Families are asking for certainty such that when they plan to return to work, childcare places will actually be available. This Bill must be about more than intentions. It must deliver practical solutions on the ground, supporting providers to recruit and retain staff, valuing experience as well as qualifications and ensuring childcare places are available in every community, not just on paper but in reality. I urge the Minister to continue listening to those

on the ground, such as providers like Scamps and Scholars, educators across County Kerry and the parents who are struggling every day to balance work and family life. If we get this right, we strengthen families, support children and protect the future of early years education in this country. I thank the Minister for her work in this area.

Deputy Grace Boland: This Bill represents the most significant reform of childcare since the of the Child Care Act 1991 came into force more than three decades ago. I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on it. Child welfare practice, interagency working and our understanding of children's rights have profoundly changed since 1991. I am very glad that the law is going to reflect that reality.

This Bill comes in the aftermath of a long and detailed review process that began in 2017 and that involved extensive consultation with Tusla, commissioned research, stakeholder submissions and pre-legislative scrutiny. It is important to acknowledge the depth of work that has gone into building consensus for reform. When enacted, this Bill will strengthen the legal framework that underpins the State's care and protection system. At its core, the Bill will improve how the State protects children from harm, supports families earlier and ensures that decisions are taken in line with the best interests and the voice of the child. It modernises care workers and care arrangements, embeds children's rights principles and enhances co-operation between the agencies responsible for supporting vulnerable children and their families.

Organisations such as the Children's Rights Alliance have recognised that the Bill responds to long-standing concerns about the principal Act, particularly around care proceedings, voluntary care and the need for stronger and clearer provisions in supervision orders. The inclusion of timeframes for infant care orders is an important step in promoting stability for children. In particular, I want to welcome the establishment of an implementation and interagency committee. Many of the failures identified in the various reviews did not arise on foot of a lack of legislation. Rather, they came about as a result of poor communication, unclear responsibilities and inconsistent follow through across agencies. Co-operation between Departments, Tusla and other bodies is absolutely essential. The introduction of a legal duty on relevant bodies to co-operate with Tusla is a significant and overdue measure and it will help to close the gap that too often leaves children waiting while these agencies pass responsibility from one to another.

The new guiding principles, which require that children's rights inform decision-making, bring domestic law into closer alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Ensuring that the children's views are heard early in the process leads to better and more stable outcomes both for children in care and for those on the edge of care. I am sure the Minister will agree that stability matters and that children already coping with trauma can be further harmed by changes in placement, long delays in decision-making or fragmented service provision. By improving care planning, clarifying duties and powers and embedding co-operation, this Bill has the potential to deliver more predictable and supportive pathways for children and their families.

I very much very welcome the Minister's announcement last December that she will be introducing an amendment to place the national review panel on a statutory footing. A statutory child death review mechanism is a key programme for Government commitment. It is essential that we have that there because as we all know, a child's death is one of the greatest tragedies

anyone can experience. While the Bill contains many welcome reforms, there are matters that will require further consideration on Committee Stage. Stakeholders have highlighted ongoing concerns relating to separated children and the aftercare supports available to them. We must ensure that no child is left behind. I encourage the Minister to speak to guardians *ad litem*. We need to ensure that they are properly and appropriately legally advised.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: As the Minister knows, childcare costs are completely out of control. Many people are paying the equivalent of a second mortgage. Shockingly, nearly 1,000 childcare providers have closed their doors over the past six years. That is incredible. The Federation of Early Childhood Providers stated that childcare facilities are closing because of rising costs and the lack of funding from the Government. Childcare costs in County Wicklow average more than €11,000 per year per child. In Wexford, they are more than €9,000 per year per child.

Now, we are talking about as many as 40,000 children on waiting lists for childcare across the State. Shockingly, the Government's increase in core funding was a paltry 5 cent per child, which is tiny. In Gorey, Erika's Fairy Wood crèche has only seen a 7% increase in early childcare and education, ECCE, capitation in the past 16 years. The ECCE only covers for 15 hours per week, but service providers cannot claim for welfare for the 14 weeks they are closed. The administration and box-ticking bureaucracy that is strangling so many groups across Ireland is forcing childcare staff, in effect, to become unpaid admins for the Government, Pobal and Tusla.

Erika offered her business to the Department as part of its plan to nationalise childcare. Unfortunately, the Minister's office declined the offer. Sadly, Erika's really great crèche in Gorey will be forced to close in June, after 19 years looking after children.

Government policy is destroying our childcare sector. A local man who came to my office told me that most of his wages goes towards the €1,400 per month charge for childcare, while his wife's income goes towards their mortgage of €1,600 per month. In view of the high cost of living on top of these charges, how are families supposed to cope? Many of them are fighting through traffic gridlock and floods to get to Dublin today, having dropped their children off at childcare. How are they supposed to survive?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Kerrane spoke about the absolute necessity that the Minister meet with AGALI. We are talking about the role of guardians *ad litem* as the voice of children. Deputy Kerrane made the points in that regard clearly and saliently. The Minister needs to engage with those at the coalface doing this work.

We have heard much about Tusla and, as Deputy Kerrane said, there is much we welcome in this legislation. We want the guidelines to be the best they can be in ensuring child welfare. We are all aware of recent issues, including the cases of Kyran Durnin, Daniel Aruebose, Vadym Davydenko, Oisín Reddin and the really brutal assault on a ten-year-old girl. Other harrowing cases have been highlighted by the Child Law Project. I accept that the Minister is, in dealing with Tusla, often dealing with its failures. We need to ensure we have a system that is fit for purpose, which it is not at the moment.

I welcome a considerable amount of the interaction we have had with Tusla. When its representatives appeared before the children's committee last Thursday, they spoke about their new model and structure and that they are now better at assessing and dealing with cases and ensuring their organisation is more fit for purpose in its operations. However, we are looking at the possibility of having 300 too few social workers and at least 100 too few social care workers. That tells me we do not have a system that is fit for purpose.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Farrelly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have spoken previously about the necessity of early interventions and the fact we are also short 500 foster carers. I absolutely commend those involved in foster care.

An Ceann Comhairle: At some point, Deputy Ó Murchú might make a new year's resolution to finish his contributions on time.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Before discussing the merits of the Bill, I take this opportunity, the first since her announcement last week, to applaud the Minister and her officials for embarking on what appears to be quite an exciting venture in regard to a public model of childcare. I reiterate the opportunity they have in respect of the very effective work the joint Oireachtas committee, of which I am a member, is doing. In the very short time we have had so far, we have shown we can work together constructively to offer a very informed critique. We would love to have an opportunity to delve into the details of what the scheme will look like. I understand the Minister will appear before the committee in early February. I hope it can be made a priority at that meeting to talk specifically about last week's announcement.

Today, we are debating something of crucial importance that strikes to the very heart of what drove many of us here to be public representatives in the first place. Without the provision of services to fully implement any law, such a law is intrinsically powerless. While I truly applaud those involved in getting the Bill to this point, acknowledging particularly the previous joint Oireachtas committee and its work during pre-legislative scrutiny, I ask us all to be cognisant of the need to make legislative provisions for children's safety, welfare and protection that can be comprehensively implemented.

The Minister will agree that being a child in this country should always be a time of exploration, fun, creativity and developing a sense of one's identity. However, it is inherently a time of great vulnerability for some. A child's physical and emotional sense of safety should be of paramount importance at all times. The decision to remove a child from home and place him or her in care should only ever occur if and when the agencies empowered by the State have truly exhausted every alternative. The shameful irony of today's debate is that, all too often, it is social policy, as determined by Government ideology, that plunges children, young people and their families into the poverty, homelessness and the very chaos and concern that gave rise to the 100,000 referrals to Tusla last year.

I support the sentiments expressed by Deputies Kerrane, Wall and Ó Murchú regarding AGALI. We have all spoken at length about this with the Minister in the short duration of the Thirty-fourth Dáil. We cannot speak about children and care without mentioning the role of

court-appointed guardians *ad litem*. I highlight once again the potential ramifications of bringing them under the management and supervision of Tusla. Guardians *ad litem* are proud of their independence and many will point to that very principle as being a crucial tenet of their role in supporting and advocating for children and young people. The proposed change that is due to take place this year raises many questions relating to the ongoing independence of guardians *ad litem* if they are under the management of Tusla. Having spoken to them, I emphasise just how concerned many of them are about the change. They have not been consulted or engaged with, which is all they are asking for at this point. They want an opportunity to meet and engage with the Minister and to offer their lived experience as to what these potential changes will look like.

Section 5 of the Bill makes specific reference to accommodation for homeless children. Homelessness and, specifically, growing levels of child and youth homelessness are, again, the result of the State's acceptance of child homelessness as a norm in our society. The Bill could go much further to acknowledge the real problem that the vast majority of children and young people who experience homelessness do so alongside their parents. There is limited mention of this in the Bill.

Section 6 outlines the establishment of the childcare implementation and inter-agency committee. I applaud the Minister for the inclusion of this very important legislative provision to ensure the rights and protections of children are considered in policy. However, it would benefit greatly from the co-establishment of regional forums to feed through their experiences locally.

Is it proposed that nominating bodies will be compelled to share non-personal information? The proposed section 11D, to be inserted in the principal Act by section 11 of the Bill, contains the words "may share". We are getting into the minutiae here but the Minister can expect amendments in this regard from the Social Democrats on Committee Stage.

Regarding section 11A(2), to be inserted in the principal Act, I welcome the intent to value children and young people's participation in decisions being made about and for them. This is a complex area but I really welcome the inclusion of this provision. The section could be strengthened by providing clarity regarding the references to "where the child is capable of forming his or her own views" and that "due weight shall be given to the views of the child, having regard to the child's age and maturity and the particular circumstances of the child". As currently drafted, this provision is arguably quite vague and could leave it open to some scrutiny. It will not be easy to provide clarity in this regard but the matter deserves further consideration.

We have all spoken over the past year or so about the very concerning and tragic loss of life of many children in Ireland. I welcome the Minister's intention to put forward amendments to the Bill to place the national review panel on a statutory footing. While this move is long overdue, I commend her on her intention to act on it. The latest Child Law Project report, which was published in January, has noted the increasing concerns expressed by the Judiciary regarding failings in the care and health systems.

The director of the Child Law Project, Dr. Carol Coulter, highlighted a shortage of social workers and referred to "cases where judges considered the plight of those in unsuitable placements and where placements had broken down,". We all know there is an acute shortage

of special care beds in this State. These are unregulated, non-registered settings that are at times staffed by private security or agency workers who lack social care or trauma-informed practice training, and they are relied upon by Tusla. When we think of care, special care and State-provided care, we can see that what I have outlined is not care. There is an opportunity with this Bill to regulate these settings. I implore the Minister and her colleagues to do so.

Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically states that all actions concerning children should have the best interests of the child as the primary consideration. Security companies providing care is never going to be in the best interests of any child. The report goes on to highlight a trend of children with additional needs entering the care system because of a lack of community support. Dr. Coulter said, "The fact that children are taken into care because their parents cannot cope underlines the need for a whole-of-government approach to dealing with disability". This type of contribution cannot be ignored.

It is proposed to amend section 69 of the principal Act to give the Minister powers to issue guidelines to Tusla regarding its performance and functions. I look forward to all of us discussing the detail of this on Committee Stage. As the Minister can probably see by now, we all have quite an amount to say about the Bill and about child protection more generally. Every question or critique is intended as a constructive, respectful contribution with regard to a child's right to safety and development.

I again take the opportunity to congratulate the Minister and her colleagues on taking this Bill to Second Stage. I emphasise our support to the Minister and her officials in progressing legislation that will have a multigenerational impact. However, this is also why I remain somewhat concerned, not just about what is included but because without the required ability, competencies and resources to enact any legislation in full, such legislation is destined to fail the most vulnerable children in our society.

Deputy Jen Cummins: As the Minister knows, our paths crossed when she was Minister for Education and I was working with the school completion programme. I worked with children and young people over a couple of decades, lots of whom have gone into care. As we all know, children and young people who go into care do so for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, the resources to prevent young people from going into care are not always there. We need an increase in family support workers, youth workers, social workers and public health nurses. It starts with there not being enough public health nurses, especially in my constituency of Dublin South Central. That leads to knock-on effects such as young people missing milestones and maybe indicators that things may not be right being missed. We need to do everything possible to make sure a child does not need to go into care by ensuring their caregivers – their parents – are supported to do everything to make sure they stay there, provided it remains safe. That is why the early identification and prevention are of utmost importance.

As education spokesperson, it would be remiss of me to not mention the detrimental effect being in care has or may have on a child who is in care. In January of last year, the CSO indicated that 7% of school-age children in care repeat at least one year in primary or post-primary school and 29% of young people in care leave school early. That proportion for young people who are not in care is 8%, so that is a whopping number of young people in care who do not complete the leaving certificate or equivalent. The number of placements a child may have in care also affects the education outcomes for them. If there is only one placement, early

school leaving stands at about 20%. If there is more than one placement, it rises to 38%. It increases each time because the environment for the child is more unstable. I have worked with children who have moved from school to school because of placements. How are they supposed to be able to progress? We really need at all times to be preventing it, though I am aware that does not always work out. We cannot prevent every child from going into care, unfortunately.

In my remaining time, I wish to look at the care needs of young people in Ireland, particularly their emotional and psychological needs. Over the time I worked with young people I have found these needs are often not the top priority. The priority is giving them somewhere to sleep, bringing them to different things and telling them about things. It is a very functional relationship. However, being *in loco parentis* means you are replacing who is not there. In such circumstances, where is the emotional and psychological support that comes from with being a human being? We all need to be nurtured, we all need to be loved and we all need to feel we are part of a family and a community, but children in care often do not feel that. They particularly do not feel it when they are coming towards the age of 18 and are going to be moving into aftercare, which can be a harsh and cruel place where there is a lack of love. It is a scary time for them.

Many of us here may be parents. The 18-year-olds we have need us as much at that age as they when they were 14 or even younger. They have different needs. They are entering into a time of independence, and things can be uncertain. There is rapid growth in their development from their social lives, things they might be learning and their jobs, and they need us. That is the same for children who are in care but they do not get that often, especially if they are in residential care because there is shift work and people are on and off. This is the challenge. How do we make sure we care for the children who are in care, especially those who are going into aftercare?

In youth work, young people are seen as individuals up to the age of 24 or 25. That is true not only in Ireland but also in other countries. When it comes to our aftercare system, that is a very vulnerable time for children. We need to ensure that young people are cared for and helped to transition into adulthood in the way that would happen if they were at home. I commend anybody who works with children in care, be they foster carers, those who work in residential care or those who help families to have meetings, if it is possible to have meetings. It is hard and it is heartbreaking, but we have to do better. We have to do the best we can to make sure that those young people are loved, nourished and cared for. The word "care" extends not just to the family but also to us, as a society, when those young people are taken away from their families, whether temporarily or permanently, and placed in care.

Deputy Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Agus mé ag féachaint ar Theideal an Bhille agus na rudaí atá sé chun a dhéanamh, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire as teideal Gaeilge an choiste nua a úsáid, is é sin, an coiste forfheidhmithe agus idirghníomhaireachta um chúram leanaí. Is mór an rud é go bhfuilimid ag úsáid na bhfocal agus na dtéarmaí Gaeilge sin. Ag an am céanna, ní dóigh liom go bhfuil gach éinne chun an teideal sin a úsáid gach lá. Sílim go mbeidh deacracht ag roinnt daoine an teideal sin a úsáid. B'fhéidir go ndéanfar giorrúchán ar an ainm sin ach is breá é a fheiceáil i dTeideal Fada an Bhille. It is wonderful to see the use of the Irish title for the committee that is proposed, but I see it being shortened by people in daily use. I suspect that it will be referred to either as "the coiste" or by an acronym.

I welcome the Bill. It is hugely important. This is an area of legislation that has not been updated for some time and that requires updating. The care of children or specific childcare measures are hugely important. I am sorry to say that we are all aware of many instances where the State has failed to deliver in that space. As such, any effort the Government makes to update the legislation in this area to ensure that there is proper care provision in place for children who need it is absolutely welcome.

Something I always say when we deal with legislation of this sort is that there are a mass of amendments to the principal Act. In this case, the principal Act is the 1991 Act. I understand that the latter is the basis of childcare in Ireland today.

7 o'clock

However, having a Bill that is a mass of statements such as "section 5 of the principal Act is amended in the following ways" makes it difficult for people to read. One of the things I always say about amendment Acts is that it would be much better to pass a consolidated Bill, restating the bits of the principal Act we want to keep and restating the sections proposed to be amended by the amending legislation. That said, it is worthy of acknowledgement that section 7 does that by the substitution of section 5 of the 1991 Act. It can be seen in the restatement of the new section 5, which will be the law after this Bill passes, that it is much easier to read. Therefore, if we can do it in this one section, where it is proposed to replace section 5 of the 1991 Act with the new section to be substituted, that is, section 7 of the Bill, we can do it elsewhere. I wanted to acknowledge that the draftsman and the Department have done that, even though it has not been done in other places in the Bill.

I refer to the table of contents, where almost every section in Part 2 is simply an amendment. For example, "Amendment of section 3 of the Principal Act" is section 4 of the Bill. I am a lawyer. Even as a lawyer reading that I have no idea what it means until I go to see what section 3 of the principal Act says. It is an important principle, in the context of drafting and making drafting accessible to people, that they are not required to sit down with three, four, five or more Acts. The worst area for this is road traffic legislation. People must sit down with several Acts to ascertain what the law is. That is more of a drafting point than anything else.

I have listened to the debate today and there is definitely work to be done. The Bill identifies areas where there are problems that need to be resolved. I note sections 7 and 8 of the 1991 Act about the committees are being repealed. I understand why that is happening and I welcome that a coiste is being set up to replace those institutions and ensure we can deliver the childcare provisions required.

The reference to the Child and Family Agency brings me back to the fact that "Tusla", as it is commonly called, is just a brand name being pushed by a marketing person in the Child and Family Agency. Rather than creating clarity, it is creating confusion. If I may, I will say a few words about Tusla. It does enormously important work. Very often it does great work. It provides lifelines for families and children who need it. It provides counselling, social protection and social care for those people. It intervenes when no other arm of the State is willing to do so. It provides succour, guidance, advice and support to those families and children. That is massively important and I acknowledge the work it does. Many of the individuals who work in Tusla - the social workers, the people who are fighting the ground war with problems that families and children are facing - deserve our acknowledgement and praise.

Tusla, as an institution or entity, however, has significant problems. I am not criticising it wholesale, but there are value-for-money issues in Tusla. Significant sums of money can be dispensed on services that do not need to be spent. Sometimes, because it is a behemoth, much like the HSE, it begins to act as such and it would be much better if it were leaner and willing to respond to the needs of the people it purports to serve.

We see in this Bill the power it creates for regulations to be made by the Minister relating to homeless children. That is exactly the kind of area where we should be legislating to empower the Government to act in exigent circumstances.

Members of this House who have dealt with constituents who come to their offices with issues that are appalling and frightening and that they would never want anyone they know or represent to deal with know it is Tusla we turn to answer those questions and respond to those problems. I welcome the Minister having the power to intervene directly by making regulations in a more reactive or flexible way. One of the difficulties with primary legislation is that to change it we all have to come here and to the Seanad and vote to do so. I welcome that section 8 provides for the right of the Minister to make regulations about accommodation for homeless children. That is one way the State is being empowered to react with a swiftness and flexibility that are not available if the power is set out in primary legislation only. The idea that it is in a regulation and that Ministers can change it as demands arise and situations change is important and welcome from the point of view of how the Bill, and the Act as it will become, will operate. Similarly, I welcome the provisions set down in section 9 about lost or abandoned children.

We often talk about cherishing all children of the nation. It is a phrase that goes right back to the beginning of our statehood and the formation of the State. It is not just a slogan or phrase; it is something by which we must live and there are any number of examples we are all aware of where we have not managed to cherish all children of this nation equally. We need to do everything we can to ensure they can be cherished. This Bill is a step in that direction. It is not a panacea and there is still a lot of work to do. The Minister is aware of that. However, if this Bill can bring us further down that road and address some of the lacunae identified by people who work in this sector and who are served by the sector, that is a good thing. On that basis, I welcome the Bill and look forward to its passage.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I had not intended to speak. I thought I would be speaking on Thursday.

I welcome the legislation but while the Minister is here, I remind her of the commitment given to provide childcare, which is far from being delivered. It is true to say that this State lets children down. The poverty figures prove this. The number of children in enduring and consistent poverty is still rising and that is down to Government policy. It is very good to talk about child protection and about reform and enhancing the role of the State in child protection, but the statistics tell us this is simply not a priority for the Government.

I urge the Minister to try to put children at the centre of Government policy, specifically issues of child welfare and neglect and children living in consistent and enduring poverty. Those children need and deserve to have a champion at the Cabinet table. They need someone to speak up for them. They do not often have a voice. Their parents are struggling to get to the end of the week or the end of the day and very often they do not have the capacity to advocate, so it falls to politicians and the Minister as the lead on this. The buck stops with her.

When the number of children in poverty in this State is rising at the rate it is, it is fair to say that children are not a priority for the Government. They should be.

As my colleagues outlined, we welcome the legislation and the chance to have a discussion about children and their needs. Often when we discuss children's needs here, it is under the heading of unmet needs. It is rare we have a chance to discuss anything else. That says where the issues are. The statistics also do not lie; they give the full picture of what happens behind closed doors for many children. We hear from parents who skip meals to ensure their children can be fed. We hear they delay paying bills and put themselves into debt just to ensure their children can get the basics, and very often the State is found wanting. The statistics on child poverty show that it is increasing at an alarming rate. They tell a tale of how children are treated. It is evident at every age and stage of a child's life. It can be seen right through from childbirth. The much vaunted and long promised €200 per week childcare vanished like snow off a ditch the minute the election posters were taken down. I fear, as the Government has stopped talking about it, that we are even further away from that commitment that was given.

Time and again, we see children slide down the Government's agenda. As I said, I hope the Minister will be - I know she should be - the person who champions the cause of children in poverty and is their voice at the Cabinet table because they do not seem to have much of a voice within the Government.

Debate adjourned.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Credit Review Bill 2024, without amendment.

Emergency Mental Health Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes the report from the Mental Health Commission entitled "Acute Mental Healthcare in Hospital Emergency Departments in Ireland: A National Survey from the Office of the Inspector of Mental Health Services", which found that "international best practice... is not available in most emergency departments in Ireland";

further notes that:

- more than 50,000 people in mental health crisis present annually to emergency departments;
- hospital managers are reporting increased mental health demand in emergency care;

— the Mental Health Commission has found substantial variation in the quality of emergency mental health services across the State, which is having a negative impact on access to care;

— eight emergency departments do not have appropriate spaces for mental health crisis assessments; and

— professionals and advocates in the mental health sector have sought urgent policy actions, including a better mental health crisis model in acute hospitals, increased investment in community-based alternatives, and examination of an increased role for smaller hospitals in mental health emergencies;

considers that:

— a fully realised network of mental health emergency rooms, Suicide Crisis Assessment Nurse services, crisis resolution teams and community supports are essential to delivering the vision set out in "Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone", and ensuring that every person in crisis receives timely care;

— access to safe, specialised, emergency mental health care remains inadequate, leaving many in crisis without timely access to care; and

— mental health crisis centres are under development by the English National Health Service to provide safe rapid access spaces for people experiencing a mental health emergency;

recalls the commitment in the Government's mental health policy "Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone", to provide appropriate mental health emergency facilities in every hospital; and

calls on the Government to:

— require every Model 3 and Model 4 hospital to have a dedicated mental health emergency room, separate from chaotic emergency departments;

— commission an expert review of the role of Model 2 hospitals in providing crisis mental health services, and invest in a network of specialist mental health crisis centres;

— ensure every hospital has the appropriate complement of specialist professionals;

— ringfence investment in mental health crisis assessment and intervention services, including community-based alternatives such as therapy services, late-night outreach spaces, crisis resolution teams, and community-based assessment, support, and treatment teams; and

— develop an integrated crisis response pathway for children and young people experiencing a mental health crisis, including an improved child and youth liaison service, with emergency departments.

This motion seeks to reshape the way emergency mental healthcare is delivered. It sets out a clear plan for a dedicated and clinically appropriate emergency mental health system because

too often, people experiencing acute distress are brought into busy emergency departments that are simply not designed to meet their needs.

The 2024 Mental Health Commission national survey on acute mental health care found that international best practice is not available in most emergency departments. That is not a marginal issue; it is a systemic failure and has very real consequences. Just this afternoon, I received a response to a parliamentary question that clearly states there has been an increase in presentation numbers with self-harm and suicide-related ideation attending emergency departments each year from 2021 onwards. The 50,000 people who present to emergency departments each year in mental health crisis deserve a service fit for purpose. Yet, the commission also found substantial variation in the quality of care available, with access depending more on geography than need. I want to make clear that this is not through any fault of the front-line workers who work continuously doing extraordinary work, often under immense pressure. Eight emergency departments do not have an appropriate space to conduct an assessment, resulting in people in distress being assessed in corridors or other unsuitable areas. This is both unfair to the person in crisis and also to the staff member. We would not tolerate this for physical health emergencies and we should not tolerate it for mental health emergencies.

This motion sets out a clear alternative, where every model 3 and 4 hospital has a dedicated mental health emergency room separate from the general emergency department. However, this is not only about our larger hospitals. Model 2 hospitals can support crisis care and that role must be examined and a network of specialist mental health crisis centres established, with ring-fenced investment in crisis teams and community alternatives. Children and young people are particularly exposed. Child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, are chronically under-resourced and limited out-of-hours provision means young people in crisis are often left without support or are brought to an unsuitable emergency department. At the end of November 2025, over 4,300 young people were on a CAMHS waiting list, with more than 1,000 waiting longer than a year. In crisis situations, these delays are dangerous.

Ultimately, this is about parity of esteem. Mental health emergencies must be treated with the same urgency as physical emergencies. By investing in dedicated facilities, strengthening community alternatives, proper staffing and ring-fenced funding, a fully fit-for-purpose acute mental health care system in emergency departments can be delivered.

Deputy David Cullinane: I second the motion because emergency mental health care services are not fit for purpose.

Too many people in acute distress feel they have little choice but to present to chaotic and overcrowded emergency departments that are simply not designed to meet their needs. This motion is about fixing and reforming the system, not managing its failures. Specialist care and safe spaces, such as assessment rooms, should be available 24-7, so that no person in an acute mental health crisis is left without care or left waiting in a chaotic emergency department room, as far too many people are. However, far too often, these services are only available from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. but, as we know, a crisis does not wait for normal business hours. This is no reflection on the staff in our emergency departments who do Trojan work. This is a resourcing problem and, I have to say, a political problem.

Every acute hospital should have a separate mental health crisis room. Every emergency department should have a full complement of psychiatrists, specialist mental health nurses and allied care staff. They should be working with a full complement of suicide crisis assessment nurses, linked in with GPs, to provide an alternative to chaotic emergency departments. When suicide crisis assessment nurse, SCAN, services are understaffed, it piles more pressure on emergency departments and leaves no alternative for a person in crisis.

In Waterford hospital, in the constituency the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I share, which has one of the best performing emergency departments in the State, there is a dedicated room made available, which I welcome, but specialist staff are mostly only rostered during normal business hours. The psychiatry department is not fully staffed and out-of-hours care can be reliant on on-call specialists who are off-site. There are just two full-time specialist nursing posts for the suicide crisis assessment programme working out of Waterford, when at least five full-time posts are needed to provide 24-7 cover for the south east.

That is replicated across the State. Nationally, every year, tens of thousands of people present to emergency departments in a mental health crisis, including experiencing suicidal ideation and severe mental distress. The Mental Health Commission has found that international best practice is not available in most emergency departments. The commission also found wide variation in quality across the State and that eight emergency departments did not have appropriate spaces for mental health crisis assessments. That exposes people to chaotic and unsafe environments.

This motion is about making sure emergency departments are equipped to deal with somebody who has an acute mental health episode. We also need to make sure services are provided at community level as well. That is very often not the case and it is unacceptable that, as a result, far too many people end up in emergency departments, where staff are dealing with the chaos that arises when people are on trolleys and so on. This is not the best place for people to end up. We need to make sure we have community services in place. When people do go to emergency departments, there should be dedicated spaces available and the best supports should be given to those who need help and support.

Deputy Matt Carthy: If I were to sum up Government responses to the multitude of questions it receives from Sinn Féin and other Deputies in the House in respect of mental health, the response could be summarised as "Wait until next year". That seems to be the answer I get to any question I put. It is shameful that we have to bring forward a motion in respect of people presenting at emergency rooms in a mental health crisis. This indicates that there is a crisis across the mental health spectrum, despite absolutely brilliant work being done by people in CAMHS and the mental health services. The truth of the matter is there are not enough of staff and they are not provided with the services they need. That says to me, very clearly, that mental health services are simply not being prioritised by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in Government.

To give one example, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and I had an interaction in respect of the acute mental health unit in Cavan hospital. The long-promised psychiatric unit at the hospital is needed for the entire region. I have a multitude of responses on this from both the Minister of State and her predecessors and what do they amount to is "Wait until next year". This year, in January 2026, the Minister of State tells me again to wait. This is not about me

or the Minister of State; it is about the people who depend on that service. Mental Health Commission reports have pointed out the unit requires an entirely new build above ground level. I ask the Minister of State to stop forcing people to wait and deliver the mental health services they actually need right now.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Every year, more than 50,000 people go to the emergency departments in Ireland because they are in mental health crisis. These are people who are scared, overwhelmed and often at the lowest point in their lives. What happens when they arrive? They are put into busy, noisy accident and emergency departments. They sit for hours on hard chairs or trolleys, with some left in corridors. Some have no private space to talk and others leave before being seen because it is just too much.

The Mental Health Commission has clearly stated that international best practice is not available in most of our emergency departments. Hospitals do not even have proper rooms to access people in crisis. That is shocking in 2026. Families in Meath regularly have to travel to Drogheda with a loved one in crisis, only to wait hours in emergency departments that are already under pressure. Parents contact us about teenagers in distress being left sitting in waiting rooms all night. Gardaí are left minding people in crisis because there is nowhere else for them to go.

This is a failure of planning and a failure of delivery by Government. We were promised proper mental health emergency facilities under Sharing the Vision but instead we have delays, under-staffing and people falling through the cracks. Mental health emergencies should be treated like any other emergency. If someone comes in with chest pain, he or she is seen quickly in the right setting but if someone comes in suicidal, he or she is often left waiting in chaos.

This motion is about simple and practical changes. We need dedicated mental health emergency rooms in Meath with proper staffing. We also need crisis teams in the community and better services for children and young people. People dealing with mental health crises do not need noise, lights and crowds. They need calm, privacy and trained professionals. At their worst moment, the system should not make things harder and they should not be turned away but right now in Meath and across the State, that is exactly what is happening and the Government must take responsibility for that.

Deputy Pa Daly: I spoke to the Minister of State last week about the passing of Stephen McCarthy who took his own life in August 2024. Over the weekend, I received a text from his brother Shane who lives in London. He said that:

If you have a family member yourself and people that you care about, no matter what community you're from, as everyone probably knows I'm from the Traveller community, my brother Stephen was also but at the end of the day, it doesn't matter where you're from or who you are, nobody deserves to die through suicide. We're all meant to die when we're old and live our life to the fullest with lots of achievements along the way and it aches my heart that my brother Stephen won't have that chance.

There are serious problems among Travellers. The suicide rate for Traveller males is nine times the rate in the overall community. Since Covid, the age profile has totally changed based on my conversations with people who are working in mental crisis. There have been 87 deaths

between 2022 and 2024 in Kerry alone. We all know the history of the CAMHS fiasco scandal in Kerry and three years later, we are still waiting for the north Kerry report. I know it has been completed but has not hit the Minister of State's desk. It is there but we do not know what is happening with it.

Kerry is one of 11 counties without a suicide crisis assessment nurse. If we could achieve one thing through this, it would be that every county should have that nursing service so that it is timely as was set out in Sláintecare - right treatment, right time and right place. That is what is needed. I am begging the Minister of State to make that available for the people of Kerry to address the crisis there.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This motion is about real people in real crisis right now and a system that is failing them in plain sight. I will begin with the case of a woman from County Mayo who has been in an adult mental health unit since June of last year. She was admitted in acute distress but was otherwise physically well. Today after repeated incidents in what is meant to be a secure unit, she has suffered a choking episode, a broken hip and most recently a broken wrist requiring surgery. Her family now describe her as frail, traumatised, frightened to walk and deteriorating before their eyes. This is not good enough. When her brother sought answers and intervened to have her removed to a nursing home, he was told that there was nothing that could proceed without written consent from a woman who by every account is not mentally well enough to give informed consent. This is not patient-centred care. It is bureaucracy used as a shield while families are left desperate and unheard.

At the very same time, a highly qualified psychiatric nurse born and raised in Mayo with ten years experience in the NHS wants to come back to work in Mayo but is being told that there are no jobs. In a county experiencing profound mental health distress, including the tragic loss of life to suicide, a highly skilled psychiatric nurse is being told she is not needed. We need to join up the dots. We cannot continue to funnel 50,000 people in mental health crisis into chaotic accident and emergency settings that are not fit for purpose. I have already spoken at length in this House about the shortage of ambulance services in the west and overcrowded emergency departments at our hospital. This is why this Sinn Féin motion matters.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The reality is those lives continue to be lost because of the State's failure to care for people experiencing a mental health crisis. We know that each year, 50,000 people try to access mental health services for the first time through hospital emergency departments. This is not an appropriate setting for people who are in severe mental distress at their most vulnerable. I think the Minister of State has to accept that. The Mental Health Commission report has confirmed that general emergency departments are failing people in mental health crisis every day. That report stated that mental health patients in both Galway hospitals - UHG and Portiuncula - are left waiting for prolonged periods in the emergency departments. In Galway, there have sadly been multiple instances of people taking their own lives after presenting at a hospital emergency department. I acknowledge the work of Joe Loughnane, who sadly lost his brother Adam in these circumstances almost one year ago. Following the tragic death of his brother, Joe has campaigned relentlessly for the establishment of specific mental health accident and emergency departments and has gathered over 20,000 signatures to his petition calling for this.

This motion is calling for dedicated mental health emergency rooms staffed by specialist professionals separate from the chaos of general hospital emergency departments and real investment in community-based crisis care so that timely and safe mental health support is available to everybody who needs it. The NHS in Britain has introduced mental health emergency departments. It can be done here and it will save lives. We have to stop sending people experiencing a crisis to inappropriate settings like overcrowded accident and emergency departments. People at their most vulnerable deserve 24/7 urgent crisis care in dedicated facilities so this is a hugely important motion and one that I call on Government to support but crucially to act on as well.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister of State knows what accident and emergency departments are like. I am sure she has been in them. The nurses who spend a lot of their time training and engaging in continuous professional development are forced to nurse patients in conditions that when I describe them as being slightly less than ideal, I am being very kind to the Government. The Minister of State knows what accident and emergency is like. It is chaotic and noisy and there are bright lights and a lot of activity. It is hard for people who really need to be in accident and emergency to visit an accident and emergency department. It is so tough for the healthcare workers - our nurses and our doctors trying to do their best in a system that is overcrowded with nurses forced to nurse people on chairs or on trolleys who are waiting, waiting and waiting for a bed. I represented psychiatric nurses in 2006 when A Vision for Change was launched. There was no place for people in mental health distress then but the Minister of State, her Government and previous Governments have ensured that what was deemed to be a crisis in 2006 is now even beyond that.

Accident and emergency is no place for a person who needs psychiatric care. It is no place for him or her and yet that is where he or she ends up. The Minister of State knows that this is where he or she is going to end up because there is no other door. I have heard her talk about the Government's "no wrong door" policy. There is no door - only accident and emergency - and that is where these people have to go.

I spoke to a woman in my constituency last week whose son was experiencing suicidal ideation. She was absolutely petrified as any mother would be so she took the only option open to her and brought her son to accident and emergency in Beaumont Hospital. They sat there for nine hours. When I tell the Minister of State that this contributed to making that young man's mental ill health worse, it really did. He entered in crisis and came out even worse with a letter that was completely meaningless. It was a referral to CAMHS for an appointment he may never get. He will be aged out before it even happens. I ask the Minister of State to not just support this motion act but to act on it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I think we have all been in emergency rooms. I have yet to be in an emergency room where staff were not dealing with a number of cases where people had particular drug issues and where people had mental health issues. In some cases, it was across the board. That is that unfortunate place where people are Venn diagrammed and it crosses over. The fact is it is not the place for them. It is not the place for others who are there. We have often been there with our children and none of it works, which puts incredible pressure on staff.

The Sinn Fein motion put forward by Teachta Clarke is absolutely straightforward.

It means that we have adequate staff 24-7, because many of the cases we deal with, particularly psychosis, happen late at night, and that we have an appropriate setting, away from the absolute chaos that is emergency medicine. That is what we need.

We have our own particular issues in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda and mental health services have spoken to hospital management. Hopefully, and this is not the first time I have brought this up, an arrangement can be made later this year that there will be some sort of 24-7 facility within the hospital for proper assessments. At times, people get sent over to DDOP in Crosslanes and the problem is that is an operating hospital, so people may have to wait a huge length of time and that does not work.

The Minister met the group regarding Maxi's law. We need to see not only community and early interventions but we also need to see emergency beds as we do not have a sufficient number in our area. There are ten beds promised as an extension. That needs to happen in relation to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital. We need to see the primary care setting to ensure the community services we have are at least in appropriate accommodation.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí as an rún tábhachtach seo a thabhairt chun cinn anocht, rud nach gcuirfidh an Rialtas ina choinne. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis chun díospóireacht a dhéanamh ar thacaíochtaí éigeandála sláinte meabhrach; réimse ar thug mé aird mhór air i mo thréimhse mar Aire Sláinte Meabhrach.

I thank Deputy Clarke for bringing forward this important motion. I welcome any opportunity to discuss mental health. Neither I nor the Government will oppose this motion. When I read it last Friday evening, there was nothing I did not agree with in it. I am not familiar with the work being done in the NHS but we will certainly look into it.

I welcome the opportunity to debate emergency mental health supports. This is an area of critical importance for people facing a mental health crisis, and for their families and loved ones trying to support them. This evening I want to set out the range of actions by Government to invest in and deliver vastly improved crisis supports and services. This covers services in our hospitals but also, crucially, as Deputy Cullinane said, a major expansion of alternative supports in our communities. This motion highlights an area of Government policy where significant focus and substantial investment is already under way.

As Minister of State, I have been working for a number of years now to expand our crisis supports. Government resourcing of mental health and suicide prevention has increased by almost 60% in my time in this office. Last April, I received the Mental Health Commission's thematic report on mental health and our emergency departments. The Government welcomed the report, and I again thank the commission for its work.

The measures I have funded in budget 2026 directly address the issues raised. They follow detailed discussions with executive clinical directors, the College of Psychiatry, front-line clinicians, people with lived experience, which is very important, and the author of the report. Budget 2026 provides an unprecedented 300 additional whole-time-equivalent staff for mental health services this year, with more than €15 million in ring-fenced funding to expand crisis supports and targeted suicide prevention initiatives. This includes €2.8 million for new

specialist crisis nursing teams - advanced nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists - working out-of-hours in emergency departments to support people presenting in distress.

These teams will operate under the national clinical programme on self-harm and suicide-related ideation, which is now active in all emergency departments. More than 50 staff already work in this programme, ensuring compassionate, prompt assessments, family guidance, and safety plans for patients and their GPs.

Out-of-hours cover has remained a challenge and resolving it is a priority. The new crisis nursing teams will work late nights and into the early morning, providing support at the times when people in crisis are most vulnerable. They will be rolled out to all model 4 hospitals this year, and to the Mercy University Hospital in Cork, due to its high volume of mental health presentations. That includes ten hospitals, four staff funded for each hospital, clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners. Recruitment commenced immediately. I intend to expand them to all model 3 hospitals in future budgets, starting with next year's budget.

A crucial part of this model is ensuring dedicated mental health assessment rooms in emergency departments, and Deputies have spoken to that tonight. While most hospitals have such a space, an audit found that eight do not. The national clinical programme is actively working with those hospitals to address this.

Last year, I launched the national model of care for consultation liaison psychiatry, which guides specialist mental health input in emergency departments and general wards. Liaison psychiatrists play a vital role for people presenting with self-harm and suicidal ideation, and I am funding further posts this year. However, as Deputy O'Reilly said, busy emergency departments are often not the right setting for many people in mental health distress. I could not agree with her more. That is why I am prioritising real alternatives, particularly crisis resolution services and suicide crisis assessment nurses, SCAN, whom Deputy Daly discussed.

In 2023, I published the innovative new model of care for crisis resolution services to shift our response for people in distress into much more appropriate settings in the community. These out-of-hours teams provide rapid assessment and intensive intervention, supported by crisis or Solace cafés - safe, non-clinical spaces offering peer support and links to services.

Crisis services now operate in six counties, and this year I am funding new services for Donegal, Kerry and the midlands. I understand that early data shows these services are responsible for an 18% reduction in emergency department presentations in areas like Cork and Galway.

GPs remain the first point of contact for many in distress, and at primary care level the suicide crisis assessment nurse service is an essential safety net. SCAN nurses provide timely, expert assessments for people in suicidal crisis. I am expanding access to the SCAN programme to new areas in every budget, with funding for 12 additional posts this year, bringing the current total to over 30. However, I want to see SCAN nurses in every single location.

Deputy O'Hara mentioned Portiuncula. For the first time ever, in the 2025 budget, I funded two SCAN nurses specifically for the Traveller community to be located in Portiuncula and recruitment is under way. We had the highest level of presentations of self-harm in relation to Travellers at Portiuncula Hospital and that is the reaction to that.

In Limerick, a new joint initiative between An Garda Síochána and the HSE, the community access support team, CAST, is piloting a co-response model for 999 calls involving trauma or mental health crisis. Early results are extremely positive, and the pilot will inform a national rollout.

Mental health NGOs continue to be essential partners, providing round-the-clock phone and text supports, digital services, and counselling. Government now provides more than €127 million annually to the sector. Funding for Pieta, for example, has increased by 25% between 2025 and 2026 to more than €4 million for crisis and bereavement counselling.

Four out of five deaths by suicide in Ireland each year are men, and I have spoken about this many times in the Chamber. I want men to know that help is there and encourage them to reach out. There is free counselling for any man in a crisis or who needs to talk to someone. I thank the Deputies for spreading this news in their constituency offices. This service is underpinned by a package of supports I announced last September, with recurring annual funding of €2 million. I encourage everyone to promote yourmentalhealth.ie/men. It is as simple as that; all the details are there. Men can reach out for these supports from their own kitchen table.

I will shortly publish Ireland's new self-harm and suicide prevention strategy, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach informed by extensive public consultation. Crisis supports and emergency department experiences were key themes raised, and these concerns are reflected in the strategy.

A major evolution since the previous strategy has been the central role of lived experience in shaping policy. This is now embedded across mental health policy, enabling true co-production and more effective, recovery-focused services.

Finally, the Sharing the Vision oversight group has been tasked with bringing all of these initiatives together under a new national crisis response framework. This will align patient pathways, integrate crisis supports, and identify and address gaps in service provision.

I thank Deputies again for this important debate this evening. I want people to be in no doubt that this is one of my main priorities for reform in mental health, and the programme of work under way and investment we are making will deliver meaningful change for how people experience mental health services when in distress.

Anyone facing a mental health crisis deserves a rapid, compassionate and effective response to their distress that meets them where they are, no matter how or when they present. Making this a reality is my priority for this year. The Government acknowledges that this is an area where there are gaps and where services are not as comprehensive or responsive as they should be. We know what we need to do to effect change and are doing it.

I look forward to hearing other contributions tonight during the debate. I will not be opposing this motion because I believe it is too important to play politics with. We cannot play politics with mental health. Nobody in opposition is trying to do so. I acknowledge the tone of everyone who has spoken so far. We are in a difficult situation where people are very challenged in relation to their mental health. If only one thing comes out of tonight's debate, it is that. Four out of every five suicides are men and there are very high levels of suicide within the Traveller community. We have seen a reduction in the number of suicides since

2000. The rate is down by 28% over 25 years, and that is due to the amount of really good work being done on the ground by staff. I acknowledge the work of everyone, whether they are working in the public sector, private sector or voluntary sector. There is a huge amount of good work being done. I direct people to the website *yourmentalhealth.ie/men*. We should all encourage people to reach out and ask for the supports available.

I thank Deputy Clarke again for her motion.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I heard the Minister of State's speech and appreciate its tone but she has to admit that our mental health services are at crisis point. More than 50,000 people with a mental health crisis present annually at emergency departments, yet many hospital emergency departments are simply not equipped to deal with such incidents. That speaks volumes about how the State treats those who are experiencing bouts of chronic depression, schizophrenia or anxiety, to name just a few conditions.

In Naas General Hospital, in north Kildare, 1,200 people with mental health difficulties were referred to the emergency room in 2023 alone. That is a staggering figure, pointing to the increased pressure on hospital services due to increasing numbers presenting for emergency care for mental health issues.

Mental health conditions do not exist in isolation. It is big-picture stuff. The housing crisis has contributed massively to the rise in the figures. We cannot talk about mental health without mentioning our housing crisis. People without a home do not feel safe ever. They are constantly on edge and worry they might not make it through the night if sleeping outside. If in an unsafe homeless shelter, they fear for their safety as they try to sleep. Many such people end up in jail instead of being properly treated for a mental health crisis. A constituent of mine in north Kildare who was struggling with homelessness and addiction has been constantly in and out of jail. Jail is not what he needs; he needs mental health services and a home, and that goes for so many people in jail. We hear a lot about the need for more jail space. We need more mental health services as well. My constituent should be availing of services in an adequately resourced Lakeview unit beside Naas General Hospital, not behind bars. We desperately need to help these people instead of casting them aside. The Government needs to invest properly in our emergency departments to properly accommodate those who report with unstable mental health. We are letting people down.

I appreciate that the Minister of State is not opposing the motion. There is no better Teachta than an Teachta Clarke with whom to work collaboratively.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: As has been said repeatedly, mental health services are in crisis. We all know this because we deal with people. I express my solidarity with all of the people who work in mental health services, including in the community and in hospitals, because they are doing their best to cope with the situation they are in, despite the lack of staff and supports.

By the time many people end up in hospital, they will often have tried to access community mental health supports over and over again, sometimes over years. We all know that early intervention is the most important thing. I have constantly raised the case of Genesis, a counselling service in Dublin 15. For a relatively small amount of money, an extra 4,000 hours

could be provided for people in the Dublin 15 area. Could we look into something like this? Genesis provides low-cost counselling for people in the Dublin 15 area.

Six years ago, I used to work as a child and family support worker and used to try to access CAMHS supports for young people. To be honest, circumstances are probably worse now than when I left the job. That is really bad because we are talking about children and other young people trying to access services. Early intervention is so important.

Just last year, in response to several serious incidents in Dublin 15 and Connolly Hospital, Transport Infrastructure Ireland constructed railings across a bridge where there were two suicides. It is terribly sad that we are building infrastructure outside a hospital to stop suicides. It should be inside. That is the most important thing. We desperately need separate facilities for people who present at hospitals with mental health issues. They should not be in the normal emergency department as it is not appropriate. They should be in a separate space receiving mental health services.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I commend Teachta Sorca Clarke on this very important motion. We urgently need fundamental reform of the State's emergency mental health services. The failure is being felt in Clare and the mid-west.

Let me tell a personal story. A few years ago, my nephew was found hanging but we were extremely fortunate that he was still alive. He was taken down and brought by ambulance to a hospital but, because it was at the time of Covid, his mother was not allowed to travel with him. When he arrived at the accident and emergency department, he was placed on a chair – it was one of the most overcrowded emergency departments – and told he would have to wait for hours to be seen. He was alone, traumatised and completely overwhelmed. He rang his mother, my sister, to say he could not cope and he walked out of the hospital. We were lucky to find him before he could do himself more harm. Other families have not been so lucky.

To provide a wider picture, in 2023 Clare recorded the highest suicide rate in the State. In 2024, it had the fourth highest. Yet, when my colleague, Teachta Sorca Clarke, received a reply on suicide crisis assessment nurse services, we learned that Clare and the mid-west have not one clinical nurse specialist. Is it any wonder that people feel abandoned by the Government when it comes to emergency mental health care?

To make matters worse, mental health presentations at Ennis hospital are not even properly recorded. There is no established process to identify patients who need access to a mental health liaison team. This upsets and angers me. People already feel they have no worth, and the absence of services tells them exactly that. People are dying. Dedicated mental health emergency rooms save lives. This must be sorted now.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Too often in Limerick, we see the devastating impact of mental health challenges. Over the past decade, Limerick city has frequently recorded the highest suicide rate in Ireland. Tonight, I want to acknowledge the volunteers who will be out tonight in the appalling weather we have been having in the past couple of days. Limerick Suicide Watch and Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention both patrol the riverside in Limerick. Haven Hub and others also do fantastic work. Many a life has been saved because of the presence and interventions of the volunteers.

The Minister of State will be well aware of the work of the community access support team, CAST, pilot over the past 12 months. Following years of delay, it was initiated on a trial basis. Since its initiation, it has delivered positive results for those in need of assistance. In the first five months of 2025, the team conducted over 200 interventions, with indications that 80% of these had a major impact on the person in crisis. Speaking in Limerick about CAST, the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, said we need to roll it out across the country. The pilot project has been working well but I am concerned that it has not received its own funding. We must ensure it becomes permanent. Having spoken to senior HSE staff and Limerick gardaí, I note the project has already saved lives and kept people out of prison and emergency departments. A senior garda told me it is a godsend. It is a no-brainer. CAST must be retained, fully developed and resourced. It should be retained permanently in Limerick through central government funding and the model must be extended to other areas.

In the Minister of State's speech, she said early results are extremely positive and that the pilot will inform the national rollout. It is a no-brainer; it works and it should be rolled out where appropriate across the State. We think about how such a simple project is working so well, saving lives and keeping people out of prison and emergency departments.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Hundreds of people around the country have good outcomes when they access mental health services but there are also hundreds who have very bad outcomes. Many with bad outcomes end up self-harming or worse.

For many, the tragedy is that suicide is the outcome but for some, what happens is that person goes on to kill someone else. I want to bring to the Minister of State's attention to people in my constituency. First, this letter is from Jodie McGuinness, whose sister lost her life in 2015.

The loss of my sister Natalie McGuinness in 2015 was not an isolated or unpredictable tragedy. Her murder was carried out by an individual already known to State bodies, including the HSE mental health services, An Garda Síochána, the criminal justice system and this was a case involving multiple prior convictions, psychiatric concerns, violent episodes and, most disturbingly, missed opportunities for intervention and public protection.

That is Ms McGuinness writing to the Minister. She went on to say:

While I appreciate the Department's acknowledgment of our family's loss, I must express my deep frustration that, once again, serious concerns have been met with procedural deflection rather than meaningful engagement.

That is the experience of a family that lost a loved one. That was Natalie in 2015.

In 2017, another young man, Jimmy Loughlin, was also killed in Sligo by a man who was in the mental health services. I have written to the Minister of State and raised it with the Taoiseach several times. These two families, including the Loughlin family, want engagement around this issue. Each time we are told that we are waiting for a report or waiting for this, that and the other. The experience of these families is that these reports are blocks in the wall to stop them from making any progress. It was last July that the Minister of State told me here in this Chamber that this report would be ready within weeks and then she would meet the family. That did not happen. What does that tell that family? What does that tell the hundreds of other families around the country whose outcome may not be that the person who was failed by the mental health services killed themselves? Those people are in the same position. The

responsibility of this service's failure lies with Government and Government must step up to the mark and take responsibility. If the Minister of State is hiding behind reports, she is not taking responsibility.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank Sinn Féin for this important and very timely motion on emergency mental health services. It is very timely because we are all acutely aware of the sheer level of demand that is there for mental health services and we know all too well of the lapses in timely care and the very devastating consequences when there are those lapses in care. Far too many are being failed by the lack of 24-7 care and the lack of appropriate space within our hospitals. It is unacceptable that assessments are taking place in inappropriate emergency department, ED, spaces that are not specifically designed for those with mental health issues. Broken bones, heart attacks and strokes are well set up within the emergency department and yet for mental health, which can be as serious with the potential for fatal consequences, it is very much the Cinderella of our health service in general but in particular within our EDs.

We know there are 51,000 presentations to acute mental health services every year and the Mental Health Commission report on acute mental health and hospital EDs painted a very stark picture of an inconsistent service with inadequate assessment spaces. That in many EDs, patients are first cleared for medical issues before being assessed psychiatrically, is simply unacceptable. That practice has to end. I know we have asked the Minister of State these questions before. I know there are efforts being made. It is not happening in every ED but there are certainly EDs where it is happening. We know the lack of 24-hour mental health emergency care is having an impact. I know there was an announcement this year and we welcome that announcement but it is only 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. and that, to me, is not 24-7. I know the number of presentations after 2 a.m. may be very few but the reality is that if somebody at three or four o'clock in the morning is presenting with suicidal thoughts or whatever, that service is not there. The reality is that back in 2016, the Government promised to roll out 24-7 pathways and a decade on, we still do not have them. They are going to be introduced in a very limited way to 2 a.m. but, of course, it is only for the level 4 hospitals.

Deputy Mary Butler: Next year.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: That means there are significant gaps across the country so we need to see it for the model 3 hospitals also. It is great if it is going to happen next year.

The other key issue I want to raise is in regard to the assertive outreach or on-street mental health teams. Again, it is a really important provision within the community. When we submitted parliamentary questions on this, the replies indicate that it seems there are huge gaps across the country. There are no assertive outreach or on-street mental health teams in Waterford, Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny, south Tipperary, south Dublin, Wicklow, north County Dublin and the north and west of the city. That is simply unacceptable, particularly when we see the great work being done in Sligo-Leitrim, Cork and, with regard to Limerick, the community access support team within Limerick Garda station. There are models of care there that we need to see rolled out across the country.

The last thing I want to say is that we all have not just stories but accounts from families of the devastating consequences of when there is not timely care. Maud Coffey was tragically

killed by her partner in 2023. Her case speaks to the failings of emergency mental health care. Her partner had a mental health condition. He had presented looking for help. It was known that he had not been taking his medication for some months. He was suffering from a relapse of schizophrenia and he sought help from the team on the day he murdered Maud. He was given an appointment for the following week, despite it being known that he was not taking his medication for at least three months. Maud's family have been incredible in their fortitude in the midst of this incredible grief, to be able to speak out and talk about it being two lives that were destroyed three years ago and two families torn apart, and that it could have been avoided.

Maud's family spoke so eloquently after the case concluded a number of weeks ago, where they talked about the systematic failings, both for Maud, who lost her life, and also for her former partner, who should have got some sort of attention on the day he went on to kill Maud. Our only hope is that after Maud's loss of life, her legacy should be that those interventions are there when people present. I know many of the rest of us in the Chamber know of other desperately sad cases.

My plea to the Minister of State this evening is in regard to the 24-7 care. It should be 24-7 care and not part of that, and it should be for the model 3 hospitals as well. Second, with regard to the assertive outreach and on-street mental health teams, it is crucially important that we see that rolled out across the country. Critically, it is to prevent situations such as the killing of Maud and indeed other people who are at risk, such as families, friends, neighbours and other supports who are trying to help people through mental health crises. Their lives are at stake if the health system does not step up to the mark.

Deputy George Lawlor: I am very pleased to support this motion. It contains some excellent proposals, many of which I know the Minister of State would take on board and agree with. It recalls the commitment in the Government's mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision: a Mental Health Policy for Everyone*, to provide appropriate mental health emergency facilities in every hospital. It calls on the Government to require every model 3 and 4 hospital to have a dedicated mental health emergency room separate from chaotic emergency departments.

I know the Minister of State is familiar with the situation in my county of Wexford, one of the most populous counties in the region, heading for 180,000 people. There is a terrific general hospital there but simply no facility to cater, from an acute point of view, for people with mental health difficulties. If you arrive between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. in Wexford General Hospital, you will be seen by a psychiatric nurse and excellent staff working to the pin of their collar but after 5.30 p.m., there is nobody. At weekends, there is nobody; you will be seen on Monday. You may be referred to the psychiatric unit in University Hospital Waterford but, as the Minister of State knows, while the staff are doing an excellent job there, it is not fit for purpose.

8 o'clock

It is not fit to meet the needs of the entire region, responsibility for which, essentially, has been forced upon it.

I am told that if you are referred by a doctor or a hospital to the HSE unit in Summerhill in Wexford, you might have to wait up to three months to receive an appointment. I am also told that there is an excellent psychiatrist there - I wrote to the Minister of State about this recently - who has not been retained by the HSE. Whether that is the physician's personal choice or is

down to the fact that she simply has not been retained by the HSE, the matter needs to be investigated nonetheless. I have been contacted by numerous families and parents who stated that this person really provided excellent care for the people in her care.

There is no sign of the promised 54-bed unit in Waterford coming on stream. What we require in Wexford, which has a population of 180,000, is a dedicated ten-bed unit adjoining Wexford General Hospital and operating in conjunction with the acute facilities there. There is an urgent need for such a unit. Wexford is a county that is above the national average in terms of the rate of suicide. There is a serious mental health crisis in County Wexford. There is also a serious crisis in CAMHS in County Wexford in the context of mental health. I was recently approached by two young people who gave testimonies to me, which I will send on to the Minister of State, which decried the care they received. I know we will always get good and bad, and we probably hear more about the bad. Where people are not being cared for in the manner you would expect, however, particularly when it comes to CAMHS, there is a need for change.

About 13 years ago, I and some of my friends in Wexford town, led by a man called Frank Flanagan, set up a group called Wexford MarineWatch. Very simply, we do suicide prevention patrols around Wexford Harbour and in the Wexford Bridge area. There was almost an epidemic of people using Wexford Bridge for self-harm or attempted suicide. We have literally encountered hundreds of people since our establishment. In some instances, we give these people vouchers to attend It's Good to Talk counselling in Wexford town - we have come to an arrangement in that regard – and this has worked very well. However, we have also seen situations where we intervened with people and where gardaí came along and cared very well for them and where those individuals were brought to Waterford and were discharged the next day. This was despite the fact they were clearly in crisis. As stated said, it is my belief and that of many people in Wexford who have had interactions with the psychiatric unit in Waterford that the latter is not fit to meet the demand that exists across the region.

We worked very closely with Waterford Marine Search and Rescue, which has been very helpful. The Minister of State will agree that it terrific work. We assisted Claddagh Watch in Galway with its establishment. The intervention of these organisations opens our eyes to the reality of what is happening on the ground in terms of people who are in crisis. Ours is only one organisation.

The ten-bed acute unit for Wexford General Hospital is not too much to ask for in the context of the mental health crisis our county is facing and for the county's population of 180,000. I ask the Minister of State to please intervene and provide that unit for the people of Wexford.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this very important motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak on it because it goes to the heart of one of the most serious failings in our mental health system, namely how we treat people when they are in deepest crisis.

The Mental Health Commission's report on acute mental healthcare in hospital emergency departments painted a harrowing picture of adults and young people arriving in hospitals in terrible distress and then being left for many hours in noisy and chaotic settings that were never designed to be therapeutic environments. This was a harrowing but all-too-familiar and all-too-normalised picture. More than 50,000 people who are in the midst of a mental health crisis present to emergency departments each year. Many hospitals still lack appropriate assessment

spaces. There is substantial variation in quality across the State. This is not a marginal problem. It is a core test of whether our mental health policy means anything in practice for tens of thousands of people, many of whom are caught in a revolving door of return visits to hospital emergency departments.

Twenty years ago, A Vision for Change promised a system built around strong community services, crisis teams, rehabilitation and recovery teams and humane therapeutic responses to those in severe distress. It envisaged agile, well-staffed crisis services, community supports and alternatives to hospital admission in order that emergency departments would no longer be the default for people in acute distress. These supports were only partially delivered. Too many people have fallen through the cracks in the meantime. What happens when community services are thin on the ground, crisis teams are understaffed and early intervention for those with psychosis is unavailable? Pressure builds in emergency departments. People deteriorate while they are waiting. Staff are overwhelmed and the most vulnerable pay the price. The Government spoke soothingly about trauma-informed care in *Sharing the Vision*. That language is welcome, but rhetoric without sufficient resources does not calm a distressed person at 3 a.m. in a crowded emergency department corridor. It does not provide privacy, dignity or psychological safety. While we absolutely agree that there is a need for better crisis-care alternatives, such as crisis rooms, crisis assessment services, community crisis centres a core issue remains, we must also strengthen community and early-intervention supports in order that far fewer people reach crisis point in the first place. That means properly resourced community mental health teams, primary care services, youth services, addiction supports and crisis teams. It means developing the crisis houses that were recommended in a Vision for Change and that never materialised. When these are either not in place at all or are not fully in place, emergency departments become the pressure valve for a system that has failed further upstream.

We also need to look at models of mental health care that are far removed from the medicalised bureaucratic system we have. In this regard, I refer to Kyrie Farm in County Kildare where recovery is fostered through a deep sense of community and therapeutic enterprising connection with nature. The Minister of State is to be commended for increases in mental health funding during her tenure, but the reality on the ground is that funding still falls far short of the scale of need and for families navigating the system access to timely care can remain a postcode lottery.

The motion before us calls for dedicated mental health emergency rooms in model 3 and model 4 hospitals, an expert review of the role of model 2 hospitals, ring-fenced investment in community alternatives, specialist staffing and a fully integrated crisis pathway for children and young people. These are sensible, evidence-based proposals. We also need to come back always to investment in the workforce. We can construct crisis rooms and centres but without psychiatric nurses, social workers, occupational therapists, psychologists and doctors to staff them, they will be mere shells. Mental health services cannot function without adequate staffing. We cannot continue to see crude, blunt recruitment restrictions imposed through the Government's pay and numbers strategy. That approach may satisfy those who produce spreadsheets in the Department of public expenditure, but it fails patients and it burns out the staff who remain.

Last week, representatives from the HSE failed to provide basic information on the number of approved psychology posts in mental health services for older adults. That was a clear attempt on the executive's part to conceal the deficit in staffing. We know that older adults with mental health difficulties are more at risk of distressing, unnecessary repeat emergency department admissions that will, in turn, lead to a worsening in the state of their mental health. The stranglehold on recruitment must end. We need proper multi-annual workforce planning, funded posts, clear staffing benchmarks as we had in *A Vision for Change* and long-term certainty, not annual emergency firefighting. We also need serious capital investment in therapeutic settings, spaces designed for calm assessment, de-escalation as opposed to containment in corridors.

The Mental Health Commission's findings on care for children in emergency departments are especially disturbing. One example cited in the report captures the reality behind the national picture. Cavan Hospital's emergency department described:

... major issues involving young patients with mental health difficulty, between the ages of 15 and 18, presenting in crisis situations, especially those young people seeking a place of safety. Such crises can persist for several days or more. Staff feel insufficiently resourced to manage this cohort of patients, resulting in frustration for clinical teams, patients, and their families.

That is an indictment of the system.

The guidance is clear: every 24-7 emergency department should have defined access to CAMHS assessment through a simple and straightforward referral procedure supported by dedicated CAMHS liaison and on-call services available around the clock through a single point of contact. Despite this, survey respondents told the Mental Health Commission that in some model 4 hospitals and several model 3 hospitals these standards simply did not exist. Delayed assessments were leading to prolonged and inappropriate placement of children in emergency departments or acute medical wards. This is not just inefficiency; it is harm.

Oversight is another critical issue. HIQA inspects emergency departments but it does not assess the quality of mental health assessments carried out there or the suitability of the environment for those in psychological distress. The inspector of mental health services has a statutory duty to report on the quality of care wherever it occurs and this report is very welcome but it must be honest about its limits. A survey-based exercise, while useful, cannot provide a full picture. Some respondents had no data on mental health presentations and some could not supply staffing information. The report acknowledges that a deeper assessment of emergency departments' mental health provision is beyond its scope. Will the Minister of State indicate whether the Mental Health Bill will close the gap in oversight and inspection of mental health care in emergency departments? These are high-risk high-volume environments, and they cannot remain in a grey regulatory zone.

A further issue which demands attention is that of restrictive practices. Based on anecdotal reports - the fact that they are anecdotal is a problem in itself - restrictive practices are being used on people in acute mental distress in emergency departments largely because these spaces are not designed or resourced to provide safe therapeutic care. The use of such practices in emergency departments appears to fall into a regulatory vacuum. As far as I am aware, neither HIQA nor the Mental Health Commission has formal oversight in this regard. There is no

national data, no consistent reporting system and no routine external scrutiny. This is unacceptable because people who come to hospital in mental health crisis usually come in a very vulnerable and distressed state of mind seeking help, not further trauma.

We cannot discuss this issue without acknowledging the devastating consequences when the system fails. The absence of appropriate supports in emergency departments and a lack of viable alternatives have had tragic results, including in the case of Adam Loughnane in Galway whose family continue to campaign for Adam's protocol. Adam's experience underlines the reality faced daily by emergency department staff and the difficulty of providing constant one-to-one supervision while people await assessment or onward placement, particularly in overcrowded emergency departments that are under extreme pressure. This gap in services worsens chronic overcrowding and piles strain onto front-line professionals. The emotional toll on affected patients, families and staff cannot be overstated.

I welcome what is contained in the motion. The message must be clear: we need ring-fenced investment for all tiers of service including emergency services. We need 24-7 CAMHS pathways that exist in reality. We need oversight that ensures that emergency mental health care is humane and sensitive to the trauma and adversity that service users have experienced, that is accountable and consistent across the country and not subject to a post code lottery. People in crisis cannot wait another decade. They need the State to meet them with a sense of urgency and containment consistently and in every part of the country.

I conclude by coming back to the Mental Health Commission, which is often referred to in the public domain almost as a sacred moral authority in the area of mental health that is beyond rebuke or question. It is important to acknowledge that it does very important and essential work, and has highly committed and capable personnel. However, it needs to answer questions on how there was such a gulf of difference between its inspection report findings into Bloomfield Hospital in south Dublin and the day-to-day reality of abuse and neglect that persisted there for residents until a very courageous staff member blew the whistle and an independent investigation was undertaken. The Mental Health Commission inspection ratings of over 90% compliance across consecutive reports needs to be called into question in that context as does its whole way of carrying out inspections.

We also had the commission's cold, detached handling of the closure of the Owenacurra Centre in Midleton across 2021 and 2022 and the transfer of vulnerable adult service users from a single-room, town-centre location where they had lived and become integrated into community over decades, only to be moved to dormitory-style long-stay wards in a relatively remote location in Glanmire and also in St. Finbarr's Hospital near the city. The Mental Health Commission initially declined to meet with family members of residents who were embroiled in this traumatic upheaval and later agreed to do so in a very cursory manner under political pressure. There was no vindication of the rights of some of those residents who did not have family representation. There was no use of soft power on the part of the Mental Health Commission to even express concern about what was happening. All of this played out very publicly at the time.

The Mental Health Commission claims it was legally constrained from commentary and yet it was able to comment following the publication of the Kerry CAMHS reports and make a case for an extension of its own regulatory powers into child services at the time. Representatives from the Mental Health Commission showed an aggressive defensiveness

against any formal questioning of these measures at an Oireachtas committee meeting in December 2022, saying they were constrained from commentary due to regulatory processes. This will despite the fact that the commission had briefed the media on its position at other junctures.

The recent Mental Health Commission report on restrictive practices was encouraging at first sight, showing a declining rate of chemical restraint. However, the report did not provide information on what it termed enduring cases of chemical restraint. It does not inform us in those cases of how long people were restrained even though there is a duty on the part of services to provide the Mental Health Commission with that information. The number of those cases is considerable. This is a very curious omission, and one that needs to be clarified.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this incredibly important motion on emergency mental health services. It is essential that we appreciate this is a vital area that needs to be looked at. For these reasons, I strongly support the motion that calls for every model 3 and model 4 hospital to have a dedicated mental health emergency room, separate from the emergency department. A dedicated mental health emergency room would be a game changer for the likes of Letterkenny hospital. It would allow patients suffering from mental health illness to get immediate specialised care which is far too often delayed and inaccessible, and in cases in Donegal completely absent.

It is devastating that in this day and age we still treat mental illness with less urgency and seriousness than physical illness. The consequences are just as real and detrimental. Left unaddressed, mental illness increases the risk of physical disease, isolation, homelessness and death. Minimising this does not reduce its impact. It allows preventable suffering and loss to continue. Research tells us that one in two people in Ireland will directly or indirectly experience a mental health crisis at some point in their life. Investing in emergency mental health services makes sense and it would have wide-ranging impacts.

The Mental Health Commission has reported that each year an estimated 51,000 people access mental health services for the first time through a hospital emergency department. That should not be the case. There should be a dedicated fully staffed place where people experiencing mental health difficulties can go. Our emergency departments have been reduced and we have not had significant investment in years. Donegal is suffering and is facing a significant mental health crisis characterised by long waiting lists, rising demands and overstretched services, compounded by the defective concrete crisis currently going on and the mental health crisis that is causing.

I have raised Oisín Keenan's research many times before. I will continue to do so because it continues to be relevant. Oisín's study, *An Earthquake in Slow Motion: The Mental Health Impact on Ireland's Defective Concrete Crisis*, has shown that rates of depression, anxiety and trauma-related disorders are all significantly higher among adults living with defective concrete in their homes compared with the general population of Ireland. More than a third of the 393 adults surveyed reported experiencing suicidal ideation and suicidal thoughts. Sadly, the research conducted on the children living in defective concrete homes has showed a similar trend which is heartbreaking. Children being raised in homes with defective concrete already experience profound and lasting effects to their mental health and emotional well-being.

Many individuals are affected by uncertainty, instability and chronic stress when growing up. This can stifle their development, increase the risk of anxiety and depression and cause behavioural issues. You can imagine just how difficult it is for children with disabilities and special needs living in these circumstances and the impact is not confined to childhood. Early exposure to prolonged stress has been shown to impact long-term physical and mental health. The crisis is intergenerational. The pressures and trauma experienced by parents and caregivers are directly influencing their children's sense of safety.

It is having a profound effect on their mental health as their lives progress, causing unprecedented levels of mental illness in Donegal. Without timely, sustained intervention, the defective concrete crisis creates a serious risk these mental health difficulties will be carried forward and become generational, deepening inequality and placing further strain on already stretched services. For this reason, we urgently need to develop an integrated crisis response pathway for mental health in Donegal involving our emergency departments, which is vital.

We have had a significant rise in young people seeking mental health support. According to Jigsaw, 744 people in Donegal sought support between January and October last year. That is a massive 34% increase on the previous year. The defective concrete crisis is one of the causes. It affects more than bricks and mortar; it affects marriages, families and children and severely impacts our elderly population, who feel abandoned. They have contacted me. They are in vulnerable situations and are going through the later stages of life in severe peril and depression. Their mental health has gone. They are broken. We need to address this and realise how serious it is.

I have been in contact with the Minister of State in the past regarding the old convent in Carndonagh, a recovery-focused, crisis intervention step-down facility. There is a seven-day outreach service which will support people to remain in their own home and integrate with their local community as planned. As well as this, day services and acute short-term services will reduce the number of admissions to the department of psychiatry. Funding for a new crisis resolution team is needed.

We need significantly more mental health facilities in Donegal to deal with the issues we are experiencing, with many more to come. Will the Minister of State inform us of a timeline indicating commencement and completion of the transition and prioritise mental health facilities in the north west? Down the line, this will be an absolute epidemic.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I commend Sinn Féin on tabling this motion on the need for emergency mental health services and stating they should be 24-7 and involve dedicated mental health emergency rooms in level 3 and 4 hospitals, investment in model 2 hospitals and proper staffing for mental health services.

The second last point is particularly important, from my experience. It refers to "mental health crisis assessment and intervention services [and] community-based alternatives... late-night outreach spaces, crisis resolution teams, and community-based assessment, support, and treatment teams". I say that because on a number of occasions in my clinic, either I or my staff have faced terrifying situations where people have called us or come into us and said they are feeling suicidal. We have no idea what to do.

If I could ask the Minister one thing, it would be to put together guidance for public representatives faced with these situations. Our staff are traumatised. We are dealing with traumatised people and we do not know what advice to give them as to where to go. Usually, we end up being told to call the police. That is literally all that is available - call the police if somebody is threatening suicide.

Two of our emergency departments, in St. Michael's Hospital and Loughlinstown hospital, had their opening hours reduced to 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. a number of years ago, which we campaigned strongly against. The only emergency department available out of hours is in St. Vincent's Hospital, which is overrun and chaotic.

I do not know if it is mentioned in the motion but we often get reports of dual diagnosis. People are turned away from emergency departments because they also have problems with abuse of drugs or alcohol. There is often unwillingness to treat people in that situation. I do not blame the staff for that. I blame the lack of specialised dual-diagnosis mental health services, as well as services in the community. Before people end up in an emergency department, there should be community-based alternatives, as the motion states, and crisis intervention teams, so there are other supports available for people in these situations.

It is good the Government is not opposing the motion but we need to see the resources in place. We also need to think beyond this motion. Many of the mental health crises in this country involve our young people. I strongly believe, and have said it a number of times in here, that we should have a psychology department in every school. This is the case in many countries, where schools not only have individuals but also have actual psychology departments. We should have the same so there are places to go in schools for young people facing mental health crises.

The Government should not be trying to deal with the consequences of such crises on one the hand, while, on the other, failing to act against some of the forces in the world fomenting such crises and leading young people to feel suicidal. I am referring to some social media companies and their reckless, irresponsible behaviour in having recommender algorithms which push stuff at young people that foments much of the mental health crises they are experiencing, including suicidal ideation, body image issues and so on, which can have a big impact on young people and can lead them to mental health crisis or even suicide. Algorithms pushing stuff about suicidal ideation at young people is absolutely shocking. There is profiteering from it, as was highlighted by Deputy Paul Murphy in the Bill we tabled to do away with these algorithms that are pushing dangerous stuff at young people.

There are many aspects to the mental health crisis that faces many in our society. It will affect many people at some point in their lives. What is put forward in the motion is an important part of the response. I hope the Government will act on it and provide the staffing and resources to make it happen. There are also things beyond this which the Government needs to consider.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I support the motion. It is a fact that emergency departments across the country are overburdened. In Mayo, there are significant delays in waiting times and so on. For individuals suffering from mental health difficulties or suicidal ideation, I do not believe an emergency department is appropriate or the best place. Every year, 51,000 people access mental health services for the first time through an emergency department. That is an

extraordinary figure. It is extraordinary for the individuals who have to go into the emergency departments, but equally for the healthcare professionals. It is crucial there is a dedicated room, with dedicated professionals available on a 24-hour basis, within emergency departments. It can be done. It is a practical solution to a major crisis.

Recently, a constituent of mine who was suffering from addiction attended an emergency department.

The response was simply inadequate in terms of being able to provide the level of care that was needed. There were significant gaps in care and the detox programme. I submitted a number of parliamentary questions to the Minister of State on this. I was trying to identify gaps and variations in delivery of addiction services and issues with female-only spaces, and the level of response was simply inadequate. I intend to submit questions again to the Minister of State and to write to her on this issue because mental health and addiction services are intrinsically linked. One question I put to the Minister of State was on the level of demand. It is extraordinary that this does not seem to be captured by the Department. These are people who are suffering immensely and the way in which we are dealing with them is unacceptable. The Department's capture and management of the data also need to be looked at. I support the motion and I look forward, hopefully, to its implementation.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Last year's Mental Health Commission's report entitled, *Acute Mental Healthcare in Hospital Emergency Departments in Ireland*, confirmed, as other speakers noted, that emergency mental health care is simply not available in most of our emergency departments. I am repeating myself here but every year more than 50,000 people in acute mental distress present to emergency departments. A number of Deputies referred to this but it is important to emphasise it. What the report shows is widespread inconsistency in the quality of care people receive. Hospital managers acknowledge rising demand. The report highlighted, among other things, that eight emergency departments lacked even the most basic appropriate spaces for crisis mental health assessments.

Professionals, families and other advocates have been very clear that the current model is simply not working. People in crisis are being assessed in totally unsuitable chaotic environments, where access to timely specialist care depends too heavily on where people happen to live. As such, I wholeheartedly support calls in this motion for a dedicated mental health emergency room service in every model 3 and model 4 hospital, separate from overcrowded emergency departments. I also support establishing an expert review of the role of model 2 hospitals and investment in a network of specialist crisis centres, including at community level. This is a fundamental point, both in terms in emergency departments in general but also in mental health services. People should not necessarily have to go to an emergency department to access emergency mental health services. Care could be community-based. If we had a nationwide network as part of the primary care centre system, people would not have to attend hospital emergency departments for many less complex medical procedures. That is another day's debate but community care is required.

All of this will require proper resourcing and will not happen overnight. The Minister of State and previous speakers pointed to some areas of improvement. While improvements have happened, a lot more is needed within a shorter timeframe if the Government is to finally deliver the safe, rapid-access mental health emergency care promised in its policy report,

Sharing the Vision, for the period from 2020 to 2030. Such care would ensure every person in a crisis gets timely intervention in a setting that provides them with privacy and, dare I say it, basic human dignity.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I welcome and support the motion. Not a day goes by that I do not think of my great friend of many years who died from suicide. I was with him the day before he died. At the time, he had even fooled me. I think of members of the emergency services who have to deal with things on a daily basis. I think of the Garda, the fire service, and suicide watch and search and rescue organisations. All these people, many of them volunteers, go out and do their best to help people. Then, I see investigations in the HSE where it takes eight years for a person to admit they were wrong and hundreds of thousands of euro wasted on legal fees because somebody did not put up their hand and say they did wrong. This money could go into services that save the lives of people suffering from mental health problems.

The same is true in the Garda. We saw yesterday that five gardaí were found not guilty after a long seven or eight years. That cost hundreds of thousands and had gardaí off the street when they could have been helping people. That could have been dealt with in a more timely fashion, which could have helped services that are badly wanted for people with mental health difficulties. We have to get this right. We have to make sure the funds available to us are used to resource the most needy, namely, the elderly and people who suffer with mental health problems. With all the challenges they have now, we have to make sure they get the best treatment. To do that, we have to stop waste and fix the issue with accountability, so that if people get something wrong, they put your hand up and say they got it wrong, learn from it and move on. That is what we have to do. Until we do that, we will have hundreds of thousands of euro being wasted on legal challenges that could help people in need. I ask for the Minister of State's help with that. I hope we do not have to wait for seven or eight years for other cases in the health services to conclude when they could be fixed if people put up their hands and were accountable. We need to learn from our mistakes. That goes all the way up the chain to the very top. We need to stop the cover-ups and help people who are in need.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome this hugely important motion. I have been fighting in the business committee to have a discussion in the House on mental health services. It is certainly an emergency. I think every TD in this Chamber knows the reality. When people are in a mental health crisis there is almost nowhere for them to go. We see it in our clinics every single week.

Deputy O'Donoghue said we have to get this right. Sadly, it is not right. It is a broken system, an absolute disastrous system, to be honest. I have had family members very close to me commit suicide but I also have a constituent who recently tried to commit suicide. The astonishing situation was that I was asked to help and, my God, I could do nothing. I asked two Ministers to help and they could do nothing. That is a serious situation. Basically, the person made a suicide attempt at home and was brought into hospital. He was supervised overnight in hospital and the following morning, the family were told to take him home or he would be dropped off by taxi. Good God almighty, the poor man was still saying he was in a crisis and needed help but he was sent home. The fact that there was self-harm involved meant he had to come back the next day and get medical treatment. Basically, as far as the hospital

was concerned, the mental health side of it was finished with. It was not. This man was still in a dreadful position in life.

People in that situation need help, and it is not there. This goes back years. A relation of mine was in the same situation but the help was not there. There were a lot of phone calls after the event but that is no good to anybody. After the event is no good. There needs to be a massive rethink here as to how mental health issues are being dealt with in this country because it is certainly not working. That is a shocking indictment. It seems to me that people are only a number. When they are gone, they are gone and we move on. That is not the way it should be. If you were struck down with cancer or a heart ailment tomorrow morning, you would expect to get the medical treatment you deserve. A mental health situation is a medical issue but it is being ignored by Government continuously.

We sometimes point the finger. I have great understanding for staff in mental health units because they are under immense pressure. It is a very difficult job and we all know it is not the fault of front-line staff who do their best in impossible conditions. This is a failure of leadership and planning at the top. The system simply is not built to deal with mental health crises safely. Families come to us in absolute despair. They know their son, daughter or partner is suicidal but they cannot get them admitted anywhere.

They are told the person themselves has to seek help. Even when they do, the help often is not there, as I have just outlined. There is nothing worse than a family begging for help and being told there is nothing that can be done. We all know the pain of losing someone to suicide. Too many families in this country have been devastated by it. It is heartbreaking to think that some of those deaths could have been prevented if there were proper crisis supports, real crisis rooms, real alternatives to emergency departments and real follow-up care.

I plead to the people out there who have a mental health illness to look for help and seek help. They should talk to friends, talk to neighbours or talk to someone. I appreciate being given extra bit of time because it is a very serious issue. I know a lot of people are very ill with it. It is sad. It is very sad.

Deputy Albert Dolan: This conversation is very welcome. I welcome the motion. I speak regularly with young people in my constituency and young families. The reality is that when somebody is in a crisis situation or finally gets to that point where they realise they are not okay, they need support and help and they reach out for help, it is vital that at that point the State is ready to meet them where they are at. We have all heard too many heartbreaking stories of people who have been left waiting, people who have felt unheard or people who have just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. The impact that can have on a family, friends and entire communities cannot be underestimated.

It is also important to acknowledge the front-line professionals. From nurses to clinicians, gardaí and volunteers, oftentimes the people on the front line go above and beyond. They do everything they can to help. They sit with people through their darkest hours. They deserve credit for that but they also need a system that will enable them, support them properly and ensure that when they are trying to support people, they have the support in place to do that effectively. That is a really important point. We need a system that supports our front-line workers.

I welcome the debate primarily because it is a chance for us to have an honest conversation about the gaps that exist while still acknowledging progress. The Government has a clear policy here about the need for the right care in the right place at the right time. Oftentimes, emergency departments are not the best setting for a person to present in a mental health crisis. It is already a chaotic environment and there is no doubt that can contribute greatly to how somebody would be feeling at that time at a point of despair. It is really important that we look at that, acknowledge the merits of this motion and move forward collectively, all seeking the best outcomes for anybody who ends up in a position where they have built the courage to present. They need to know the State is right there beside them.

It is important to look at what happened in the budget. It was a major step forward. It included 300 additional mental health staff and more than €15 million ring-fenced for crisis supports and suicide prevention. Speaking as a man, there were 15,000 hours allocated for men's counselling last year. That was really welcome. I know there are new, specialist crisis nursing teams that are working out of hours in major hospitals. These are all things to show the Government is taking this seriously and we want to see serious improvements in this. It is also a reflection that more has to be done because we all know the cases. We all know families who feel that their person who ultimately took their own life was let down by the State or services and it is really important that we minimise those encounters and situations. They cannot be allowed to happen. We have to be there to support people. The system has to be there to support people. We also have to be really solution-oriented here. All of those investments I spoke about there is the direction of travel.

It is important to discuss how hospitals respond as well. There are national clinical programmes in all 26 emergency departments now. There are proper assessments, safety plans and follow-up care. I will finish with one last point. Everybody here can agree that when somebody is in a crisis or somebody has an emergency, the State needs to be there to meet them.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk about this very important issue. I am glad Sinn Féin has brought it forward here this evening. Every one of us has known a lot of people who committed suicide. It is very sad when you lose very fine people that way. We would all love to do a whole lot more for them. We need to do more because the national survey from the Office of the Inspector of Mental Health Services has found that international best practice is not available in most emergency departments in Ireland.

I can honestly say we do not have enough facilities in Kerry to deal with the number of people who have problems, especially young people. What happened with south Kerry CAMHS and north Kerry CAMHS is just the tip of the iceberg. In 2016 I had only been up here a very short time when I got a call from a young family, the brothers and sisters of a young boy who was threatening to commit suicide. His father had done it five or six years before that. They were up day and night with him. They had him in a certain hospital at this time and the hospital was letting him go home. They were dreading the weekend and wondering how they would mind him for another weekend. I rang the hospital and I was very glad that a senior nurse came on the phone to me and promised she would look after him. She kept him for three weeks in that hospital. He is perfect today and, even if I never do anything else in my life, I will be glad of that. We are not able to do it for enough people.

I am glad that the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, when she spoke earlier said she would increase services in Kerry. By God, we certainly need them. I am appealing to her to get hold of the HSE and ensure that happens. I hear many other Deputies talking here about how ordinary emergency departments are not the place. They certainly are not. We should have a separate room and separate people to deal with these young people - it is often young people who go in. They have troubles from different things, possibly including addiction.

There is savage pressure on youngsters now who are going to college, trying to compete and trying to stay in education. It might be hard for them to find their path and which way they want to go. There is so much we could do. We certainly need more psychiatrists but we need more psychologists as well to talk to them and to understand. It is only people like that who can understand the problems they have. Some of it can be hereditary. It has been in families and we know that. We are all united here together that the services must be enhanced and increased. We must help these lovely young people and people who often leave this earth too soon. We have all been at the funerals. We know the trauma it leaves behind for families. It is serious. We have to do more.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I really welcome Sinn Féin bringing this motion forward. I welcome the fact the Government is not opposing it. I thank Deputy Cullinane and Deputy Sorca Clarke for their calls for reform. This morning, I spoke at an event for Movember. I was not invited there just because I have a moustache. Before I got involved in politics, when I was shouting from the outside of this House during lockdown, I ran an event for Movember called Movement for Mental Health. It was when we were in those confined areas. I was trying to get people out and put it on their social media that they were moving and getting active. We raised €20,000 and it was great. From that, my passion came forward.

I have lost friends, be they schoolmates, people I used to serve and people I was always working for and working with, to suicide. The Minister of State is very well aware of this. It is the hidden fact of mental health. I was very lucky that, when I struggled with mental health when I was younger and in those developing years, I went to a university that had a free counselling service.

I know people who look at me now might ask, "How did he struggle?" It is the people we do not think are struggling who are struggling. I have seen that with my friends. We are always going back and wondering why we did not ask him or her about it. That is the part we all can resonate with in Ireland. One in five people experience it in their life.

Can the Minister of State see the badge I am wearing? It reads, "It's OK Not to Be OK". That was started by a lady named Theresa Kelly, from Edenmore. What she has done is to not accept the delays in legislation. She has taken something into her own hands. It is good to see Dublin City Council getting behind it. It is good to see other Deputies and other councillors from Dublin getting behind it. What she has done is create a badge for people to wear to break the stigma on mental health. I was at schools recently giving out the badges. Everyone is getting behind this campaign.

There are people in crisis who are waiting hours, sometimes days, on trolleys in emergency departments, as everybody across this House has said. It is not the hard-working men and women in our hospitals who are the problem. The problem is the current system for getting people the help they need. As I said, I was lucky to have been going to a university that had it.

Some people do not have that chance. There is a huge statistic on the economic barriers people are facing for mental health.

Regarding the "It's OK Not to Be OK" badge, it is a small badge, but there is also a little card they give out. What the card does is give people information on eight free services they can go to, be it the Samaritans, Pieta House, Woman's Aid, Men's Aid, Childline, Alone, the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, homeless emergency accommodation and all these great organisations. Giving people that little card with all the information in one place gives them that option. It is not just that, however. It is the fact that it is being supported across the House. I love when it happens that there is an issue and people put aside politics and just get to the solution. The leadership I have seen from Theresa has been unbelievable for someone who is not in politics. To have her work rate is something I aspire to. She does not have an off switch.

Now, we see that for young people in Ireland mistakes and rejection are made public. People only show the good side of their lives on social media. Statistics show that young people are experiencing mental health issues at a higher rate because of social media. It is because of the pressures that are on them these days. I welcome the motion, and I would love if youth services were properly funded, community counselling was more widely available and for addiction services and family supports to continue to be rolled out. There is great work being done across those Departments. It is not just about normalising the struggle. It is about how "It's OK Not to Be OK", and it is absolutely okay to ask for help. If there is anyone watching us in this Chamber on a Tuesday night and we can change one life and show people how to reach out, then we have been successful. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): First of all, I want to thank all the Deputies for their contributions on this important motion this evening. These are vitally important services, and the Government has taken action to reform, reorganise and invest in the services for people facing into a mental health crisis. There is still much work to do to build supports up to where we know they need to be today.

As my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, highlighted earlier, this work covers both our hospital-based supports and our community-based alternatives. We know that emergency departments are often not ideal settings for people experiencing a mental health crisis. However, they are an essential 24-hour service, and we know that people will continue to present there when they need immediate care. This fact underlines the dual approach we are taking to mental health crisis service reform in rolling out specialist nursing teams in emergency departments and building up our new crisis resolution services in our communities. The main objectives of Sharing the Vision, Ireland's national mental health policy of which we are all aware - I thank everyone who spoke about it tonight - are to enhance the provision of services and supports across a broad range, from the promotion of positive mental health to specialist mental health service delivery. Actions under the policy cover prevention and early intervention, service access, co-ordination and continuity of care, social inclusion and accountability and continuous improvements. Implementation is being driven by the national implementation and monitoring committee. This group has been reviewing the issues of mental health crisis supports. A specific work team is developing an overarching framework to better integrate the range of out-of-hours and crisis services and supports available. One of the things that was highlighted again tonight was the crisis service and the supports available. As we continue to expand alternatives to hospitals for those in crisis, this work will deliver on an

overarching crisis response framework to align patient pathways, integrate crisis services and address specific service improvements to fill any gaps in provision that are identified.

Mental health is a priority for the Government, demonstrated by the record funding increase since 2020. Funding has increased by over 50% in this time and this has allowed us to recruit more staff, develop new digital services, provide more counselling and roll out specialist services across the country. The ambition of the Government is to provide timely and responsive access to safe, high-quality mental health services for people in mental health crisis and deliver the right care in the right place at the right time. This means effective, compassionate and responsive services in the community, but also in our emergency departments and hospitals. The wider shift to community-based services is particularly significant for mental health where, as we have noted, emergency department and hospital-based services are often not the most appropriate setting for people in distress.

Building on this progress to date, in budget 2026, we are making real practical investments to help people in crisis when they need it most. First, we are investing €2.8 million this year to begin the establishment of the specialist nursing teams in every major hospital emergency department during the busiest out-of-hours periods. These teams, made up of highly trained advanced nurse practitioners and clinical nurse specialists, will be there to provide immediate support to people who arrive in crisis. We also opening the three new crisis resolution services, with teams made up of expert mental health professionals, and Solace crisis cafes, which are staffed by lived experience peer support workers. These services already operate in six counties and in 2026 will expand to serve communities in counties Donegal and Kerry and the midlands. These will be safe, welcoming drop-in spaces for anyone who is feeling distressed or overwhelmed. There is a further €4 million dedicated to early compassionate community-based supports, which is really important. Community supports are really important. This year, we also funded 12 additional suicide crisis assessment nurses. These nurses work directly with GPs to support people who come forward in distress. This represents a €1 million investment. We are providing €415,000 for suicide prevention initiatives designed with the Traveller community. This is by the Traveller community, ensuring culturally appropriate support where it is needed most. We are significantly increasing funding to voluntary and community organisations, including organisations like Pieta House, HUGG and SOS, by €1.7 million, recognising the vital role they play on the ground every day.

We are creating a new crisis response pathway for children and young people. This includes 19 new specialist CAMHS doctors to cover emergencies and out-of-hours needs, along with five new adult liaison psychiatrists. This is a major €4 million investment in timely and responsive care. Taken together, these measures show clearly that the Government is serious about strengthening crisis supports, investing in prevention and ensuring help is available when and where the people need it most.

The national clinical programme on self-harm and suicide-related ideation works in our hospitals to make sure that anyone who comes to an emergency department after self-harm or because they are thinking about suicide is treated with compassion and gets a quick assessment of what they need. They are then given support and advice on staying safe and a written safety plan that is also shared with their GP. Staff also help link each person with the right follow-up care. The programme is run by teams of specialist mental health nurses and it is now in place in all 26 emergency departments across the country, including every model 3 hospital, with

approximately 50 staff involved. The programme also gathers important information on self-harm presentation and shares it with the National Suicide Research Foundation, which keeps Ireland's self-harm register. This data is published every year. In 2024, 12,621 self-harm presentations were reported, a 10% drop compared with 2014. A key part of the service is having a dedicated room in each emergency department for mental health assessments. The national clinical lead has been working with hospitals to ensure these rooms are available.

9 o'clock

While most hospitals already have such a room, an audit found eight emergency departments still do not have one. The programme is actively working with those hospitals to put that right.

In 2025, we launched a new model of care for consultation psychiatry, which gives hospitals a strong and clear framework for developing these vital services. Liaison psychiatry is the team that supports people who come to emergency departments or hospital wards in need of both physical and mental help, including individuals experiencing eating disorders, self-harm or suicidal thoughts. These services play a crucial role in ensuring people receive the right mental health support when they need it most. As part of budget 2026, we are providing funding for five additional full-time staff to help to put this new model into practice.

The Government will shortly publish Ireland's new self-harm and suicide prevention strategy, as referred to by many speakers. It will build on the success of the existing strategy, Connecting for Life, while addressing gaps and areas that require more focus. The new policy implementation structures will be supported by a lived experience panel hosted by the National Suicide Research Foundation. We continue to embed lived experience into Government policy formation and delivery.

Last year's public consultation involved surveys and a series of in-person consultation sessions. The online survey closed with 1,895 submissions and 200 people were involved in the in-person and online sessions. Access to mental health crisis services and poor experience of presenting to emergency departments emerged as the key theme in these sessions, as detailed in the report on the consultation published by the Department of Health last year. That was the main issue identified. The Government has listened to this, as the new measures we are funding this year demonstrate.

Reducing deaths by suicide is a very complex task but evidence and experience internationally show that measurable improvements in suicide prevention can be achieved through effective cross-sectoral, cross-government and cross-functional working. Connecting for Life adopted this approach and, as a result, suicide reduction initiatives have advanced in many areas, including local government, justice, media, agriculture and health. The strategy had strong cross-departmental support, including from the Departments of Social Protection, justice, education, higher education and agriculture. This will continue and will be strengthened in the new strategy. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has allocated €1 million in dedicated funding to begin the new strategy, which will be published in the coming months.

As we bring tonight's debate to a close, I thank all Deputies for their contributions. We each know constituents who have faced profound crises and have turned to us, as their public representatives, at moments when they felt most alone. The actions the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has taken and the investment the Government is delivering will ensure our response is more compassionate, more effective and will deliver in the right settings. The

Government's ambition is clear and the programme for service reform, integration and expansion is well under way. The Minister of State is committed to improving emergency mental healthcare and welcomes this opportunity to set out the range of initiatives the Government is resourcing to make this a reality for the people in our communities who need to access these vital services. I thank all who contributed this evening. It was really important to have this debate.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There is a crisis in how mental healthcare services are delivered across the State. The lack of proper services means people experiencing a mental health crisis must present at hospital emergency departments. A person so presenting may, at the time of presentation, be in a state of psychosis and, having had to wait a number of hours for treatment, may come out of the psychosis. Some of them have then been sent home. This is highlighted in a recent report by the Mental Health Commission, which also showed there are often substantial delays for people undergoing a mental health crisis in terms of mental health assessments, especially in the evenings and at weekends.

Existing emergency mental health services are being placed under great pressure and strain as they currently face a surge in demand. This is particularly prevalent among young people, who have also been heavily impacted by the housing crisis. Demand for mental health services among this demographic has increased by more than 50% in recent years. An EU report in 2025 showed significant concerns with regard to mental health levels in Ireland, with the State receiving the lowest average score on a mind health index among the nine European countries surveyed. For a number of years, Ireland has been ranked as among the worst countries in the world for mental health. Services in this area have been haemorrhaging highly qualified staff, who are not being replaced.

We have been talking about these matters for years. It is unacceptable that there has been such a poor response from the Government in tackling this mental health crisis. Sending those experiencing a psychotic episode to Garda stations or ill-equipped hospital emergency departments is not the solution. At the very least, every hospital should have dedicated spaces with specialist mental health teams available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Ireland will continue to rank as one of the worst countries in Europe for mental health if we do not implement these changes.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Emergency mental health services in this State are virtually non-existent. On any given day, more than 100 people will present at an emergency department in extreme distress and there just will not be the services and facilities to support them. Emergency mental health services remain underfunded, understaffed and largely unavailable when people need them most. That failure is costing people's lives and it is simply unacceptable.

Among the cases that have come through my office, I remember a young man coming in who produced a bread knife, which was very scary. He rolled up his sleeves to reveal he had been self-harming. There were no supports for that young man, who ended up in the local Garda station on that occasion. He is no longer with us. People and their families have been crying out for help and we are powerless to do anything other than to suggest they go to an emergency department, where they can hope to be one of the lucky ones who get help.

The healthcare professionals working in our hospitals are amazing but they are not miracle workers and cannot magic up services that do not exist. We cannot continue to funnel people in crisis to emergency departments that are not equipped or resourced to help them. We must ensure hospitals like Tallaght hospital have the appropriate complement of specialist professionals. We must ring-fence investment in mental health crisis assessment and intervention services. Particular attention must be paid to developing an integrated crisis response pathway for children and young people experiencing a mental health crisis. Surely people in the darkest moments of their life deserve a calm, safe and professionally staffed environment. Is it too much to ask for dedicated emergency mental health services, 24-7 crisis teams and local supports? We need them now, not in five or ten years.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank Deputy Clarke for tabling this motion and all the speakers, including the Government speakers, who contributed to the debate on this very sensitive subject. I thank the Mental Health Commission for its work.

I welcome the opportunity to again address the House on the topic of mental health services, having first done so back in 2016. I am sad that there has been very little change in the ten years since. We tell those suffering with their mental health to seek help but that help is not always there. I know this myself. Colleagues may know that I lost two brothers to suicide. It has been a while and I still do not know how my mam, brothers and sisters deal with it. That pain is always there but nobody talks about it.

Many emergency departments do not currently have suicide crisis assessment nurses, as several speakers have noted. I want to be clear that I do not blame the staff, who spend years training for this work. They have been totally let down by the system and by the Government. It is a system that undervalues them, overworks them and does not listen to them. That has been going on for years. I spoke about it ten years ago.

In the brief time remaining, I will talk about the people who are left behind after a loved one's suicide. It is absolutely harrowing. The Government is not opposing the Bill but I will give the Minister of State a very quick synopsis in the 26 seconds I have. When my brothers died, the coroner's reports were crap, the HSE service was crap and how everybody dealt with death was crap. An Garda Síochána and all the emergency services were amazing, in fairness, but we never got counselling. We have moved on from that but the point I am making is that I do not want to be here in another ten years repeating myself. We do not want to have to keep talking about this. We need to improve the services and we must do it now.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: My home county of Wexford has been left behind in many facets in the past two decades, especially when it comes to mental health services.

As far back as 2009 or 2010, St. Senan's Hospital was no longer permitted to take in new acute mental health patients, which immediately resulted in the closure of ten mental health acute beds. Mary Harney was the Minister for health at the time and ten new acute mental health beds were promised in the five-year plan, A Vision for Change. They were to be located in Wexford General Hospital as a new acute mental health unit. Some 16 years later we are still waiting on that broken promise. County Wexford still does not have a dedicated, 24-7 acute adult inpatient unit despite a population of almost 180,000 citizens.

There are currently 1,400 children in the Wexford-Wicklow area waiting to be seen by CAMHS. What is even more disturbing is they are waiting over 52 weeks for their first appointment. The Minister of State knows, and indeed everybody knows, that emergency departments are not a fit place for people experiencing emergency mental health problems, especially people who may have suicidal tendencies. The least that should happen is that every model 3 and model 4 hospital must have a separate emergency mental health room with appropriate specialist professionals. Investment in mental health crisis assessment and intervention must be copper-fastened and ring-fenced. Again, I ask for a commitment to a 24-7 acute mental hospital adult unit in Wexford and for the ten-bed unit promised by consecutive governments since 2010 be facilitated in Wexford General Hospital.

I welcome that the Government is not opposing the motion.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I welcome that the Government is not opposing the motion but the Minister of State and her colleagues need to act, and act much more quickly than they have to date. At the current rate it will be the mid-2030s by the time we reach the target under Sláintecare. People in crisis cannot wait that long. We are going to lose people. People are going to lose quality of life between now and then. I have heard the lack of service provision being described as "gaps" throughout this debate but these are not gaps but black holes of absolute service deprivation. In some areas services simply do not exist. A "gap" gives an indication this is something that is easily fixed but it is not as there is nothing there to link up in some areas and it is grossly unfair. We cannot keep sending people to emergency departments and calling that care because it is not. Those people should never be in emergency departments and would not need to be there if the proper structures were in place in the community, if we had suicide crisis assessment nurses and ring-fenced investment and if we as a State examined every possible potential specialist and activated each and every one of them, from our community therapists to our psychologists, our psychiatrists and our wonderful staff who are already in the mental health services. Each and every one of them needs to be activated.

The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, spoke earlier about the suicide rates and four in five suicides being men. I do not believe in pitting one area of need against another. I do not believe in pitting one geographic area against another. However, when we speak of suicide and of mental health there is a group of people we do not recognise enough and they are the people who make the badges. It is the people who are not charities, are not NGOs and are not linked in formally with any structure of the State. I am going to be parochial here, which I very rarely do in the House, but I want to acknowledge on the issue of men's mental health Blue Balls Ireland, Blue Balls Midlands, Blue Balls Bull Wall and the newly-formed Blue Balls Wicklow. They do tremendous work and they are community-driven and grassroots-led.

One thing has been very clear across every contribution this evening, which is that the current system is not working, that it is failing people in need and that it is failing the people who work in the services as well. I ask the Minister of State to act on this motion rather than just not opposing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Courts Service

141. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he proposes to introduce new legislation in relation to the interpretation and translation in legal proceedings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6115/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: Many people will be surprised to learn that there is no set quality or standard in respect to interpretation and translation in legal proceedings in this State. Many would argue it is undermining our criminal justice system. Is it the Minister's intention to bring forward legislation or regulations on the use of language interpreters in court?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Carthy for his question. It is probably motivated by the "First Conviction" documentary that was on RTÉ in November of last year. It highlighted a conviction that was overturned by the Court of Appeal back in November 2021 on the grounds that court thought the interpretation services that were provided to the accused were unsatisfactory. I think the Court of Appeal judgment referred to very serious inaccuracies in the translation. The Deputy will be aware we have legislation in place to govern the quality of translation in our courts. It is set out in SI 565 of 2013 on interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings. It transposes EU Directive No. 64 of 2010. It says that a person who appears in a criminal court "shall have the right to the assistance, at no cost, of an interpreter as set out in these Regulations". It also sets out provisions in respect of the quality of interpretation. If the quality is not sufficient, obviously the court can direct that the interpreter be replaced. That is given practical effect in our courts by the Courts Service entering into a contract with an entity or entities that provide those translation services. I am satisfied that in the vast majority of cases the quality of the translation services provided is sufficient and professional. What was surprising in the particular case that was overturned on appeal is the fact the language in the court was French, rather than something more exotic. When accused people are before the courts they will have their own legal representation and if there is any issue in respect of the quality of translation services then, as the regulation, provides, they can be set aside.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister referenced a 2021 case. The Court of Appeal found "serious, and potentially far-reaching, inaccuracies" in that case. The interpreter in that case had assisted in more than 240 other cases that had been before the courts. After that judgment the interpreter continued to work in that role for another 40 cases. I find it hard to believe the Minister does not accept this case highlights that having no regulation - no competency tests - in respect of interpretation can potentially undermine our justice system. It is not just about the right to a fair trial and to have an interpreter, which is important, but it is also about the very real potential that a failing in this regard could result in an actual criminal managing to overturn a conviction. In a note from the Courts Service to the justice committee on this issue, the head of that service stated the court or any party to the case can request that the interpreter be replaced, but does the Minister accept the problem is that the person before the courts or their representative might not be in a position to identify the problem with the interpretation

they are receiving? I take it the Minister is saying he has full confidence in the system as it stands.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Every day of the week there are a series of cases going on in the Central Criminal Court and in the circuit criminal court for which translation services are required. That is part of the consequence of having a multicultural society in which people from all backgrounds end up as witnesses or accused before the court. Any person who is accused of a criminal offence and who needs the services of a translator will have their own legal solicitor and counsel representing them. I suggest to the Deputy that it will become readily apparent if the translation services being provided are not adequate. What is surprising is that it took the Court of Appeal to intervene in this particular case. However, if there were further issues and ongoing issues with translation services I would expect to see a whole series of convictions being quashed or translators being set aside by the court, but that is not happening.

This was a serious matter, but it was an isolated example and there are measures and protections in place to deal with poor quality in translation services.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is the Minister seriously saying he will wait until there is a series of overturned convictions before he acts on what is clearly a gaping problem? He is right that the State pays a significant amount to companies under contracts for translation services, but the translators, it has to be said, are fairly poorly paid.

I have to ask the Minister what checks are in place, through the Courts Service or An Garda Síochána, to ensure interpreting is of a good standard. Are there digital audio or video recordings? Are they checked independently? Best practice across the world, including in our nearest neighbours' country, is that regulations that can be upheld have been put in place. The Association of Translators and Interpreters Ireland has repeatedly called for the regulation of court interpreters in Ireland. It has argued that the current unregulated system risks miscarriages of justice, violates the right of defendants to a fair trial and creates a potential scenario where people who are guilty of offences can find a route to being released on a technicality. Therefore, I have to ask again. Will the Minister ensure we put in place a system that can have public confidence?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The public can have full confidence in this. What happens in practice is that the Courts Service enters a contract with translation providers, those being, companies that provide translation services. A fundamental requirement of that contract is that the contracted company must ensure interpreters possess the qualifications and competence appropriate to the tasks for which they are employed. The contract agreed under the central procurement framework sets the standards for interpreters supplied to the Courts Service. There are procedures in place to ensure the quality of the interpreters and translators being provided is adequate. In the unusual situation that does not happen, it can be, and generally is, readily apparent in a court room. If it happened in the Dáil and translation or interpretation services were being provided, the individual would be aware that the communication was not being provided adequately. There are mechanisms for checking this-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: What are the mechanisms?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----but this is not an issue in terms of undermining public confidence in the criminal justice system. It is a confident system.

Question No. 142 taken with Written Answers.

Language Schools

143. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of English language schools that were subject to inspection by immigration officials in each of the past five years, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6116/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): The programme for Government contains a commitment to publish a national migration and integration strategy detailing how the Government intends to meet the demands and opportunities facing Irish society in the coming years. The Department is currently working with other Departments to develop this strategy. As part of this strategic approach, I am reviewing the area of student permissions, including with regard to English language students.

All education providers are subject to unannounced inspections, online monitoring or random spot-checks to ensure their compliance with the interim list of eligible programmes, ILEP. This includes the maintenance of records and reports. All education providers listed on the ILEP must have clear systems in place for the recording of attendance and must clearly outline the rules on punctuality and the related penalties. Such records may be requested by the immigration service at any time and failure to provide them can result in the removal of a provider from the ILEP system.

The number of English language schools that potentially could have been subject to physical inspections in 2025 was 86. The number of in-person inspections carried out by my Department in 2025 was four. In 2024, there were two inspections; in 2023, there were three inspections; in 2022, there were two inspections; in 2021, which was a Covid-19 year, there were no inspections; and in 2020, there were seven inspections. It was necessary to halt inspections during the pandemic due to the public health restrictions. However, monitoring activities still continued, involving routine or specific requests for records and information relating to compliance with requirements and sector-wide surveys. Furthermore, up to and including 2024, the Garda National Immigration Bureau, GNIB, carried out further inspections for counties within their remit before the transfer of registration functions to my Department

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister of State's colleague, the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy James Lawless, told a media outlet at the end of last month that some English language schools were acting as tick-box exercises to allow people to get work permits. Is that an assertion the Minister of State agrees with? On what basis has that assertion been made?

If other Ministers have been making similar assertions and that were the view of the Government, it would be incomprehensible that the Minister of State would stand over there being four inspections in a year. It is clear, based on the level of inspection of language schools,

that it is nowhere near the number people would expect if the issue were as serious, or the Government were taking the issue as seriously, as suggested.

Have any education providers, as a result of inspections, been removed from the ILEP for failing to comply with immigration requirements?

Deputy Colm Brophy: In relation to students coming to the country to study, whether in the university sector or English language sector, it is my view and that of the Government that we want to have a high-quality, professional system for education. We want to see the best academic institutions providing a top-quality service, whether in English language or other areas of education.

The purpose of coming to Ireland to engage in study should be that. It should not be for work or any other purpose. The majority of students who come here want to do that. There is an attraction - and it needs to be examined - in the availability of employment, which is 20 hours during term time and 40 hours outside term time, and we will keep it under constant review. However, the focus has to be that they are here to study. That has to be the primary driver of the visa being granted.

On the Deputy's specific question about whether schools were removed from the ILEP system, my understanding is that the majority of schools, when a problem is brought to their attention, rectify it. Therefore, it is not necessary to remove the course from the ILEP system.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On one hand, the Government says English language schools are a tick-box exercise to allow people to get work permits. The Minister of State has indicated this evening that a number of people are securing stamp 2 visas, which are in effect precarious work visas. I think the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has confirmed that. However, levels of inspections are minimal and no school has been closed as a result of those assertions. The ESRI Asylum and Migration Overview 2024 that I mentioned was published just in December. It highlighted the example of Brazilian migration to Ireland in a study that illustrated the precarity and exploitation of Brazilians working in Ireland on stamp 2 visas. The author of that study argued that the stamp 2 visa, though a study visa in name, acted as a precarious work visa as well. When will the Government stop talking about this and what will it do about it?

Deputy Colm Brophy: The situation, as I outlined already, is straightforward. People come here to study. They want to study. In facilitating them studying, we also have to look at whether there should be, as there currently is, an option for them to avail of work. It enables them to participate in their studies. How that is managed is important. I would not be in favour of a process where people were effectively working on the side. It has to be the opposite.

I want to see structures in place that ensure that, when students come to this country, their primary purpose in coming is to engage in academic activity or study, be that in the area of English language or one of the various areas of further education. As to whether that should be facilitated by the ability they have at the moment to work for 20 hours per week, I do not think that is precarious working. It is facilitating students to engage in their studies. However, it is equally important that the institutions know and are clearly aware of the fact - the Department conveys this to them all the time - that they must enforce the rules around their

students attending their courses and engaging in their studies. That is at the heart of what they are supposed to be doing as academic institutions.

Crime Prevention

144. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will report on his engagements in relation to organised crime activities in Limerick; the initiatives being undertaken by his Department to ensure public safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6117/26]

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Minister should be aware that criminal feuding in parts of Limerick in recent weeks has seen an escalation in violence. In recent weeks, this violence has escalated in dramatic proportions, particularly in Ballinacurra Weston and surrounding areas. For fear of criminal retaliation, much of this violence has gone unreported. However, among the most recent incidents, there have been gun and arson attacks on homes and cars, assaults on people in the area and threats of violence against and intimidation of others.

I am extremely concerned for the residents of the area. Many will recall the violent criminality that plagued Limerick in the early 2000s. Without robust intervention, I fear we are not far from returning to those very dark days.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): Targeting the work of organised crime groups who inflict intimidation and violence on families and communities across Limerick and Ireland is a top priority for our Department and the Government.

Since my appointment, I have met with the gardaí in Limerick and I know they, along with their colleagues in Garda national units, are committed to targeting organised criminal groups and individuals involved in the sale and supply of illegal drugs. They are pursuing charges against people suspected of involvement in organised crime and have successfully secured convictions in the courts against organised criminals.

The Gardaí has advised the Government it is carrying out a range of both high-visibility and covert operations on an ongoing basis to support public safety in Limerick. Garda activities in Limerick include separate ongoing operations targeting money laundering activities by organised criminals involved in the drug trade, burglary, disrupting drug dealing networks and providing a daily proactive policing presence in areas affected by serious criminality in Limerick.

The Garda Commissioner assigned 30 new probationer gardaí to the Limerick division in 2025, the highest annual allocation since 2020. Limerick has also been one of three pilot sites for the deployment of body-worn cameras, which enable gardaí to record incidents and have been found to support deterrence of criminal activity.

We are also taking a range of other measures to tackle organised crime more broadly, including increasing to life in prison the maximum sentence for conspiracy to murder to tackle those who direct gangland and drug-related crime. We are enacting new laws that will criminalise the grooming of children into a life of crime. We have new laws to provide for the

use of facial recognition technology in the investigation of certain drug offences, and legislation to reduce the time that assets must be confiscated by the Criminal Assets Bureau before disposal.

It is also important to acknowledge that community safety is not just a matter for An Garda Síochána. As the Deputy knows, we are rolling out the community safety partnerships, which are the successor to the joint policing committees. The delay in rolling out the Limerick one is with the local authority.

I also want to mention that, in Limerick, which Deputy Quinlivan is well aware of, there is the work by the CAST team, which is led by Superintendent Andrew Lacey, which is doing fantastic work with vulnerable people and people with mental health challenges. That brings together both the HSE and other agencies to deal with those cases.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I spoke on the CAST teams earlier. I have also been in contact with stakeholders in the community and I assure the Minister of State the concerns I raised with him today are echoed by most people in the community. Frustrations are building and many feel the Garda response has not been adequate enough against these criminals. Having said that, I believe the gardaí in Limerick are doing the job in some of the most challenging of circumstances, and more supports and resources are needed for them.

I recently spoke at length to people with first-hand and direct knowledge of this feud. They are good people who have given so much good to the community. They noted families are sleeping in shifts, whereby some sleep while others guard the front door and monitor CCTV cameras. They do so due to the threat of petrol bombs or worse being fired or lobbed at their homes. This is no way for anybody to live. I have also been contacted confidentially by several local parents who are not letting their children go to school because they are worried they may be injured, beaten up or whatever on the way to school.

The violence, drug dealing and organised crime is not exclusive to this part of the city but we are seeing a pattern in Limerick. It is a pattern that sees gardaí intensifying their efforts in one area, leading to re-emerging criminal elements in other parts of the city. For instance, when we focus on Ballinacurra, Weston, People's Park, St. Mary's Park and Garryowen, they will have zero Garda presence.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is important to put on the record and inform the Deputy's constituents and my own in Limerick that, as of 30 November 2025, the most recent information available is there are 607 gardaí assigned to the Limerick division, which is a net increase of 25 since the beginning of last year and an increase of 53, which is about 10%, since 2015. As the Deputy knows, the Garda Commissioner assigned 30 probationer gardaí to Limerick during 2025, which is the highest annual allocation since 2020. There are 35 gardaí assigned to the Garda roads policing unit, an increase of five since the start of last year, and there are 32 designated community gardaí, an increase of two since the start of last year. Additionally, we have 71 Garda civilian staff assigned to the Limerick division, which is freeing up a huge amount of time and resources of sworn gardaí to be devoted to front-line policing.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I have been asked by the community to specifically ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to visit the area and to talk to the local chief superintendent and community leaders. We are seriously concerned about what is going on in the area and I do not think anybody is grasping the severity of what we are worried about.

The Garda knows exactly who is involved and who is gaining from this misery. I appreciate that the gathering of information and investigations need to be thorough, but the community must see a robust response. Without one, I fear we are seeing escalation and a deep frustration within the community and, unfortunately, we might see the loss of life.

We in Limerick have had some challenges with criminality in a small minority of areas that can be fixed. These are areas with good people and are communities which utterly despise the organised crime gangs and their criminality. They just want to get on with and live their lives. The tentacles of criminality spread to all the communities, from urban to rural and urban centres to suburban towns. As I said earlier, our gardaí do a difficult job and crucial work every day as they serve and protect communities, and they have my full support in doing that.

We have seen from previous operations, such as Operation Copóg, that when the resources and funding are put into Limerick and when the resources are put in to the Garda and it is supported properly, they work well in combating the type of organised activity I have been talking about and, more important, the force has the support of the community. I ask the Minister to visit the area and get involved.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have been there.

Deputy Niall Collins: As the Minister has just said, he has been to and is no stranger to Limerick. I outline to the Deputy the huge increase in numbers of personnel to Limerick. There will be further allocations around the country next week. There will be a significant allocation of new probationer gardaí which I think the Deputy will welcome, when we have that officially next week.

I want to detail to the Deputy and the people of Limerick - the Deputy's constituents and mine - the number of Garda operations ongoing in Limerick at present, because it is important. First, Operation TARA is a dedicated local drugs unit which continues to detect and investigate drug trafficking offences. Provisional figures for 2025 indicate a 13% increase in detections for possession of controlled drugs for sale. There is also Operation Coronation, which is ongoing in the Limerick division and focuses on the investigation and prosecution of money laundering offences. We have Operation Gealbhan which is on the south side of Limerick city and provides an increased Garda presence through covert and overt patrolling to prevent and detect incidents of serious criminality. We have Operation Silverside, which commenced in January 2023 and focuses on the activities of persons based in the west Limerick area involved in organised criminality on the Continent of Europe and beyond. Finally, we have Operation Thor which is aimed at targeting organised crime gangs and repeat offenders in the Limerick division through co-ordinated crime prevention and enforcement activity. The 2025 figures indicate a 38% reduction in burglaries in Limerick. The Deputy can see there is a lot of positive outcomes happening in policing in Limerick. I thank him for raising all those issues and giving us the opportunity to put it on the record.

Legislative Measures

145. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he plans to introduce legislation to regulate nitrous oxide. [6635/26]

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Does the Minister have any plans to introduce legislation to regulate nitrous oxide and other inhalants? As we know, those who use nitrous oxide and other inhalants as a drug are putting themselves at serious risk. Last week, Private Members' time was used to discuss nitrous oxide in particular, and the Department indicated it required time to assess the issues. It is important, however, that greater action is taken to regulate the sale of nitrous oxide and other readily available inhalants. The sale of nitrous oxide for human consumption is a criminal offence but people are still getting their hands on it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. Before I talk about legislation, I will repeat something he said there. Taking nitrous oxide is playing Russian roulette with your health. We know from what the HSE and the hospitals have said, there are many incidents of people suffering severe illnesses and damage to their health as a result of taking nitrous oxide. It can wreak severe neurological damage on an individual. It can damage your reproductive health and, really, you are playing Russian roulette if you take it.

As regards legislation, as the Deputy will be aware, the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010 criminalises the sale of nitrous oxide for human consumption.

Nitrous oxide can also, however, be used for legitimate purposes. It is sometimes used by dentists and in the catering profession. The Deputy will also be aware that section 74 of the Child Care Act 1991 provides for the offence of sale of certain substances, which includes the sale of substance to a child such as the type of substance we are talking about here. The Deputy is right about the Private Members' Bill introduced by Deputy Mark Ward last week. I welcome the fact that there has been a lot of public discussion in the intervening time, which is beneficial.

In considering legislation, I have to look at what impact any legislation proposed or introduced would have on the EU technical regulations information system, which requires that legislation or proposed legislative changes that can interfere with the sale of legitimate products and legitimate trade be notified to the EU in advance. That arises in the context of the prospective regulation about what is a lawful substance for certain purposes. I will certainly be keeping it under consideration. I am also aware that the Commission has published a draft amendment to the regulations in order to place restrictions on the marketing of dinitrogen oxide, which is the technical name for it. I am not closing my mind to legislation but I have to go down these avenues before I make a final decision.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: My question is probably wider than just the issue of nitrous oxide. It also concerns readily available inhalants like aerosols that we would all use, including deodorants. Last week at the Oireachtas Committee on Drugs Use, we heard from a broken-hearted mother and father who had lost their teenage son as a result of him having inhaled an aerosol. It is every parent's worst nightmare to lose their child. We have to look at all of these inhalants in the round. We cannot afford to sit around. We have to look at regulating this whole area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy can appreciate the difficulties that arise when we are dealing with something that is lawful, such as aerosol or spray deodorants. Obviously, we cannot ban them, but the Deputy is trying to put forward proposals that could facilitate their regulation. Even before we go down the avenue of starting to look at legislation, the most important thing we can do is to educate people and to warn young people about the dangers associated with nitrous oxide or the aerosol narrative that the Deputy just cited. It can have dire consequences on an individual's health. What nitrous oxide in fact does is cut off the oxygen supply to the brain. If people were aware of that and the neurological consequences of it, I do not think they would be engaging in the use of nitrous oxide to the extent they are now. I am also pleased to tell the Deputy that between 2020 and November 2025, the Revenue Commissioners seized approximately 250,000 kg of nitrous oxide canisters, so there is a recognition that this is being imported for purposes other than legitimate purposes.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I appreciate that. I genuinely feel that the whole education side of it is really important, as well as regulation. It has to be a two-pronged approach.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy that there certainly needs to be a two-pronged approach. We need to warn people. Sometimes we look at the drugs issue very much in terms of what legislation can be introduced. However, it is really about warning people of the dangers associated with taking drugs. Everyone in this House has seen terrible outcomes from people taking drugs. They are referred to as recreational drugs but there is no recreation associated with them. They ruin young people's lives and the people who are distributing and selling these drugs really need to be dealt with severely because they are abusing our younger population and need to be dealt with very seriously.

I will keep an open mind in respect of it. I commended Deputy Mark Ward last week on bringing forward the Private Members' Bill. The reason I could not just let it go through is that I have to see what is happening in Europe on the matter. I also have to see whether this would infringe on trade in the area of legitimate purposes for nitrous oxide, whether that is in the catering area, dentistry or other legitimate purposes. If, having looked at what is happening in Europe, I think there is a necessity for regulation here, I will propose it.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence

146. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the measures his Department will take to address and reduce domestic violence, including prevention initiatives, supports for victims, improvements in interagency co-operation; the actions being taken to strengthen law enforcement responses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5985/26]

Deputy Paul Lawless: Domestic violence and abuse is a major issue and a scourge on so many households across this country. What is the Department doing to reduce domestic violence in terms of prevention initiatives, supports for victims and reform of the judicial system in light of the recent case of Margaret Loftus in Mayo?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a priority for the Government and for me. If the Deputy looks at the recent budget allocation and the recent establishment of Cuan, he will see that the Government has made a very specific decision that it wants a separate statutory agency to deal with this issue. We are putting in funding of €80 million in respect to this issue, which shows an increased investment of €12 million year on year, which is a sign of the Government's financial commitment.

Similarly, we have an implementation plan for the zero tolerance strategy. That is an appropriate name for the strategy we want to adopt in respect of domestic violence. Sometimes the term "zero tolerance" is used in a general sense. It is absolutely appropriate when it comes to combating domestic violence.

The Deputy asked what is being done. A number of legislative proposals are being brought forward, such as the sexual offences Bill, which was recently considered by the justice committee by way of pre-legislative scrutiny. I have introduced a proposal that would allow perpetrators of domestic violence to be included on a new register of domestic violence. A miscellaneous provisions Bill, which came before the Dáil last week, seeks to restrict the disclosure of counselling records in sexual offence trials. As is apparent from the sexual offences Bill, I am also seeking to reform the sexual consent laws, while the miscellaneous provisions Bill contains a provision seeking to criminalise the offering or advertising of rent in exchange for sex. I am also working on guardianship rights.

The Deputy mentioned a particular case in the context of what is being done in the courts system. A lot is being done there. The Family Courts Act was enacted in 2024. I have a plan in place for the implementation of that policy so that family law courts will operate on a consistent and expert basis throughout the country. Obviously, domestic violence is a criminal offence. It is not something to be associated with family law, but we want greater speed in our family law system to facilitate all those individuals.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The case of Margaret Loftus exposes very deep structural problems in An Garda Síochána but also in the judicial system. Her story shows how a victim has been failed, in the first instance by An Garda Síochána and then by the judicial system with regard to how slow and opaque it has been and how that system was weaponised, particularly with regard to the disclosure that was consistently sought by the perpetrator. She stated recently that the judicial system was as traumatising as the abuse itself. Margaret endured over 50 court hearings before a plea was eventually offered - a process that was incredibly difficult for her, her family and her ability to move forward. It is crucial that the process be expedited in these cases to ensure that a victim can begin to live again and move on with their lives.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Last week, I commended Margaret Loftus. I do not know if it was to the Deputy but I certainly commended her in the House to a number of other Deputies. I commend her bravery and her perseverance. Ultimately, she did get the conviction she sought. A court held in her favour and recognised that she had been a victim of an assault and a judgment was delivered in that regard.

The Deputy spoke about issues in respect of An Garda Síochána. I have to mention that Margaret Loftus commended Commissioner Justin Kelly on the role he played in the prosecution and how seriously it was taken when he got involved.

I also understand that the husband in question was suspended from An Garda Síochána in 2018. The Garda, therefore, did respond to it. I want to ensure that the criminal justice system, whilst remaining fair, is sped up as much as possible. In order to achieve that, I am putting further resources into it. The number of judges on the Central Criminal Court has never been higher. We are going to create more posts for judges later this year. The more judges we have the more resources, and cases will be resolved and dealt with more quickly.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I very much welcome the movement in terms of more judges. That is crucially important. We also need to ensure there are statutory timelines for these cases. We cannot have a situation where a victim has to go through the courts for more than a decade. It is unacceptable. Domestic abuse is such a horrendous violation for any individual. We should restrict the use of disclosure orders in domestic abuse cases. There is movement on that Bill and we certainly welcome that. This case presents a particular issue in terms of potential abuse and the Department should seriously review it to ensure no victim is retraumatised in the manner Margaret Loftus was.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I cannot formulate a policy based on one case. However, the cases the Deputy gives to me and other cases that are reported on the system generally influence and guide policy in the area. Some cases will take time no matter what level of resources we have put into them. For example, historic sexual abuse cases are going to take time because the gardai have to go back and seek witnesses from many years ago so no matter what level of resources I put in and no matter how many judges are there to deal with cases on an expedited basis, some cases are going to take time. We all want to make sure the rights of victims are vindicated and protected and victims get justice. At the same time, as Minister for Justice, I have to ensure that the rights to a fair trial of people who are accused are similarly protected. We do not want to go so far that that important constitutional right is compromised. It is about getting the balance right, but I agree with the Deputy that we need to speed up the process.

An Garda Síochána

147. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration his plans to simplify the administrative burden placed on volunteers through Garda vetting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6085/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: The National Vetting Bureau and the Garda vetting Act have been in place for about 14 years. Has the Minister any plans to simplify the administrative burden placed on volunteers and employees through Garda vetting and the bureau itself? Will he make a statement on that given the length of time it has been in place?

Deputy Niall Collins: The primary purpose of vetting carried out by the National Vetting Bureau is to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. This requires a robust Garda vetting process that reassures the public, and in particular parents, that appropriate checks are

conducted on people who are seeking or taking positions of trust. The Government is aware that concerns have been raised regarding certain aspects of the vetting process, and we have listened carefully to the views of the sporting and voluntary sectors. In this regard, I am aware that aspects of the current voting system result in a highly segmented process. Furthermore, we believe that the vetting system should be updated to ensure vetting is portable.

Further to the work carried out by the Garda vetting review group, steps are being taken to implement a number of key changes to the vetting process that will ensure it remains robust and effective, while improving service to customers. In practice, and subject to general requirement that vetting be renewed every three years, this will mean that when a person is vetted for the work they do, will be doing or are likely to be involved in as part of their employment or volunteering within identified risk categories, further vetting will not be required if the person moves to another role within the same risk category. These changes will require amending legislation and updating technical systems to support the revised approach. The Government is working closely with An Garda Síochána to improve the vetting process, and we look forward to updating the House in due course on progress in this matter. Our aim is to ensure Garda vetting systems continue to be fit for purpose, robust and future-proofed while continuing to protect children and vulnerable adults. We are committed to proceeding with these changes to make the process more efficient for volunteers and organisations without compromising essential safeguards that protect those in our care.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I agree with him that the system was designed to protect young people and vulnerable adults and I appreciate that must be robust. However, as he has said, it has been segmented and we need a portable system. He mentioned that steps have to be taken. We produced a Bill in 2022 and we were told by the Minister standing in at the time that a body had been investigating the practicalities for some time. We all know that people are getting vetted three, four, five, maybe even six times in the one year for their employment, the Teaching Council or the rowing, football or soccer club. All of this has to be done, to use the Minister of State's word, in a "segmented" way. The Government has known about this for years now. It knows the administrative burden is far too much. It can be made simpler. What I want to know, and the Minister will forgive me for asking the question, is, given it has known about it for so long: when is this legislation going to be produced?

Deputy Niall Collins: There are changes that will be made to resolve the Deputy's concerns and ours. We have listened to the views that have been carefully expressed, we have met directly with the Sports Federation of Ireland on the matter, and our Department has also received correspondence from a range of voluntary organisations informing us of their views. We are aware that concerns have been raised as to the reliability of a portability approach and in this regard we note that where a teacher is vetted, the Teaching Council permits him or her to move from one school to another without revetting. All that is required is that a teacher is registered to retest every three years on a scheduled basis. Consequently, if this system of portability is safe for engagement with our schoolchildren, we believe it will also be safe for broader application. Drawing on the work of the vetting review group, we are committed to ensuring the vetting process is administratively proportionate while remaining robust and fully focused on the core purpose of protecting children and vulnerable adults.

Deputy Pa Daly: What we proposed almost four years ago was that the chief bureau officer would establish what we call a register of general consents. The Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, gave great assistance so that people would remain on the register for three years, give their permission and, under section 6, give a general consent to the disclosure of vetting information to any organisation that might require it. At the time, the Minister said the Department must investigate any revetting impact upon constitutional rights, employment law and the Unfair Dismissals Act 1977. That is all fine. However, we have a situation with junior parkruns for example, which take place all over the country, where volunteers stand in and keep an eye on the route to make sure children run around in the correct way. There is a danger that this may be cancelled because of an ultra-conservative approach being taken where even someone who stands there for 15 minutes on a Sunday morning would have to be Garda vetted. A register of general consent would avoid this, make it simpler and encourage people to volunteer because a lot of people are put off and groan when they hear they have to be revetted for the second, third or fourth time in a year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The problems that are caused by Garda vetting delays to community organisations, sports clubs and childcare services, among others, have been well set out by Deputy Daly. People will agree that the most bizarre revelation has been that Garda vetting is actually affecting the gardaí themselves. The Minister confirmed to me today that some Garda recruits who were due to attest from Templemore next week will not be able to even start work, because, bizarrely, their Garda vetting has not been completed yet. That is crazy.

The Minister said it is better to conduct the vetting in parallel to the training rather than delay someone starting. What happens if it turns out that somebody is going through training, having access to the Garda Training College and Garda stations and then ultimately fails the vetting process?

10 o'clock

I am told, for example, that a Garda trainee was actually sacked last week, just ten days before their graduation, because they failed vetting. I do not know how serious the issue was in that regard, but I ask the Minister of State to confirm whether that is true and whether he would agree it is very serious. More importantly, will he outline what the Government plans to do about it?

Deputy Niall Collins: In general terms and taking on board what Deputy Daly said about the multiplicity of factors, I want to speak about turnaround times. I am advised by the Garda National Vetting Bureau that the target turnaround time for organisations using the eVetting system is five to ten working days for over 85% of vetting applications received. I am informed that 85% of vetting applications are processed within nine working days, which is within the target turnaround time. There are a number of factors outside An Garda Síochána's control that can impact on the timeline for individual applications. These include, for example, where a person has lived overseas. In such cases, An Garda Síochána must contact law enforcement partners in the relevant countries to obtain information, and this takes additional time. Vetting is carried out by An Garda Síochána in accordance with the national vetting bureau Acts 2012 to 2016.

I beg the Chair's indulgence to reply to Deputy Carthy on trainees, which he raised. In general, all trainees are vetted in advance of entering Templemore. No candidate is allowed to enter the Garda College without a level of vetting that allows the Commissioner to be confident they are of good character. However, in recognition of the fact that the completion of the full vetting process before admission to training was delaying member recruitment inordinately, An Garda Síochána has introduced a resequencing of vetting. As Deputies are aware, this resequencing means that before a candidate can enter the college, they will have fully completed stage 1 and sometimes stage 2 of the three-stage process. The remaining stages are completed while they undergo training in Templemore and prior to their attestation as members of An Garda Síochána. No one is attested as a member of An Garda Síochána unless and until they have been fully vetted.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Was someone sacked just ten days before graduation?

Deputy Niall Collins: We do not have any knowledge of that, but if the Deputy wants to writes to us about it, we can look into it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): We can deal with that at another time.

Domestic Violence

148. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the current number of domestic violence refuge spaces within the State; and the number he intends to have in place by the end of 2026. [6174/26]

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question. Before giving the specifics, I will outline the method by which we organise refuge spaces and safe houses. It is through Cuan, collaborating with various stakeholders. The Deputy will be aware that Cuan collaborates with domestic violence services, approved housing bodies, the Department of housing and local authorities to facilitate local action and support service development and the delivery of safe accommodation and ancillary services.

Currently, the number of safe accommodation spaces nationwide, including refuges and safe homes, stands at 232. I am informed by Cuan that, in 2025, the number of domestic violence refuge units increased by 13 – four in Louth and nine in Dublin – bringing the total to 172. A further nine units are being developed in Dublin and are expected to be operational early this year. A 12-unit refuge located in the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown council area is scheduled to be completed and operational later this year. By the end of this year, we aim to increase the number of safe accommodation spaces, including refuges and safe homes, to 287. This will bring the total number of refuge units to 193 by the end of the year. Furthermore, Cuan is working towards having a minimum of 50 new refuge units under construction nationally across multiple sites in 2026.

Last year, the number of safe home units increased by eight, bringing total safe home capacity to 60. Cuan is working to increase that capacity to 94 this year. Therefore, a considerable amount of work has been done in respect of refuges and safe homes. Both are

important. While safe homes do not have the same level of protection and services as refuges, they remain extremely important in providing safe accommodation for women fleeing domestic violence.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In January 2022, the Minister's predecessor committed to doubling the number of domestic violence refuge spaces in the State by the end of that year. I acknowledge that the doubling of available spaces is significant. However, the number in question is only half the number mandated by the Istanbul Convention on the prevention of violence against women and girls. That said, the Government commitment was to increase the spaces in 2022 from 141 to 282. Will the Minister outline again how many additional spaces have actually been delivered since 2022? Did he say 287 were supposed to have been delivered in 2022? How many will be delivered this year?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am conscious of the Deputy's interest in refuges in Monaghan and Cavan. I was in Cavan–Monaghan recently. Progress is being made in respect of Monaghan and I had discussions with the local authority in Cavan.

On safe accommodation spaces nationwide, including refuges and safe homes, the number stands at 232. I realise the Deputy wants to focus on numbers but the most important thing is to ensure as broad a range of refuges and safe homes as possible throughout the country. Considerable progress is being made in respect of this. I hope that by the end of this year, we will have increased the number of refuges and safe homes to 287. There is a tendency among policymakers – I am not suggesting the Deputy is among them – when considering refuges to assume they are the answer. In the first instance, the person who should be leaving the home is the abuser, the person who has inflicted violence. Regrettably, we are now getting into a situation where it is assumed the victim is the one who has to leave.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister for the number he just referred to: 232. We have not even increased the number to 282, which we were supposed to do in 2022. It is four years on from the Government's announcement of zero tolerance of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Cavan and Monaghan remain without any refuge centres. As a member of Monaghan County Council from 2012, I was shouting about this, but we still do not have a centre. I realise the Minister has said it is not regarded as that important for perpetrators to leave their homes, but perpetrators are not leaving their homes. Therefore, where are affected women supposed to go? There is still no domestic refuge centre in Cavan or Monaghan. I know it is coming on board, but I have been listening to this for the past 12 years. When is it going to happen? It would be useful for the Minister to outline this. If he is going to events in Monaghan regarding a domestic abuse refuge, it would be good to let the TDs in the locality know about it. We are being kept in the dark and do not know when this domestic abuse refuge centre is coming on board. I was told at a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts that there would be one in Cavan and one in Monaghan.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank Deputy Bennett for raising the question and commend the Minister for his work in this area. It is a difficult area, most of all for the women dealing with issues.

I want to ask a question. I have heard from people working with women that Cuan seems in the main to work within a 12-week window. Many of the issues women are dealing with, including difficult situations at home, require more than 12 weeks to work out. I am familiar with a facility in Killester where women were for a year or more trying to resolve issues and getting the help they so badly needed. Could the Minister comment on the strategy of Cuan? How is it meant to work?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will deal with Deputy Ó Muirí's point in the first instance. I was out at Aoibhneas in his constituency, which is also that of Deputy Brabazon. Obviously, there are good refuges there.

The 12-week window is not a rule of Cuan. I have spoken to Cuan in respect of it. I have spoken to the service providers. They do not have a 12-week period during which you can stay for 12 weeks and you have to go afterwards. There is no strict rule in respect of that.

In regard to the number issues raised by Deputy Bennett, when I am talking about refuges I am not saying they are not important. We also need to realise that barring orders are still an option that is available and we should be seeing more of them so that the perpetrator gets out.

On the refuge provision in Cavan-Monaghan, the capital assistance scheme stage 1 application for a refuge site in Monaghan was approved by the Department of housing last October. Work is ongoing towards submitting a stage 2 application, which will include further detail and costing for the full extent of works. The capital assistance scheme, CAS, process takes on average 75 weeks, with construction typically taking 15 to 18 months. Safe Ireland is the lead approved housing body on this development. Safe Ireland has expressed its commitment to explore other options of accommodation in the area of Monaghan but there is progress being made in the constituency.

Family Reunification

149. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the total number of people who were granted permission to enter the State under the family reunification scheme, where the sponsor held refugee or subsidiary protection status, in 2025. [6121/26]

155. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he is concerned that family members of refugees will be endangered by his proposals to limit access to family reunification; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6019/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I ask the Minister to present to us the total number of people granted permission to enter the State under the family reunification scheme, where the sponsor held refugee or subsidiary protection status in 2025.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Gannon. I propose to take Questions Nos. 149 and 155 together.

The answer for 2025 is 669. The answer for 2024 was 979. Deputy Gannon has asked me questions in respect of refugee status applications for family protection. As he will be aware, there is another type of family reunification that arises as well. That is for individuals who have not been granted refugee status but are individuals who are here working. That is referred to as non-EEA family reunification. That process is not a statutory scheme. It is an administrative scheme that is run by my Department. Recently, I updated the rules in respect of that family reunification process as well. On the numbers for non-EEA, I think they were in the region of 18,000 in 2024 or 2025 - one or the other. There is also a third type of family reunification, which is in respect of people joining from EU countries who are permitted to be here to work.

The Deputy's question, I suspect, arises in the context of the proposals that have been announced by Government to deal with new family reunification rules in the International Protection Bill 2026, which will be introduced in the Dáil tomorrow. What guides the Government and me in regard to proposals in respect of family reunification is that at present, family reunification can be secured for a refugee the day after they are granted refugee status. When it comes to the assessment of the grant of family reunification, on the one hand we have to balance the rights of the individual refugee to seek family reunification but we also have to balance it with the rights and interests of the public with regard to the impact it may have on public well-being and the public purse. They are perfectly legitimate factors that have to be taken into account. It is necessarily the case that because somebody is coming through family reunification, the rules at present for refugees are that they do not have to show they are going to be able to support an individual they bring into the country as part of their family.

My view, and that of the Government, is that the same or similar rules should apply for those who can bring in family under non-EEA. If you want to bring a family member in, you really need to be able to show you can support that family member.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I am very familiar with the differences between the three schemes, which is why I very specifically framed my question in the context of the family reunification scheme under the refugee scheme. I am glad the Minister gave me an exact figure of 669 because I found it quite eye-opening when he was doing an interview with "RTÉ News: Six One" a couple of weeks ago when this scheme was announced. He was asked the exact same question and his answer, to give a definition, was that it was approximately 1,000. There is a big difference between approximately 1,000 and 669.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I was referring to 2024.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In fact, it is almost 50% of a difference.

I will go into the details of why family reunification is catered for under the Geneva Convention because it is very different. I could understand the logic if the Minister tells me that somebody comes here on a work visa and would need to be able to demonstrate. I can see that argument. I may not agree with it in its entirety but refugees have already gone through the system. They have proven their capacity to be eligible for refugee status and to have a family member here gives them the capacity to integrate, find work and be able to support. The three schemes are very different. They need to be seen that way.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: When I was asked that question on RTÉ, it was in the very early part of January and I was asked what the number was for last year. I thought that was a reference to 2024 and as I said to the Deputy, in 2024 it was 979. That is what I was referring to. In 2025, it was 669.

The Government is entitled to take into account the consequences and cost of family reunification for individuals who are coming here sponsored by refugees. I know it is a sensitive issue but it is hugely affected by the numbers of people in general seeking asylum in the country. Prior to Covid, as the Deputy will know, we had relatively small numbers seeking international protection. It was around 3,000 to 4,000 per year but in the years 2022 to 2025, inclusive, collectively we saw around 58,000 arrive seeking international protection. I have to be conscious of the fact that the numbers are rising very significantly and I think that has to guide the laws that Governments introduce.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Again, I am very specifically referring to the refugee family reunification scheme. We have a high bar in this country already to achieve refugee status. In order to achieve that, the person needs to demonstrate that they fled war, persecution or that their family is from a place where loss of life would have been a possibility or a direct threat to life. It is actually only 669 people and it is immediate spouse, your wife, your husband, your child or, in the case of a child that has come here, it is just their parent. There is already an 18-month wait for the family reunification scheme. If a child comes here unaccompanied at the age of 15 or 16, they would have to wait three years, so they have already timed out of the system.

I do not doubt that the Minister has a difficult job but for this particular policy change, I do not think it is reflective of a fair or just system. There is still time to change; I understand the Minister is bringing through amendments to the International Protection Bill. I would ask him that maybe we should just reflect on this particular scheme, taking all the others out and dealing with them individually. This one actually aids integration and helps the person who has already proven their status beyond a very high bar.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will go to the European Court of Human Rights. In its judgments it has consistently said that when it comes to family reunification, a member state is entitled to engage in a balancing act to ensure there is a fair balance between, on the one hand, the applicant's interest in being reunited with his family and, on the other, the interest of the community as a whole to control immigration with a view to protecting the economic well-being of the country, ensuring the effective integration of those granted protection and preserving social cohesion. That is a dictat that is used repeatedly by the European Court of Human Rights in challenges to family reunification.

In regard to family reunification as well, I have a breakdown here of the figures on the make-up of the family relationships for the numbers coming in. It is not just daughters, sons, husbands or mothers; it is also brothers and sisters.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I know what the refugee scheme is for.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is a broad collection of family members that come within the parameters of the definition. As the Deputy said, the legislation is going to be introduced. The family reunification issues will be considered on Committee Stage. I will keep an open mind in respect of it but I do think there will be changes, definitely. I will say that to the Deputy----

Deputy Gary Gannon: Absolutely, to that particular scheme.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----and if he puts forward amendments, I will give consideration to them.

Immigration Policy

150. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the position regarding the humanitarian admissions programme; if he will commit to accepting future applicants in the coming years under this scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5993/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. My question refers to the humanitarian admissions programme. The Minister will be aware that it is a very important programme. I wonder if he can make a statement on it and tell us whether new applications will be accepted in 2026 or how that scheme is going to progress into the future.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy. As he will be aware, the humanitarian admissions programme prioritises at-risk individuals, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, LGBTQ+ individuals, judiciary and journalists for admission to Ireland as programme refugees. This is managed within the remit of the Irish refugee protection programme in the Department. Over 700 people from Afghanistan have been admitted to Ireland under this programme since its inception in 2021.

Under the terms of the scheme the number of admissions available under the 2025 programme was set at 50 and the number of applications received exceeded that. Not all applications therefore were successful. The 2025 programme is now complete and arrangements are being made for Department officials to facilitate the arrivals of the remaining successful applicants. All applications submitted to the Department for consideration under the programme were subject to review by officials to ensure a fair process. The Department has committed to admitting 50 applicants under humanitarian admissions for both 2026 and 2027. Further information on the programme for 2026 will be made available shortly.

Deputy Barry Ward: I hear what the Minister of State is saying. I am not entirely clear on why there is a limit of 50 because the people we are talking about here particularly need our support. For example, two Afghan women who are living in Ireland have spoken to me about this. They still have family stuck in Afghanistan. Their families are at risk because they have left and their families are necessarily a target then for the Taliban. We all know what the Taliban is capable of. We all know the abuse that women, in particular, suffer at the hands of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

I know there is always pressure on resources in this regard but these are people who particularly deserve our support and our shelter and the opportunity to come here and live a life that they cannot live in their home country. They are often very highly skilled, very highly educated people. They can contribute in our community as well. Is there a reason that 50 has been picked? I am assuming it is 50 in 2026 and 50 in 2027. Is there a reason that number has been picked and can it be expanded?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I fully understand and accept what the Deputy is saying about the situations people find themselves in. There is no question that I, and the people who are directly on the coalface of operating this scheme, really understand the implications of somebody being accepted or not accepted into the programme. However, as I outlined to the Deputy, the programme is a very specific programme in how it actually handles people. Someone who comes in under the programme is provided with a very comprehensive wraparound range of services, which includes everything from English-language provision to community supports and structures. This enables those who arrive under the programme to integrate into Ireland very quickly and fully. It is because of that and because of the capacity constraints within the ability to deliver that programme that we believe setting the figure at 50 on an incremental basis per year is the best way to ensure not only that we are bringing people in, which we want to do, but also that we are delivering fully to them the most comprehensive service as part of the programme when they arrive.

Deputy Barry Ward: I appreciate that and I understand where the Minister of State is coming from. I do not know if it is possible to say what the cost per member of that programme is, or if it has been broken down. In the context of their families, is there room to identify a person who has come here? In the case of Afghanistan, for example, it tends to be women; often very highly qualified women such as women journalists, women judges and women lawyers who come here and their families remain targets in Afghanistan. I appreciate what the Minister of State said about resources. Of course we have to keep an eye on that but in the circumstances of these people, can we identify what the per-person cost is and whether that cost is lesser for the members of their family who might want to come here? I have been in touch with lots of people in my constituency who have sheltered people and have agreed to house them when they are here. If there can be an alleviation to the cost to the taxpayer through people like that, is the Department open to this as something that could allow us to bring more people in under the programme?

Deputy Colm Brophy: As the Deputy knows, we had an original programme in relation to Afghanistan. We have moved to this particular model for the reasons I outlined to the Deputy in my earlier contributions. I think it is important, having moved to that model and having moved to an assessment system which enables what we believe to be the fairest and most accurate assessment of who can come and who can qualify for it, that we continue with that model for the moment. I take on board what the Deputy is saying about the impact this has on extended families. Unfortunately this is a scheme for which so many people are deserving. In this country we operate it in conjunction with other countries around the world which have their own schemes in place to give that particular refugee status to people who are a very vulnerable cohort. For the moment I am happy that the scheme is operating in the most fair

and effective way we can do it. I am always open to look at new ideas and new processes to ensure that in the future it continues to operate in that manner.

Question No. 151 taken with Written Answers.

Stardust Fire

152. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the current stage reached in the assessment of phase 2 of the Stardust redress scheme relating to survivors of the fire; the remaining steps required to complete that assessment; the indicative timeline for bringing proposals to the Government for consideration; the nature of the redress proposals under development, including the reference points being used; the expected timeline for the commencement of payments following Government approval; the engagement undertaken to date with survivors and their representatives, including a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6209/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Anocht, ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire on phase 2 of the Stardust redress scheme for survivors. This is an ongoing saga between the Department of justice and survivors who have waited more than 40 years for justice. Will the Minister please outline the current stage of the phase 2 assessment, the remaining steps, when the proposal will go to Cabinet and what form of redress the survivors can expect? When will the payments begin?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am very conscious, and the Deputy will be very conscious, that we are approaching the 45th anniversary of the Stardust tragedy. It was an extraordinarily traumatic event for the people in the Deputy's constituency. He was not alive at the time but it was an extraordinarily traumatic event. The previous Government did a very good job in seeking to resolve and to address the ongoing pain that had existed for 40 years. There was the State apology. In 2024, as the Deputy will be aware, the Government approved a two-phase approach to redress arrangements. Phase 1 has been completed. It was in respect of the individuals who died in the Stardust and there was an *ex gratia* redress scheme for the families of the 48 victims of the fire. That has concluded.

The next phase seeks to deal with the individuals who were in the fire and who were injured. We have some data on that because of the Stardust Victims Compensation Tribunal, which was established in 1985. We know the number of persons who went to that tribunal. It is in the region of 825. I am finalising proposals in the Department in respect of phase 2. In preparing proposals for my consideration and final approval, the guiding principles that informed phase 1 are just as important for phase 2. Given the passage of time, it is of the utmost importance that in developing an approach, we prevent further trauma for applicants and minimise any pain they may suffer from it.

I do not want this to be a litigious process. I do not want it to place any extra burden on the individuals involved. I want a simple scheme whereby the people who were in the fire on the night and were injured can receive a payment in recognition of the fact that this process has dragged on for so long. It will not be a recompensation payment for the injuries they suffered

- that was already effected by the tribunal – but it is a payment in giving recognition for what has happened in recent years.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome phase 1 and the work done by the previous Government. It is now on to this Government and the Minister's Department. The core issue is that the commitment made to survivors has not been honoured, in their opinion. I know from speaking to some of the survivors in my constituency that people were told that phase 2 was progressing and that proposals were imminent. However, the engagement has not been continuing with the solicitors involved. Can the Minister explain exactly what is delaying the process? Is it legal advice or costings, is it internal departmental approvals, or is it a decision we need to push for? Why is the Department not communicating with the solicitors? The lack of engagement is deeply concerning. I visited some of the houses, including Antoinette Keegan's house. She welcomed me in. I know that losing her family members still haunts her today. It is something she has fought for her whole life. Will the Minister give a commitment that there will be engagement with the survivors' legal team?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I give the Deputy a commitment that I am going to bring proposals to the Government in the near future. I am finalising them within the Department. I want to get them right. Obviously I want to discuss them with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in advance of bringing them to the Government. That is something I will do in the next short period of time. I do not want to give the Deputy a date and then it is not satisfied. This is not a case of phase 2 being forgotten about; that is not the issue. However, one thing I do not want to happen is for phase 2 to turn into a litigious process that requires the presence of solicitors. I want a system whereby those who were injured can apply for what will be an agreed amount of recognition payment that the State will pay in respect of what happened and the delay in establishing the truth of what occurred in the Stardust.

I will not put people through another tribunal or another compensation process. I do not want it to be litigious. I do not think lawyers need to be involved in it. When the proposal that I am putting forward comes, I think it will be a very simple one and will not require legal advice in order for the people to avail of the benefits of it.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome that. I understand phase 2 is not just about redress; it is practical and financial and long overdue. I appreciate that the Minister cannot give a specific timeline but I welcome that he will bring forward proposals on this. The survivors and their families were looking for a timeframe for when the payments will commence and what will be developed. I again thank Antoinette Keegan for working with me and my office and for speaking to me in her home. I saw at first hand how it still haunts her to this day. She told me the story of being beside her two sisters when they were killed. All she wants is truth and justice. As the Minister mentioned, we are approaching the 45th anniversary. The memory has never gone away for the survivors.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. I think the inquest was beneficial and therapeutic for the survivors. I think they were satisfied with the process that the State belatedly put in place by way of the inquest, which was important. There is no attempt on the part of the Government to move away from the decision that was previously made. Phase 2 will occur; I

just want to get the proposals right. I want to discuss it with others. All I can say to the Deputy is that it is something that will happen in the near future. I repeat that I do not want, and I know the Deputy does not want, for people who were injured in the Stardust to be put through some form of new litigious process that requires an adversarial or inquisitorial process. I want a much simpler scheme that is a recognition payment, not a compensation payment for their injuries. It is a recognition payment because of the delay in the State facing up to its duties in terms of determining the outcome of what occurred.

Road Traffic Offences

153. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of e-scooters tests that have been completed in the Dublin metropolitan region since July 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6194/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I have raised the issue of e-scooters here before. I ask the Minister the number of e-scooters tests that have been done in the Dublin metropolitan region since the Garda got the ability to do it in July 2025, and if he will make a statement on it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy has raised the issues of e-scooters and scramblers before. Deputy McAuliffe, who has consistently raised the issue of scramblers, is seated beside Deputy Ó Muirí. I take this opportunity to express my condolences to Grace Lynch's parents, Siobhán and Martin, on her horrific death last weekend. Obviously, I am not going to talk in too much detail about it because I am conscious that a man was charged this evening with a criminal offence.

On the matter raised by the Deputy, he will be aware that regulations were signed into law in 2024 by the then Minister for Transport to provide that an e-scooter can only have a maximum design speed of 20 km/h or less. An e-scooter which does not meet the technical requirements may not legally be used on public roads. Additionally, the Road Traffic Act makes dangerous driving an offence in all locations, not just on public roads, and provides the Garda with new powers of seizure.

The Garda has undertaken a proof-of-concept project for the introduction of mobile dynamometers for the purpose of enforcing these e-scooter regulations. They were distributed across the four Garda regions. Dedicated targeted operations took place with a particular focus on urban areas and larger towns. I am informed by the Garda that the evaluation period has now been concluded following the use of the four dynamometer devices nationally. I am informed that the number of tests undertaken did not form part of the evaluation. I can report, however, that there were 958 fixed-charge notices issued for e-scooter-related offences in 2025 and that there were 817 e-scooters seized or detained in 2025.

Garda authorities also advise that, further to the proof of concept, gardaí are in favour of the organisation having wider access to such technology and that gardaí operating checkpoints using the dynamometers reported high levels of public interest and engagement. People were curious and I understand that Garda management is currently assessing options regarding the purchase and allocation of dynamometers to roads policing units.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I join the Minister in offering my condolences to Grace Lynch's family on a tragic situation in Finglas. I thank the Minister for the information. There has been quite a bit of interest in what the Garda was doing. Issuing 958 fixed-penalty notices and seizing 817 e-scooters represent good progress. I support the roll-out of the technology further afield. Recent RSA research shows e-scooters are now perceived as the most dangerous mode of transport in Ireland, more dangerous than motorbikes in fact. CHI statistics from Temple Street show that, since May of last year, 25 children were admitted with an e-scooter-related traumatic brain injury. The issues that e-scooters bring are very serious and very real for young people. The Garda Síochána's own statistics show there was a big uptick in serious accidents involving e-scooters in late 2025. I appreciate ongoing support in that area.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Last night in Finglas, hundreds of people came out to support the Lynch family and to tell the Garda, Government and particularly those who recklessly and dangerously drive e-scooters and scramblers illegally that enough is enough. Grace Lynch was a beautiful young girl with her whole life ahead of her and that was robbed from her on Sunday afternoon. Our community is sad but we are not surprised because we have been talking about it for years. In 2023, community leaders came here to the Public Gallery to welcome extensive new powers being given to the Garda, and yet today we are asking how were these new powers not enough? How were they not enforced? I thank the Minister for meeting me today. I know he has spoken to the Garda Commissioner. I know the Cabinet discussed this matter and I have discussed it with the Taoiseach. It is very simple: Finglas wants a ban on scramblers on roads and in public places. We want the ban fully enforced by senior gardaí and we want to make sure that every aspect of the State knows that this can never happen again.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I reiterate what Deputy McAuliffe from my neighbouring constituency has said. It is not just in one constituency but across Dublin. On my way in to Leinster House one day, I saw a scrambler with two young lads without helmets. When I was pulling into Leinster House, they were going in the opposite direction on the road. I offer my sympathy to Grace Lynch's mother, Siobhán, who spoke powerfully last night calling for scramblers and e-scooters to be banned. They are a scourge on our communities. Has there been any examination into the fear among gardaí chasing e-scooters and scramblers of GSOC taking them off the beat? Is that something that is being examined?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputies for their contributions. I commend Deputy McAuliffe on the role he played in enacting the amendment to the Road Traffic Act back in 2023. A significant legislative change was achieved as a result of that. Today when we all reflect on the awful death of Grace, we may think that not enough was done in respect of that legislation; a lot was done in that legislation. Most importantly, within it, the amendment of section 35 of the Road Traffic Act brought in by that legislation allows for the Minister for Transport to restrict or prohibit the use of specified vehicles in certain areas. Deputies will have heard the Taoiseach speaking in the House this afternoon. There is a commitment from Government that that amendment of section 35 will be invoked and I think it should be. The Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Canney, has committed to ensuring that there is a prohibition on the use of scramblers on public roads and in public parks. Scramblers should be used on designated tracks for scrambling bikes - we used to see them on

the television years ago - or on pathways up the mountains. They are not for use on public roads. I know we will still have the same issue in respect of enforcement.

It will be easier and there will be a societal response if there is a law saying that scramblers cannot be used on public roads.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Going back to e-scooters for a minute, I support their use. Number one, they are economical for those who use them. Number two, they are environmentally friendly as a means of going around the city. However, they have to be regulated because they have to be used safely. The challenge is getting people to use them safely. All the rules are in place in terms of age limits, speed limits of 20 km/h, safety gear - we could do more there - and passengers. People have to be on their own on an e-scooter. It is about enforcement, technology and empowering An Garda Síochána to keep up the good work they did last year and roll it out as far and wide as we can so that, eventually, e-scooters are being used safely.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I think we were all taken by the words of Siobhán when she spoke about her daughter, Grace Lynch, an absolute loss to the family and wider community in Finglas. There is a huge level of anger about what has happened on many working-class estates, not only in Dublin but in my county of Louth, particularly in Dundalk and Drogheda. There are a huge number of scramblers and e-scooters, some of which have been modified and are technically illegal, but we also hear of drone units that cannot be put into operation and guidelines that are not in place. While the Minister might say a lot has been done, not enough has been done. We need an answer. None of this is good enough. The community and the country demand action. We cannot let this go after the loss of Grace Lynch. It is a wonder we have not dealt with more of these serious circumstances in recent times.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: My own view is the death of Grace Lynch is a watershed moment. Sometimes those events happen and, I regret to say, her death could be a watershed in the change of attitude of policymakers, legislators and the public to scramblers.

I hear what Deputy Ó Muirí said about e-scooters. They are a separate issue but the presence of scramblers on public roads, in parks and on public pathways is unacceptable. They should not be used there. They are a threat to people, not just because they are being driven dangerously but because they were never designed for use on public roads. The law exists. We do not have to go through the Houses of the Oireachtas making new laws. The laws are there. When the regulations are signed by the Minister for Transport, they will send a clear message and show scramblers simply cannot be used on public paths, in public parks or in public areas. It is my hope it will provide for that.

Road Traffic Offences

154. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the number of checkpoints that were located and completed at district level for the period 1 January to 14 January 2026; the number of arrests made, breath samples taken and significant detections made relating to speeding and mobile phone use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5964/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: This question asks the Minister the number of checkpoints located and completed during a period in January, the number of arrests made, the significant detections made relating to speeding, mobile phone use and other road traffic infractions such as heavy goods vehicles travelling on roads when they should not be.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The most recent information I have on the dedicated road traffic enforcement operation carried out by the Garda is for the period from Monday, 1 December 2025, to Monday, 5 January 2026. That is a period of 35 days. During this period, regrettably, there were 26 fatalities on our roads and over 70 serious collisions, which resulted in a number of people incurring serious and life-altering injuries. There was no shortage of gardaí deployed during the operation. Gardaí carried out nearly 10,000 checkpoints, comprising statutory mandatory intoxicant testing and regular, high-visibility policing checkpoints. A total of 765 people were arrested during this period for driving under the influence of an intoxicant - 56% of those were primarily alcohol-intoxicant and 44% were primarily drugs. Nearly 26,500 drivers were detected for speeding offences by gardaí, mobile safety camera vans and static safety cameras by An Garda's road safety partners, GoSafe. Gardaí seized nearly 3,000 vehicles for a range of offences under the Road Traffic Act 1961. Nearly 1,700 fixed charge notices were issued for the offence of using a mobile phone while driving and over 450 fixed charge notices were issued to vehicle users for not wearing seatbelts.

These figures give an indication of the extent of ongoing enforcement activities by An Garda to keep people on our roads safe; and the reality that significant numbers of road users are, regrettably, still prepared to take risks with their own safety and the safety of other road users.

It is important to emphasise that checkpoints and enforcement can only be part of the solution. The use of improved technology, additional speed cameras and enhanced data sharing are also helping to ensure a broader approach to road safety enforcement in Ireland.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra sin. I am asking this question in the context of persistent road safety concerns raised with me by constituents and, I would say, all road users. There is a growing perception in my constituency - I am sure we see it around the country - that behaviour on the road has deteriorated, significantly in some cases, and aggressive and risky manoeuvres are more commonplace. There are issues with vehicles breaking red lights at signalised junctions and dangerous U-turns at intersections with filtered traffic signals.

As the Minister alluded to, the extent of offences detected by An Garda Síochána is significant and I commend its work. There are other, more persistent issues, such as heavy good vehicles on roads in my constituency like Newcastle Road, Aylmer Road and Kennelsfort Road. Technology can be used to detect such vehicles on those roads, was done quite successfully in London through the London lorry control scheme. Is there any scope to introduce a similar scheme here to free up Garda resources to focus on safe driver behaviour?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have some statistics for the period 1 January to 14 January 2026. I am advised gardaí performed a total of 3,599 checkpoints between those dates. There were 37 arrests made under sections 4 and 5 of the Road Traffic Act or for failure or refusal to provide a roadside breath or fluid test.

Many gardaí are assigned to road policing units and they take it extremely seriously. The statistics I have provided show clearly there is a large amount of policing of roads ongoing. The problem is people continue to break the law and do foolish things such as using mobile phones or drink-driving. Garda enforcement is an important part of the solution but the message needs to get out to people that such behaviour on the roads contributes to and causes increased fatalities.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I agree entirely and I commend the Garda on the significant resources it has put in. The new information the Minister has given me suggests it is maintaining these checkpoints at a similar rate to that achieved in December and I commend that. However, his information also shows the extent of Garda hours being spent on checkpoints.

My question focuses on whether there is a role for technology to free up that Garda time to focus elsewhere. The Minister mentioned additional speed cameras, both static and mobile. I welcome them but I encourage him to consider more consistent checks, as was done in London with regard to heavy goods vehicles on roads in urban areas. That is a matter of concern, especially for people whose children walk to school on congested roads like Newcastle Road, Kennelsfort Road, Palmerston Road or Aylmer Road in Newcastle. This improves the compliance of vehicles on those roads and frees up Garda hours. The Minister mentioned the use of drone technology to track vehicles. The Garda needs to consider how to use technology to free up hours for the high-value tasks that are important to protecting people and keeping them safe on our roads.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree the Garda should use advanced technology in every sphere of its work. In other aspects of criminality, technology is used to a great extent. Similarly, the Garda should be using technology. There is a very large contract in place between An Garda Síochána and GoSafe, which provides the services for the safety cameras on our roads.

The more cameras that are there and the more effective they are, the safer our roads will become. What changes human behaviour on the roads is the prospect of being detected, whether through a Garda checkpoint or penalty points coming. I agree with the Deputy. I will look into the type of technology he has identified that is operating in the UK. An Garda Síochána is aware of other technologies that are available as well. We will seek to bring in that extra technology but there is ultimately a big responsibility on people to slow down. It is people's recklessness and carelessness on the road that are causing these fatalities and they need to change behaviour.

Question No. 155 taken with Question No. 149.

Questions No. 156 and 157 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Funding

158. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the reason funding for the drug-related intimidation liaison role at the western area support project will not be renewed; and the specific alternative supports that will be in its place to ensure

victims and families facing organised crime drug-related intimidation will continue to receive equivalent specialist assistance without interruption. [6122/26]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I ask the Minister the reason that funding for the drug-related intimidation liaison role at the Whitechurch addiction service was not renewed this year; and the specific alternative supports that will be in its place to ensure victims and families facing organised crime and drug-related intimidation will continue to receive equivalent specialist assistance without interruption.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question in respect of the Whitechurch addiction support programme. As the Deputy will be aware, there is funding available under the community safety fund. I think I spoke to him about it before in the justice committee. It is funding that is available to go back into local communities, particularly those that have affected by criminality, and is the proceeds of crime. Since it was launched in 2022, it has supported 127 community safety projects all across Ireland. The fund is now managed by the national office for community safety in my Department that was established last year.

From the outset, the fund has been dedicated to one-off initiatives or short-to-medium-term projects limited to two years. Documentation made available for potential applicants to the safety fund in 2025 reiterated this. It is also made clear that repeat funding of community safety-funded projects would not be considered. As part of the process, applicants are asked to outline the sustainability of their project and the potential to mainstream or scale up the project beyond the community safety fund once the short-term funding has ended.

However, I am very conscious of the very important and valuable support provided by the Whitechurch addition support programme. This programme clearly delivers crucial support in the community and I would suggest the sponsors contact the national office for community safety - I can give the Deputy the details - for advice on other funding streams that could be explored. In October, I announced the allocation of €4.4 million through the community safety fund to 42 new community safety projects nationwide.

There are other sources of funding available. I am happy to engage with the Deputy in putting the national community office in touch with Whitechurch. If it is a commendable project, which I believe it is, it can apply for other sources. There is no guarantee that if a project gets funding under the community safety fund one year that it will get it the next year.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That is probably part of the issue. I have raised drug-related intimidation with the Minister on numerous occasions. I am not sure, in terms of this particular project, if it availed of the community safety fund. I suspect it did, which is why that is not being renewed, given the requirement for a project to be something new that has not been funded previously. Therefore, it would not be eligible. I am also very conscious of drug-related intimidation being seen as something that is a scourge on communities the length and breadth of Ireland, but tackling it is not particularly well funded. I spoke to the Minister today at the committee about the fact that the drug-related intimidation and violence engagement, DRIVE, scheme was basically funded to €280,000 a year across the Twenty-six Counties. That equates to less than €20,000 per county. I am also conscious of the €4.4 million from the proceeds of crime fund. Of the 42 projects under that fund this year, only five were in any way related to

drug-related intimidation, equating to approximately €473. Essentially, for drug-related intimidation this year alone, the Minister's Department and the Department of Health have allocated less than €700,000. I do not doubt for a second that the Minister recognises drug-related intimidation as something to be confronted, but what I do doubt is the capacity of this minuscule funding to deliver in terms of achieving that aim. I would like to work with him. If we work collaboratively, we can get more things done in this area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We had a discussion about this today at the justice committee and the Deputy will be aware how I mentioned that it was only last May that the DRIVE project had been launched. I know we had a discussion as to whether €280,000 was sufficient. It is the start. I want to see more money going into it and there is an ask for more money in respect of it. I am very conscious of the impact that drug-related intimidation and violence has on communities. It is important that those communities know they have the support of the State in combating that level of intimidation. If people believe they are on their own and they have no one to turn to, that is a very lonely place for them to be. If, however, there are support groups in place that can provide relief and support to individuals who are suffering drug-related intimidation, that can strengthen them.

The Garda take this matter extremely seriously as well, as the Deputy knows. Anyone who is subjected to drug-related intimidation should report it to the Garda. The Garda will deal with it sensitively. The alternative is we just allow the law of wild west to operate, and that is not acceptable.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): 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 John Clendennen - To discuss the need for additional primary care resources and elective surgery capacity in the midlands.

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

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

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

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

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss prepay customers facing involuntarily disconnection over winter.

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

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss public transport projects in Cork city and county.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the delivery of level 2 general palliative care services in the community, including clinical nursing services outside normal working hours in County Louth.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss funding to bring the main N70 in Cahersiveen town and the footpaths up to a safe and acceptable standard.

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

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the expanded use of the discretionary medical card.

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

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss enhancing public transport links between Lucan and the airport.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss core funding for Ballyfermot youth service.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the Cork events centre project and the new tender process.

Deputies Gary Gannon, Rory Hearne - To discuss the enforcement measures against scrambler bikes nationally.

The matters raised by Deputies Gary Gannon, Rory Hearne, Séamus McGrath, Conor D. McGuinness, John Clendennen and Pádraig O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Road Traffic Offences

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am taking this on my own. I think this is my third time today speaking about scrambler bikes. I spoke initially with the Taoiseach today, I spoke with the Minister in committee and now I have the opportunity to raise it as a Topical Issue. The reason it is topical is because of the tragedy that occurred in Finglas two nights ago when a 16-year-old lost her life in a manner that was despicable and heart-wrenching. Yesterday, we all watched a mother, who had to place her grief and her devastation alongside courage that the whole country could only see as unimaginably brave, stand in front of her community - a part of Dublin that I do not represent but one that I know quite well - and find the strength in her voice to say that we, and she herself, would campaign to remove scrambler bikes from her community. It was awe-inspiring to see that level of courage. We are all devastated that she had to find this courage, given the grief that she had suffered only the day previously.

The Minister has said in one of his last contributions that this should be seen as a line in the sand and I absolutely believe him. Regarding the enactment of section 35 of the Road Traffic Act, there was actually a lot of good in that in terms of the capacity of gardaí to intervene. We have seen the seizure of more than a few hundred scrambler bikes over the last number of years. However, I live in the city centre. Each morning and night, I will walk my dog through various parks around the area and without question you will hear the rev at some point that week of a scrambler bike. When you hear that rev, you will look around and see parents grabbing their children. If there is a football match going on, it will stop. I have been walking down the streets and you see scrambler bikes coming up through bike lanes. I have been walking home from the Dáil in the evenings and have seen them going up and down O'Connell Street.

We have to take scrambler bikes out of our communities. We have to simply ban them from urban areas. I say urban areas because, obviously, they are the areas I understand well, but I am conscious this is an issue that impacts communities the length and breadth of the country. There is no justification for a person to be on a scrambler bike in an urban environment, or any road in a public area, yet they persist. The Garda has done a great job in terms of seizure and apprehension of the bikes, despite the fact that there is a grey area in terms of whether gardaí can pursue. I am conscious that the previous Commissioner said that gardaí had that power but it was left up to individual gardaí to make that decision. That was wrong.

I understand that section 35A, which would mandate the prohibition of scrambler bikes, has yet to be brought into regulation. We discussed that today. However, we need to go further and go at the sale of these bikes. There is the idea that a scrambler should only be used in an environment where there is a club associated with it. If it has a role in some sort of rural vocation, that is fine, but we cannot have a scenario where you can go onto Snapchat and buy a scrambler bike second-hand. Gardaí have told me they are seizing these bikes and the same people they are seizing them off are getting more two or three days later. We absolutely need to ban these bikes.

11 o'clock

I will trust them because I saw the determination in the Minister's eyes and the Taoiseach's eyes today but we need to go further. We need to regulate the sale of them and make them much harder to purchase because there is no justification for what we see with our own eyes. There are kids on scrambler bikes. Let us be very clear: people are transporting drugs on them, the bikes are seized and they are back on a different scrambler like within a couple of days.

I would like to understand the timeframe by which section 35A will actually come into force and maybe we can go beyond that and regulate their sale.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy. I was humbled and in awe as well at the strength of Siobhán Lynch in what she said, having gone through such a traumatic event in her life. The Taoiseach said today that there is nothing we can really say that will alleviate the pain she and her husband, Martin, are going through. I received an email this afternoon from Grace's aunt, Rachel, who raised a number of issues with me. There is a change because there is complete determination and agreement across the House that the provisions within section 35A need to be invoked and regulations need to be made. The Taoiseach was straightforward here today when he said that probably should have been done earlier. There is now clearly widespread, universal support in

this House for regulations to be made that will restrict and prohibit the use of scrambler bikes in public places and public parks. That is a priority.

The reason why I think that is something there is political consensus to do is because it can be done so immediately. Section 35A has been enacted. The regulations being prepared by the Minister for Transport are in an advanced stage of preparation. We now need to just do it and put in place regulations that will prohibit and restrict the use of scramblers on public roads, in public parks and public places. I agree with the Deputy. There used to be a form of sport where you would see scramblers on television going around a track or they would be in a certain area out in the countryside. People would put them on a trailer on the back of their car and bring them to the location. That is where they would use them. They were never intended for use on our public road system. In fact, it is an abuse of the system that people have been using them but this change, by putting in regulations pursuant to section 35A, will change circumstances.

The Deputy said we should go further and regulate it. The Deputy talks about regulating their sale. I have no doubt the Government will give consideration to that but the Deputy knows himself that when it comes to something like that, we will need legislation in place for regulation. That takes time. That takes consideration. When you are going to regulate the sale of them, presumably people who want to use them for sporting purposes on tracks or up the mountains where it is permitted will be permitted to buy them. We just need to think of the consequences of that. That is why the immediate focus and immediate pressure should be on the commencement of regulations under section 35A.

The legislation that was enacted back in 2023 introduced some additional amendments to strengthen our legislation in relation to the misuse of scramblers and other vehicles. First, as the Deputy knows, it extends the dangerous driving offence to cover all locations and not just public places. Second, it gives gardaí the power to seize a vehicle being driven dangerously in any location. This legislation also creates powers to restrict the use of specified vehicles or classes of vehicles, which is now also being considered. It has always been an offence to drive scramblers dangerously. I can assure the House that gardaí have enforcement powers to stop and seize the vehicle where this is the case. Members can see they have seized vehicles.

In terms of the pursuits policy that was introduced in 2024, it provides direction to gardaí who engage in pursuit tactics and pursuit management to reduce risk. Obviously, nobody in this House wants to see gardaí not pursuing people who are engaged in criminal activity but as the Deputy will appreciate, if the gardaí are pursuing somebody on a scrambler bike going through a residential area at speed, there has to be some discretion on the part of gardaí to be able to think if this is creating a more dangerous environment for the community. It requires a certain amount of thinking on their feet and discretion by gardaí. The policy is that they can pursue.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I know it has always been an offence to drive scramblers dangerously in a public environment. I also know that in a public place, there is absolutely no safe way to drive a scrambler. That is what the difference is. There is no safe way to drive a scrambler in an urban environment. I trust the Minister on the enactment of regulation that will bring through the provision. I would like a sense of the timeframe from the Minister because we all

watched Siobhán Lynch last night. The pain in that mother's voice is an absolute line in the sand moment for us.

There is a mother and a family who are grieving but also committed to changing a situation that is impacting their whole community, their whole city and beyond. They deserve a sense of a timeframe for the regulations to be advanced. Will it be a month or two months? That is a justifiable ask. If the Minister cannot shed light on that today, maybe he could make a public statement on it by the end of the week. However, we have to go further. I understand legislation takes time but as the Minister said himself, there is cross-party agreement. There is nothing stopping us from getting emergency legislation through, if necessary.

If a person seeks to buy a scrambler for sport, I absolutely understand that. There are still clubs. There is one up on the Alfie Byrne Road and I am sure there are others around the country. I am also conscious people need them on farms and in other rural environments. There is no reason why that cannot be linked to some form of an identification number from a registered supplier so that when you purchase them, there is a number allocated. That way, they are a restricted vehicle. All of us would agree with that. They do not belong in any public place.

Let us ban them. I understand that is happening and we need a timeframe but let us go further and regulate them. These are the vehicle of choice for the transportation of drugs in my community and others. Let us get in front of that now and start the process.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. The Government and everyone in this House is committed to banning them on public roads, in public parks and in public places. That has to be done. The Deputy asked me for a timeline. I am not supposed to reveal what is discussed at Cabinet.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That is fair.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: However, I can tell the Deputy having been at Cabinet this morning and having listened to the Taoiseach, there is a real commitment to ensuring this is done urgently. These are regulations that are being prepared in the Department of Transport. They will be signed by the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who has delegated responsibility for road safety. There is a real urgency coming from the top of Government, from the Taoiseach, and all of us, to ensure that is done as quickly as possible.

I cannot give the Deputy a timeline but the advantage of having the legislation in place is that all we require is for the regulations to be drafted, sent to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel and the Attorney General's office, stamped and signed. There is an urgency and real pressure on Government to do that, as there should be, and ensure those regulations are signed promptly.

In terms of how the Deputy talks about regulating it, in many respects, it is not dissimilar from the discussion about nitrous oxide. Nitrous oxide can be used for legitimate purposes. It can be bought for legitimate purposes. Similarly, scramblers can be used for legitimate sporting purposes. If we are going to introduce a system of regulating the sale of them, we will have to

set out a mechanism as to what will be required in order for someone to be able to purchase them and where they can be used.

We will still have the issue that will need regulations to be put in place so that they are banned on public roads and in public parks. I have to say to the Deputy that if we could achieve that and get them banned on public roads and in public parks, that meets the cry from the Lynch family in terms of what they want. It meets the demands of what this House wants as well.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister for being here. I raise the issue of section 254 licence applications, under the Planning and Development Act 2000, which permits the installation of telecommunications masts in communities. I believe this is a fundamentally flawed process and I will explain that in a moment.

Of course, we need to improve our telecommunications infrastructure. There is no doubt about that. However, we need to do so in a sustainable manner and one which does not adversely affect our communities.

The section 254 application process is a secretive process. It is non-transparent. There is no statutory obligation on the applicant to publish a site notice, for example, to let a community know that such an application is being made. There is no statutory requirement on the local authority to publish the fact that an application has been made under section 254 for a telecommunications mast to be installed in their community. Because those requirements are not laid down in legislation, it is up to local authorities to interpret how they should approach this. Many do not publish them and, as I said, there is no requirement for a site notice. In my experience, most residents only become aware of such masts being installed in their communities when they see the construction work taking place. That is deeply unfair. Residents do not have a say in the process. Because they are not aware of it, they are not able to have an input. In fact, even if they were aware of it, at a local authority level, there is no mechanism for them to have a say. They can appeal if they are aware that an application has been made and permitted. They are entitled to appeal that to An Coimisiún Pleanála. Again, however, in many cases, residents are simply not aware that an application has been lodged with the local authority or, indeed, granted. It is deeply unfair that residents will not have their voice heard in this respect.

Because there is no requirement in terms of distance from a family home or a residential property, many of these masts, which are 18 m high in many cases, are installed within a distance of only metres from people's properties. That is totally unacceptable. If any of us in the Chamber woke up tomorrow morning and saw one of these 18 m high telecommunications masts being installed within a matter of metres of our front door, back door or bedroom window, I know full well we would not be happy and we would be asking ourselves how this is possible. It is possible under the current rules, however, and that has to change because it is deeply unfair and inequitable. People's homes are so important to them. They are their sanctuary. They are where they want to spend their time. The fact that their house and what is precious to them can be impacted in such a way by one of these masts being installed is totally unacceptable.

The local authority does have to take certain criteria into account to ensure it is proper and sustainable planning and that it is consistent with development plans and so on. It looks at things like the density of such telecommunications masts in the area. There is a fourth criterion as well in relation to public safety, such as the obstruction of footpaths and so on. However, these are very vague requirements for the local authorities to take into account. Nowhere does it state that they have to take into account the distance from a residential property. In fact, I understand they are prohibited from taking that into account because it is not part of the application process. This needs to change urgently. I ask the Minister of State to please take that message away tonight so that communities will not wake up with these masts being imposed on them without their knowledge or input.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this Topical Issue matter relating to section 254 licence applications for telecommunications infrastructure and proximity to residential properties, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne.

Under section 30 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, the Minister with responsibility for planning is specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any planning-related matter with which a planning authority or the board is or may be concerned. Section 254 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, provides for a licensing system for appliances and structures placed on, above, under or along a public road, including footpaths. The Act provides that a public road has the same meaning as the Roads Act 1993, which defines it as "a road over which a public right of way exists and the responsibility for the maintenance of which lies on a road authority".

A person applying for a licence must provide the planning authority with such plans and other information concerning the position, design and capacity of the appliance, apparatus or structure as the authority may require. A licence may be granted by the planning authority for such period and upon such conditions as may be specified, including conditions in relation to location, design, space taken up by the appliance and the need to protect protected structures, etc. Within the statutory framework, licensing is a matter for each individual local authority and the Minister with responsibility for planning has no role in the matter. In considering an application for a licence under section 254(5) of the Act, a planning authority shall have regard to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area, development plans, the number and location of existing appliances and the convenience and safety of road users, including pedestrians.

Section 254(5A) of the Act outlines the licensing process in respect of an application for a licence to erect, construct, place or maintain overground electronic communication infrastructure and any associated physical infrastructure, including telecommunications poles. If a planning authority fails to make a decision within a period of four months commencing on the date of receipt of an application, a decision of the planning authority to grant a licence shall be deemed to have been made on the day following the expiration of that period of four months. Where a planning authority requests additional information from the applicant and has not made a decision within a period of four months of receiving the applicant's response to the request, a deemed decision to grant a licence shall be deemed to have been made. A deemed decision to grant a licence shall be subject to the condition that the network operator concerned,

in advance of commencement of the works, shall inform the planning authority concerned and the National Roads Authority or road authority where applicable.

Under section 254(6), any person may, in relation to the granting, refusing, withdrawing or continuing of a licence under this section or to the conditions specified by the planning authority for such a licence, appeal to An Coimisiún Pleanála under section 30 of the Act.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I respect the fact that he is here this evening but, unfortunately, that reply does not in any way address the issues I raised in relation to these telecommunications masts being installed and erected close to residential properties and the fact that there is no provision whatsoever in the rules and regulations to ensure there is a safe and respectable buffer distance required. The landscape of our communities and streetscapes are changing in urban areas because of the installation of these 18 m high steel poles and telecommunications masts. Residents and communities are absolutely shocked when one of these appears in their area and they realise they have had no input or say in the matter and their voice could not be heard. Of course, they turn to public representatives, but we have no answers for them because, as I said, this is a secretive and non-transparent process. The fact that local authorities do not even have to publish these applications is fundamentally wrong. The fact that there is no site notice is fundamentally wrong. It is about restoring some trust in the system here. This is under the Planning and Development Act. It is a licence application, not a planning application. However, we do have to restore public trust in how these applications are administered, processed and so on. While we are all in favour of technological advances, it should not come at the total abandonment of our communities in terms of sustainable planning.

I put it to the Minister of State, as I said earlier, that if this happened to any of us in the House and we woke up to one of these 18 m high telecommunications masts being put in front of, behind or alongside our house, I am sure we would a lot have to say on the matter. I simply cannot understand how it is not provided for in the legislation that the installation of these masts should be a safe distance from a family home or a residential property. Again, I ask the Minister of State to please take that away so that this issue can be looked at with urgency.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this Topical Issue matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne. The Planning and Development Act 2024 was signed into law by the then President on 17 October 2024. The Department is putting arrangements in place to implement the phased commencement of the Act of 2024 to transition to new legislation across the planning system, taking account of the need to liaise with local authorities, planning bodies and other stakeholders. The existing provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 will remain in place until the relevant provisions of the Bill are commenced.

Section 254 of the Act of 2000 will be replaced by sections 13 and 14 of the Act of 2024 on commencement of those sections. Section 13(4B) of the Act of 2024 was added on Seanad Report Stage to include a regulation-making power for the Minister to prescribe certain classes of licence requests as requiring public notification. The amendment takes account of the input on Seanad Committee Stage in relation to a licence for telecommunications masts and ensures there is public notification process for such licence applications. Specifically, I will bring the

further points Deputy McGrath raised to the attention of Department officials and the Minister, Deputy Browne.

Commercial Rates

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Ar dtús báire, tá an cheist seo an-dáiríre. Baineann sé le gnólachtaí a chuireann seirbhísí cúnamh linbh ar fáil ar fud Contae Phort Láirge. Tá sé thar a bheith deacair dóibh leanúint ar aghaidh ag cur na seirbhísí sin ar fáil de dheasca billí a bhfuair roimh an Nollaig ó Chomhairle Cathrach agus Contae Phort Láirge ag eascairt ó athluacháil de chuid Tailte Éireann.

This is a really serious issue affecting childcare providers in County Waterford. I have no doubt similar issues, if they have not arisen, will arise in other counties. Almost a dozen childcare providers I have been in touch with received astronomical rates bill from Waterford City and County Council just before Christmas. These are private businesses solely providing the early childhood care and education scheme, funded entirely by the State, which were never liable for rates in the past and did not expect to be so liable. Three days before Christmas, they were hit with rates bills, of €4,280 in some cases and, in other instances, of an eye-watering €12,040. I am glad the Minister of State is sitting down for that figure. These operators are telling me they cannot continue if they have to pay these rates bills.

There has been discussion in the Chamber in the past few weeks about the issues affecting the childcare sector, how many providers are closing their businesses, letting staff go and leaving the industry, and how many parents are finding it hard to get childcare spaces. Every provider that leaves the industry places a greater burden on parents seeking to access childcare. That is before we get into the costs of running these businesses and the affordability for parents of having their children cared for in those settings.

The rates bills came as a surprise, as I said, because these businesses had never before been liable for rates or received such a bill. They operated on the legitimate understanding that they were exempt from rates because they provided purely ECCE services. They did not operate additional childcare services or, indeed, any other commercial operation from their premises. They were operating on the basis of a circular issued by the Valuation Office in 2010, which stated that to be exempt from rates required compliance with certain qualifying criteria. These were that the property be used exclusively for the 38-week sessional ECCE-funded preschool services and for no other purpose, such as childminding, creche services funded by private fees or any other commercial use, and that the expenses incurred in providing this ECCE preschool sessional service must be defrayed wholly or mainly out of moneys provided by the Exchequer.

The providers satisfy those criteria and have always done so. Nothing in their business operation or service provision has changed, yet Tailte Éireann took it upon itself at the end of last year to conduct valuations of their premises and then to issue notice to Waterford City and County Council, which was duly bound to issue bills to them seeking what I would say are extortionate rates. Those rates will put them out of business, thereby reducing a level of service in rural areas and small towns in County Waterford, much-needed employment in those communities and a vital service for parents who may have to commute to work in Clonmel, Waterford or as far as Little Island in Cork.

I am hoping to hear that the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, have a plan of action. I am seeking clarification as to whether there has been a change of policy and whether these businesses that were previously exempt from rates are now rateable. What has changed, when was that policy changed, by whom and for what reason, and how was it communicated, or if there has been no such change in policy, how will the issue be resolved in order that these businesses can keep providing the services that are so badly needed?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity to clarify the position regarding early childhood care and education facilities, commercial rates and the role of Tailte Éireann in that regard. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne.

Tailte Éireann is an independent Government agency that provides a property registration system, property valuation service and national mapping and surveying infrastructure for the State. It is independent in the exercise of its valuation functions under the Valuation Act 2001, as amended, and neither the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage nor his Department has any function in decisions in this regard.

Tailte Éireann has overall responsibility under the Act for the maintenance of all valuation lists used by local authorities in the calculation of rates liabilities. Under the Act, all property is rateable unless it falls into one of the exempt categories listed in Schedule 4 to the Act. There is a very specific range of exemptions that can be applied and Tailte Éireann has no discretionary latitude to grant exemptions not covered by Schedule 4.

Paragraph 22 of Schedule 4, which was inserted by the Valuation (Amendment) Act 2015, refers specifically to early childhood care and education facilities and provides an exemption for: "Any land, building or part of a building used exclusively for the provision of early childhood care and education, and occupied by a body which is not established and the affairs of which are not conducted for the purpose of making a private profit". Therefore, while the Act provides that early childhood care and education facilities that are operated on a not-for-profit basis are exempt from rates, it does not provide a general exemption from rates for all childcare or childminding facilities operating on a for-profit basis. To avoid ambiguity, if an early childhood care and education facility is operated on a for-profit basis, then it does not fulfil the criteria for exemption under paragraph 22.

As a matter of course, Tailte Éireann examines all properties on their individual merits by reference to the relevant statutory provisions governing the operation of the Act and case law arising from the independent Valuation Tribunal and the higher courts. There are a number of avenues of redress for an occupier of a rateable property who is dissatisfied with a determination of valuation by Tailte Éireann made under the provisions of the Valuation Act 2001, as amended. First, before a determination is made, there is a right to make representations to Tailte Éireann in relation to a proposed valuation. Later in the process, if the occupier is still dissatisfied with the determination, there is a right of appeal to the Valuation Tribunal, which is an independent body set up for the purpose of hearing appeals against determinations of Tailte Éireann. Thereafter, there is a right of appeal to the higher courts on a point of law.

Under Irish law, there is a distinct separation of functions as between the valuation of rateable property and the setting and collection of commercial rates. The commercial rates

payable on a particular property is a product of the valuation of that property, as determined by Tailte Éireann, multiplied by the annual rate on valuation, ARV, which is set annually by the elected members of the local authority as part of its budgetary process. The billing and collection of rates is solely a matter for the relevant local authority. Tailte Éireann has no function in that regard.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It clarifies the situation in that he stated explicitly that for-profit childcare providers are liable for rates. However, there has been a change of policy. It may have taken place several years ago but there has been a change of policy and that policy was not executed in County Waterford. These businesses were not liable for rates in the past but they have now been hit with these bills. Nobody has communicated this change of policy to them. Several of them, if forced to pay these rates bills, will have no option but to shut down.

The Government is missing a trick here. These might be private commercial operators in one way but, on the other hand, they are providing exclusively a State service that is paid for exclusively by the State. In effect, they are agents of the State and their existence and their provision of the ECCE service is precisely because they are filling a gap the State has left in rural communities in places such as Lemybrien, Kilmacthomas, Lismore, Abbeyside and Touraneena. They are facilitating people, particularly women, to have their children looked after in order that they can go to work in rural Ireland, contribute to the local economy and have that level of independence. They are providing a service the State has never provided, paid for by the State, yet they are being hit with rates bills of €12,040 in some cases.

I take it from the Minister of State's answer that there has been a change in policy and it happened several years so but is only now being executed and put into effect in Waterford, where it is creating havoc. There is a gap here and it is something the Government needs to address. In effect, these agents for State services are being put out of business when the sector is already in freefall.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity to clarify the position regarding commercial rates liabilities for ECCE facilities and the role of Tailte Éireann in the matter.

As I said earlier, I am taking this Topical Issue debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Browne. Tailte Éireann is independent in the exercise of its valuation functions under the Valuation Act, as amended. The Act provides that early childhood care and education facilities that are operated on a not-for-profit basis are exempt from rates. It does not provide a general exemption from rates from all childcare or childminding facilities operating on a for-profit basis. There are a number of avenues of redress for an occupier of a property who is dissatisfied with a determination of valuation by Tailte Éireann. The billing and collection of rates is solely a matter for the relevant local authority and, as I said, Tailte Éireann has no function in that regard.

Hospital Services

Deputy John Clendennen: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak this evening. Before I start, I want to reflect on how far we have come as a nation in the last 25 years in relation to health. Our budget in 2000 was €5.6 billion and this year it is €27.4 billion, which is a fivefold increase. We see improved individual outcomes, economic growth with a healthier and more productive workforce, increased life expectancy and greater equity and social well-being across the population. However, multidisciplinary primary care was first discussed here as a concept in the 1980s. The first strategic plan, Primary Care: A New Direction, was introduced in 2001. We saw our first primary care centre nine years later in Mallow, and since then we have seen over 180 new primary care centres delivered nationwide. I firmly believe it is an infrastructural development area that is not recognised half enough when it comes to the delivery we have seen in the area, with many more in the development pipeline. In my county we have seen Tullamore up and running. We officially opened Banagher Primary Care Centre with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill last year. Birr is nearing completion and I recently visited it. Edenderry is at the planning application stage and I hope, once we get approval on that, the HSE will prioritise it for development.

We have the bricks and mortar and now it is a matter of ensuring adequate human resources capacity. I acknowledge Dr. Velma Harkins in relation to the introduction of the international medical graduate rural GP programme, which has made a material difference in relation to providing GPs in rural areas. We heard from many in opposition in this Chamber about how we were never going to see a GP again and services were lost. This has taken the pressure off but we need more. There are problems which remain and I hear about them regularly from my constituents. Occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists and chronic disease supports are seriously lacking. There are a number of vacancies in these roles that need to be filled as a matter of priority in my area. There are long waiting times and waits for assessment and intervention. People are literally waiting for years, so I ask the Government to prioritise this, working with the HSE.

Elective surgery is a growing problem and the statistics speak for themselves. Midland Regional Hospital, under the stewardship of Louisea Burke, has proven itself to perform at every level, and there are plans for further development of dialysis, an oncology day ward and an extension to the existing emergency department. It proudly boasts one of the lowest emergency department trolley numbers in the country. I visited recently and saw this at first hand. The urgent need for an emergency department is backed by the fact that, in 2025 versus 2024, there was a 3% increase in ED attendees, with 9% of those being over 75 and 11% over 90. This is a bed capacity challenge which brings a significant increase in surge requirements and that is impacting on elective surgery. We have seen insufficient protection of elective beds, underutilised theatres due to staffing and schedule constraints, high cancellation rates because of emergency demand, and elective surgery constantly crowded out, not because the need is not there but because emergency takes priority. We have seen increases as high as 48% and 27% in inpatient and day cases, respectively, as well as in endoscopy year on year. This is something that needs to be addressed by the Government as a matter of priority.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for raising this really important topic. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister.

The Government acknowledges many patients are waiting too long for care, but we are committed to improving access to hospital care and reducing waiting times for patients, including through the multi-annual action plan approach. Building on the progress made to date, we will continue to focus on reducing waiting times for scheduled care in our hospitals through a range of measures, including service reforms and innovation, as well as targeted increases in capacity. The Government is also committed to increasing elective care capacity across Ireland to ensure high-quality and timely scheduled care is available to all.

In order to meet medium-term demand, we are delivering the first phase of increased elective capacity through a national network of surgical hubs. The two surgical hubs at Tallaght and Mount Carmel in south Dublin are already open and are having a real impact on day case waiting lists. There are due to be five more surgical hubs opened in 2026 at Cork, Galway, Limerick, Waterford and in north Dublin. Hubs at Sligo and Letterkenny will then follow, with design for both now under way. In the longer term, and to meet the needs of our growing and ageing population - the Deputy is right to note it is ageing - we are also delivering a national network of elective treatment centres in Cork, Dublin and Galway. These new facilities will make a real difference to those who are waiting for access to elective treatments while also freeing up capacity in other hospitals to deal with more complex and emergency cases. Patients in the midlands will have access to these elective treatment centres on an equal basis to everyone else in the country, that is, based on clinical need. This will help to reduce waiting times for elective procedures and ultimately lead to a more efficient and responsive system for everyone.

Long waiting times are not unique to the hospital system, however. To address the long waiting times for primary care therapy services, the Department of Health is currently engaging with the HSE on a focused approach to these waiting lists. Under this programme of work, in September last year the Minister asked the HSE to put measures in place to address the long waiting lists for physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. This is expected to remove over 60,000 people from these three waiting lists throughout the country. In addition, to ensure the necessary resources are available to maintain waiting lists below that target, the HSE is prioritising recruitment of permanent staff to primary care therapy services, with approval of an additional 200 whole-time equivalents in the national service plan for 2026. It is therefore about recruitment too, which the Deputy spoke about, through the different areas.

An additional 12 posts have been allocated to the midlands integrated healthcare area, including posts to address vacancies in occupational therapy and physiotherapy for children's services in Offaly and Laois. I am also very pleased to advise that additional primary care infrastructure is in development in County Offaly following on from the opening of primary care centres in Tullamore and Banagher in recent years. Birr primary care centre is due to open in the first half of this year. It will include an extensive GP practice and allow the HSE to consolidate its primary care and mental health services under one roof, and this will be of real benefit to the people in the area. The Edenderry PCC is in the early planning stage and a planning application was submitted for this development to Offaly County Council this month. All of these measures are showing significant investment in the area and will have a very positive impact on the people of the midlands.

Deputy John Clendennen: I appreciate the Minister of State's response but the options that will be given to patients in the midlands are in every geographical location around the country

except the midlands and that is exactly what needs to change. Sláintecare commits to reducing waiting times, bringing care closer to home and regional delivery. We want to see all three delivered in the midlands. On a basic human level, behind every waiting list number is a person living in pain, struggling to work or watching their quality of life deteriorate. If you are living in the midlands or in Offaly you are expected to commute or get a train in order to avail of those services, and that is simply not acceptable in 2026.

In 2018, A Trauma System for Ireland: Report of the Trauma Steering Group recognised Tullamore for its 24-7 emergency department with trauma, orthopaedic and general surgery on call. That is a strategically important location. As recently as July 2024, a report commissioned by the HSE exploring the options for increasing hospital capacities in the midlands identified the need. Yet, in the response this evening, there is no recognition of that.

We are seeing population growth. We need to future-proof for it. It took 30 years to deliver the concept of primary care centres. The midlands and Offaly cannot wait 30 years for elective capacity to be brought there. We need to move away from a model under which we are expected to go to Dublin or Galway. We want that capacity to be brought to the midlands and to take the pressure off the other areas. I propose that the Government look strongly now at forming some kind of dedicated stakeholder task force to work on the issue as a matter of urgency to ensure patients in the midlands who want and need elective surgery can get it in the midlands, and do so as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I assure him the Government is committed to providing access to the best care for the people of Ireland. We are clear that no matter where the facilities are located, everyone should have access to adequate and appropriate care based on their needs. Through the delivery of this programme, we are increasing capacity to meet short- and long-term needs, but the surgical hubs and elective treatment centres together will form a national network. These facilities will enable the delivery of care for all patients. Geography will not be a barrier. Instead, consultants and other doctors will be able to refer on the basis of patient need.

I see where the Deputy is coming from but the Minister welcomes the news that the development of the primary care infrastructure in County Offaly is progressing, offering a real example of the investment the Government is making in community-based health infrastructure, providing a single point of access to healthcare services for patients.

I assure the Deputy that there is currently no barrier to recruitment to primary care services and an additional 200 staff for primary care therapy services have been prioritised in the HSE national service plan. I assure the Deputy that I will be speaking to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, tomorrow and I will highlight the concerns Deputy Clendennen raised tonight. I thank him for raising this important issue.

Vaccination Programme

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for coming this evening to take this Topical Issue matter.

Over recent months, there has been ongoing debate about the merits of providing enhanced influenza vaccines such as high-dose or adjuvanted formulations for people aged 65 years and older. The Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, conducted a health technology assessment, HTA, which found that enhanced vaccines are likely to provide greater protection than standard influenza vaccines in older adults, with the potential to reduce severe illness, hospitalisation and influenza-related mortality in this high-risk group. Despite these findings, the HSE did not proceed with a tender for enhanced influenza vaccines last year, citing cost-effectiveness concerns. However, the scale and severity of the influenza outbreak in recent weeks, characterised by high levels of community transmission, significant pressure on hospitals and a disproportionate impact on older people, raises questions about whether the current approach adequately reflects the true cost of influenza to the health system. Hospital admissions, bed occupancy and delayed discharges during peak flu periods carry substantial financial and operational consequences. Preventing even a modest proportion of these admissions through improved vaccine effectiveness could offset the higher upfront cost of enhanced vaccines.

In addition, vaccine uptake among older adults remains suboptimal in some communities, suggesting that availability alone is not sufficient. Public awareness, confidence and timely access all play critical roles in determining vaccination rates. Clear public messaging, earlier seasonal campaigns and stronger engagement through GPs, pharmacists and community organisations may help to improve uptake, particularly among those at risk of severe outcomes. In light of this year's flu cases and associated hospitalisations, what consideration has been given to funding an enhanced flu vaccination programme for older adults ahead of the next flu season? What measures are being considered to improve public awareness, confidence and uptake of the flu vaccine among older people to maximise the impact of the vaccination programme and reduce preventable illness and hospital pressure?

We are not a million miles off the vaccination target for the age cohort of 65 and older. However, another concern I have is for those aged between two and 17. The HSE has a target that 50% of children in that cohort will be vaccinated, but we are way below that, at below 20%. Will the Minister of State give consideration to improving uptake of the flu vaccine among children?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter in the House this evening. The Minister for Health shares his concerns about the protection of older adults against influenza. For those in recommended groups, the influenza vaccine reduces the risk of serious illness and death from flu. Ensuring high vaccine coverage is a priority in order to reduce severe illness from influenza, RSV and Covid-19 over the winter period.

Ireland's immunisation programme is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee, NIAC. The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of a disease in Ireland and international best practice. NIAC routinely revises recommendations to facilitate the introduction of new vaccines and to keep on top of changing patterns of disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to change over time. The vaccination programme provides a free flu vaccine to those most vulnerable to the impact of flu. Every year, the WHO reviews global surveillance data and recommends the specific strains that manufacturers should include in the season's vaccines based on the flu strains that

are considered most likely to circulate. All licensed influenza vaccines included for the 2025-26 season comply with WHO and NIAC recommendations.

In 2024, HIQA carried out an enhanced flu vaccine health technology assessment, which found there were limited studies on the effectiveness of enhanced flu vaccines, along with a lack of data over multiple seasons. Due to the variability of seasonal influenza, a single study may misrepresent average vaccine effectiveness. Based on the limited data, the HTA determined that switching from a standard to an enhanced flu vaccine for those aged 65 and older was likely to reduce the burden of flu. However, whether such a switch would represent a good use of public money would depend on the price of enhanced vaccines when compared with the standard flu vaccine.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC, reported overall low to moderate relative vaccine effectiveness for the enhanced influenza vaccine against laboratory-confirmed influenza-related hospitalisations. It concluded that evidence specific to the relative effectiveness of enhanced influenza vaccines when compared with standard vaccines was still limited and that further studies were necessary to allow more substantial conclusions on the potential benefits of enhanced influenza vaccines.

The HSE is responsible for the procurement of vaccines in line with EU and national procurement rules. It was asked to commence a tender process to determine if enhanced flu vaccines could be purchased at a cost-effective price and within its existing budget. It carried out an analysis of the tenders received and on 4 February 2025 advised the Department of Health that neither of the available enhanced vaccines for older people met the criteria set out in the HTA for net monetary benefit compared with the standard flu vaccine.

The HIQA HTA estimates that procurement of the enhanced influenza vaccines would cost between €4 million and €19 million per year. However, the actual costs remain commercially confidential and are not known until tenders are evaluated each year. Decisions regarding increased spending in one area could impact the provision of other technologies and treatments in the healthcare system. Therefore, cost-effectiveness must be considered in any decision-making process.

It is important that the Department and the HSE adhere to the value-for-money obligation set out by the Department of public expenditure in relation to the efficient and effective use of public funds and resources.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State, who is here instead of the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. She has probably heard me in parliamentary party meetings in recent years talking about access to drugs in general in the round. It does not surprise me that the response from the Department is that we need to do more research because that is generally what it does when it comes to expanding and rolling out drugs right across the board for patients.

There is one thing that annoys me. As a Government, we have made a political decision to expand the RSV programme. It is a commitment in the programme for Government. While my question does not directly relate to RSV, it is on the spectrum when it comes to flu vaccinations. RSV vaccination is right in there. We have made a political decision as a Government to expand that. NIAC has recommended that the RSV vaccine be expanded.

However, we have not done that yet. I am not discounting the fact we might do it in the future, and I hope to God we do, because it will prevent some of the chaotic scenes we see in our emergency departments over the winter months in particular.

I would lay down the gauntlet to the Department of Health that it is time it got off its chair and made these decisions and big calls. NIAC has recommended that the RSV vaccination be expanded to older people. We already do it for children. It has recommended this. The Minister of State has said that it will cost between €4 million and €19 million for flu. Obviously, there are many caveats in that. I assume it involves many different age cohorts and whatever. I ask the Minister of State to consider rolling it out to people in nursing homes who may be vulnerable, to see if that is effective and cost efficient to begin with. Obviously, cost effectiveness is more important than people's health; that is what I keep being told here when I raise these questions. As regards cost effectiveness, has the Department estimated to the Minister of State, or would she be able to find out in writing afterwards, what the cost of people who present with flu or RSV, for example, is during every winter period? I guarantee it is far less than the €4 million to €19 million range given to us this evening.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Certainly, I will get those answers for the Deputy. I am pleased to note that in this flu season, the uptake rate for the vaccine among adults aged 60 and older was 66%, and for fair deal residents it was 83%, which is high. This is very positive and has been a factor in ensuring hospital and trolley numbers for flu this year are lower than previous years. It is important that we protect ourselves and each other from infection during the winter season by availing of the flu vaccine when it is offered. The introduction of an enhanced vaccine can be reconsidered when the cost effectiveness is more favourable. I will get the Deputy those answers.

I urge all those who are eligible for any vaccine under the national immunisation programme, at all stages of life, to take the opportunity to be vaccinated. It is important that we tell anyone who needs to get their vaccine that they need to get that as soon as possible.

Again, I thank the Deputy for highlighting this matter. I will certainly bring his questions back to the Minister and get answers, particularly with regard to children. It is important we look at that again. I thank him for raising this very important topic tonight.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.54 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 28 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.54 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 January 2026.