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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Eanáir 2026

Wednesday, 28 January 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): 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 Barry Heneghan - To discuss issues regarding St. Joseph's Primary School, Fairview.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the development of a minor injuries hub plan for Balbriggan.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss actions taken by Government in relation to ongoing human rights abuses by the Chinese Communist Party against the Uyghurs.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the long waiting lists for home support home help in Cork.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss funding to bring the main N70 in Caherciveen town, and the footpaths, up to standard.

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

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss enhancing public transport links between Lucan and the airport.

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

Deputy Brian Brennan - To discuss access to resources for first responders and advanced paramedics.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss prepay customers facing involuntarily disconnection over the winter.

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

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

Deputy 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.

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

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the new Kilkenny Institute of Further and Higher Education training campus.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the response to anti-social behaviour caused by those illegally driving scramblers and e-scooters.

The matters raised by Deputies John Paul O'Shea, Robert O'Donoghue, Louis O'Hara, Peter 'Chap' Cleere and Barry Heneghan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Home Help Service

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue matter in relation to a very important issue in County Cork concerning the provision of home help home support services. Home support is often known as home help and is one of the most essential person-centred supports provided by our health and social care system.

It is a service that allows older people and those with additional needs to continue to live safely, comfortably and independently in their own homes and communities. For many families across Cork and throughout the country, home support is not just a convenience; it is a lifeline. Every single day, home support workers carry out dignified and compassionate work that enables people to remain connected to their neighbours, communities and the place they call home. This sense of place, familiarity and independence has a proven and profound impact on a person's physical and mental well-being. It gives reassurance to families, reduces isolation and promotes independence, values that must remain at the heart of our health service. We also cannot ignore the critical role that home support plays in easing the pressure on our hospitals. When adequate support is available in the home, unnecessary hospital admissions can be prevented and hospital discharges can happen more smoothly. For older people in particular, remaining at home with proper assistance is often far safer and far healthier than spending extended periods in acute settings.

Home support services are a vital part of the wider solution to overcrowding, delayed discharges and pressure on our emergency departments. However, to fully realise the benefits of home supports, the service must be properly resourced, properly staffed and delivered in a timely and consistent manner. Too many people are waiting far too long for essential hours to begin and too many families in Cork are left in distress trying to bridge that gap. This is not

acceptable. A service that is so fundamentally important cannot be allowed to operate under strain, uncertainty and chronic short staffing issues.

I want to mention a couple of examples while I have the time in relation to what I have experienced over the past number of months in terms of the acute waiting list for home support in Cork. As of 11 November, the HSE responded to a parliamentary question by saying over 890 clients were wait-listed for home support in Cork city and county. Of those, 543 are waiting for a first-time service and 347 are waiting for additional hours to be allocated. This is not just an issue in Cork but one right across the country. I put in another parliamentary question in relation to the lists for the entire country. We have over 5,000 people who have been allocated home support home help who are waiting for that care to be provided.

I say this with real respect but the HSE is not responding to requests from politicians, including me. I know that the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach has been involved in meetings with the HSE as well. It is just not happening. Despite the fact that we raised this issue in October, we are back here again at the end of January and there is still no alleviation of the pressure on the home support that is available in Cork. In fact, I believe it has got worse. This is the reality of what we are facing. I am asking the Minister of State to intervene personally with the HSE in relation to this matter. I am asking that a proper plan be put in place to recruit home support workers, be it in the public health service or in the private service, to ensure this service is continued in future for the people of County Cork.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy John Paul O'Shea for raising this important matter. The Government is committed to supporting older people in Ireland and improving their access to healthcare services in the community. Budget 2026 saw an increase of approximately €215 million to maintain and enhance services for older people, resulting in a total allocation of over €3 billion for the first time. This includes a further substantial increase for home support services to bring the 2026 budget allocation to over €900 million, more than doubling the investment since 2018. The target for the delivery of home support hours has increased accordingly, from 24 million hours in 2025 to 26.7 million hours for 2026. That is an increase of 1.7 million hours.

In the Cork area, provisional figures from the HSE indicate that over 2.2 million hours of home support were delivered up to the end of November 2025. This represents an increase of 6.5% compared to the number of hours delivered in the same period in 2024. There were 6,022 people receiving a home support service at the end of November 2025, compared to 5,796 at the end of November 2024, which is a 3.9% increase. The waiting list for home support services in this area at the end of December 2025 stood at 915 people. Of these, 547 people were waiting for new packages, while 368 people were waiting for additional hours.

The HSE has stated that it is acutely aware that there are capacity issues across both direct and indirect provision of home support throughout the region. The HSE is committed to attracting additional staff and increasing its capacity to deliver support to as many clients as possible. The HSE is running ongoing recruitment campaigns as well as supporting the professional development of staff working in the area. HSE south west has advised that recruitment efforts in the Cork region are ongoing with a recruitment campaign currently live to recruit healthcare assistant staff in Cork and Kerry. Additionally, HSE south west has advised that dedicated recruitment co-ordinators for healthcare assistant, home support, run

campaigns throughout the year. In the six months from August 2025 to January 2026, 29 healthcare assistants, home support, have been hired in the Cork region.

More broadly, addressing the home support waiting list is a priority for the Government. Improving these lists requires more support and more workers at a time where there are international challenges with recruiting healthcare workers. The strategic workforce advisory group on home carers and nursing home healthcare assistants was set up in 2022 to address the challenges relating to front-line carer roles in the home support and long-term residential care sector. Work continues to deliver on the recommendations of this group, including a survey on the experience of healthcare assistants, which is due to be launched shortly. This will inform development of future target interventions to increase recruitment retention in the sector.

I will take this matter up with the HSE, at national and local level. I have already held meetings with representatives of the HSE. I will meet with the HSE personnel involved in home support in Cork to see if we can reduce waiting lists and waiting times. For those who are waiting for them, home support packages are hugely important. The home support providers Bill has just passed the Second Stage. The purpose of this legislation is to improve the regulation of the sector. More importantly, it is the first step in ensuring that home care will be provided in the context of a statutory home care scheme.

On the particular issue that the Deputy has raised in respect of Cork, I will follow up directly with my officials and the HSE in Cork. I will also follow up with the HSE nationally.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State very much for his keen interest in this matter. I would appreciate if he could follow up with the HSE in Cork in respect of it.

Investment in the home support is an investment in dignity, well-being and independence for thousands of people. It is also an investment in a more efficient health system that supports people earlier, prevents avoidable illness and ensures better use of our limited hospital capacity. Home support workers must be valued, supported and recognised for the essential front-line role they play. They deserve for fair pay, sustainable working conditions and the resources necessary to carry out their jobs effectively.

There was a campaign to recruit home help support workers in Cork in July. As of 11 November, when the responses had been assessed, the HSE in Cork had identified 64 potential candidates but not one new home support worker was in place. That is not acceptable when there is such a long waiting list. Over 1,000 people in Cork and Kerry are waiting for home supports. Some 64 candidates were identified in the period between July and November but they have not been appointed.

The principle here is simple. It is not a funding issue; it is a resource issue. People should be supported to live at home for as long as possible. The State must ensure that the supports required are available to them when needed, not months later. Home support is one of the most empowering, cost-effective and socially valuable services that we provide in this country. Strengthening it must be a priority for the Government. It must also be a priority for the HSE and all of us going forward.

I welcome the Minister of State's intervention. I encourage him to make contact with the HSE in Cork and to improve the situation. As public representatives, we cannot continue to

have a situation whereby home help requests come in and action in respect of them is still not taken six months later. I would appreciate the Minister of State's support on this matter.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The home support services is a core service for older people. It is a highly valuable service used by them, their families and the HSE. Delivery of a high-quality consistent home support service is essential to help people to live well in their homes and communities for as long as possible. Recruitment to this sector is an ongoing challenge for both the HSE and private providers. Within the HSE, work is ongoing at the regional and national level to build capacity to support workforce development and improve access to home care services in the community. Within the Department of Health, work to deliver on the recommendations of the strategic workforce advisory group to support the recruitment and retention of workers in essential front-line care roles is continuing.

Since the strategic workforce advisory group was established, record levels of care have been delivered in the community. Within the Department, work is ongoing to explore options to increase the effectiveness of home support and to address waiting list issues experienced by clients around the country. Among the changes will be to explore the use of assistive technology in home support initiatives in order to directly address rural home support provision. Research is ongoing in the Department to improve the current provision of home support in communities and enable our home support service to take advantage of new technology and the support available in the sector to support clients in the service.

Going back to the specific request in relation to Cork, I will meet with the HSE in Cork to discuss recruitment, waiting lists, waiting times and the plans that are in place to recruit people and, more particularly, to bring down the waiting times.

Home support is a priority for the Government. We have made record levels of investment of more than €900 million. As already stated, the home support providers Bill will increase and improve the quality of care available in the sector. Furthermore, there is a commitment in the programme for Government regarding the design of a statutory home care scheme. In the context of the practicalities, we have provided an addition of 1.7 million hours. That was a priority in the budget.

On the Deputy's specific request, I will meet representatives of the HSE in Cork to discuss the delivery of home support hours and will update him accordingly.

Hospital Services

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to raise a pressing issue that is affecting my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, particularly Balbriggan but also Rush, Lusk, Skerries and more rural areas. There is ongoing pressure on Drogheda and Beaumont hospitals that could be alleviated to some degree by the establishment of a minor injuries clinic hub in Balbriggan.

There are now approximately 30,000 people living in Balbriggan. In total, there are between 60,000 to 70,000 people living in that part of the constituency. This is a large and growing community that relies almost entirely on the emergency departments in Beaumont and Drogheda for the treatment of minor injuries. As we know, these hospitals are under tremendous strain. Constituents regularly report waiting eight, ten or 12 hours for treatment of

injuries, such as sprains, small breaks and minor infections, that do not require full hospital interventions. This is not fair on patients or hospital staff. We all accept that hospital emergency departments must prioritise serious cases. However, the reality is that a significant proportion of attendances at Beaumont and Drogheda hospitals could be treated in properly staffed community-based minor injury hubs. It has already been agreed that there is a need to establish a minor injury hub plan for Balbriggan as well in the context of the wider hospital avoidance strategy. The proposal is about prevention, efficiency and patient dignity.

What is particularly frustrating for people locally is that we are repeatedly told that Balbriggan primary care centre is full, when, in fact, only a portion of the building is being leased by the HSE. It is therefore not at capacity. The entire building is not fully leased and, therefore, is not being fully utilised. There is space there that could be used for GP services. There is existing healthcare space in Balbriggan that could be used to deliver a minor injuries hub. The provision of such a hub could immediately reduce pressure on the emergency departments in Beaumont and Drogheda if the HSE engaged constructively on leasing and service planning.

A minor injuries hub in Balbriggan would divert thousands of non-life-threatening cases away from Beaumont and Drogheda, free up emergency department capacity for critically ill patients, reduce waiting times and ambulance offloading delays and provide faster care closer to home for my constituents in Dublin Fingal West. This would align with Sláintecare and the HSE's hospital avoidance objectives. Other parts of the country already have minor injury units that operate for extended hours and that treat large volumes of patients safely and efficiently. Dublin Fingal West is one of the most rapidly expanding constituencies in the country and should not be an exception.

I call on the Minister of State and the HSE to engage urgently with local representatives on available capacity within the Balbriggan primary care centre, progress a staffing and operations plan for a minor injuries hub and recognise that this project is a practical and cost-effective measure to relieve pressure on Beaumont and Drogheda hospitals.

This is not about future planning. It is about addressing the needs of a population that already exists and of hospitals that are already under pressure. The demand is clear: hospitals need relief. It is time to move from acknowledgement to action.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

The Government remains fully committed to the implementation of healthcare reform under the Sláintecare framework, ensuring that patients receive the right care in the right place at the right time. Central to our hospital avoidance strategy is the development of injury units, which provide safe and efficient care for injuries that are unlikely to require hospital admission, such as broken bones, sprains and burns. These units are designed to provide the same level of care for specific conditions as an emergency department but more locally and with significantly shorter waiting times. By providing the same level of care for specific conditions as an emergency department but with significantly shorter waiting times, injury units play a vital role in reducing congestion in our acute hospitals. Last year, there were 222,697 attendances at injury units, representing a 5% increase compared to 2024. Crucially, the median patient experience time, PET, in an injury unit remains exceptionally low, at just 1.3 hours, ensuring

that patients with non-life-threatening injuries can access the care they need much more quickly than in a traditional emergency department setting.

In relation to Balbriggan, the Balbriggan primary care centre already delivers a broad range of integrated services to meet the health needs of the local population. These include primary care therapy services, community specialist teams for older people, a chronic disease hub, mental health services and disability services. The centre also hosts two GP practices and a pharmacy. The Minister is committed to building capacity in primary care by recruiting additional staff and promoting advanced practice roles in the community.

The HSE undertook a national injury unit review in 2023 to examine service levels and geographical coverage. This review has informed the 2026 national service plan, which includes provision for new units in Tallaght, Athlone, Carlow and Ballina. Regarding the Deputy's request for a minor injury hub, I must advise that while the HSE undertook a national injury unit review in 2023 to examine geographical coverage, there are currently no plans to open an injury unit in Balbriggan. The 2026 national service plan focuses on new units in Tallaght, Athlone, Carlow and Ballina. However, the HSE continues to review expansion plans and future-proof the system by working towards standardising opening hours, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week, across existing sites to improve accessibility. Residents in Balbriggan currently have access to the following options for non-life-threatening injuries: the Mater Smithfield rapid injury clinic in Dublin 7; the Dundalk injury unit at St. Joseph's Hospital; and Connolly hospital emergency department, which features a dedicated nurse-led minor injury unit.

The Department and the HSE will continue to monitor population growth and geospatial implications to ensure that our urgent care footprint evolves to meet the needs of growing communities like Balbriggan.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: While I welcome the Minister of State's comments on the need to move appropriate services out of acute hospitals into smaller community-based hubs, and the policy direction is absolutely correct, Balbriggan is the type of location where this should be applied in practice. A community-based hub at Balbriggan would work extremely well under the pull-out model, especially for services that do not need to be delivered in acute hospital settings. This is particularly important for older people who are often the most disadvantaged by longer waiting times, overcrowded hospitals and extended waiting periods. In addition, a community hub at Balbriggan could accommodate preventative and routine services, such as vaccination clinics, baby and child health services and other primary and community care services that are currently fragmented and over-centralised. This approach would reduce footfall in our hospitals, improve uptake of preventative care and better serve Dublin Fingal West.

Importantly, the infrastructure already exists in Balbriggan. As I outlined, the primary care centre there is not completely leased by the HSE meaning there is real potential to expand services without the delays and costs of a new build. I urge the Minister of State to ensure Balbriggan, while not in the plan for 2026, is actively considered under the pull-out scheme and that the HSE engages locally to deliver a community hub that reflects Government policy and local population need. This is exactly the type of initiative that makes Sláintecare real on the ground. We need to make a plan for Balbriggan to keep people, not just in Balbriggan but

in Rush, Lusk and Skerries at the rural end, in the constituency and not travelling. I accept there are the three locations the Minister of State outlined, but we should keep it within the community rather than send people into Dublin or up to Louth.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. As I said, I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill.

The Government remains committed to the implementation of healthcare reforms that ensure patients receive safe and convenient care in the right place at the right time. Last year, we saw 222,697 attendances at injury units across the country, which was a 5% increase. This demonstrates the growing public confidence in this model. By maintaining an exceptionally low median patient experience time of just 1.3 hours, these units provide an efficient and faster pathway for those with non-life-threatening injuries.

While there are currently no plans for a stand-alone injury unit at Balbriggan, we are future-proofing the national network by standardising opening hours, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. seven days a week, and opening new units in Tallaght, Athlone, Carlow and Ballina. In the interim, Balbriggan primary care centre continues to play a vital role in delivering a vast array of integrated services from chronic disease management and older people's specialist teams to mental health and disability services. I assure the Deputy that I am committed to building further capacity in primary care by recruiting additional staff and promoting advanced practice roles to meet the needs of a growing population. The Department and the HSE will continue to monitor population growth and geospatial requirements to ensure our service evolves to meet the needs of the people of Balbriggan.

Disability Services

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I raise the proposed development of an equine therapy centre at the Toghermore House site located in Tuam. Toghermore House is owned by the HSE. It previously hosted a number of mental health support services until these services were relocated to a separate facility in Tuam in 2023. Since the relocation of these services, there have been proposals to develop the site, along with its over 40 acres of land, into an equine therapy centre. However, to date, no concrete plans have been progressed. Equine therapy offers significant physical, emotional and cognitive benefits to children and adults with disabilities. There are many examples of similar therapy centres. The Liskennett farm, which is based on the Cork-Limerick border, demonstrates the benefits these centres bring to both service users and the local community.

The Toghermore site has the potential to not only provide these benefits to the local community but also to become a regional centre for this form of therapy in the west of Ireland. I am of the understanding that as of last year the HSE was reviewing the future use of the Toghermore site. I recently met with Ability West to discuss disability services across County Galway and the proposed Toghermore project was raised with me. Given the massive potential of this project and the likely delays in securing funding if it were to be a HSE capital project, there is a view locally that other options should be considered in progressing this project. One such option could be the potential gifting of the land to a section 39 organisation to allow it to progress this project. That organisation could also engage with local sports clubs to explore

whether sporting facilities could also be co-located at the site. To do this, the HSE would need to engage with any such organisation and, to date, this meaningful engagement has not happened. Will the Minister of State provide an update on this issue and on the review into the future of the Toghermore site?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am responding on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, who is fully committed to providing the necessary supports for people with disabilities throughout the country, including those in Galway.

I advise the Deputy that the Toghermore House site at Tuam, which is owned and operated by the HSE, is under review. In 2024, a HSE feasibility study was conducted. Following on from this work, a more in-depth health planning study was devised to provide greater detail and allow a more informed decision to be made.

The HSE has additionally advised the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, that it aims to have a specialist appointed in February 2026 to commence the study, which will encompass the entire campus, including the buildings. Development of infrastructural proposals cannot be progressed until this review has concluded.

The HSE is also engaging with Galway County Council. A meeting was held between Ann Cosgrove, integrated healthcare area manager and Liam Hanrahan, CEO of Galway County Council, on 4 June 2025. A follow-up meeting was held recently between the HSE and county council and another meeting is planned between the parties before the end of January 2026. At present, the HSE continues to utilise facilities on the grounds of Toghermore House for a number of services, including the national counselling services, mental health services, quality and risk, paediatric outpatients, HR and administration support. In addition, a building at the Toghermore campus has been temporarily licensed by HSE to the Office of Public Works for the use of the office of the director of authorised intervention, Tuam. This is a time-bound agency under the auspices of the Department which is overseeing the excavation, recovery, analysis, identification, if possible, and dignified reburial of remains located at the former mother and baby institution in Tuam. The OPW is currently undertaking refurbishment works to fit out the building on the HSE Toghermore campus to meet these requirements. The works are also addressing essential structural issues, for example, works on the roof and upgrades to mechanical and electrical installations.

I advise the Deputy that the Department will continue to monitor the progress of the HSE in reviewing the Toghermore site. Any further progress on the utility of the site is subject to the outcome of the study to be completed by the HSE, which includes considerations of an equine therapy centre.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Minister of State for the update. I understand that the review is ongoing. I urge him to ensure that this is progressed as quickly as possible and that there is engagement with the local organisations like Ability West around the potential for equine therapy there. It would be a game-changer for Tuam and north Galway as a whole. There is a chronic lack of sporting facilities in the area and the potential development of an equine therapy centre would also be an opportunity to support the development of sporting facilities. Many local clubs and schools do not have these facilities. There is a wider need for

a communal sports area that the whole community could use. Gifting the site to a section 39 organisation would ensure the potential for greater flexibility to co-locate other facilities at the site if it was owned and operate by such an organisation. Toghermore could be an example of best practice of how we can create an inclusive campus that supports the needs of children and adults with disabilities in Tuam and the surrounding area. I urge the Minister of State to engage with the HSE, Ability West, and other organisations in the local area, and ensure that this project is progressed quickly.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy again for raising this. I know it is an important issue for the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and indeed for the whole Government. I know she is keen to ensure that all opportunities for the Toghermore campus are explored and that full service delivery capacity can be realised, to the benefit of local and surrounding communities. I reiterate the commitment of this Government to delivering real and tangible solutions to enhance services and better support the needs of adults and children with additional needs in Ireland, as outlined by the commitments set out in our programme for Government.

Further and Higher Education

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I raise the issue of the new Kilkenny college of the future. In October 2024, the Department announced the purchase of a stand-alone 15 acre site that would become the new home of the college of the future in Kilkenny. Government funding worth tens of millions of euro will be required to drive the development of the site at Joinersfolly, south of Kilkenny city. This site will create a new state-of-the-art education and training campus for Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board and, more importantly, consolidate the delivery of skills provision for the county. It is really positive news that we have our own site but we need this project to move on to the next stage as a matter of urgency.

The purchase of the 15-acre site was hugely important for the region. I and my colleagues are incredibly excited to see it become a campus that will delivery so much for the learners, staff, and the community of Kilkenny and Carlow ETB. In 2022, the Government announced that Kilkenny had been chosen as one of the locations to develop a further education and training college of the future. It is not ideal at the moment that further education and training provision in Kilkenny has been scattered around 15 different locations in the city. Now provision will be brought together in one modern, high-specification facility, where learners will have the opportunity to progress in the best possible facilities. This is what we mean when we speak about driving parity of esteem across the tertiary sector. It should not matter where people live, what they are studying, or whether they are in FET or university. Everybody should have the opportunity to reach their potential and they should have that opportunity as close to their home as possible.

As I said earlier, the project will consolidate existing provision, incorporate new training programmes and specialisms, and develop support services at one location with convenient transport access and services. There is huge excitement in Kilkenny and Carlow ETB. I extend warm congratulations and thanks to the executive team, originally led by Eileen Curtis, and now being brilliantly driven by Dr. Lindsay Malone, and to the current and previous board members for their commitment and support for the project. It will bring enormous benefits for students in the years ahead. As a former chairman of Kilkenny and Carlow ETB for over seven

years, it was a priority for us to get a further education and training campus for Kilkenny. When I was chairman of Kilkenny and Carlow ETB, we launched Carlow Institute of Further Education and Training, which has been a tremendous success, with more than 1,000 students.

For Kilkenny city and county to be at the stage it is at now marks an important step forward in the delivery of the college campus but we are ready to go. We just need a nod from the Government to appoint consultants to get this project started. This will be transformational for Kilkenny, the south east, and all the staff and students who currently use and potentially will use Kilkenny and Carlow ETB in the future. There is a trade expo tomorrow night in Carlow, run and organised by Kilkenny and Carlow ETB. There will be thousands of students from across the constituency who will get the opportunity to meet potential employers on the trade side. The fact that they can now learn their trade in Carlow and Kilkenny is significant. We have a brilliant facility in Carlow which is state of the art. It is top class. We need the same in Kilkenny and we need it now.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The proposal before us, as he said, is not just another bricks-and-mortar project. It is a strategic investment to deliver an integrated further education and training college for Kilkenny which addresses historical infrastructure deficits and drives the reform we have committed to across the FET sector. As the Deputy told us, a suitable site has been acquired at Joinersfolly, to the south of Kilkenny city. This purchase, coupled with the investment in enabling infrastructure, will consolidate dispersed provision into a single modern campus and deliver a consistent learner experience across a wide range of programmes. As the Deputy said, it is not ideal that provision has been scattered around 15 different locations. It should not matter where people live. This proposal aims to and will change that. Kilkenny and Carlow ETB proposes to deliver a flagship facility designed for approximately 1,000 full-time learners and 3,800 part-time learners. The campus will bring together training services, post leaving certificate courses, back to education initiatives, Youthreach, the adult learning service, adult guidance, and youth and community education under one roof and with room to adapt as needs evolve.

Following a robust evaluation, the Kilkenny project has been approved to proceed to the pre-tender project design, planning and procurement strategy stage. SOLAS has already commenced preparatory work on standardised tender documentation towards the appointment of design teams.

The departmental officials recently met with all 12 of the chief executives who have projects under this programme. At this meeting, the ETBs were informed that they need to prioritise the appointment of design teams for these projects in 2026. This initiative is one of 12 projects in the FET college major capital programme. Since September, eight have progressed to the same pre-tender stage, alongside Kilkenny, and these include Cork, Cavan, Bray, Newcastle West, Clonmel, Galway city and Dublin. Our intent is that all 12 projects will be fully designed and ready to tender within the current national development plan timeline to 2030, with strategic delivery occurring along the same timeline.

The FET major capital programme tackles legacy deficits and supports consolidation in high-quality facilities. It integrates FET pathways, develops specialist centres, strengthens unified tertiary planning and forges links with regional industries so learners train for real jobs

in their local economy. All of this is anchored in the FET strategy's three pillars of building skills, fostering inclusion and facilitating pathways. The pre-tender stage interrogates the preferred option, refines assumptions, advances design to inform the detailed business case, and sets the procurement strategy and project execution plan. It is about certainty on scope, budget, risks and delivery sequencing.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I particularly welcome the last words of the Minister of State on delivery because that is what we want. I really welcome the fact we are getting so close to the appointment of a design team this year for this project. It is not only the staff of Kilkenny and Carlow ETB that will benefit from this. There are 5,000 full-time and part-time students in Kilkenny who can benefit from the service. We are ready to go in Kilkenny. If we need to be put forward as a pilot scheme or an exemplar for other ETBs to follow that is absolutely no problem. Kilkenny and Carlow ETB has experience in managing high-volume capital developments, incorporating almost €90 million in what it has done over the past number of years. There is real-life experience. This has to be done urgently. Everybody in Carlow and Kilkenny ETB is excited for all of the current and future FET learners in the locality. With one in ten adults in Ireland now learning through FET or apprenticeships, the ongoing development of high-quality college environments is absolutely key, especially in locations such as Kilkenny and the south east. We will play a critical role in meeting the increasing demand for upskilling in our communities.

The capital infrastructure announcement for the Kilkenny college of the future is a milestone moment for FET in the south east. It will drive access to education, lifelong learning and workforce transformation in the region. As I have said, we need action and, more importantly, we need to see delivery. I implore the Minister of State to pull out Kilkenny and Carlow ETB as a stand-alone project. We are ready to go. We just need a little bit more impetus and drive from the Department to get this project over the line. It is all about delivery and I welcome the feedback and comments of the Minister of State. I also welcome her support and that of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, for this particular project. It is a key infrastructure project for the south east and thousands of children and learners will benefit year after year.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I am grateful to Deputy Cleere for providing me with the opportunity to set out the position for this project in Kilkenny. The Department and I are prepared to continue to work collaboratively with Kilkenny and Carlow ETB via SOLAS to advance this ambition. Capital investment is a key priority for the Department, and I recognise fully the importance of developing, enhancing and supporting the FET sector to allow it to provide high-quality campuses for teaching, learning and research. Let me be clear that the Department, working through SOLAS and in close collaboration with KCETB, will continue to drive this project at pace while maintaining high governance standards. We will deliver a campus that will stand the test of time and deliver for learners, employers and the wider community in Kilkenny.

It is important to understand what is happening now. The project has been approved to proceed to pre-tender project design, planning and procurement stage with a number of other FETs. When at this stage, the preferred option is subject to more detailed scrutiny, assumptions have to be tested and refined, risks are better understood, and the design is sufficiently advanced to arrive at the detailed business case. This project is at the preliminary business

case, which is an in-depth assessment of the project that looks at demand analysis and options analysis and reviews phasing potential and risk assessment.

I assure Deputy Cleere it is the intent of the Department to move as quickly as possible with all of the FET colleges. I have been to Carlow already and I will visit Kilkenny in the near future, within the next few months and this is a promise, to hear what is happening there. I am very pleased that the project is at this stage and that there is real hope it will be delivered in the near future.

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ó toghadh chun an Tí seo mé, bím i gcónaí ag caint faoi oideachas, go háirithe oideachas i mBaile Átha Cliath thuaidh. Mar is eol don Aire Stáit, bím i gcónaí ag labhairt faoi Stapolin Educate Together National School, ETNS, Gaelcholáiste Reachrainn agus Killester Raheny Clontarf, KRC, ETNS. Troidim ar son na scoileanna sin. I am always fighting for education and today I want to raise another school, which is St. Joseph's primary school. This is a small senior boys school which has been failed by how our DEIS and disadvantage supports are being applied. The school has 115 pupils. It has one of the most disadvantaged catchment areas in Dublin's north inner city but it is still classified as DEIS 2 rather than DEIS 1. I have sent representations to the Department because it needs significant supports but it is not getting them.

I have been speaking to the principal, who is working tirelessly. He has told me that more than 20% of the pupils are in IPAS or emergency accommodation. These include children in international protection, children from Ukraine, children in emergency accommodation and children living in homelessness. Approximately 25% of the pupils live in the north inner city, an area which is designated as having concentrated disadvantage. The Minister of State is aware of this and we have had discussions on it. Despite this, the school is excluded from North East Inner City Initiative, NEIC, supports and City Connects supports.

What makes the situation even worse is that on the same grounds as the school is on there is a secondary school which receives City Connects supports and which has benefited from NEIC funding. Children from the same families, living in the same homes and often facing the same difficulties walk into one building that receives supports and another building that does not. This is the reality. St. Joseph's is also a continuation school for three DEIS 1 primary schools. These are St. Mary's primary school, which is beside it, St. Vincent's infant boys school in the Ballybough and Summerhill area, and St. Laurence O'Toole's school on Sheriff Street. These are all DEIS 1 schools.

In practice what is happening is that boys attend one of these schools until first class. A boy could be going to one of these schools with his twin sister. At the age of eight he is transferred to St. Joseph's, which is an all-boys school, and he loses the DEIS 1 supports that his sister is still getting.

He is losing the DEIS 1 supports. His younger brothers in the junior school are getting the DEIS 1 supports but the boys who transfer to the more senior school are not. The principal, whom I spoke to today, estimates that fewer than ten pupils of the 160 come from non-DEIS backgrounds. From speaking to Tiarnán Crowe, the principal, and Richie Walsh, the ex-principal and father of Mikey Walsh, I found their passion for education is exemplary. This

issue needs to be investigated urgently. The school's intake is huge and it has already been recognised as experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage. Even yesterday, we were speaking about mental health, and we are always speaking about trying to bring up young men. In this case, support for young men from a disadvantaged area is being removed at a critical time in their development. If we are serious about prevention, this is exactly the stage at which we should be strengthening their support. St. Joseph's, the senior school from second class upward, also has an historical junior autism class, but then there is no junior mainstream class in the school for those children to integrate with. This is acknowledged by the Department in emails to me and it is acknowledged by the NCSE as being contrary to the best model it has, yet the school is still being told there is no immediate solution. As a result, the children remain in an unsuitable structure and a small school. The staff in St. Joseph's are exemplary and I urge that this be examined by the Department. I thank the Minister of State for his engagement so far.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): It is like being in a meeting in Cork North-West. I am delighted to see how professional an operation it is. I am delighted to be serving with the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach as well. Deputy Heneghan raised the issue in relation to disadvantage in the north-east inner city. I thank the Deputy for his engagement on education matters in the role that I hold at the moment. I urge all Deputies and all public representatives to continue engaging on education because it is hugely important for the future of our country. Education has served Ireland very well over the last decades and beyond and we need to ensure that we are really up to speed with it.

The DEIS programme supports 1,200 primary and post-primary schools, reaching approximately 260,000 students with an annual investment of €180 million. The DEIS programme is targeted at schools with the highest level of concentrated disadvantage, with the DEIS urban band 1 schools representing those with the highest concentration of students with the greatest level of need and therefore receiving the most intensive supports. Schools with DEIS urban band 2 supports also face significant need and receive a broad range of supports, including the reduced pupil-teacher ratio, additional school grants, access to the home-school community liaison scheme and the school completion programme, literacy and numeracy initiatives and targeted attendance and retention measures.

It is possible for two neighbouring schools to have different profiles in terms of the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the relative weighting of disadvantage apportioned in each. The designation of neighbouring schools to different DEIS status does not mean that there is no educational disadvantage present in one school. It means that the concentrated level of educational disadvantage of the two schools is different. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is committed to narrowing the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and introducing an innovative solution to address disadvantage. To this end, the new DEIS strategy to 2035 will be published in the coming months. This will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of children at risk of education disadvantage, developing more innovative approaches to tackling education disadvantage and working towards a more flexible system of support to ensure that a school can receive the right supports at the right time. Any future changes to the overall allocation of resources to schools under the DEIS programme will be considered within the context of the new DEIS strategy. In

respect of the education provisions, the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, works with schools to ensure pupils in special classes receive an appropriate education, with teachers, SNAs and inclusion supports.

In relation to support provided in the north-east inner city project, it should be noted that in order to be classified as a north-east inner city primary school, the primary school must be a DEIS urban band 1 school located within the north-east inner city boundaries. St. Joseph's Primary School in Fairview is not located within the boundaries and does not have the DEIS urban band 1 status. Ten primary schools located within the north-east inner city with DEIS band 1 status, in addition to having the high percentage of pupils enrolled within the north-east inner city, are classified as such schools. It is important to recognise the challenges outlined by the Deputy and to compliment the team working there. I have no doubt that they are doing extraordinary work, particularly in relation to the challenges the Deputy outlined. We will be publishing the new DEIS strategy in the coming months but issues like that will have to be fed into that process as well.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I really appreciate the work and I also appreciate the work with Stapolin and everything else in the area, with the Killester, Raheny, Clontarf, KRC, secondary school campaign and Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. In the Minister of State's words, the designation of neighbouring schools as having different DEIS status does not mean that there is no educational disadvantage present in one school. It means that the concentrated levels of educational disadvantage of the two schools are different. From speaking to the Minister and visiting the school, I can see that is not the case. It is the same pupils going through the school and then going to the secondary school. It is in that period between age eight and when they get to secondary school that they are being removed from these supports that we put in place for children in disadvantaged areas. I urge the Minister of State to get the Department to examine this school. I do not know how it slipped through the cracks.

I acknowledge the work the Minister of State has done and the work of the constituency TD, Deputy Gary Gannon of the Social Democrats, who represents the children attending this school. The children remain in an unsuitable structure. As I have said, the staff in St. Joseph's are excellent but they are going beyond. They are stretched and they are missing that funding. I am asking for an urgent review of St. Joseph's current DEIS status. It makes no sense that the status has been removed for that period for young men, especially with the struggles of life at this time. I also ask for immediate inclusion in the NEIC and City Connect supports as the sisters of children in this school, who are attending a school beside it, in the same catchment and the same area, are getting these supports. It makes no sense that the Department is saying this. I ask for a concrete timeline and solution for appropriate placement in the junior autism class. I appreciate the work the Minister of State has done and his visits to schools in north Dublin. I have seen first-hand the work he has done but I ask him to visit this school to see the current situation. I think it slipped through the cracks of the Department and I urge that it be examined. I am asking the Department not only for a review, but for a clear timeline for the DEIS reclassification. Young men should not have supports removed at such a critical time in their development.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question and the energy he has put into it. The DEIS programme has been hugely successful right across the country, both in urban

and rural Ireland, to ensure that we are tackling disadvantage at its core. Retaining students within the education system is a huge priority for the Government. It is huge for Government policy and for my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, and me as well. We are acutely aware of the challenges that exist. The DEIS programme has shown up the challenges. On a number of occasions, we have seen that schools which are practically on the same campuses and have pupils from the same socio-economic backgrounds are classified in different strands. The system to designate DEIS schools is completely automated. This has been looked at very carefully but, as we go into the new DEIS programme, I and the current and former Ministers, Deputies Naughton, McEntee and Foley, as well as Department officials, are acutely aware of this anomaly that is showing up within the system. One thing we need to do is to make sure that we are tackling disadvantage at its core and that we are not leaving anybody behind. Education is one of the great levellers and one of the great enablers. We want to ensure we get it right in the inner city and right across the country. The Deputy could no be more direct in the picture he paints of this issue. It is something the Department is giving serious consideration to in the context of the DEIS strategy, which we are committed to publishing in the coming months. We will certainly take on board what the Deputy has said in relation to it.

Emergency Winter Payment for Disabled People: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- disabled people in Ireland are among the most socially excluded and disadvantaged in the State, with some of the highest poverty, deprivation, and unemployment rates in Ireland;
- one in five disabled people live in consistent poverty, nearly four times the national average, while nearly 40 per cent live in enforced deprivation;
- in the context of escalating costs in energy, food and housing, disabled people are particularly vulnerable to cost pressures, especially as they are more likely to spend more of their time at home;
- the State-commissioned Indecon Cost of Disability in Ireland - Research Report, published in 2021, estimated the extra cost of living with a disability to be in the range of €8,700 - €12,300 (€10,490 - €14,830 adjusted for inflation);
- Budget 2026 reduced income for disabled people by an estimated €1,400 per year, according to the Disability Federation of Ireland; and
- the Disability Federation of Ireland has called Budget 2026 a "devastating setback for disabled people... which leaves disabled people poorer, unsupported, and excluded";

further notes that:

- the need for a cost of disability payment has been identified as far back as 2004, something which was reaffirmed by the Indecon report;

— a 2022 Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled "Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare" found working-age adults with disabilities experience "distinctively high rates of income poverty, deprivation and consistent poverty";

— the 2025 Programme for Government committed to the introduction of "a permanent annual Cost of Disability support payment with a view to incrementally increasing this payment";

— the Government has failed to deliver any such permanent payment, and instead delivered a Budget which cut the incomes of disabled people and left them worse off; and

— as a result of the Government cutting their incomes, disabled people have been forced to make unconscionable decisions about how to live on more limited means, forgoing necessary levels of home heating, nutrition, and greatly reducing their mobility and independence;

recognises that:

— the Government repeatedly claims that it wants to target resources at those who need it most and an emergency winter payment for disabled people would do just that, meaning it is in line with purported Government budgetary policy;

— disabled people need emergency financial support as they are experiencing an extremely challenging winter period, due to cost pressures associated both with their disabilities and seasonal costs, including energy, housing, and food costs;

— an immediate emergency winter payment would serve as a vital support, which would protect against the increased risk to disabled people of falling into poverty and deprivation; and

— an emergency €400 winter payment is affordable and fiscally sustainable, given the cost of the measure, €124 million, amounts to a small portion of the budget surplus last year, which was even larger than the Government forecasted; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately (within a month of this motion being agreed) introduce an emergency winter payment of €400 to all qualified recipients of;

— Disabilities Allowance;

— Invalidity Pension;

— Blind Pension;

— Incapacity Supplement;

— Disablement Pension; and

— Domiciliary Care Allowance; and

— immediately progress the introduction of a permanent cost of disability support payment, as promised in the Programme for Government, as a matter of urgency.

I rise to introduce this motion, on behalf of my party, to introduce an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities, who are so badly in need of the support of this House. I thank the disability organisations - the Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland and Access for All - and others for their leadership in this campaign and the opportunity to support them. I also thank my parliamentary party colleagues for their support and Deputy Liam Quaide, to my left, for his counsel and leadership and his work on disability policy.

We bring this motion to describe the callousness of the Government and present it with an opportunity to correct its neglect. People with disabilities in Ireland face a cruel system and a crueller Government. They are the cohort in Ireland with among the highest poverty rates and deprivation rates. The experiences of people with disabilities in services - transport, housing, access to care, financial support, accessibility, educational supports - illustrate the astonishing range with which the State manages to fail disabled people. Ireland's employability gap for people with disabilities, according to a 2022 OECD report, is the highest in the developed world, meaning that if you are disabled in Ireland, you are less likely than your peers to be employed than in any other developed country. What a damning indictment of successive Governments' policy. To add insult to injury, this Government chose in its most recent budget to strip people with disabilities of €1,400 in annual payments, according to the Disability Federation of Ireland.

Last month many disabled people gathered in the cold and rain outside the gates of Leinster House to describe the brutality of this winter. I and many others in this House heard their stories: the woman who searches in her wheelchair from shop to shop to find the best deals for food; the man with the cane who sits in front of his electric heater and is now turning on only one heating rung instead of two; the mother with Parkinson's who had to take her child out of crèche because she had to choose between that and feeding her family; the young man choosing between heat and charging his electric wheelchair. The list goes on and on.

During budget week, the Minister for Social Protection told this House that he had introduced payments that would keep up with inflation. What he did not say is that the net change for people on disabilities payments was negative. Not only did he not keep up with the generalised rate of inflation or with energy costs, housing costs or food costs; he also failed to keep disabled people's incomes level with even the nominal levels that they were at last year. He actually reduced them.

I know the Minister is a good man. He is doing his best. Quite frankly, however, a reduction in incomes for people with disabilities, especially during a cost-of-living crisis, is absolutely appalling and shocking. When I asked the Minister for a report on the cost-of-disability payment in committee, he responded by saying he did not like reports and would prefer to act. Well, here is the Minister's opportunity. He can act, and Fianna Fáil can act with him. We have even written the motion for him and designed the scheme. All he has to do is say yes. Should he say no, however, I have a request. It is not good enough to just read from the sheet prepared by his officials or collaborate with the Government Whip on voting down or amending the motion. No, he must go further. I ask him not to visit upon the disabled people of this country a further indignity of not being honest with them as he does so. I ask him to at least have the courage to tell them that he will reduce their income and will not restore it this year. I ask him to at least tell them that he has no intention of honouring the commitment in the programme

for Government on a cost-of-disability payment until he is at least 40% of the way through his term. I ask him to at least give them his honesty if he cannot give them his support, and I ask him to look them in the eye as he does so. Some of them are here in the Gallery and they are watching.

To those of you at home watching, perhaps with one rung of the heater on instead of two, I want you to know that the Social Democrats knows you are there. We see you, we hear you and we share your anger. We are fighting for you, even if this Government is not.

I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The cost-of-living crisis is affecting people across society but disproportionately impacting disabled people. It has been long established that disabled people already face major additional financial burdens that result from living with a disability in a society that is so poorly adapted to their needs. These costs mount up daily in areas like healthcare, transport, energy, specialist equipment and the variety of supports needed to live as independently as possible.

The figures are stark. Two in every five people with a disability cannot afford essentials like heating or new clothes. One in five lives in consistent poverty. Disabled people here also face far greater barriers to employment than their European counterparts. Yet, instead of easing that pressure, budget 2026 is leaving disabled people €1,400 worse off than the previous year. That is indefensible.

In the Social Democrats alternative budget, we put forward fair and achievable proposals, including a permanent cost-of-disability payment alongside a €15 weekly increase in disability allowance. Taken together, those measures would have increased disabled people's incomes by over €1,800 a year. Following a campaign led by a coalition of disability organisations in December, we called on the Government to introduce an emergency winter payment of €400 for disabled people and we are doing so again today.

We actually agree with the Government that targeted cost-of-living measures are needed for groups most vulnerable to poverty, but the Government failed to take that opportunity in the recent budget. It did not introduce the cost-of-disability payment that was set out in the programme for Government and actually stripped away one-off supports. At that protest in December, one man spoke about having to decide whether to turn on two bars or one bar on his electric heater because energy costs have risen so sharply. At a later session here on the campus of Leinster House, we heard a harrowing account of a woman having to stop home dialysis because of energy costs and relying instead on hospital dialysis, which placed her health more at risk and is actually a greater financial cost to the State.

This is the gulf that has opened up in Ireland between a flourishing economy on the one hand and the vindication of basic rights for disabled people on the other. We again urge the Minister to intervene and deliver this modest targeted payment. It would benefit around 310,000 people at a cost of approximately €124 million. It is eminently doable. Each year winter bonus payments across core social welfare schemes are funded through Supplementary Estimates. This payment we are proposing can be delivered in exactly the same way. Of course, much more needs to be done in the medium to long term, such as removing barriers to education and employment, introducing personalised budgets and delivering the permanent

cost-of-disability payment. Right now, however, people are struggling, and a targeted €400 payment would be a very modest step in the right direction and would make a material difference to people who have been disregarded for too long. This comes back to basic respect and dignity for disabled people. They deserve a Government that puts its money where its mouth is when it comes to the real, unavoidable costs of living with a disability and a Government that matches soothing rhetoric around disability rights with concrete action.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Fight, fight, fight, scrap, argue and fight again. That is how one disabled woman described her relationship with the State in the audiovisual room recently. She is not alone. It is the one thing that always comes back when we talk to disabled people about their real lived experiences. It is a constant struggle for them. They are trying to fight and advocate for themselves to get supports they not only need, but are entitled to. Disabled people really feel like this Government has forgotten them and that they have been ignored. When you look at the budget that went through in October, it is clear why they feel that way. The budget was absolutely huge. We are a wealthy country. Millions upon millions were given in tax breaks to developers, and yet disabled people are €1,400 worse off as a result of that budget. I really do not understand how the Government can talk about supporting disabled people when it is leaving them that far behind in the annual budget.

I know it is planned to bring in a cost-of-disability allowance. That is really welcome, but there is a gap. People are struggling now. This motion is very modest. We are talking about €400. However, it will support disabled people over the period from now, when they are struggling with the cost of living, until the time when the Minister is able to bring in that cost-of-disability payment. We really ask that the Minister look at this. I also ask the Minister, when he stands up, not to speak to us, the people in the Gallery and the people watching this debate about the services now being provided for disabled people because that is the constant narrative from the Government. Disabled people cannot eat services. They cannot clothe themselves with disability services. They cannot pay their rent or mortgage with disability services. They certainly cannot heat their homes with them. We are talking about a €400 payment. It is very targeted. It is targeted at the people who need it most. We have discussed this with Government backbenchers and they agree. The Minister knows this is the right thing to do. I ask him to give serious consideration to it, particularly as people are not going to be able to manage until he can bring in the cost-of-disability payment.

Deputy Jen Cummins: This motion requires the Government to do the right thing for disabled people. I worked with the Irish Wheelchair Association in the late nineties as a personal assistant. Just before that, I worked as a personal support worker for disabled people in London. I was a newly graduated young person and I was very happy to do that work and gain an insight into the perspectives, practical needs and care needs of people with disabilities. At the time, I noted that services and supports for disabled people in London were far better than those for Dubliners. I am not sure that Dubliners are now in a better situation than they were in the late nineties. Things are equally as bad. This country needs to make sure that all vulnerable people are protected.

When we have all of the budget surpluses we have, I am lost for words that we always choose to forget the most vulnerable in our society. The need for a cost-of-disability payment was identified as far back as 2004, only a couple of years after I came back from London, when

I was working with people with disabilities. That principle was reaffirmed by the State-commissioned Indecon report published in 2021. In 2022, the ESRI produced a report, *Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare*, which found that "working-age ... [people] with disabilities ... experienced distinctively high rates of income poverty, deprivation and consistent poverty". It is mind-boggling that working people would still face consistent poverty. The programme for Government contains a commitment regarding the introduction of "a permanent Annual Cost of Disability Support Payment with a view to incrementally increasing this payment." However, when it came to budget 2026, there were tumbleweeds. Nothing was included. The Government has come out with this new mantra that this is year one of a five-year budget. That is no use to people with disabilities who cannot pay their bills now. As my colleagues stated, they are choosing between eating and heating. They are choosing whether to turn on a dialysis machine and to live their lives with dignity. The cynical part of me wonders whether the Government is saving up money in this year one of a five-year budget until just before the next election, when there will be a big splurge. I really hope I am wrong about that. I really hope I am just being uber-cynical and that this will not prove to be the case.

In my constituency of Dublin South-Central, I meet people who are struggling to pay bills, eat healthily and heat their homes. They really need this extra money. As I said earlier, no one in this country should be struggling or falling below a safety net. They should be allowed to live their lives with dignity. This motion gives the Government a solution. The Taoiseach regularly stands where the Minister is sitting now during Leaders' Questions and tells us that we do not offer solutions. Here is a solution. It is very practical. As Deputy Whitmore said, it is not going to cost the earth but it will mean the world to people with disabilities. This is an easy solution. Please take it. We love giving our solutions away because we have solutions that are costed, focused and evidence based. We are working with people in the community in this country and we know that things are not as good as they should be. I ask the Minister to consider what we are saying.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Deputies Hayes and Quaide for bringing this motion before us and for their commitment in respect of this matter. Effective parliamentary exchange often involves a contest of beliefs. Some people hold certain values while others hold different values. That is an exchange. However, this motion also includes what are just facts. If I mention a fact that the Minister disputes or says is not true, he should feel free to call me out. The first fact is that "disabled people in Ireland are among the most socially excluded and disadvantaged in the State, with some of the highest poverty, deprivation, and unemployment rates in Ireland". The next fact is that "one in five disabled people live in consistent poverty, nearly four times the national average, while nearly 40 per cent live in enforced deprivation". The motion reads:

... in the context of escalating costs in energy, food and housing, disabled people are particularly vulnerable to cost pressures, especially as they are more likely to spend more of their time at home ...

We know that to be true. The next line reads:

... the State-commissioned Indecon Cost of Disability in Ireland - Research Report, published in 2021, estimated the extra cost of living with a disability to be in the range of €8,700 - €12,300 ...

That is €14,800 when adjusted for inflation. We also know that to be true. Given the truths and the facts that all of us across the Chamber must accept regardless of our beliefs and values, this motion is effectively about whether we are willing to let disabled people sit in cold homes this winter while the State tells itself comforting stories about its future plans.

Right now, people with disabilities are being forced into decisions that no one in this Chamber would accept for themselves. They have to choose between heating and food, medication or the equipment they need to stay alive and independent. That is not rhetoric. That is the lived reality described by the Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland and Access for All Ireland, which protested outside this House in December asking for one urgent and modest intervention, an emergency winter payment of €400.

Disability in Ireland is not just about individual circumstances. It is about inequality. It is also about the extra costs people face just to get around, stay connected and live with dignity. These are absolutely not lifestyle choices. They are the price of participation in society. If you are disabled, you are more likely to struggle to make ends meet. You are more likely to face barriers in accessing housing, transport, work and education. You are more likely to be pushed to the margins and told to wait. We know from the State's own research that the cost of disability can swallow more than half of a household's disposable income. The cost can rise even higher for people with severe limitations. When you strip that cost out, poverty rates for disabled households explode. These are not marginal pressures. They are structural, relentless and exhausting for those who are forced to experience them.

Disabled households carry costs most of us will never have to think about, such as the costs of medical equipment that has to stay powered, assistive technology, accessible transport, modified homes and ongoing care. None of these are optional. All of them cost money. Budget 2026 stripped away cost-of-living supports, leaving disabled people up to €1,400 worse off. The Government knew the cost of disability was not addressed and chose to proceed anyway. It made a judgment, and today we are asking it to reflect on that decision.

It is shameful that we are even debating this in such a wealthy country. Last week, we were talking about the fall-out and anxiety faced by thousands of carers opening letters warning them that they may now owe tax. This week, we are debating whether people with disabilities should simply be able to heat their homes. That says everything about who we keep asking to pay the price. There seems to be no limit to how far this Government is willing to go when it comes to making life harder for people with disabilities, whether that be through administrative decisions, quiet policy choices or simple delay. That is how inequality grows, quietly and predictably, budget after budget.

We are often told in this House, when we bring forward solutions, whether it is housing, infrastructure, policing or school places, that the issue is not that simple, that things take time, legislation has to change and that a system needs to catch up. However, the motion we bring forward today is literally that simple. There are people with disabilities who live in households they cannot afford to heat. We are in the throes of winter. It is freezing, and there are people with disabilities who are making choices between heating, eating and medical equipment.

There is a requirement for urgency in how we approach this because it is not reflective of a modern republic when we ask people who are already vulnerable to experience hardship that none of us across the Chamber would ourselves ever have to face.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Tairgim leasú Uimh. 1:

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

"recognises that:

- the Government acknowledges that disabled people face additional costs in their daily lives;
- the Government's determination to address this issue is reflected in the Programme for Government commitment, to introduce a permanent Annual Cost of Disability Support Payment;
- delivering on this commitment is a core objective of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which the Government published in September 2025;
- a dedicated Disability Unit has been established in the Department of An Taoiseach, to drive progress in enhancing supports for disabled people;
- progress will be driven and monitored by the Cabinet Committee on Children, Disability and Education;
- under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was developed with the involvement of disability advocates and representative groups, the Department of Social Protection is mandated to lead a cross-Government Strategic Focus Network Summit on the Cost of Disability; and
- work is already underway to establish and define the detailed remit of the Strategic Focus Network Summit:
 - the Strategic Focus Network Summit will be organised by the Department of Social Protection and, as a cross-Government endeavour, will include, other Government departments, and importantly it will involve disabled people and their advocates;
 - this work will inform the approach to be taken in delivering on the Programme for Government commitment;
 - officials have held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss the structure and content of the Strategic Focus Network Summit;
 - the views of disabled people and all relevant research, such as the Indecon Cost of Disability in Ireland - Research Report, and the more recent Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled "Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare", will be given due consideration when progressing this work; and
 - a public consultation process on how a cost of disability can best be delivered will also be launched shortly;

notes that:

- there is already a broad range of income support payments for disabled people;
- there are approximately 231,000 recipients of disability income support payments and 170,000 recipients of caring payments, including the Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA), with estimated expenditure of €6.5 billion across illness, disability and carer's schemes combined in 2026; and
- Budget 2026 provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures, and this contained significant targeted measures to support disabled people, including:
 - a €20 per month increase in the monthly rate of DCA bringing it to €380 per month from January 2026, this represents an increase of over €70 or 23 per cent since 2022;
 - a €10, or 4.1 per cent increase in the weekly rates of payment, bringing the personal rates of payment to €254 per week from January 2026, this represents a €51 increase in weekly disability income support payments since Budget 2021;
 - the highest ever increases in the Child Support Payment, an increase of €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over, and of €8 to €58 for children under 12, these payments have increased by €48.20 and €28.20 respectively since 2017;
 - a €5, or 15 per cent increase in the Fuel Allowance, bringing it to €38 per week from January 2026 providing recipients with an additional €140 during the annual Fuel Allowance season; and
- an increase of €325 to €1,000 in the income disregard for single carers and €750 to €2,000 in the disregard for a couple, these increases mean a couple with an income of just under €140,000 can still qualify for a carer's payment;
- both the increases to personal rates of payment and the Fuel Allowance were ahead of the general inflation rate reported by the Central Statistics Office of 3.2 per cent in the year to the end of November 2025, and an energy cost increase of approximately 3.5 per cent for the same period; and
- to make the welfare to work journey as smooth as possible, and to support disabled people into work, Budget 2026 provided for:
 - people moving from Disability Allowance or Blind Pension to take up work to retain their Fuel Allowance payment for five years;
 - people getting Disability Allowance or Blind Pension who have children being eligible for Back to Work Family Dividend when taking up employment and moving off those payments;
 - expansion of the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) to people who acquire a disability while in employment, and to those who transfer from Invalidity Pension to Partial Capacity Benefit; and
 - increased rates under the WSS, which will take effect from April;

— in Budget 2026, the Government allocated €3.8 billion to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for disability services in 2026, including funding for community-based specialist disability services to ensure people with disabilities receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place;

— this represents a 20 per cent increase year-on-year and represents an overall increase since 2020 of €1.8 billion; and

— a dedicated unit has been established in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, to drive reform and to lead a full review of Ireland's disability service model and this unit will work hand-in-hand with disabled people, their families, and representative organisations to shape a long-term vision for services to 2030; and

further notes that:

— under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme, a special Heating Supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances that have special heating needs, for example, in the case of ill health, infirmity or a medical condition;

— an Additional Needs Payment may also be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which an applicant is unable to meet out of their own resources;

— in 2025 there were over 2,300 Additional Needs Payments made towards household bills and heating at a cost of almost €1.3 million;

— there were 692 recipients of Heat Supplement at end of 2025; and

— any person who considers they may have an entitlement to a payment under the SWA scheme is encouraged to contact their local community welfare service, and the National Community Welfare Contact Centre is in place - 0818-607080 - which will direct callers to the appropriate office."

Gabhaim buíochas leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta as cúrsaí míchumais a ardú sa Teach. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí Hayes agus Quaide as an rún tábhachtach seo. I assure the Cathaoirleach that the Government recognises that disabled people, their families and representative organisations face unavoidable and ongoing additional costs in their daily lives. I assure the House that improving outcomes for disabled people is a top priority for me personally, and for the Government. It is our determination to achieve this, and this is reflected in a key programme for Government commitment that will introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. Delivering on this commitment is a core objective of the national human rights strategy for disabled people. A dedicated disability unit has been established in Roinn an Taoisigh to drive progress in enhancing supports for disabled people. Progress will also be driven and monitored by the Cabinet committee.

We know that addressing the cost of disability is not a question of income support alone. The delivery of, and access to, services is also key. The Private Members' motion refers to the Indecon report on the cost of disability. That report was commissioned by my Department, but it sets out how addressing the additional cost of disability requires a broader approach than simply increasing existing payments or introducing new ones. We need all of the Departments and agencies of government to work together to address this issue in a comprehensive way. Under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was

developed with the involvement of disability advocates and representative groups, the Department of Social Protection is mandated to lead a cross-government strategic focus summit on the cost of disability. That work is under way, and I will come back to that later on.

There is a broad range of income support payments for disabled people, including disability allowance, partial capacity benefit and invalidity pension. There are approximately 231,000 recipients of disability income support payments and 170,000 recipients of caring payments, including domiciliary care allowance. Expenditure across illness, disability and carer's schemes combined in 2026 is estimated at €6.5 billion, which represents an increase in expenditure of approximately 38% since 2020.

We were clear as a Government that there would be no one-off payments in budget 2026. I want to introduce permanent measures that will improve outcomes for disabled people. I also take this opportunity to outline the measures Government has in place to support disabled people. Budget 2026 provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures. It builds on the already comprehensive level of support available by targeting measures aimed at supporting carers and recipients of domiciliary care allowance and making it easier for people with disability to progress into and, more important, stay in employment. Recipients of payments received a Christmas bonus of a double week's payment in December. We provided a €20 increase in the monthly rate of domiciliary care allowance, which brought it to €380 from January. This represents an increase of over €70, or 23%, since 2022. We also increased the weekly personal rate of payment such as disability allowance by €10, or 4.1%. That brings the personal rate of payment to €254 per week from this month, which represents a €51 increase in the weekly disability income support payments since budget 2021.

Recipients of disability allowance and other payments who have children have seen their weekly rates of child support payment increase by €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over, and by €8 to €58 for children under 12, from January 2026. These are the largest ever increases in these payments, which have increased by €48.20 and €28.20, respectively, since 2017. This month, the fuel allowance payment increased by €5 to €38 per week. This represents an increase of 15%, providing recipients with an additional €140 during the annual fuel allowance season. Both the increases to personal rates of payment and the fuel allowance are ahead of the general inflation rate reported by the Central Statistics Office of 3.2% in the year to the end of November 2025.

Importantly, in relation to the cost of living, and the cases being referred to by Deputies, nobody in Ireland needs to go without food or heating for financial reasons. My Department's community welfare service is available to provide financial support for those essentials. I do not want a misleading and dangerous message to go out that people must choose between food and heating. I will ask my officials to again engage with the organisations to point out the supports and contact points available. Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, a special heating supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances who have special heating needs, for example, in the case of ill health, infirmity or a medical condition. Additional need payments may also be made to help meet essential one-off costs, which an applicant is unable to meet out of their own resources. These payments are available to those who need them and qualify, regardless of whether they are in receipt of a social protection payment.

In 2025, there were over 2,300 additional need payments made towards household bills and heating, at an investment of almost €1.3 million. At the end of 2025, there are 692 recipients of heat supplement. Again, I ask any person who considers they may have an entitlement to a payment under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme to contact the Department. I will provide contact details to Deputies. There are supports, and I want to make sure that those who need them know they are there and that they can avail of them.

The budget also contained a number of measures, in line with work I am doing on an ongoing basis, to make the welfare to work journey as smooth as possible and to support disabled people into work. Those moving from disability allowance or blind pension to take up work will be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for up to five years. We are making the back to work family dividend available to people who move off disability allowance or the blind pension and into employment. The wage subsidy scheme is a key disability employment support provided by my Department. It aims to encourage employers to offer substantial and sustainable employment to disabled people and it supports the employer to cover the costs of significantly adapting a job's tasks or role. Budget 2026 provides for reducing the number of bands in the wage subsidy scheme from five to three and increasing all the rates so that from April 2026, the base rate will be €7.50 per hour, up from €6.30. Where an employer employs between seven and 16 employees under the scheme, they will receive a new rate of €8.50.

In addition, an employer who employs 25 or more employees on the wage subsidy scheme may receive a grant of €30,000 towards the cost of employing an employment assistance officer.

These changes are important because they encourage employment. As Deputy Hayes said, we have one of the lowest records and I want to change that. They are also hugely important because we know that a fear of losing secondary benefits is a major barrier to people taking up employment. We have also provided for the extension of the wage subsidy scheme to people already at work, who acquire a disability or whose ability to work has reduced such that their job has to be significantly adapted. Last year, we modernised the language of the wage subsidy scheme in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We also increased the pool of potential employers. I will continue to focus on employment and increasing the opportunities available for disabled people within employment.

I want to focus now on the work that is under way in my Department in relation to the cost of disability and the permanent payment. This is a cross-government endeavour, including other Government Departments. Most importantly, it involves ongoing consultation with disabled people and their advocates. My officials have already held a series of meetings to discuss issues in relation to the strategic focus network summit as well as cost-of-disability issues. Last October, we held bilateral meetings with the National Disability Authority, AsIAM, Family Carers Ireland and the Disability Federation of Ireland. The cost-of-disability strategic focus network summit was the main agenda item at my Department's disability consultative forum on 2 December last. The organisations that attended were Chime, the Disability Federation of Ireland, Inclusion Ireland, Independent People with Disabilities, the Irish Society for Autism, the Irish Wheelchair Association, the National Advocacy Service, the National Disability Authority, Rehab and Vision Ireland. Just last Friday, we met with the Disabled Persons' Organisations Network, namely, the Irish Deaf Society, the National Platform of Self-Advocates, Disabled Women Ireland, AsIAM and Independent Living Movement Ireland.

We will be launching a public consultation on this payment and I look forward to submissions from across the House in relation to that. As I committed to Deputy O'Reilly, I intend to discuss it with the Joint Committee on Social Protection. I assure the House that this is my priority for budget 2027. I look forward to submissions on what that payment may look like and to engagement well ahead of budget 2027, so we have a chance to get a fully agreed proposal, if possible, on what that payment will look like. The key difference is that this is a permanent payment, not a year-on-year temporary payment. It is a permanent investment in addressing the cost of disability for those who need it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: People with disabilities in this country consistently live in poverty and experience financial struggles much more than the general population, as we have heard in detail from my colleagues this morning. Addressing the cost of disability is not giving something extra for people with disabilities as an act of generosity or pity. It is about creating a more equal Ireland and realising the rights of a group of individuals who face huge barriers to the realisation of those rights. It is about showing people the respect that they deserve as valued members of society. We need to see the cost of disability addressed in the long term. People with disabilities should not live with a tax on their lives. They deserve the same standards of living and care, and the same chance to thrive, as everybody else.

This motion is about dealing with the present crisis, which has left so many people unsure of how they will heat their homes, pay for medication or travel to appointments. It is about having a real plan and ambition to make the long-term changes that we need to guarantee people equality. I do not apologise for using that language. The Minister has accused us of using alarmist language. He told us to be careful about using alarmist language when we talk about people choosing between heating and eating. It is not alarmist to the people whose lived experience is choosing between heating and eating. However, I am really glad that the Minister raised the topic of language because in this State we have seen a charitable model of disability dominate policy delivery for people with disabilities. We have just about moved ourselves to a medical model in certain parts of our policy-making for people with disabilities. What we actually need, when we think and talk about disability, is a rights-based model. What that means is that all of us in this country have the right to work, the right to live, the right to privacy and the right to health. When we recognise that we all have those rights, we then identify the shortfalls in certain groups meeting those rights. Then we realise that, as a State, we have an obligation to remove those barriers and to bring people to the same level so that they can access and participate in society in the same way as everybody else.

The Minister's comments today are littered with policy after report after consultation. I can tell him that the disability community in Ireland are exhausted and fatigued with consultation, sick to the teeth of hearing about the next report which is going to tell them what they need when they already know what they need. They have been very clear about it and the Social Democrats have been very clear about it. This is a gap and I fully acknowledge that the Government talks about this being a priority. I recognise that the Tánaiste has created the specific group that he has, and that it is reaching into every Department. I recognise all of that, but delivery is not happening. The starkest example of that is budget 2026, in which disabled people were left €1,400 short. They are living that right now. They are living the heating and eating choice. I do not apologise for that language. It is not alarmist when it is lived experience.

We know the reasons people with disabilities are more likely to be in poverty. People with disabilities face additional daily costs when it comes to medication, specialist equipment, adaptation of homes and everything they need to be able to live their lives in dignity. We are one of the worst in Europe when it comes to participation of people with disabilities in the labour market, as the Minister has acknowledged. The lives of disabled people in this country are full of additional costs that most of us cannot imagine on a day-to-day basis, and an exclusion from the labour market that makes it even more impossible to survive in dignity. These are the people who have the least power to insulate themselves from this cost-of-living crisis that we are all experiencing, yet this year they are facing the brunt of it. We can do better and we must do better for people with disabilities. This is what we are asking today and every day, and we will continue to fight for as long as it takes to achieve true equality for those among us with disabilities.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It is deeply disappointing that the Government is opposing this motion and I think there are people with disabilities across the country who are going to be very disappointed as well. Our contributions are not alarmist; they are grounded in evidence and research. We know that the annual cost of living with disability is estimated at between €10,000 and €15,000. According to the ESRI, there is a weekly cost of between €488 and €555. A household with a disabled member needs an income that is 52% to 59% greater after tax just to reach the same standard of living as a household without a disabled member. For households with a member who has severe limitations, the additional cost can be as high as 93%.

I want to pass on to the Minister what some people with disabilities have said about their lives and the impact on them. One person said that in some weeks, it is a toss-up between food or bills as there is nothing left. Another person said they are not looking to be a millionaire but looking for security, a home, heat, food, family and not to fight for the basic things. A third person said disabled people are more reliant than ever on their families and their independence is being eroded.

In our alternative budget, the Social Democrats proposed an extra €15 per week in disability allowance, an emergency €400 winter cost-of-disability payment, and a permanent cost-of-disability support payment. In the Government's budget, disability allowance went up by just €10 to €256. That is just €520 over a year. The Government failed to provide a permanent cost-of-disability payment, putting it off until 2027. This is inexcusable. The Government may have postponed this measure but people with disabilities cannot postpone their expenses. Its approach still seems to be rooted in charity rather than rights. People with disabilities need clarity and action, not more ambiguity and delay.

It is now more than 20 years since the Department of Social Protection commissioned a report on the cost-of-disability payment. That was reaffirmed in the 2021 cost of disability in Ireland research report. How much longer does the Government need? Just this month, the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, told the *Irish Examiner* that the practicalities of payment are still being worked out. Acting like a commentator rather than a member of Government, the Minister of State was quoted as saying:

What would that payment look like? What rate would it be set at? How would you qualify for it? How would it be paid?

Ministers thinking aloud across the pages of newspapers is not one bit helpful. Has no financial planning been undertaken since the cost-of-disability report was published four years ago? People with disabilities do not need more off-the-cuff commentary from Ministers. They need real progress and a permanent cost-of-disability payment. I urge the Minister to reconsider his stance on this, support the motion and provide these basic supports so that people can live decent lives in Ireland because it is not good enough.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for his statement in response to our motion this morning. I worked in disability services as a social care worker for many years. We have heard many voices, specifically of those with disabilities, come through this morning. I would like to share a common trend among family members of people with disabilities who often shared a consistent experience of having to navigate the mechanisms of the State, the outcomes of which they felt were often down to luck more than design and who, at times, had to show resilience within their family after getting refusal after refusal and having to apply through various mechanisms and fora in order to be able to avail of what essentially are basic services, basic funds and basic grants. It could be made an awful lot easier. The reason I want to share that is that when you draw specific attention to language, all we are trying to do this morning is to represent the voices of those we have heard over recent weeks, recent months and recent years who have said the system is broken. Notwithstanding some of the great work that the Minister has highlighted in his response this morning, we should start from a common place, that, right now, budget 2026 targeted people with disabilities by leaving them with considerably less than before.

The Minister mentioned the idea of the cost-of-disability payment being a top priority for him. There is another trend here where disability payments are a priority. Child poverty is a priority. Housing is a priority. Health is a priority. Everything is a priority for this Government but the outcomes are not improving. If anything, what we are seeing is the outcomes in some of these top priority areas disimproving.

Then we see the Taoiseach set up a unit within the Department as if that is going to be the silver bullet to change the lived experience of people's lives, whether it is in child poverty or for those who are experiencing disability. As a very constructive proposal this morning, what we have tried to do is present something that is workable and pragmatic but is a necessity. It is not an optional extra; it is a necessity.

The Minister is choosing to amend or do away with our motion. That is fine but we sincerely implore the Minister to consider this in the short term while he and his officials work on the cost-of-disability payment for budget 2027. Whatever way, shape or form this looks, it must be brought forward in the next couple of days or weeks to make sure basic services for people with disabilities can be met.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to start by thanking the Deputies for bringing forward this motion this morning and giving us a chance to have this important discussion. I want to state, as I have done previously, that disabled people are not disabled by their own bodies, their own neurodiversity or their own intellectual capacity. They are disabled by society - a society that puts barriers in their way to access work, supports and even something simple like public transport. Disabled people face hurdles that able-bodied people could not even begin to imagine. Fair play to disabled people and their advocates because they are getting themselves

organised. They are putting themselves onto the agenda and are making their voices heard. They are a powerful lobby. These are people who fight every single day of the week for every shilling, every cent and every tiny little bit of support. These are fighters because the system has made them into fighters. They and their advocates are powerful representatives and they should be listened to.

The Minister and his Government talk a lot. We have Cabinet committees, task force reports, etc., but they are light on action. I would have thought that the very least that a decent Government would do in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis is not make things worse for people. Yet, people with disabilities find themselves €1,400 worse off as a direct consequence of the budget. They do make the choice about heating or eating and to charge their mobility or medical devices or pay for their groceries. They are real choices that real people have to make in the here and now.

The Minister said in his contribution that we should be extremely careful about alarmist language and that we should not be putting out a misleading and dangerous message that people must choose between food and heating. Those are not my words; those are the words of people with disabilities. They have told us and have told him, if he was willing to listen, that those are the choices that they have to make. Do they want to be in that position? No. Do they want to be in the audiovisual room having to talk about the intimate details of their lives? No. They want to be getting on with living their lives but for them living their lives involves making a choice, in some instances, between heating and eating. That is not alarmist language; that is a fact for people with disabilities. That is how they live their lives. Every single day is a battle. They want the Government to stand up and be on their side. I urge the Minister to support his motion and withdraw his shameful amendment.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is straightforward. It is not the first time that we have had this discussion. The fact is the Minister has straightforwardly accepted that there is a cost of disability. I can also say that the Government accepted, when it was giving out one-off payments, that in providing a cost-of-disability payment, and for the first time recognising that, it realised there is a huge issue for those who are disabled in relation to the day-to-day cost and the logistics, whether it is the extra cost of transport, availing of healthcare, or a million and one things that we all take for granted that cost a lot more and are a lot more difficult to do.

In fairness, the Minister is going to hear an awful lot about a choice between eating or heating because we have heard it directly from those who are impacted by the lack of a payment - up to €1,400 if we compare it with last year. That would be a slash in relation to anybody's means of paying for their needs. People are absolutely at the edge in relation to payments. We have all heard from the wheelchair users who cannot afford to charge their wheelchairs at times. They have to decide on individual payments and on what they can and cannot do. This is straightforward.

I commend the work of the Disability Federation of Ireland, DFI, the Irish Wheelchair Association and Access for All on highlighting this issue. I thank the Social Democrats for bringing this motion forward. What we need to see is action. The Minister is doing the right thing in relation to the review process, looking at exactly who gets paid a cost-of-disability payment and looking at the amount it needs to be. That is grand for next year. At the moment,

however, there are people who cannot afford to pay their bills. I cannot get away from the idea that some weeks it is a toss up between food or bills as there is nothing left.

We know the issues, which I brought up with the Minister previously, that need to be addressed in making it easier for those with a disability to be employed, because the numbers in this State are not up to scratch, and they are improving the WSS, the reasonable accommodations, workability and employability, work and access and so on.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: In September of last year, the then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, conceded that pulling one-off payments would be difficult. His decision at the time was predicated in part upon inflation continuing to remain around 2%. Those were his own words. In reality, CSO figures now show a 12-month inflation rate of 3.2%. It was a callous and cruel budget that was cut-throat with cost-of-living supports. In defence of his compassionless budget, the Taoiseach acknowledged that these supports have been crucial in responding to the cost-of-living crisis. Does he think the cost-of-living crisis is over? Does he believe that he has solved it? Does he think that the added costs of disability evaporated? He must believe he fixed that also. The Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, believed that these supports were not fiscally sustainable. Those were his own words.

How fiscally sustainable does the Taoiseach believe it is for a disabled person to see their income decreased by €1,400 per year? TDs from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the so-called Independent lackeys endorsed a heartless budget last October – one that absolutely hammered people with disabilities. This motion offers them the opportunity to purge their contempt.

The then Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, said that cutting these payments would be difficult. Paschal showed no difficulty when generously gifting the World Bank €10 million of taxpayers' money. There was no talk of fiscal sustainability then. Paschal does not give a damn. Now the Minister, Deputy Calleary, has the opportunity.

Sinn Féin fully supports the motion before the House today, which mandates the Government to restore the €400 emergency winter payment-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: -----because there is no other way to address and respond to the challenges we face as a society. Every Member of this House can staple their colours to the mast through this motion. Are the members of the Government not concerned that both the ESRI and the PBO predict that poverty will continue to rise for people with disabilities?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I will move on to the next speaker.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Do they want to do something about it?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I call Deputy Newsome Drennan. Deputy Bennett is eating into the time of her own party members.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: If so, the Minister must support this motion.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: As someone who has spent a significant portion of my adult life working with adults with disabilities, I strongly welcome this motion. I witnessed on a daily basis the financial cost of living with a disability, the relentless extra expenses and the hidden burdens that add up to a reality of constant pressure.

Reading this motion reminds me of our first Private Members' business in the Dáil after the budget when we raised this very issue and presented our own solutions. Sadly, the Government parties failed to take any of those proposals on board. Here we are, months later, and the crisis we warned about has come to pass in full. The heightened risk of poverty for those living with a disability is an appalling reflection on the failure of the Minister and his colleagues.

Each and every week in this Chamber we raise the case of groups of people who are struggling, who are left behind by the Government, but it seems to fall on deaf ears. Who is this Government championing? Is it those with a disability? Is it those struggling to find a home or to find affordable childcare, or is it the large property developers and multinational corporates like Starbucks and McDonalds? When we look at the measures put in place by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the latter have received more than generous measures, while the former did not even receive enough to keep up with inflation.

The welfare and treatment of our most vulnerable citizens is the mark of society we want to achieve but this Government has decided to subject tens of thousands of people with disabilities and their families to poverty and deprivation. I have heard from far too many people in Carlow and Kilkenny who are experiencing a level of hardship they have never known before because of the Government's failure to listen to the pleas for support. How the Government can stand over this suffering is beyond me. Is it a matter of policy and how the Government views society or is it simply that it is out of touch with ordinary people?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I thank the Deputy. I have five speakers left and nine minutes and 40 seconds. I will allow them all to contribute.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank the Social Democrats for bringing it forward. People with disabilities are disproportionately at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Households that include people with disabilities require between 41% and 93% extra disposable income to achieve the same standard of living as households with no disabled members. A budget that leaves them significantly - by €1,400 - worse off than the previous year undermines Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and deepens inequality.

The motion before us speaks to a profound injustice that this Government continues to perpetuate. Last year's cost-of-disability package, though insufficient, has been ripped away. What is offered in budget 2026 is a devastating drop in income for people with disabilities. While Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their Independent colleagues offer empty election-time promises, their actions abandon people and leave them with impossible choices between heating their home and charging a mobility device, between eating and keeping the lights on. That is their words. We see the hidden poverty in our constituencies on a daily basis: the prepay

meter disconnections, the arrears, the children growing up at risk. This is not just policy failure, it is a conscious poverty trap.

The Government must deliver an emergency winter payment. It must also deliver a fundamental shift. We need a Government that sees the dignity of disabled people not as a line item to cut but as a responsibility to be upheld. This motion is a step in that direction. I urge people to support it.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I too thank the Social Democrats for this motion. Life is difficult enough for people with disabilities. They spend their life fighting for basic services – OT, speech and language, physiotherapy and mobility equipment. I know parents who have to fundraise for wheelchairs and other equipment for disabled children. Being able to get around is something we take for granted, but people with disabilities have to plan how to get around, be it on a bus, a taxi or a train.

When disabled people get older, they have to fight for their independence. They have to wait up to 20 years for a home to suit their needs. Do they really have to struggle now to heat their homes? Is that what we are talking about? The evidence is irrefutable. People living with disabilities live in consistent poverty.

I will go back to the Minister's speech. The Minister said he knows the additional costs faced by people with disabilities. On the topic of employment, he said he wants to state his full commitment. On the last page he stated he is pleased to begin this work. How long has he been in power? How long have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael been in power, yet people are still consistently in poverty? The Minister's statement on the last page is an absolute disgrace. He said we should be extremely careful about using alarmist language. Is he blaming disability groups for being alarmist? Is that what he is saying? They are the ones who are telling us. This is why we have motions. They are telling us. Is the Minister blaming those organisations for being alarmist over €1,400 being cut from the budget? This is an absolute disgrace. Will the Minister withdraw what he said because that is an absolute slur on those organisations who took the time to come in here to give their life experiences?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Budget 2026 was an insult to people with disabilities. All through the winter people have suffered as their income has taken a serious hit. The withdrawal of supports in this year's budget has left people with disabilities worse off by €1,400. This was a shocking betrayal of people with disabilities, who were promised the sun, moon and stars by the Government parties during the general election campaign.

It was already difficult enough for people with disabilities to get by. The Disability Federation of Ireland tells us that households with a disabled member require, on average, 50% extra disposable income to achieve the same standard of living as a similar household with no disabled members.

Many constituents have been in touch with me outlining the stark impact the withdrawal of support is having on them. The reality is that the Minister's decision to cut essential supports has left disabled people across this State in poverty and having to make the most difficult decisions to get by and get the bills paid when we have rising costs across the board. This is unforgivable.

We know that people with disabilities are already disproportionately at risk of poverty and social exclusion, yet the Minister made this choice because the stance of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents on disability has been consistently out of touch. They only acknowledge the poverty people with disabilities face at election time when it suits them. The Minister stated that the Government will consider a cost-of-disability payment in next year's budget. How can he seriously suggest that people with disabilities should have to wait for a year - spend a full year in poverty - and then he might fix this problem? The Government must recognise the fact that living with a disability comes with increased costs. People need supports that reflect that in the here and now. I call on the Government not only to support this motion but to act on it and ensure it provides an emergency cost-of-disability payment as soon as possible.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I thank the Social Democrats for this motion. Constituents and disability support groups across County Clare have been contacting me. They are shocked and deeply disappointed that this Government is refusing to call for an emergency winter payment for people with disabilities. They cannot understand how money can be found for developers and for those who are already flush, yet people with disabilities have to make the stark decision to eat or to have heat.

The Taoiseach has stated that such a measure is not fiscally sustainable. People have said to me that asking people with disabilities to wait is what is truly unsustainable. They are absolutely right about this. They are not looking for luxuries, they are looking for help to meet essential needs - extra costs for heating and to run specialised life-sustaining equipment. Is that really too much to ask?

Just before Christmas on a bitterly cold winter day, I met protesters outside this very Dáil. One protester said to the crowd with devastating sarcasm, "Is it not great the Government is giving us extra fuel allowance? It is giving me enough to buy firefighters for a fire that I cannot even afford to keep lit." That is the reality - a very stark reality. They have told me the extra €10-a-week would not even come close to covering their real living costs. The message of that protest was simple and shameful: eat or heat. I find that utterly disgraceful. Delaying supports does not save money, it pushes people with disabilities into debt, into loans, into financial holes they may never climb out of. Some are spending their days in local libraries just to stay warm. What kind of way is that for this Government to treat people? I am asking that it does the right thing and supports this motion. People with disabilities deserve dignity, not delay; and certainty, not excuses.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta as an rún ríthábhachtach seo a chur os ár gcomhair ar maidin. It is only a couple of months since Sinn Féin brought a similar motion before the Dáil and it speaks volumes that we are back again so soon. It speaks to the tireless work of disability advocates and the dire conditions and desperation people with disabilities are living with.

There is no two ways about it; people with disabilities were the biggest losers in budget 2026. Our most vulnerable lost €1,400 of their income while big developers won to the tune of many millions of euro. This is indefensible. Once again, people with disabilities were the sacrificial lambs and the last to benefit from our ballooning national wealth. That €1,400 was precious to households that were already more likely to be fighting poverty before their household income was slashed by this Government in September. Dozens of constituents of

mine across Kildare South have been in touch with me sharing their stories. Clare, in Kildare town, is having to choose between heating her home and charging her medical devices. Paul has ended his own physio to fund his son through college and Anne, in Rathangan, is missing routine appointments which she used to attend by taxi so she can afford her weekly shopping.

The Government responded to calls for an emergency winter payment by saying it will take care of them next year, basically telling disabled households to put up and shut up and demonstrating how this Government is completely out of touch with how poverty affects people. The disabled community are telling us loud and clear that they cannot wait. People are experiencing acute hardship now. This will continue if we do not take action. The community has no faith left in this Government after the callous hand dealt out to them in October. It is not too late to make this right. I call on the Government to support this motion and introduce a €400 emergency payment. This is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I thank the Deputy. I will move on to the next speaker for the Labour Party, Deputy Mark Wall.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I will move our amendment, if that is in order.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): The Deputy cannot do so.

Deputy Mark Wall: I will not move it then.

As Labour Party spokesman on social protection and disability, I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important motion. I sincerely thank colleagues in the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion. It is very timely given the cold and unpredictable weather we have been experiencing over the past number of weeks.

The Labour Party has an amendment to this motion to ensure all disabled citizens are captured within the motion. I welcome the spirit of this motion, and our amendment would ensure that all disabled citizens were included. The Labour Party amendment would extend the emergency payment to older people with a disability in receipt of a State pension. This amendment would also ensure that any future cost-of-disability payment supports for older people whose disability ceases to be recognised on the current social protection system once they begin to receive a State pension after moving from one of the listed disability payments. Our amendment also seeks to substantially increase the income disregard for the disability allowance and the blind pension in recognition of the higher costs of living and the 25% increase in the national minimum wage since it was last increased to only €165 in 2022.

I have continually raised the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and its impact on people with disabilities. The Cost of Disability in Ireland report from Indecon shows that people with a disability face extra cost from €9,000 to over €12,000 a year. These costs are quickly absorbed by inadequate social welfare payments like the disability allowance.

I am very disappointed by the lack of progress this Government has made in progressing a cost-of-disability payment. It cannot continue to put this on the long finger. Disabled people

are having to make very tough choices such as whether they can turn on the heating or have something to eat.

Budget 2026 marked a decline in the standard of living for many disabled people. The past number of budgets provided access to the disability support grant, a once off cost-of-disability payment that Government paid three years in a row. However, the cost of disability is not a once off. The failure to continue this payment, even on a temporary basis while a new payments was designed, has left disabled people losing nearly €1,400 a year. Given the Minister's update this morning on the disability support grant, why did the Government choose to get rid of these short-term payments in the absence of this new payment and it coming into force? Nobody has that type of money lying around. For some households, it is the difference of being above the poverty line and whether the Government likes it or not, that is a fact.

I have counted at least eight programme for Government commitments to addressing the cost of disability, including a new payment and extending free travel to children who receive the domiciliary care allowance. However, the Government has not yet addressed a single one of these commitments. What it has done is continually increased costs faced by these households.

The Government favoured a VAT cut rate of nearly €700 million for fast-food chains that were already making millions of euro in profits while disabled people and their families can barely afford to keep the lights on. This VAT rate cut could have funded the new cost-of-disability payment starting at €25 per week with money still left over to do more for these households. To add insult to injury, the Government provided a tax cut to developers amounting to over €500 million. This is the money that could have been used to increase the income disregard for the disability allowance to €250, increase the funding for the employability and workability programmes to support people with disabilities in the work place, and provide 1,000 extra places on the wage subsidy scheme, restoring the link to 70% of the national minimum wage and introduce reforms to improve the scheme. Implementing these measures would have still leftover finance to provide even more supports for people, like increasing the income threshold for the medical card or cutting public hospital parking charges in half for those who need them most.

I want to address the Minister's speech. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and the Minister will not be surprised that I will bring up the community welfare service once again. I heard the Minister speaking this morning on the heating supplement that the community welfare service administers, and he said he would share details with all the Members of this House. Does this Government, the Minister and everybody here not realise the problems that so many people have contacting their community welfare officer? Does the Minister not know the problems those with a disability have in filling out such forms and getting bank statement after bank statement for a system that, I will say again, has lost its personal touch and has become centralised?

As part of this motion from the Social Democrats, I am asking the Government to give a commitment that the heating supplement will be properly advertised. As somebody who has worked in local government and at national level for almost 25 years, it beggars belief that there is a payment that so many people know so little about. Will the Government make it easier to apply for that payment and will this payment be judged sympathetically by the community welfare service? Will the need for form after form for such a payment be reduced?

At the end of the day, this heating supplement could actually make a difference and is part of what this motion calls for today. It could make a difference as to whether a person turns on their heating or not. It could make a difference to the quality of life for so many disabled people.

The Minister mentioned that 692 people are in receipt of the heating supplement yet he also mentioned 231,000 people are in receipt of disability allowance and 170,000 people are in receipt of carers allowance. That is 692 people versus 231,000 and 170,000 people. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach must get my drift that if the Government is serious about helping people with disabilities, it now has an outcome and needs to share, advertise and allow people get the heating supplement urgently so those with disabilities can have a quality of life and not just the 692 people for whom I am sure it is very welcome.

I ask the Minister of State to bring this message back to the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and to ask the Government to make a difference. The heating supplement will make a difference if it is offered to those who need it the most. Like other colleagues, in my office in Kildare South – I am sure it is the same for the Minister of State in his office – I receive calls from people on a daily basis who tell me that they simply cannot turn on their heating. What is proposed here is a solution that the Government could introduce straight away.

I will conclude with a few lines from a constituent whose story I shared previously in this House and with whom I have been in regular contact in the meantime. What I am about to read into the record accurately sums up what the disabled community thinks of the Government's actions. The person in question wrote:

I do not believe that they will put finance into services that matter most, even those that people will benefit from. It is just words to distract the public and kick the can down the road.

That is the type of sentiment I get day in, day out in my office. Why are people with disabilities always the ones who have to fight? Disabled people state that they need more than words; they need action. I have given the Government an action it could take. A total of 692 people are in receipt of the grant in question, but almost 500,000 people may need it. That is the action that needs to be taken. As we always say in this House, action speaks louder than words.

Disabled people are tired. That is the sentiment I am getting from them. They are tired of fighting for their children and for themselves. The Government's inaction has forced that tiredness upon them. They need to see action now, and they need payment. I welcome the fact that the Social Democrats tabled this motion. We support it, but we have tabled an amendment to it. We ask that the Government withdraws its amendment and supports those with disabilities once and for all.

Deputy Paul Murphy: “My life is a balance between heating my home or feeding my children”. That is not exaggeration or scaremongering. Rather, those are the precise words - I took them down when she spoke at the briefing in the audiovisual room - of a disabled woman who is facing the impact of these horrific and cruel cuts from the Government. To attempt to shame the Opposition for speaking this truth and reflecting this reality and say that we are

scaremongering in some way is very poor form on the part of the Government. This is the life people are living.

I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this important motion. I do not thank the Government for bringing forward its shameful countermotion. The Government likes to talk a lot about targeting supports. That is its big talking point on this issue. It is targeting all right. Incredibly, the Government, during a time when it has a significant budget surplus, has targeted disabled people. There is no question about that. It has targeted disabled people for particularly cruel cuts.

We know that, incredibly, the budget made almost everyone worse off. People who do not own big fast food restaurants, who have not developed a bunch of apartments or who are not big landlords have basically been made them worse off. The budget made the poorest even more worse off, and it made disabled people the worst off. It has been said again and again but cannot be said enough that the disabled support grant has been cut by €400, that the living alone allowance lump sum of €200 is being cut, that the fuel allowance is being reduced for disabled people with a net loss of €160 and that the October double payment of €254 and the electricity credits of €250 have been cut. The total value of cuts for disabled people is €1,404. That is utterly shameful.

It is worth noting – I always try to make this point when we are talking about this issue – that in the context the same budget in which the Government took such a cruel approach to disabled people, Google walked in the front door of the Department of Finance and had a meeting with the Minister for Finance in which it asked that the research and development tax credit be increased by 5%, from 30% to 35%. What did the Government say? It said, “Yes, no problem. There you go. Here is €300 million”. That is public money going to Google when it would cost less than that to implement what is being asked for here, namely an emergency winter disability payment for those people who have been affected by these awful cuts.

We know - the Government knows too - that the cost of having a disability in this country in 2021 was over €10,000. Today, it is around €15,000. While the official at risk of poverty rate is 32.5%, when the cost of disability is added, the risk of poverty increases to between 65% and 76%. We know that 39% of those who are unable to work due to disability are living in enforced deprivation, which is quite grinding poverty. We know we have the worst rates of employment of disabled people of any country in the European Union.

It is excellent and inspiring to see the Disability Federation of Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association and Access for All Ireland working together to put this issue on the agenda and put pressure on the Government. On 9 December, despite a storm, they were outside the Dáil to protest the Government's cuts. They said then that the Government is forcing them into a choice between heating and eating. They warned that people could be in an absolutely desperate situation and could die as a consequence. Did the Government listen? No. That is why we need to build this movement even further. Disabled people need to be at the centre of that movement, fighting for an affordable Ireland. We need to be on the streets, supporting disabled people and demanding budget measures that do not enrich the already rich and big corporations but, rather, give ordinary people a break.

The very minimum of what is needed is to say to the Government to stop its attacks on disabled people and stop forcing disabled people even deeper into poverty. The Government

must give an emergency winter payment to combat the hardship disabled people are facing today. After that, we must implement a permanent and decent cost-of-disability support payment, as we have included in our budgets for multiple years in a row. The people cannot wait. That is what the Government is saying to them, however. It tells them to wait until the next budget and not to worry because it will deal with it then. They cannot wait because the cuts have been implemented now and the cost-of-living crisis is now. They need support right now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is despicable that people with disabilities lost €1,400 in the budget. To hit the most vulnerable in that way while giving massive additional handouts to some of the most profitable companies in the world in the form research and development tax credits says everything people need to know about the priorities of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their supposedly Independent allies.

The disability community is very angry. It will take to the streets in a demonstration on 28 February co-organised by the Cost of Living Coalition, with which many of the Opposition parties are involved, and trade unions, unemployed organisations and a range of civil society organisations. I urge people who are rightly furious about what has been done by this Government to people with disabilities to get out onto the streets in large numbers in order to mobilise and demand.

What we are discussing reflects what the disability community is fighting for. I commend the Social Democrats on putting the motion forward. I am sure the Social Democrats would be the first to acknowledge that the motion contains the demands being made by the disability community. It is demanding these things and it is very angry. I wish to convey that to the Government, which is will be facing a storm if it does not meet those demands. The disability community has insisted that there be a protest. It is not that we are suggesting a protest. Rather, the community is demanding one. It is going to mobilise, and I hope there will be a massive protest to send a message to this Government that disabled people want the emergency payment of €400. It is absolute pittance compared with what the Government has given to developers and big, obscenely profitable multinationals. The cost-of-disability payment is something for which we in People Before Profit have been advocating for many years. That is in recognition of the enormous additional costs of disability. They are also evidenced based. People with disabilities are not making this up.

I credit my colleague in Sinn Féin Deputy Louise O'Reilly, who she pointed out to me that the Minister stated that the Opposition should be careful about using inflammatory suggestions to the effect that there is a trade-off between heating and eating.

What flipping planet is the Minister living on that he would say that. It is absolutely outrageous. Does he know that about 500,000 households are suffering from energy poverty and that people with disabilities suffer disproportionately as a result of the things to which I refer? This is not rhetoric from the Opposition; these are evidence-based assertions regarding the facts. Any TD who is in touch with people in their area and who talks to people with disabilities knows that people on lower incomes and those with disabilities, with all the additional costs they have, amounting to between €12,000 and €15,000 a year, are disproportionately hit by energy poverty. It is a very real choice for people with disabilities to

have to make the decision to turn off the heating. If they do not do so, they will not have enough to pay for groceries or pay their bills. What the Minister said was just extraordinary.

The Government should do the right thing, reverse the disgraceful attacks on the incomes of those with disabilities that the it instigated in the budget and, finally, recognise the right of people with disabilities to real equality. Real equality means giving them a cost-of-disability payment to allow them to participate equally in our society.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Last year, I had Maurice Noonan and Eilish Sheehy up from Limerick. Both are wheelchair users. They were looking for the simplest of things, namely access to buildings in order that they can have a normal life. Both of these people work. When we look at the measures taken in the budget, we can see that: the disability support grant was removed, resulting in a loss of €400; the living alone allowance was removed, resulting in a loss of €200; the fuel allowance was reduced to €160; the October double payment was removed, resulting in a loss of €254; and electricity credit was removed, resulting in a €250 loss. The total amount of those losses is €1,404. This is outside of the impact of cost-of-living increases. The loss in question affects for people with disabilities who work and those who do not work. The Government reduced the USC but never changed the tax base. This means that people who are working are paying more tax. That is for everyone, whether they have a disability or not. People are paying more tax at a time when there are overruns in the HSE and in the various Departments. There are billions of euro in overruns, but the Government cannot provide for those who are the most vulnerable.

The people I know who have disabilities, whether they are working or not, want to be looked at as ordinary people, but they also want equality from a work perspective and from a quality of life perspective. This means that if they go out, they want equality. Yet, the Government has done what I have just outlined. This is not what Irish people were ever about. We look after everyone, but we are not looking after people with disabilities or the elderly. All the things that we have worked for all our lives have been ignored by the Government. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, that we need to make sure this is addressed, and quickly.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the motion. We fully support it. People with disabilities face extra costs every day. These are costs they cannot avoid. When winter hits, the pressure becomes even greater, especially with heating and energy bills rising again. Right now, households across the country are under serious strain. Energy costs are still one of the biggest drivers of hardship. For disabled people, those costs do not just stay the same when prices go up; they get worse. The supports they rely on do not stretch far enough and the bills keep climbing. That is why we support what the motion is seeking, namely targeted and practical help that people can feel the impact of straight away.

A once-off winter payment would be direct and focused and would go to people who are carrying unavoidable extra burdens. The Government keeps saying it wants to target the resources. Here is a clear opportunity to do exactly that. It should not stop at one payment. We need to move away from those *ad hoc* crisis-driven reactions and finally put in place a proper permanent support framework that reflects the real documented cost of living with a disability in this country. If the Government will not back a once-off payment now, at the very least it should publish a clear timeline for permanent measures. People do not need headlines about proposals; they need a date, decisions and delivery. This is not an abstract policy debate.

Across Cork, Limerick, Galway and Roscommon, families are asking the same questions: "Where is the support coming from and when is it coming?". We will back any measures that ease pressures this winter and we will keep pushing for permanent solutions.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: We have all seen both the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the increase in the cost of living. When we go to the fuel tank at home or the petrol pump or when we go to Dunnes or SuperValu, we are seeing it. It is doubly affecting those people who are the most forgotten and most vulnerable in our society, namely those with a disability or an invalidity. The people who are choosing between heating and eating have been described as being obliged to decide whether to pay their fuel bills. I had a carer on the phone to me the other day. She stated that she visits a gentleman and that he is wrapped up in six blankets and has one bar of the fire on because he is afraid to turn on his heating. He is afraid of the postman delivering the next bill that will come in from the ESB or Bord Gáis. This is how difficult it is for people. The Minister of State has a Government report which tells us that the cost of living for people with disabilities is higher than average. They are obliged to meet additional costs of between €8,700 and €12,000. If we take into account index-linking, then it is probably €10,000 to €15,000, particularly in view of the costs people currently face.

Deputy Collins is right that while once-off solutions are great - and it is great to get headlines - we have to start index-linking support for people with disabilities, both young and old, for the most vulnerable and for the forgotten people of this country, including the elderly and widows and widowers. This is not an elderly thing; it is about people who have either an invalidity or a disability. Those who are rearing families are finding it very difficult, and the Minister of State is not listening.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I support the motion. Those with disabilities are the most vulnerable people in our society. That is a fact. Right across Mayo and the rest of Ireland, there are people with disabilities who are struggling. In many cases, they are struggling physically. They are struggling to overcome all of the barriers they encounter in daily life. Now, increasingly, they are struggling with an enormous burden financially as well. The financial burden on so many vulnerable people is incredible. The Indecon report of 2021 outlined that the cost of disability, which is the additional cost for a person, is €12,000 annually. When indexed against inflation, the amount involved rises to €15,000. Despite that and, what the Government said during the general election campaign to the effect that it was going to prioritise those with disabilities - it is even in the programme for Government - what has actually happened is that supports for people with disabilities have been cut by up to €1,400. People with disabilities are significantly less well off this year than they were last year, despite all the rhetoric. That is why I am so disappointed.

The motion before us, which is a good one, will provide practical support for people with disabilities. It offers, perhaps, a very small glimmer of hope during this very difficult winter for those individuals. The Government, however, has completely erased the motion. That is extraordinary. When they reflect on their political careers, will the Minister of State and the members of the Government be able to say that they supported the most vulnerable in our society, the people who could not necessarily always advocate for themselves or those who are struggling at home? The motion would offer people practical support in terms of a payment

this winter and a recognition of the fact that there is a cost of disability, that this cost should be recognised by the State and that support should be available to them.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: With one in five disabled people living in consistent poverty, which is almost four times the national average, and with about two in five experiencing enforced deprivation, this cold and constantly wet winter paints nothing but a picture of cold homes, skipped meals and lives lived in constant financial battles for the people who are least well positioned to fight those battles.

We know the need for a cost-of-disability payment was identified over 20 years ago, in 2004, reaffirmed in the Indecon report in 2021 and promised again in the current programme for Government, but there is still no permanent disability payment, no delivery and no timeline. People have been left in the lurch waiting. Everyone's costs have risen but their incomes, in particular, have risen and their incomes are falling. The Government's own research shows that the extra cost of living with disability can reach almost €15,000 a year when indexed link to inflation, yet instead of easing that burden, budget 2026 cut disabled people's incomes by an estimated €1,400. The €400 emergency winter payment being called for today would provide some immediate relief to those who need it most, the people who are disproportionately affected by high energy bills, food price inflation and housing costs because they spend more time at home and face unavoidable disability-related expenses.

If the Government wants to do what it says about targeting resources where they are needed, this is one place to start. It is exactly that and it would cost €124 million, which is half the amount of money wasted on the budget giveaway to developers for apartments that are already built. It is unfortunate that we need to deliver this emergency assistance that disabled people urgently deserve now. I urge the Government to allocate this payment on a once-off basis pending the introduction of a permanent needs-based allowance. We have to take a holistic view of people with disabilities regarding job opportunities, how incomes can be increased and how costs can be cut overall. Above all, we need a regular income that reflects the additional cost for disabled people and this once-off payment has to come in this year.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion, which is very important. We all know that people with a disability have the greatest need to be looked after. I honestly believe that people with a disability who are living on their own should be looked after more than anyone else because they face all the costs of keeping the house and trying to keep themselves warm. We all know that since Bord na Móna closed down, the cost of electricity has gone up day by day. The regulator is not doing his job. Different energy companies are putting up electricity prices at different rates, and we cannot understand that. At one time, as the others were putting them up, one company actually put them down. I cannot understand what is going on there and I do not think the Government understands either. The regulator needs to be more prominent and active. I know what it means to have a disability as my grandfather spent 29 years in a wheelchair. I remember him, from when I was a young fellow, and how hard it was for him to manage at that time. I understand that it is harder for people with a disability to live compared to people who are mobile and do not have a disability.

I often see how Kerry County Council revamps some of its social housing. It puts in heat pumps and then we see the exorbitant bills that people get for electricity. I do not know why this is happening. It is supposed to be cost-effective but it is a fact that people get exorbitant

bills and get into serious trouble. People whose houses were redone late last year already have savage bills.

I know that every one of us has different priorities. We saw yesterday evening that Ireland is contributing to a €90 billion loan to Ukraine to help it with its energy. We must look after our own people at home first and foremost. People in Ireland are our priority. The cost of living is going up every day in one way or another.

People living on their own are really struggling and they have to get different payments to try to help them along and help from organisations like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. But for these organisations, some of these people would not manage at all. We need to do more for our people with disabilities. Many of them are afraid to even light the fire because they are so frightened about this. They are upset with this worry about climate change. They feel guilty if they light the fire and many of them do not have the fire to light. People in social homes that been revamped and fitted with heat pumps are getting savage bills.

The Minister must go after the regulator and give people confidence. They do not have confidence in what the regulator has been doing. We need to bring down the cost of the electricity. I do not believe it is fair that it has risen day by day with no checks on how it is going to be managed or curtailed. The regulator is simply not doing his job.

I appeal to the Minister to do something for people with disabilities, especially those living on their own who are finding it difficult to survive. The word is that Exchequer funding and taxes are up, so I am appealing to the Minister to do something for these people who genuinely need a bit of help and are waiting for it. They are depending us to ensure that they get something.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to this debate. While the Government has opposed this motion and tabled an amendment to it, that does not mean that we do not recognise the difficulties and additional costs that disabled people face. We are very aware of those costs. Our determination to assist people with those costs is reflected in the improvements we have made to disability support schemes in recent years and our commitments to further improvements.

We are committed to introducing an annual cost-of-disability support payment. We will do this over the lifetime of this Government. Through the strategic focus network summit, we will work with disabled people, their advocates and representatives in developing a way forward. I am pleased to say that this work is progressing. As the Minister clearly stated in his opening remarks, he will bring forward proposals in the first half of this year on the cost of disability. It is a priority for budget 2027. It is important to emphasise that the Government remains committed to continuing its long-standing practice of consultation and close engagement with stakeholders and disability representative groups. It is important to stress again that nobody in Ireland needs to go without food or heating for financial reasons.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: People are.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Department's community welfare system is available to provide financial support for these essentials. The additional needs payment and the heat supplement

exist for precisely that purpose. As a TD, I am acutely aware of that. People are getting support that way. We have to be very careful not to frighten people by putting out messages about people having to choose between food or heating their homes.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: That is what they have to do.

Deputy Seán Canney: Supports are in place for the people who need them. It is up to us as public representatives to direct people to those supports when we know they are struggling. Opposition Deputies had their chance to speak. It is called respect and democracy.

The Minister spoke about the Government's commitment to introducing the annual cost-of-disability support scheme. This is incredibly important but is just one piece in the jigsaw. The programme for Government and the national human rights strategy for disabled people include a whole range of commitments for disabled people. We have committed to reforming the disability allowance payment and removing anomalies in the current means test for that payment. The Department of Social Protection is conducting a review of means testing generally across the schemes, as has been requested in the House.

We will be guided by the outcome of that review.

We are committed to progressively increasing weekly disability payments. We have been doing this, including in the recent budget in which we increased the personal rates for qualified adults and child support payments. To ensure that ongoing medical assessments are not carried out in respect of people with lifelong conditions that are not going to change, we will examine the ability to work criteria for certain payments.

The issues faced by disabled people cut across government, not just one Department. That is why the national human rights strategy for disabled people is a key focus. It adopts a whole-of-government approach, with individual Departments and State agencies responsible for planning and delivering the commitments that come under their remit under five key pillars, including employment.

We all know that many disabled people face barriers in the workplace and when looking for employment. We want to address those barriers. The Department of Social Protection, through its nationwide network of Intreo centres, provides employment services for jobseekers. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, these mainstream services are available to disabled people.

More tailored supports are also offered, in particular, EmployAbility offers specialised employment services to people with disabilities. It can help people find work through the job matching services and offer ongoing in-work support to employees and employers. There is now a designated disability employment personnel officer in 62 Intreo offices. We are promoting training initiatives to raise awareness and understanding of disabilities among Intreo staff generally.

In July 2022, the Department launched the early engagement scheme. This scheme proactively invites people to talk about their employment ambitions with Intreo staff and then helps them achieve their goals through the Department's employment training support. Taking part is voluntary.

In December 2023, a new employment programme under the new European Social Fund Plus funding was announced. WorkAbility: Inclusive Pathways to Employment Programme aims to support about 13,000 disabled people progress their training and employment ambitions through 57 local, regional and national organisations. The programme runs from January 2024 to December 2028 and the experience to date has been very positive.

Funding is also provided for GetAHEAD and the Willing Able Mentoring programmes to help people with disabilities transition from education to work. GetAHEAD works to upskill graduates with disabilities, with information sessions and training events. Willing Able Mentoring provides mentored and paid work placements for graduates with disabilities. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, has committed to expanding and building on successful programmes, such as WorkAbility, EmployAbility and the new work and access programme, to support people with disabilities into employment.

Budget 2026 provided for an expansion of the wage subsidy scheme and an increase in the payment rates. These positive measures build on the other recent improvements to the schemes, such as the reduction in the number of hours, from 21 to 15, for work.

There are already arrangements in place whereby when a former disability allowance customer's employment ceases or their hours are significantly reduced within 12 months of the termination of their disability allowance, it is open to that person to contact the Department to have their payment reinstated without the need to make a new application. These requests are read within 48 hours of receipt and are fast-tracked back into payment from there. We are committed to further improving the position in this regard.

We are also extending the back to work family dividend to people with children who are moving off disability allowance or the blind pension and into employment. This will ease the transition over a two-year period. We also work with employers and across government to improve employment for disabled people.

Secondary benefits are of great support in assisting people with additional costs. The Government is focused on heating costs today. Budget 2026 increased the rate of fuel allowance by €5 per week. This will provide an additional €140 to people during the annual fuel season.

Fear of losing secondary benefits can also be a very significant concern for people when they are considering taking up or increasing their employment. That is why it is very important for us to introduce measures whereby recipients of disability allowance or blind pension will be able to retain their fuel allowance payment for up to five years after moving into employment.

There are already arrangements in place for the retention of certain secondary benefits when a person comes off a disability payment and into employment. A person can retain eligibility for the free travel scheme for five years if they move into work from disability payments such as the disability allowance, the invalidity pension, the partial capacity benefit and the disablement benefit along with incapacity supplements. In addition, a person who is receipt of certain social welfare payments, such as the disability allowance, for 12 consecutive months may retain their medical card for three years after moving into employment.

In the work we are doing now on the cost of disability, it is important to remember that we are building on the supports already available and the improvements that have been made, particularly in recent years.

I will make a comment on what I heard in the Chamber. People are calling for permanent solutions to this problem and that is what we are all about. One-off payments are fine, but they give no certainty for the future for people with disabilities. We need to have long-term benefits.

The Minister for Social Protection and all of us in government remain committed to continuing the range of supports available to disabled people under review to ensure they are meeting our objective of improving outcomes for disabled people, their families and their communities. I thank the Deputies who brought forward this motion and all the Deputies who contributed to the debate.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank everyone who contributed to the discussion and my colleagues, Deputies Quaide and Hayes, for bringing forward the motion and all the work they did on it.

I first want to address the very serious comments made by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, earlier on. He said he did not want a misleading or dangerous message going out that people must choose between food and heating. These comments show how grossly out of touch with reality the Minister is. It is very disturbing that he does not realise what is actually going on. Indeed, the comments he made afterwards that he is going to get his Department to get onto the disability organisations that are talking about the reality faced by disabled people to try to get them to change what they are saying is-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: I did not say that. I said we would provide the information on the supports that are available.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: If there is any implication of getting onto them to-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: There is no such implication.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I am glad the Minister clarified that. However, his comments are nonetheless very disturbing. They do not show a knowledge of the realities that are faced by disabled people due to the Government's decision to cut the incomes of disabled people by €1,400 in the budget. That is an absolutely unforgivable decision on any scale and is utterly unnecessary at a time when we have a budget surplus running into billions of euro. It was a cruel and heartless decision.

I have a question for every Government Minister and backbench TD. When they got involved in politics and first ran for elected office, did they ever envisage a time when they would be part of a Government with billions of euro in budget surpluses that would cut the incomes of disabled people by €1,400? To be fair, I cannot imagine they ever envisaged such a situation, ever signed up for it or would have ever have supported it. Why are we now in a situation where that is exactly what is happening? They voted through a budget that cuts the income of disabled people by €1,400. When there is a modest proposal for an emergency

winter payment to take some of the pain out of that, for just €400 per person, they do not support that proposal. Why are they doing this? Why will they not now make a stand in support of disabled people who do not want to be in this situation of effectively reaching out to the Government and crying out for this emergency winter payment measure? They want to be able to participate fully in Irish society, the same as anybody else. They do not want to be in this situation. It is not too late for the Government to reduce its cruel and heartless decision. I call on it do that now.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I also thank my colleagues, Deputies Quaide and Hayes, for bringing this motion forward. Politics is all about choices. This Government made a choice in the budget to cut payments for people with a disability while it gave a VAT cut of €390 million to investor funds and developers.

Right now, disabled people are struggling to pay the cost of living, including the costs of heating, food, and charging mobile equipment and wheelchairs, yet the Government refuses to implement our very straightforward proposal for a €400 emergency payment. It has the budget surplus. Why will it not ensure disabled people can turn on their heat this winter without worry or fear? The Taoiseach said the emergency cost-of-disability payment was not fiscally sustainable. What is not sustainable is disabled people freezing in their homes.

This is supposed to be a republic based on equality and social justice. For disabled people and carers, this is a republic in name only. These are the most vulnerable people, yet the Government gives hundreds of millions of euro to wealthy investor funds while cutting the payments for disabled people. The Minister's statement says it all. It is absolutely disgraceful that he said we should be extremely careful about our alarmist language and should not be putting out anything that is misleading. I ask him to withdraw that. Who is doing the misleading? Is it the Irish Wheelchair Association? Today, the Irish Wheelchair Association made a very clear statement that people with disabilities are choosing between eating, heating and covering basic costs. The Minister is so disconnected. That he could make his statement shows how disconnected and out of touch the Government is. I am utterly shocked. The statement implies the Government has access to the funds to make the payments if it wanted to make them. What is happening is the Government's fault. It is gaslighting the public and disabled people, denying them their reality. It is saying they are not actually suffering from a cost-of-living crisis or facing these choices. They are facing these choices. This is their lived reality.

I am really shocked that the Minister stood up here today and made the statement about misleading and about dangerous messages to the effect that people must choose between food and heating. I am not sure the Minister actually thought through the significance of his statement. It is one of the most profoundly hurtful and disconnected statements I have heard a Minister make about people with disabilities. It implies they are essentially making up the assertion that they are choosing between eating and heating. I am shocked. I ask the Minister to withdraw his statement and apologise for making it.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank all the Deputies who spoke in support of this motion and also those who did not speak but who I know support it. Regardless, I am very disappointed by the Government's response. I know I am not alone and that I speak for tens of thousands of disabled people when I say it is a great shame that the Government has not sought to support

them adequately this winter. The Minister spoke of a supplementary welfare scheme totalling 3,000 recipients in 2025. This motion affects ten times that number, namely 310,000, so the Government should do better.

This is my first Private Members' motion in this House, having watched many others. I was not hopeful that the Government would relent on an Opposition motion. I was disappointed by its response but not surprised. It raises the question as to when the Government will respond to the urgent needs of disabled people. How many briefings for TDs must be held? How many committee rooms must be filled with ordinary people forced to ask for help? How many motions, votes or speeches are needed? What will it take to break through the callousness of a Government that would leave disabled people cold, hungry and impoverished? What should I tell them about their Government? What defence is there for neglect?

Government is not easy in any country and I do not doubt the sincerity or good intentions of anyone in this House who comes in every day to work on behalf of his or her constituents, but surely it does not sit well with anyone here, in government or opposition, that those outside this House in poverty and deprivation are reliant on the very privileged few who sit here dry and warm. There is an enormous privilege associated with debating motions like this one and voting on the laws that govern our country. There is also an enormous responsibility. Hundreds of thousands of people are struggling with the choice between heat and food, and between their children's needs and their own. I am referring to those in arrears on their electricity bills, those who scour supermarket shelves for the best deals on food, those who in record numbers have sought help from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to meet their basic needs, and others. I am so conscious that there are too many in this country who do without and who are not given the immense privilege that I and everyone else in this House have been granted. That is frightening but it is not alarmist, dangerous or misleading, unless the Minister wants to accuse the Society of St. Vincent de Paul of being misleading. I am referring to the reality on the ground. It is the reality this Government has designed.

I find it hard to wrap my head around the fact that the Government's answer to this motion is "No". I ask it to consider its great privilege in holding the purse strings of this country and passing the laws that direct where they are loosened, and, perhaps, to consider that this great privilege carries a responsibility to those who are vulnerable outside this Chamber and that there is no better example of these people than those with disabilities.

Is the Government so distrustful of the Opposition that even when it tables constructive motions – motions aligned with the programme for Government, motions that are fiscally sound and motions targeted at the most vulnerable – it will not relent? Has Irish politics come to leaving disabled people impoverished, because it was not the Government's idea? What does the Dáil do with that reality? What does the electorate do with that reality? Did people really vote for a Fianna Fáil that leaves disabled people in poverty and cuts their incomes? Is that really the character of our country? Somehow, knowing many voters, I think not. I think I know the great character of the great people of this country and think they would be ashamed of how the Government will vote tonight. The Government should be ashamed too.

Amendment put.

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

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 11.57 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar mheán lae.

Sitting suspended at 11.57 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yesterday, everyone here in the Dáil expressed sympathies on the horrific and senseless death of Grace Lynch. I raised with the Taoiseach his Government's persistent failure to keep communities safe. So many communities across the city of Dublin and the country are tormented by persistent antisocial behaviour by those who feel they can do whatever they want whenever they want and who intimidate and harass people every single day. Ask people from these communities and they will tell you that they simply do not have enough gardaí in their communities, on their streets and walking the beat. There are not enough gardaí to provide a strong, consistent, visible deterrent and a quick policing response to those who are quite literally terrifying communities 24-7.

Last night, I was at a meeting in my own constituency in the north inner city with residents of Blessington Street square and the surrounding areas. The Garda was there, as was Dublin City Council. This is a community of the finest people you could ever meet. They really look out for each other, care about their neighbourhood and want it to be a safe place to live but that is not the case. Last night's meeting was called because these people's lives are being made a misery. Every day, they are faced with open drug dealing and drug taking in front of their homes and constant low-level criminality and antisocial behaviour. It is not just people's homes. Local businesses are also under huge pressure just to stay open. There is a persistent atmosphere of intimidation and danger. This community has been robbed of its right to safety.

The single biggest ask last night was for more gardaí on the street in the community. Gardaí in the area, by the way, are doing their very best but we simply do not have enough of them. The result is that those engaged in antisocial and criminal behaviour, drug dealing and drug taking have free rein to do whatever they want. This is not the experience of just one community, although they are having a particularly hard time of it. This scourge of antisocial behaviour and the lack of gardaí to respond is something that communities everywhere will know all too well.

At this time, when communities are crying out for stronger, more visible policing, it is frankly unbelievable to me that gardaí who will be graduating next week will be prevented from starting their work. Why? Their Garda vetting has not been completed. My understanding is that up to 20 gardaí from the class graduating next week will be prevented from getting onto the streets because of this problem - that is, gardaí who are trained, qualified and ready to go, stopped from getting to work because the vetting process is not fit for purpose. You could not make this up.

The Garda vetting review was set up four years ago. It submitted its recommendations to the Minister for justice and, even though the Minister accepts there is a problem, he has failed to solve it. How many newly graduating gardaí will be prevented from starting work because their Garda vetting is incomplete? My information is that it is up to 20 from next week's graduating class. Can the Taoiseach tell me if there are more? Can he explain to every community crying out for greater Garda visibility-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----how it is that we are in this situation? Can he give an explanation of that?

The Taoiseach: First of all, the Government is absolutely clear on the need to deal robustly and very firmly with antisocial behaviour. An investigation is under way and that restricts what I could say but we are very conscious of the very grave consequences that can arise from antisocial and unacceptable behaviour by people, the degree to which communities are under pressure, and the degree of anger out there in communities at the perception or sense that certain people can ignore the law. We do need to acknowledge that An Garda Síochána is bringing criminals to justice and to account very significantly in terms of the gangland scene in general but also in terms of many other crimes within communities.

The key issue for us in the post-Covid period has been visibility. The Government has a policy of very high visibility and the new Commissioner, Justin Kelly, is equally of that view. The position is improving significantly in terms of the numbers coming out of Templemore. I attended a graduation ceremony in Templemore just before Christmas. Huge and record numbers came out, to be followed up by even higher numbers going in. It is not true to say that people will not be able to go onto the streets straight away. I am informed by the Minister that they will. Some 170 are coming out of Templemore next week. They will be on the streets. I have seen it in different parts of the country. The idea has been to allocate significant numbers to given communities. Those coming out next week will be allocated to the communities the Deputy has referenced.

I accept the anger in such communities and it does work where you have high-visibility policing. The recruitment and retention is well under way. There is a Garda budget of about €2.74 billion in 2026. An extra 1,000 new gardaí will come on stream, with a doubling of the Garda Reserve as well, to over 600. We ran two recruitment campaigns in 2025. There is a steady pipeline of new recruits. Over 11,000 applications to join An Garda Síochána were received last year. We had 194 gardaí attested in November. In 2025, we had around 617 newly attested gardaí. Some 223 trainees entered Templemore in November, which is the largest intake at Templemore since 2014. The total number of trainees to enter Templemore is close to 800, the largest since 2018.

We now have a total of 14,462 gardaí across the State and we are going to continue that level and pace of recruitment on an ongoing basis and for the duration of this Government. The funding will be provided to enable that to happen. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has already had substantial discussions with the Commissioner in regard to the allocation of those resources to improve Garda visibility across our country but particularly in areas where antisocial behaviour is strongest, and also in our city and town centres, where there has been a lot of activity around drug trafficking-----

Deputy Seán Crowe: When is the Taoiseach going to tell us about the Garda vetting?

The Taoiseach: -----and also in regard to theft from shops and businesses and so on. People basically want to go about their normal lives with a sense of safety and security. Greater numbers of gardaí on the streets will help that. That is happening and it will continue to happen.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Therefore, there is no firm, robust response to anti-social behaviour. That is the stuff of fiction from the Taoiseach. There is not. Ask anybody anywhere. Ask them in Dublin's north inner city; ask them in communities across the country. This scourge goes unchallenged. Communities are telling us loudly and clearly that one of the ingredients to actually get a proper response is high visibility out on the streets and across the community but that is not happening, and it is not happening because the numbers are not there.

I asked the Taoiseach a question about Garda vetting and the fact that up to 20 in a given class of gardaí will be prevented from starting their duties because of an internal Garda process. The Minister, at the committee yesterday, confirmed that was the case.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I did not. That is wrong.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am asking the Taoiseach to be very clear and confirm for me what the numbers are.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Deputy is making this up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How many gardaí are prevented from graduating because of a delay in internal Garda vetting? I would like an answer to that please.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy just said the Minister said something at the committee yesterday which the Minister has just very clear said he did not say at the committee yesterday. I cannot respond-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is on the record.

The Taoiseach: I cannot respond. I am not responding to assertions by the Deputy that are not soundly based. Deputy McDonald just pointed to Deputy Carthy, so she clearly did not hear the Minister saying that yesterday.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He is the Chair of the committee.

The Taoiseach: Yes but the Deputy said it as if she knew it - as if she had heard it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The video is there.

The Taoiseach: She said it as if she had heard it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Was the Taoiseach at the committee?

The Taoiseach: Deputy Carthy was Opposition spokesperson for defence. I know how he can exaggerate and how he can spin and he can do a lot of things like that.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Was the Taoiseach at the committee himself?

The Taoiseach: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Let the Taoiseach answer the question please.

Deputy John Brady: Where were you?

The Taoiseach: The Minister for justice has made it clear to me he did not say that yesterday.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Will there be gardaí not attesting next Friday? The answer is "Yes".

The Taoiseach: He is saying it here and I am saying it here in the House now. I am simply saying Deputy McDonald did not hear that yesterday.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are all gardaí Garda vetted?

The Taoiseach: I just want to make the more fundamental point-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is not the leader yet.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are they Garda vetted?

The Taoiseach: I want to make the more fundamental point, if I may-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why do you not answer the question, if you may?

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies did not allow the response.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We did not get a response.

The Taoiseach: On the recruitment numbers, we are recruiting gardaí at record numbers----

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Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are they vetted?

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, the time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are they all vetted?

Deputy Seán Crowe: The answer is "No".

The Taoiseach: In Dublin city the gardaí have increased significantly and people have seen that.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

The Taoiseach: You are not allowing me to answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: At the outset, I want to acknowledge the death of former Minister of State and Labour TD for Waterford, Brian O'Shea. My condolences and those of the Labour Party are with his wife, Eileen, their family and with his community.

Let us talk about the Taoiseach's so-called reforms to the rental sector. He has billed the Residential Tenancies Board amendment Bill as a reset of rental protections but in reality, it is yet another chaotic intervention – the seventh rewrite of rental rules in a decade. That fact alone tells a story of its own because the relentless churn deepens instability, turbocharges rents and creates new legal loopholes and uncertainties. The Taoiseach is dressing deregulation up as reform but creating a system so opaque that nobody understands their rights. Nationwide rent pressure zones sound meaningful until you read the small print. Allowing landlords to reset rents to so-called market value between tenancies will rip up those vital protections altogether. Effectively, it is rewarding eviction.

The Government's plans are not completely meritless – we acknowledge that. It is positive to see six-year tenancies and restrictions on evictions by large landlords. Linking rent increases to inflation is better than the chaos renters face now. However, we can do so much more and we must do so much more for renters.

The Labour Party believes renters deserve a freeze now to give real breathing space while prices spiral. We know the modest positive gains are overwhelmed in this Bill and by Government policy by a plan that tries to fix market failure with yet more marketisation. The

Taoiseach must know this will not work. His assurances collapse under your assurances collapse under scrutiny.

The proof is in the pudding and the Taoiseach's housing pudding is inedible. Take the tenant in situ scheme. This was supposed to keep renters out of homelessness when their landlord sells but last year in the face of stalling sales under tenant in situ, the Taoiseach insisted to me that the scheme was working as planned. Now, we learn that Dublin City Council purchases under the scheme have collapsed by 70%. Just 77 homes were bought in a year. Eviction notices are landing in people's postboxes with no safety net for families. "Working as planned" really means working for nobody. We see the same pattern in social housing. Councils are increasingly taking enforcement action against developers who are breaching their legal duty to build social and affordable homes.

The Taoiseach knows the Labour Party has proposed transforming the Land Development Agency into a State construction company to ensure the State can build directly for the benefit of everyone. The notion of such an initiative seems to incense the Taoiseach. Instead, his policy relies almost exclusively on private developers for the delivery of social homes. This has been expensive, inefficient and ignored.

When will the Taoiseach admit that his policies on housing are failing? Will he shelve these new plans for renters and bring in real protections and real commitments for state-led delivery?

The Taoiseach: First, may I extend my deepest sympathies to the family of the late Brian O'Shea and to his wife, Eileen. I served with Brian in the House. He was a thorough gentleman and a wonderful parliamentarian. He was always calm and always thought of things in perspective. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.

I find the Deputy's presentation, if she does not mind my saying so, somewhat incoherent and a bit chaotic in the sense that one moment she uses the word "deregulation". I just cannot comprehend how she thinks a Bill, which will create a national rent regulation framework, is deregulation.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Of private rents.

The Taoiseach: She cannot have it each and every way. We will now have national rent control over the entire country and the Deputy calls that deregulation.

We will strengthen the protection for renters through the introduction of tenancies of minimum duration, which is an effective end to no-fault eviction. We are establishing a rent price register. In fairness, the Deputy acknowledged that but at the same time she called all of that chaotic. Both cannot be correct.

The arrangements to reset the rental market rate only every six years is important. First of all, six years is a bigger protection than would have been there heretofore but, second, there has to be a balance between attracting private sector investment in addition to the enormous public sector investment in housing. The Department of Finance estimates that to get to 50,000 houses a year, we need about €20 billion in the economy allocated and spent on housing. The State will not be in a position to find €20 billion every year for the next ten years and, therefore, we do need a balance. There is no question but that this emanated from the national Housing

Commission although not the specifics. The national Housing Commission was very clear. The Deputy has said this time and again that the Government ignored the housing commission. We did not, actually. We moved on the recommendations pertaining to rent. It said the present situation cannot continue. You have to give permanent clarity and a degree of certainty to the market over a significant period of time and that is what this legislation will do. The reform of the rent pressure zones was necessary and was recommended by the Housing Commission.

Real investment in dwellings for the first three quarters of 2025 were up 12.7% *vis-à-vis* 2024. Completions for the first three quarters of 2025 were the highest since 2008. Planning permissions are up 29% and 50% on the second quarter of 2025. That is planning permissions in the third quarter of last year. Commencements in the fourth quarter of 2025 are up 50% on the previous quarter. The housing infrastructure and investment fund has been announced and there is a further €1 billion there over the next number of years.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

The Taoiseach: The feedback from our budgetary measures is positive in terms of getting more apartments going in that particular sector.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Taoiseach for his kind words about the late Brian O'Shea. That is appreciated.

I did have to laugh when the Taoiseach used the word “incoherent” about my contribution. It is his housing policy that is incoherent. It is his measures on renters that are incoherent. Let me give him two examples. In Galway this week, with our Councillor Helen Ogbu, I heard about students renting Monday to Friday in Galway city who have to move all their possessions out of their apartments on a Friday, so that their landlord can rent out the apartment on Airbnb for the weekend. Where is the coherence in that for renters? Last night viewers of “Prime Time” will have been moved by the renter, Aoife McGrath, who broke down telling the story about how she had received her third no-fault eviction notice in four years and is now in her 30s desperately seeking somewhere to live.

These stories are not unique. We hear them all the time from our own constituents, from people desperately trying to find somewhere to rent. These so-called rental reforms in fact will create different classes of renters and will diminish protections for many. They lack coherence, as indeed does the Government's housing policy. When will we see real protection for renters and real delivery of homes at scale?

The Taoiseach: The case the Deputy just outlined would be covered by these regulations and she is opposing them. There is no point in raising individual cases here, with the correct empathy and so on like that, if she then proposes to oppose the very measure that would prevent three such evictions in a short number of years.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There were 5,450-----

The Taoiseach: That is exactly what this regulation is trying to counteract and deal with. More importantly, I take issue with the Deputy's construction company in terms of the

substance behind it. Is she saying we are going to have direct labour in every local authority or direct labour by the State? Is that the model?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Fianna Fáil delivered homes at scale through a State construction company.

The Taoiseach: We have delivered 53,000 social houses since we came back in 2020 through local authorities and through approved housing bodies. That is a good mechanism for social housing and it is working. We need more affordable housing and we need more apartment building in addition to what we are doing on social housing. We are getting results on social housing, no question, where construction is at its highest since the 1970s. We are going to continue with that and increase it in the time ahead.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I express our sympathies to the family of the late Brian O'Shea. He indeed was a gentleman.

The Government recognises the significant additional costs disabled people can face in their daily lives. Those are not my words. That is a line that the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Dara Calleary, has trotted out repeatedly since he was appointed last year. He said it again this morning, but they are only words and do not mean anything. They will not heat a single disabled person's home. The Minister said these empty words while announcing that the Government will tonight vote against the Social Democrats motion to introduce an emergency €400 winter payment for disabled people. This would be a modest first step to help disabled people get through winter until a proper cost-of-disability payment is introduced.

He then went on to say, "I do not want a misleading and dangerous message to go out that people must choose between food and heating." Could this Government possibly be any more out of touch with reality? This is what Joan Carthy from the Irish Wheelchair Association said in response to the Taoiseach's comments on Leaders' Questions a couple of weeks ago:

While the Government speaks of future plans, reviews and budgets yet to come, disabled people are already living with the consequences of inaction.

The emergency winter payment campaign exists because people are being forced to choose between heating and food, cancelling essential medical appointments, and sitting in cold homes because energy costs are unaffordable. This is not hypothetical. It is happening now.

Why is the Government claiming that what disabled people are saying is dangerous and misleading? Why is it not listening to what disabled people are trying to tell it about the real challenges they face in terms of heating and the cost of living?

The emergency measure we are proposing would cost €124 million. That amounts to just 1% of the €12.4 billion surplus from last year. Taoiseach, please do not pretend that the Government cannot afford this measure and please do not pretend that disabled people are asking for something they are not asking for. Disabled people cannot live on empty platitudes coming from the Government and they cannot pay energy bills with broken promises from the Government. This is a crisis that is affecting people's health and well-being. We are talking about disabled people in one of the world's wealthiest countries, struggling to get through winter, which is shameful.

I ask the Taoiseach to explain why the Government has made huge cuts to the incomes of disabled people. Why did it make such a cruel and heartless decision? Does the Taoiseach stand over the Minister's comments from earlier? Why is the Government not supporting the modest proposal for an emergency winter payment of €400?

The Taoiseach: First of all, the Government did discontinue the specific measures that we had introduced for the previous two years to deal with inflation across the board. It was not any one particular sector. The Deputy continually and disingenuously narrows it down and say we made cuts. We got rid of the one-off payments. They were not fiscally sustainable and they are not fiscally sustainable. That is the bottom line here and we need to be honest and real about it. I know those in opposition will not be because they will always come back and say we could provide another €100 million here or €500 million there. Having once-off payments is not a sustainable way to deal with these issues.

However, we did take measures in the budget to support people with disabilities, which the Deputy has ignored, because the budget is not just about payments in themselves. Across all five pillars of the strategy, supporting disabled people at every stage of life, we took measures. The cost of disability is one of those and we will deal with that comprehensively in the next budget. We delivered a record 20% increase in disability funding because supporting disabilities is about investment in services. It is about practical supports. It is about opportunities in education, opportunities in employment and opportunities in community participation. That investment in services is vital and needs to happen on a sustained basis, so we put it permanently into the budget - not once-off, but permanently into the budget for the long haul in respect of improving services in all those aspects of life for people with a disability.

We have to strengthen mainstream public support and measures for households impacted by disability on a sustainable basis. We increased the core rate of social welfare payments by €10, bringing personal rates to €254. We increased domiciliary care allowance by €20 monthly. We increased the earnings disregard for the carer's allowance to €1,000 per single person and €2,000 for a couple. The analysis by the ESRI and the Department of Finance confirms the positive impact of these decisions. It concludes that the at-risk-of-poverty rate across the population falls by 1.7%, with the largest reductions for older people, a fall of 6.2%, and for the population affected by disability, a fall of 3.8%. Those are not my figures; they come from the ESRI and the Department of Finance.

On the cost-of-disability payment, the Minister is consulting. He wants to do it properly and on a sustainable basis and he is working on that. This is a five-year Government. We committed to this and we are going to do it. We are going to do it in a proper structured way and not with a once-off measure or anything like that. It has to be done that way. This is not simple either and let us not pretend it is. This has to be done properly and that is what the Minister is going to do. He was referring to political commentary, not commentary from representative organisations. The Deputy should not deliberately misrepresent in that way.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There is no misrepresentation. Disabled people's organisations have been saying this. I quoted exactly what Joan Carthy from the Irish Wheelchair Association said in response to the Taoiseach's comments a couple of weeks ago. She said that disabled people are being forced to choose between heating and food. For the Government to label what

disabled people are saying as misleading and dangerous is utterly unacceptable. I do not think the Taoiseach should be defending it. He should withdraw it and apologise for it.

The Taoiseach has not even once acknowledged that the budget has cut the incomes of disabled people by €1,400 and he has not once acknowledged the very real hardship that causes for disabled people. Will he acknowledge that and admit the Government got it wrong? We have not been calling for once-off measures; we have said we need permanent solutions. This emergency winter payment is because the Government did not bring in a permanent solution in the budget. Will the Taoiseach acknowledge the hardship the Government has caused? Will he admit it was wrong to cut the incomes of disabled people by €1,400? Will it now take action to restore the incomes of disabled people? It has the resources to do it.

The Taoiseach: We did not cut anyone's income by €1,400.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes, you did.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You did.

The Taoiseach: Hold on now. We brought in emergency one-off payments for two years for a whole range of sectors. The Deputy knows that well. Fine, he is in opposition and has to spin it in the way that he is spinning it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: You are in government.

The Taoiseach: What we did in the budget was to introduce record increases in investment in services for people with disabilities-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That does not pay the bills.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: They are €1,400 worse off.

The Taoiseach: -----in education, in health and in areas like respite and residential where we have to substantially increase provision. The way to do that is to allocate funding on a sustainable and permanent basis. The additional needs payments are there and that is what the Minister is referring to as well.

They are there for people who are in difficulty in terms of heating and food. Those payments are there and 2,300 people availed of them last year. They are available to people who end up in difficulty for one reason or another. Our social protection programme is there to help people in those circumstances.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is a very famous poem, which I am sure the Taoiseach knows, by Pastor Martin Niemöller, "First They came". It begins:

First they came for the communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a communist

Then it says:

I did not speak out

Because I was not a Socialist

Then it is a trade unionist, then a Jew. Of course, eventually there was nobody left to speak out. It is easily transferable to the Taoiseach's approach to the actions of the US President and the Trump regime. You could insert "Mexicans", "migrants", "Muslims" or "peaceful protestors" into any of those lines. Who must they come for before the Taoiseach will speak out? He has not spoken out about Trump's attack on Venezuela and the kidnapping of its leader or about the bombing of Iran. He still has not even ruled out going on the Board of Peace for Palestine that Trump is proposing - a disgusting collection of war criminals aiming to turn Gaza into Vegas. Where does he stand on the unleashing of ICE, operating in the US as a modern Gestapo or as modern-day slave traders? I am sorry this is causing amusement. It is actually very serious.

A new poll by Amárach yesterday showed the Taoiseach is out of sync with the majority of the Irish population. Some 47% do not want the leader of our country to go to the White House on our national holiday and give publicity to a dangerous demagogue, colonialist, racist and sexual predator, while 35% do. The Irish public is again ahead of the political establishment. They want the Taoiseach to show a moral backbone.

St. Patrick's Day is particularly about the Irish migration experience. What an insult to celebrate it with somebody who is terrorising migrants as we speak. There are many despots in the world but I would like the Taoiseach to focus on the one he is going to greet on St. Patrick's Day. Louis XIV said "*L'État, c'est moi*" - "The State is me"; Trump is saying "*Le monde, c'est moi*" - "The world is me". He has to be stopped.

The Taoiseach was questioned on this last week and said, "bread on the table". Have he and Fine Gael led us to the point where our economic policy is so reliant on American FDI that we are in moral bankruptcy when it comes to these issues? The single biggest fear of American multinationals pulling out was the housing crisis that the Taoiseach has created - nothing else.

Has the Taoiseach seen the videos from Minnesota? People shout across the streets, "They're coming. Stay inside." They whistle to defend and warn their neighbours. Children are screaming in detention camps, modern-day concentration camps for kids. There is a protest going on in one as we speak. US cities are in revolt against Trump. Which side is the Taoiseach on? Will he go and shake hands with the tyrant who is calling them domestic terrorists or will he show solidarity with the ordinary people of the US challenging this dictator?

The Taoiseach: I find the Deputy's contribution interesting-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is good.

The Taoiseach: -----because she quotes the poem, "First They Came." That is more applicable to the Maduro regime than-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Aw, here we go.

The Taoiseach: It is. What is the "aw" about?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are not giving Maduro a bowl of shamrock. He will be on trial the day you go, actually.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a back-and-forth, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: President Trump was democratically elected by the American people in an emphatic electoral victory. The Deputy may not like that but she cannot actually dispute it. Maduro stole the election and had a regime of repression that was reprehensible.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is not her question.

The Taoiseach: I am answering the question.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are executing people on the streets of Minneapolis and you are going to give him a bowl of shamrock.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, you know how this works.

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are executing people.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach will be within his rights to sit down.

The Taoiseach: It was a regime of repression and that regime came for people. It created the largest migration out of Venezuela ever in that country's history. I met with migrants from Venezuela when I was at COP. They told me in a very sad way of the demise and destruction of their country by Maduro and Chávez before him.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You only have another minute to talk the clock down.

The Taoiseach: People on the other side of the House were sneaking regards of the Maduro regime. It always strikes me as extraordinary that the main Opposition party attended his inauguration. That is the difference in the House here. Let us be under no illusions.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You are a disgrace.

The Taoiseach: I am. Of course I am.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You are a disgrace. Answer the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, it is not your question.

The Taoiseach: We have compromised not one iota of our values in terms of our engagement with the United States-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: When did you speak up?

The Taoiseach: -----or in terms of our position, for example, on the Middle East, where there was significant pushback. Ireland is recognised around the world as asserting its principled position. I salute what Prime Minister Carney said at Davos. It is exactly what we have been doing: application of principle and pragmatism. The principle is we believe in an international rules-based order. We have not compromised on that and will not.

When it came to Greenland, we very firmly and calmly, along with our European partners and member states - Deputy Coppinger has no time for the European Union but I will say it anyway - did not compromise our core position in terms of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Greenland and Denmark. We did not compromise at all. That remains our position but I believe in engagement. I do not believe in the Deputy's approach that we should not engage with anybody. If I was to apply her approach, there are many people in the world we would not be engaging with. She is very selective. Her party and group has an obsession with the United States. It does not have to be President Trump; it could be President Biden or President Obama.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: That has been a consistent thread in that group's presentations here for the past two decades.

An Ceann Comhairle: Now, Deputy Coppinger.

The Taoiseach: Not just Deputy Coppinger personally but people with her and Deputy Murphy and so on like that.

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

The Taoiseach: "Bread on the table" is about workers of this country-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, time is up. It is Deputy Coppinger's turn to respond.

The Taoiseach: -----who you purport to represent. You ignore the reality of the importance of that economic relationship.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are here to question the Taoiseach and Government. The Taoiseach is not here to question us in this slot.

Deputy James Lawless: You will never be in government. You will never have to worry about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have absolutely nothing to answer for in relation to protesting against dictators, including the Iranian dictator, against whom I have been on many protests, and including Putin - I have been outside that embassy more times than any Government members have. I do not need to be selective. The Taoiseach is selective about who is a dictator. He has imposed sanctions against Iran but nothing against Israel which has been genociding the people of Palestine for over two and a half years.

Is the Taoiseach going on the Board of Peace? Is he so craven that he has not even got the spine to clearly state he would not take any part in such a board? He has had over a week to answer that question. The reality is there is a civil war, in effect, going on in cities in the US. My faith in humanity is restored by the ordinary Americans who are rooting and standing up for their neighbours and pushing Trump back. He has had to push back.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It would be nice to have a bit of solidarity on a St. Patrick's Day from the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Could I first of all say that yesterday in the House, Government sought sanction for a loan for Ukraine? The Deputy was not there to vote but her colleagues voted against that. We support peace-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: St. Patrick's Day, please.

The Taoiseach: I will answer now in whatever way I deem to answer-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are not answering the question.

The Taoiseach: -----and if you do not like it, that is your problem. The bottom line is this. The Deputy and her colleagues have been consistent on Ukraine. They will preface remarks by saying "We're against Putin, blah, blah, blah" but move on quickly.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are attacking Ukrainians who live here. We are defending Ukrainians.

The Taoiseach: There are 30 million people-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach is the one cutting them.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Murphy voted against €90 billion for Ukraine that Europe wanted to give to support the ordinary people of Ukraine to weather the appalling assault by Russia. That is his position.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy is out of order.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Because the Government voted down the amendments that said it could not be used for weapons.

The Taoiseach: You always find an excuse. I want to say this. In terms of our fundamental principles, we do not compromise. We have had a long historic relationship with the United States. It is family and the migratory experience. The Irish built America, along with others.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I asked about the Board of Peace.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Catherine Ardagh for Other Members' Questions.

The Taoiseach: We have made it clear with European colleagues that our main interest is in Gaza and the Middle East in terms of contributing to peace.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Are you going on the Board of Peace?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I now move to Other Members. I call Deputy Catherine Ardagh.

The Taoiseach: That will be the approach we will take.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I want to begin by paying tribute to Grace Lynch. Grace was a strikingly beautiful young woman with her whole life ahead of her who was taken far too soon. My heart goes out to her family, particularly her mother, who is determined to ensure action follows this awful tragedy.

Nothing we in this House can say can lessen the loss, but we owe it to Grace and to communities across our city and country to ensure that this tragedy leads to meaningful and effective action.

The antisocial and dangerous use of scrambler and quad bikes is nothing new. It has been, for many years, a scourge on our communities. It is not an isolated problem; it is a daily occurrence in Dublin South-Central and in many urban areas around our country. It is an issue that has been raised in this House on numerous occasions by Members on all sides. Before the 2020 general election, we in Fianna Fáil made a clear commitment that gardaí would be provided with powers to seize scrambler bikes when they are used dangerously or in an antisocial manner. We followed through on that commitment and enacted the Road Traffic Act

2023 to strengthen Garda powers in this area. All legislation needs to be looked at, reviewed, amended and parts commenced. We need to go further in the context of the legislation relating to this matter. The Minister for justice has been clear in recent comments that scramblers and quad bikes are not permitted on public roads unless they meet the relevant legal requirements. It is necessary to state that position. However, the reality on the ground is that clarity is not translating into consistent enforcement.

Parts of the regulatory framework outlined in the legislation have not yet been fully commenced or operationalised in a way that gives gardaí the confidence and the certainty they need. What communities see, what Garda representatives acknowledge, and what is happening on the ground is that there is uncertainty around the circumstances in which scramblers can be compulsorily seized, how ownership is established where bikes are unregistered and uninsured, and what happens to seized vehicles where no lawful ownership can be ultimately demonstrated. There is also public confusion about whether confiscated bikes are ultimately returned, retained or destroyed. That lack of clarity seriously undermines the deterrent effect the legislation is intended to have. Obviously, the tragic events in Finglas have once again shown that this behaviour is not merely antisocial; it is potentially and dangerously lethal. While gardaí are doing their best within the framework currently available to them, it is clear that additional clarity, commencement and operational support are required.

Is the Government satisfied that all relevant provisions relating to the use, seizure and disposal of scramblers and quad bikes have been fully commenced? Will further legislative provisions, amendments, regulations and guidance be implemented? I request that the Government consider a 30-day amnesty and a possible refund scheme for those who own scrambler or quad bikes and surrender them and that gardaí be given enhanced powers after any such amnesty.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. She is correct in saying that the parents of Grace Lynch, Siobhan and Martin, have shown extraordinary courage and bravery in the context of the devastating loss of their beautiful daughter. I have spoken with them, as has the wider family. I have spoken with them.

We are very clear in respect of this matter. I have discussed it with the Ministers for justice and Transport. There will be a meeting this afternoon with the relevant officials and the Ministers to discuss the commencement of the remaining piece of the 2023 Act. I said yesterday that this should have been done; it was not. If people do not have insurance or a driving licence, they are not meant to be on the road. That requires detection. It is far simpler if scramblers are taken off the public roads and not allowed on them. The law allows for that. I consulted with the Attorney General yesterday. Despite the different discussions that are under way, the Attorney General is very clear. The 2023 Act allows for the banning of scramblers and quad bikes from public roads. I intend, with my colleagues, to proceed with that. It is going to happen.

The Minister for justice has met with the Garda Commissioner. He accepts that there needs to be an intensification of activity by the Garda in specific areas where this type of antisocial behaviour is a scourge, and particularly where scramblers are used on an ongoing basis. If any other areas are surfaced in terms of issues around confiscation or ownership, we will deal with those, preferably by means of existing legislation. If new legislation is required, however, we

will bring it forward. We believe that the enforcement of existing legislation is a prerequisite and that the commencement of all aspects of existing legislation is something that should happen forthwith.

As the Deputy stated, the seizure powers were commenced. Since then, about 300 scramblers and quad bikes were seized by gardaí over the past two years. Historically, scramblers were racing bikes intended to be used on courses. That is it. I have a very simplistic view about it. I know matters can get complex in terms of types of vehicles and all of that, but it makes it far easier for enforcement if it is a very straightforward law and a ban. They are not on public roads; that is it. That is what will happen and that is what we intend to do. We will keep a very close watch in order to ensure that we plug any other gaps that may emerge subsequently.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I welcome the Taoiseach's response and his clarity in relation to these bikes not being allowed on public roads. Even after this awful tragedy occurred, we still had reports to our office of scramblers out on roads in parts of Dublin South-Central. People are really keen to see action on this. Will the Taoiseach provide a timeframe as to when subsequent regulations will be enacted? Are a possible amnesty and a refund scheme things the Government might consider? If there were an amnesty, would the Government consider enhanced powers for gardaí after it has taken place? These bikes are a scourge, and we do not want to see any further tragedies resulting from their use. This is something we have been shouting about in these Houses for a long time. We have acted on it, but not enough.

The Taoiseach: I have convened a meeting for later today with the Ministers. I will have better clarity around the timeline after that, but it will not be a long timeline. The Attorney General will be at that meeting as well. This is something I want done very quickly. The parents who have lost their beautiful daughter in the most appalling of circumstances do not even have to ask for this. We want to make sure that something like this, in so far as is possible, never happens again. We can never say that with any great certainty and clarity because of the behaviour of people.

On an amnesty, we are hearing feedback about some of these scramblers. I do not want to brand everyone, but we do not want to be rewarding people who do not need to be rewarded. I will ask the relevant Ministers to examine what the Deputy is saying. We did that with knives in the past and it yielded results. We will ask the Ministers to examine that fully.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Eight days on, and the Taoiseach still ignores the calls for Larry Murrin to step down from his role as chair of Bord Bia. His position is untenable. There is a massive conflict of interests with him remaining in post, particularly as his company imports Brazilian beef into the Irish market. This is totally in conflict with the role of Bord Bia, which is to promote Irish food, including Irish beef. How long will the Taoiseach keep his head buried in the sand, ignoring farming organisations, parties across the Dáil and many of his own TDs? The Government appointed Mr. Murrin as chair of Bord Bia. It has the power to remove him from post. The more it dithers and delays, the more damage is done to the

reputation of Bord Bia. When will the Government use the powers available to it and remove Mr. Murrin as chair of Bord Bia?

The Taoiseach: I would like the Deputy to outline the powers and the basis for what she said. I have never been one for witch hunts. Notwithstanding the issues, I just do not like them. Governments have to do things properly and have to behave properly and appropriately. In terms of individuals, I have no relationship or whatever with Mr. Murrin. However, Bord Bia has performed exceptionally well. In total, Irish beef exports to 70 countries have increased over the past five years by €890 million. That is from €2.2 billion in 2019 to €3.1 billion in 2024. That is an increase of 40% in beef exports, and we are in here looking for the head of the person who was the head of the organisation that has achieved that.

We need to have perspective in our debates.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Farmers have perspective-----

The Taoiseach: I know, and farm organisations-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----as does everybody else.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: We have to run organisations properly and effectively.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will stick to the minute for each Member.

The Taoiseach: There has to be some balance.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: The board met-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach's time is up. It is Deputy Ivana Bacik's time now.

The Taoiseach: -----and it took a view.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Carers do incredible work out of love and in service to our State, but they continue to face penalties despite the invaluable work they do. I have heard heartbreaking testimony from carers across the State, overwhelmingly women, who are now living on the bread line after providing years of unpaid care. I want to raise a specific issue, namely pensions. I have heard from women carers who stepped outside the paid workforce to carry out care. They feel hoodwinked now because nobody explained to them their care-related credited contributions would not qualify for the contributory State pension. Having missed out on a salary during the period of care, they have also forfeited a pension.

There is a 2024 recommendation from the joint committee on social protection to treat all care-related credited contributions as the same value as paid contributions in the context of pension eligibility. The Minister is here with the Taoiseach. I am looking for a response, if not immediately then perhaps from the Minister in writing. I will forward the specific query, which is an important one for carers.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, we have a significant set of objectives in the programme for Government that we wish to achieve. The most important of these is the removal of the income disregard and the means test. There are other measures as well. I will ask the Minister to respond to the Deputy on the specific issue she raised in respect of pension contributions.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Storm Chandra brought absolute chaos to parts of Dublin, Wexford and Wicklow yesterday. Homes and businesses were destroyed and there was commuter hell for thousands of people left sitting on the M1, the M50 and the N11 for four or five hours in traffic. The reality is that these storms are going to come more often and will be more severe. We need to be better prepared.

The Minister for housing made an extraordinary accusation on Alan Corcoran's show on South East Radio this morning when he accused Met Éireann of guarding information and, essentially, withholding flood warning information about this storm event. Does the Taoiseach agree with the housing Minister that Met Éireann is guarding this information? If so, what is he going to do about it?

The Taoiseach: I did not hear that interview. The Deputy is correct to say that the severity and frequency of these storms is going to continue. Climate change is here now. We are investing in adaptation and mitigation efforts. We are contributing financially to that. We really need a debate on flood relief schemes in the context of getting them through the system. There is enormous consultation involved. Environmental considerations have to be taken into consideration. There is an absence of balance between the-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Flood relief schemes have nothing to do with the traffic issues yesterday.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a back-and-forth.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy raised the issue of storms. I want to make the point that we must protect life, property, businesses and the livelihoods of people. I would argue that, as a society, we have overdone it in terms of all the various consultations and so on that must take place to the detriment of getting flood relief schemes through local authorities and the planning process in a timely manner. The one in Enniscorthy was refused on the basis of the presence of the pearl mussel or whatever. That should not happen. The new legislation we are seeking to pass will deal with some of that, but it is an issue on which we need greater consensus across the House.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: What about Met Éireann?

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Mayor of Budapest, my Green Party colleague Gergely Karácsony, is being prosecuted for holding a Pride parade in the city last June. As the Green Party spokesperson for foreign affairs, Councillor Janet Horner, has pointed out, Mayor Karácsony is facing a fine this time. Will he be facing jail the next time? In June, I and Irish MEPs joined the hundreds of thousands of Hungarians in standing against the efforts of Orbán’s Government to stifle the freedom of speech that Pride represents. At what point does Orbán pass the tipping point? At what point do we recognise that his Government has gone beyond being conservative and very right wing and has actually become an authoritarian entity that is using the law to stifle freedom of speech? Prime Minister Orbán may well be here later this year as part of the events relating to the EU Presidency. Will the Taoiseach make his views about the value of freedom of speech, as represented by Pride, known to Mr. Orbán if he does come here?

The Taoiseach: I have made my views known to him on previous occasions. It is reprehensible behaviour. What is happening with the prosecution of the Mayor of Budapest for organising and participating in the Pride parade is unacceptable. I have made that consistently clear, both as foreign Minister and as Taoiseach, to Prime Minister Orbán, as have others. There are fundamental issues here, as an EU member state, in terms of upholding basic values. As part of his campaign to seek re-election, Prime Minister Orbán is attacking the European Union, seeking to undermine it, engaging in name-calling and so forth. There are serious issues that the EU will have to come to terms with at some stage.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: All brands of salbutamol nebulisers currently covered under the medical card scheme are out of stock nationwide due to a manufacturing problem and issues with the supply chain. Therefore, pharmacists, through no fault of their own, have to come up with alternatives, namely the prescription of an unlicensed product that is not covered by the HSE and that is not reimbursable. That probably costs about €30. I am getting dozens of calls to my office about this. When I put it up on Facebook and asked people to make contact with me, hundreds of individuals made contact with our office about other products that are not available or about substitute products that are coming in. There are products that are not available that are covered under the medical card scheme. People have to use substitute products as a result and they have to pay for them. These sometimes cost €30, €40 or €50. Can we make allowances for those people who are on the medical card such that when there is a supply deficiency and a product is not available, the cost of substitute products will be under the medical card scheme?

The Taoiseach: We have to be careful about this, because there has to be some regulatory framework governing substitute products.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I agree.

The Taoiseach: It is not simple. We have had experiences in the past where situations have been exploited or whatever. I will refer the matter to the Minister for Health and him to respond to the Deputy about the issue. I appreciate him raising it because obviously, it is an issue of concern to quite a number of people out there.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I raise the issue of the five gardaí who were acquitted in Limerick Circuit Court this week. They all deserve apologies from the Garda Commissioner, and I sincerely hope this will happen. The Garda division of Limerick encompasses quite a large area of County Clare. I have spoken on this issue many times over the years. In my opinion, this was a witch hunt that was wasteful of the time of our Judiciary and of taxpayer's money. It cost an estimated €3.5 million. It took nine years to happen. You would have been tried for murder in less time than this trial took.

The investigation and subsequent trial destroyed the careers and reputation of the five gardaí involved. There is more to it, however, because a much wider net of more junior ranking gardaí had their personal phones and laptops confiscated as part of this investigation. They too have endured reputational damage and seen their careers stagnate and flounder under a veil of unwarranted suspicion. Any remaining trials must be struck out.

The apologies need to come from the Commissioner. Additionally, however, the principle of discretion needs to be made very clear to all gardaí. It is a central plank of the syllabus of Templemore training college. Thus, it must be a central plank of day to day policing in Ireland. We either allow it or we do not. Discretion must be central.

Can I just say-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, the Deputy cannot. His time is up.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: -----that we see in other jurisdictions how brutal policing can be.

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

Deputy Cathal Crowe: We have a very proud history of policing by consent in Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Crowe is encroaching on everyone else's time. His time is up.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: We must always protect our gardaí and stand with them.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the very strong position that has been consistently articulated by Deputy Crowe in respect of this issue. It is fair to say that those gardaí have been acquitted by the courts. That is an issue on which we have to reflect. I will discuss the matter with the Minister for justice and the implications of that. It seems that a review of what transpired needs to happen because it impacted Garda morale more broadly and had a significant negative impact on the careers of the five gardaí and, as the Deputy stated, of others as well.

The principle of discretion is important. An Garda Síochána has served us well. There have to be checks and balances in every system. There has to be accountability. There has to be perspective in how all of these issues are dealt with. Given what transpired, one has to question whether the principle of perspective was applied here or not.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. I call Deputy Carrigy.

The Taoiseach: I take on board what the Deputy is saying and I appreciate that he has been consistently and articulately advocating on this issue for a long time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up. We have to stick to the time.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I speak as a member of the all-party Joint Committee on Autism. At a meeting yesterday, the autism innovation strategy, launched by the Government in August 2024, came up. As part of that strategy, in one of the points related to advocacy, understanding and acceptance, we stated we would establish an autism innovation fund. The fund is to be twofold, to provide for funding for innovative projects, initiatives and activities designed to support and empower autistic people around Ireland and, second, to support research that aims to increase our understanding of autism and autistic people. To date, to my knowledge, no procedures have been put in place and no funding has been spent in that regard. In budget 2025, €2 million was budgeted for this and nothing was spent, and €2 million has been budgeted for 2026. When will we see this money rolled out to organisations that are advocating on behalf of the autistic community throughout the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will have to talk to the relevant Ministers in respect of the autism innovation fund, which was recommended by the committee. I may have further discussions with the Deputy to see how best we can proceed with this and in what specific area. It has application across education, health, work and generally. Maybe it should be combined with some research and some broader analysis of the spectrum, if you like, and how best we can do better in respect of people who are on the autistic spectrum in terms of their participation in life.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Taoiseach says time and again that housing is the number one issue for this Government, and he accepts that there is a housing crisis. Notices to quit are on the increase in every county, including mine, Waterford. Last week, I met with three families, all of which have children, who received notices to quit. They are very worried and stressed about having to find alternative accommodation, which the Taoiseach knows is not easy. They have been getting on to letting agencies and asking me and others to support them. It is a really stressful situation.

Obviously, I contacted the local council to see what support it can give, and one of the few options was the tenant in situ scheme. The senior management in the council told me that the best way they can describe the Government's response to this issue is that it turned the funding down to a trickle. In 2023, the council was able to purchase 29 homes in Waterford under the tenant in situ scheme. In 2024, it was 39 homes, but because the Government dramatically reduced the funding last year, it was four homes.

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

Deputy David Cullinane: The council is telling me that this year, it still has not received its allocation. I ask the Taoiseach to look at this issue again because this scheme is one of the few supports that is available and is actually working for those families.

The Taoiseach: Actually, the Government brought in the tenant in situ scheme and provided substantial funding. In some areas - I am not saying in Waterford - the scheme broadened and was used by local authorities for investments that should never have occurred. We had cases where some local authorities were spending €50,000 to €60,000 on the refurbishment of houses. The whole purpose of the tenant in situ scheme was to stop people going into homelessness immediately, so the house was purchased. Suddenly, the fund was getting used for much broader purposes. There was a need to review it and target it at those who were in an immediate danger of homelessness.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Government gutted it.

The Taoiseach: We did not gut it because the same funding was applied, and that additional funding was applied. Some local authorities were approaching it differently - there is no question that they were - with different applications that were unnecessary in my view. It tends to happen when funding and so on gets allocated like that. There has been engagement with the local authorities and the Minister, and we have a scheme in place. It is more focused and targeted now than it was.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: Nearly 24 years ago, the site of the former Fitzgerald camp Army barracks in Fermoy in my constituency of Cork East was handed over to the IDA. Unfortunately, it has remained idle since, with no formal applications to operate on the site received in the last five years. This is despite the fact that this is a serviced site in a prime location only five minutes from the Cork to Dublin M8 motorway. I am sure the Taoiseach will agree that the development of such a site would be an enormous boost for the businesses in Fermoy and the wider Blackwater region. Therefore, can the Taoiseach clarify whether the IDA still considers this site strategically viable? If not, what alternatives could be considered?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I am familiar with the Fitzgerald camp barracks. I will talk to the IDA and respond to the Deputy. Personally, I think that if the IDA has purchased the site, it is potentially a site that could attract foreign direct investment, FDI, into the Fermoy and north Cork area, which is important, if that is possible. I remember people in Carlow asking me many years ago if the IDA site could be used for something else, for domestic purposes. I asked them to hold on and, thankfully, we did. Why? It is because Merck, Sharpe and Dohme came in and is now manufacturing the highest value cancer drug in the world, Keytruda, in Carlow. I know people see an empty facility or spare ground and ask whether it can be filled with all sorts of things. I will talk to the IDA to see what the potential is. I will get clarity from it and then come back to the Deputy.

Deputy John Lahart: I want to reinforce the message from a previous speaker in relation to scrambler legislation. As the Taoiseach knows, I worked particularly hard in opposition, with his support, to draft a Bill around scrambler legislation between 2016 and 2020. In

government, we introduced legislation which senior gardaí in Tallaght in my constituency have described as game-changing. Because senior gardaí were reluctant to engage in pursuit of people on scramblers, we asked them what laws they wanted. As far as we were concerned, we gave them the laws they were looking for, which included confiscation, as was mentioned earlier. I support a ban on scramblers on public roads, which the Taoiseach has spoken about. In my constituency, however, while they are a nuisance and a real menace on public roads, it is in public parks that they do most damage, tearing up pitches and amenity space. I ask the Taoiseach to consider that because, at the end of the day, if the Government banned them, there would still be a question of how-----

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

Deputy John Lahart: -----to pursue them to confiscate them. That is where our laws came in.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that the Deputy has been consistently advocating for law on this issue. We passed the 2023 Act largely as a result of the Deputy's advocacy and that of Deputy McAuliffe, and, I have to say, others in the House. It seems that for about 85% of that legislation, the regulations were then formulated to commence and then there was one aspect, the banning. There is a pursuit policy. As the Deputy knows, pursuit policies have to be balanced with avoiding any further danger and loss of life. On public parks and pitches, scramblers should of course be banned. That is what I hope to deal with today in our meeting. I do not hope to do so; I will deal with it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to speak on behalf of the fishermen of this island who are warning that 2026 will be the worst year the sector has ever faced after drastic reductions to fish quotas and cuts to the key stocks. The industry is facing an imminent existential threat. The Government recently announced the establishment of a task force to support the industry and coastal communities. I certainly welcome that. I ask the Taoiseach that the regional inshore fisheries forums, RIFFs, are directly represented on the new fisheries seafood task force chaired by Mr. Michael Berkey. This equity is vital for all inshore fishing communities around the county. Each RIFF member would be representing approximately 300 vessels from their local region.

I ask the Taoiseach and Minister as well that we have proper labelling for imported fish. People here think they are eating Irish fish when they are eating fish that is days old coming from all parts.

The Taoiseach: It is going to be a very difficult year, a difficult number of years, actually. I have met with the fishing representative bodies along with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, who have responsibility for the marine. Largely because of the research that came in terms of the stocks, which everybody generally accepts - that has always been a consistent position - there has been a 70% reduction in pelagic, which is shocking. It really will be devastating. As the Deputy said, our challenge is to establish the task force. I also hear the call of the inshore fishermen in terms of representation on that. I will talk to the Ministers in respect of that. More importantly, there will have to be a state aid

programme or support programme from the Government to support fishers through this very difficult period.

It is not just the pelagic; there are significant reductions in other species as well, which makes for a very difficult scenario. Also, the European Union then has to get more robust in its engagement with Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland in terms of the overfishing of fishing stocks more generally.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Is mian liom ceist a chur ar an Taoiseach maidir le rud faoina raibh mé ag caint le duine ó mo Dháilcheantar i Marino, Mick Finnegan. It is to do with the Geoffrey Shannon report into historical child sexual abuse in St. John Ambulance Ireland. The survivors, including Mick Finnegan, have contacted me about not only the lack of progress but the lack of basic communication from the Department of children. Many feel they have been left out completely and some say their efforts to secure a meeting have not been acknowledged. The people who came to me and with whom I have had meetings came forward with a serious abuse issue. They have engaged with the State in process and good faith. They deserve better than silence.

Inniu, is í an cheist atá á cur agam ar an Taoiseach ná cad é atá ag tarlú leis an status report anois. Is there any timeline for the report on St. John Ambulance Ireland and will any steps be taken to ensure survivors are properly informed?

The Taoiseach: Beidh mé ag labhairt leis an Aire leanaí, an Teachta Norma Foley, faoin cheist seo. Tá deacrachtaí ann agus níl Mick Finnegan sásta leis an méid atá tar éis tarlú go dtí seo. Mar sin, beidh mé ag labhairt leis an Aire agus, b'fhéidir, déanfar teagmháil idir an Roinn agus na daoine a luaigh an Teachta Heneghan.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Following Storm Chandra in the past few days, many homes around the country have been destroyed. I have stood in this Chamber previously asking about flood alleviation and what will be done in terms of planning. As I told the House on those occasions, I have personal experience, with my German family, of the effects of flooding. Four years later, things are not great from a building perspective but also from an emotional and psychological perspective. Things are very difficult and that is echoed in any society where a flood has come and caused damaged.

In Dublin South-Central, Dublin City Council homes cannot be maintained because there are just not enough maintenance crews and this brings so many issues. With regard to what the Government is saying about flood planning in the future, can anything be done for councils around the country that are dealing not only with fixing the problems from the floods but also with preventing them in the future? It is about funding for councils to deal with the effect of flooding and rainfall on council housing.

The Taoiseach: We have allocated funding to councils. They might say otherwise but there has never been more funding allocated to councils than in the past number of years. We will continue to work with them in regard to prevention. Yes, there is an issue in terms of co-ordination and around local forecasting as opposed to the national forecast. There are issues there. To be fair, a lot of councils have improved an awful lot in terms of providing sandbags

and various measures. A lot of interim prevention measures are happening now in advance of a full-scale flood relief scheme going through planning, being built and so on.

These are very serious issues. It is soul-destroying when flooding happens to people's houses or businesses. I have been in flood-affected areas and in the homes. It is utterly soul-destroying psychologically and we have to do everything we can to prevent it. That is why the planning and the progress of flood relief schemes have to happen much faster.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I raise the reinstatement of the supplementary pension for our uniformed services members. As the Taoiseach is aware, the fast-accrual nature of the pensions for our Defence Forces, fire services, gardaí and prison officers was decoupled from the supplementary element during austerity. This is a financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, measure, which the Taoiseach's party made an unambiguous promise to unwind in this term. However, it did not make the programme for Government. I attended the seminar yesterday on pensions for uniformed service members, the coverage of which the Taoiseach will have seen today in the likes of *The Irish Times*. Aisling Buffini of Dublin Fire Brigade and many others spoke yesterday. This is having an impact on recruitment and ultimately on the retention of members of our uniformed services, who, it need hardly be said, perform such vital services in our country. Can this FEMPI measure be unwound as soon as possible?

The Taoiseach: First, very significant measures have been taken in terms of recruitment and retention in our uniformed services, with the result that we have huge volumes of applications to An Garda and other services. We have made progress in the Defence Forces in the past two to three years and we need more progress there. We have made progress on that front because of measures we have taken to enhance the conditions for people in the uniformed services. I will talk to the relevant Ministers. Pensions are always difficult and complex - there is no point in saying otherwise - but I will talk to the Department of public expenditure and other Departments in respect of the issue the Deputy has raised.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I raise Uisce Éireann's connection charging policy and the fact there is no discount available for any groups of customers. The connection charging policy has been produced and approved by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, together with Irish Water and the Department. Will the Taoiseach engage with the Department, particularly in relation to community and voluntary groups, which are being charged enormous sums for a water or wastewater connection facility? For example, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, were in Rylane in my constituency recently celebrating the turning of the sod for a new community centre there. That centre is being charged €70,000 for a wastewater and water connection, which the community will have to fund. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with the Minister, Deputy Browne, to see whether we can create a policy allowing for a discount for community groups.

The Taoiseach: That is a substantial sum of money, particularly when the State, through another Department, is allocating funding to new community centres - I am not sure whether that happened in Rylane - and then it is being taken out on the other side. On the other hand, Uisce Éireann needs some sustainability in terms of funding. We need a balance and, in

particular, we need to take on board the overall public good and that the provision of community-based facilities provides for the public and communities at large.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The Taoiseach will be aware of the impact of Storm Chandra, particularly on the Wicklow-Wexford constituency. I pay tribute to the county councils, emergency crews and volunteers. In villages right across the constituency, in Woodenbridge, Laragh, Aughrim, Wicklow town, Castletown, Clohamon and Bunclody, we have seen rivers and streams burst their banks. I welcome the Government's opening of the humanitarian assistance scheme and that every support will be made available to those villages and communities.

However, one of the big problems yesterday was flooding on the N11, which led to very serious delays for commuters from Wicklow and Wexford. The rail line, which is one of the most neglected rail lines in the country, is not an alternative. Indeed, it is closed again today. I call on the Taoiseach, as I have asked for several times, that we prioritise investment in our commuter infrastructure and that a transport task force be set up for counties Wicklow and Wexford to address the problems with regard to the N11 and the Rosslare rail line.

The Taoiseach: Without question, Wicklow and Wexford were severely hit by Storm Chandra yesterday. The schemes have been opened in terms of the emergency response payment and the business and community flooding support scheme, both of which are clearly required. Other locations across the country are affected as well but, certainly, the impact of rivers in Wexford and Wicklow bursting their banks has been severe.

I was in Gorey recently with the Deputy. We met with councillors from Wicklow and Wexford and, yes, the issue came up in terms of the N11 and the whole public transport system. I certainly will talk to the relevant Ministers to see whether we can put together a group to examine that. I will also engage with Iarnród Éireann and others in terms of prioritisation of what is a populous area regarding investment and how we can accelerate the investment in the railway in particular.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: A number of weeks ago, I was contacted by a mother in Loughglinn whose son had an asthma attack over the Christmas period. The rapid response vehicle arrived from Roscommon town within 17 minutes and saved his life. If that call had come in on a Monday night, the rapid response vehicle would not be available because it is parked up for 12 hours. The overtime the National Ambulance Service has been paying for a number of years has been pulled and the rapid response vehicle is no longer available for the people of County Roscommon on a 24-7 basis, as it more or less has been since the closure of the Roscommon hospital emergency department in 2011. I have been raising this issue for months. I again call on the National Ambulance Service to please restore 24-7 cover for Roscommon of the rapid response vehicle, which is needed due to our distance from the nearest emergency department.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising it. That seems like something that should be rectified. I will talk to the Minister and the HSE in respect of this, and to the National Ambulance Service. I appreciate she has been raising it on a consistent basis.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Uber and other taxi app companies have been at the transport committee this week. Across the world Uber makes enormous profits by driving down the amount given to taxi drivers and driving up the cost to passengers through add-on charges and dynamic pricing. Taxi drivers have been forced to protest about this. What they have proposed to benefit the driver, the passenger, the taxpayer and the wider public is that the NTA should have its own app so we do not have profiteering, surge pricing or attacks on the income of taxi drivers. The NTA should have a booking app that provides information on what taxis are available and transparency in terms of fares and that protects the incomes of taxi drivers to ensure we have a proper, safe, regulated, affordable, effective taxi system. Will the Taoiseach listen to the taxi drivers?

The Taoiseach: Again, I have to examine that. Obviously the NTA is the regulatory body. It is an independent transport regulator. Something like the Deputy proposes, or the taxi drivers propose, would need to be examined in the context of that legislation and whether the NTA is in a position to actually do what is being suggested.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Easy.

The Taoiseach: There could be a potential conflict of interest. I have not examined it in detail. The Deputy has raised it and I will ask that the NTA engage with that to see whether it is possible for it to do that.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.22 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.22 p.m. and resumed at 2.22 p.m.

Infrastructure Plan: Statements

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank Members of the House for the opportunity to provide an update on the Government's work to accelerate infrastructure delivery, and to discuss my Department's role in the management and delivery of capital projects and programmes. In particular, I will outline some of the recent and ongoing developments in my Department, as we implement the actions contained in the accelerating infrastructure action plan which the Government published in December.

As we look back on recent weeks and the rupture in the global international order, the case for fundamental reform has never been stronger. The need for high quality, modern infrastructure has never been clearer. The choices we now set in motion on infrastructure delivery will determine our economic competitiveness, our climate resilience, the protection and creation of jobs, and, ultimately, the quality of life enjoyed by people in communities across the country.

I am acutely aware of the multifaceted and interconnected challenges the Government faces in infrastructure deficits and the need to prioritise investment in major housing, water, energy and transport projects. In the programme for Government, published one year ago, we made five key commitments for infrastructure delivery. They were: to create a Cabinet committee

on infrastructure to drive delivery; to undertake an early review of the national development plan; to review and reform the prioritisation of capital projects in key agencies; to broaden the remit of the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, to provide expert advice for major infrastructure; and to create a dedicated infrastructure division in my Department, including formation of an accelerating infrastructure task force to assess the implementation of measures to accelerate infrastructure delivery.

In the past 12 months, we have delivered on each of these commitments. The Cabinet committee on infrastructure to drive delivery was established in April last year. The review of the national development plan was published in July. Sectoral plans setting out the projects and programmes to be prioritised by each Department over the next five years have been published. The NDFA is broadening its remit for the provision of expert advice on major infrastructure; and the dedicated infrastructure division in my Department was established with a new deputy secretary general appointed last December.

Moving beyond the programme for Government commitments and towards the concrete actions that will be taken over the lifetime of this Government, we published the NDP review and the report on engagement and barriers to infrastructure in July and the subsequent Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan in December. These three documents represent an unprecedented increase in investment, a realistic outline of the barriers to infrastructure delivery and a time-bound plan to remove those barriers.

The Government has set out annual sectoral allocations for 2026 to 2030, and overall Government capital expenditure ceilings to 2035, leading to a total public capital investment of €275.4 billion over the period to 2035. This includes €202.4 billion in Exchequer voted capital expenditure from 2026 to 2035. Of this, €102.4 billion is being allocated over the five-year period 2026 to 2030, which represents a 30% increase over the previously agreed capital ceilings for the same period. This is an additional €23.9 billion over and above the previous allocation and is further complemented by an investment of €10 billion in equity and fund releases, which is specifically being provided for investment to expansively improve and upgrade infrastructure mega-projects in the water, energy and transport sectors over the period to 2030.

Some €3.5 billion in equity funding was provided to ESB Networks and EirGrid in 2025 to fund enhanced energy grid capacity to support the Government's housing and competitiveness objectives. Some €2 billion in equity funding has been provided to Uisce Éireann to enable the delivery of 300,000 additional homes. A further €2.5 billion in funding is being provided to commence the greater Dublin drainage and water supply project over the period to 2030, and €2 billion from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund will fund and support low-carbon transportation, such as MetroLink.

The review prioritised increased investment in critical infrastructure for water, energy, transport and housing to allow us to enable the delivery of hundreds of thousands of additional homes; provide greater opportunities for our enterprise economy and support our international competitiveness; and support all other necessary economic and social development, such as schools, hospitals and further and higher education. Total capital investment in 2025 was €16.6 billion. This will be increased to an allocation of €19.1 billion for 2026, as outlined in the Estimates published in December. It represents the highest annual spend on capital investment in this country. Capital expenditure has increased by almost €9.5 billion or 97% over the period

2021 to 2026. This increased investment has seen its share rise from 11% of overall current and capital expenditure in 2021 to 16% in 2026.

Following the publication of the review last July, Departments began to develop their sectoral investment plans to provide specific details on projects they intend to deliver and progress between 2026 and 2030. These plans have provided the construction and built environment sector with a clear and structured pipeline of projects to be delivered over the next five years. I was pleased to participate in the launch of the education sectoral investment plan earlier today with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, which will provide hundreds of new buildings and school extensions, with a particular emphasis on special education over the next two years.

By outlining the scale, scope, and timing of upcoming infrastructure projects, the sectoral plans provide greater certainty for industry to be able to plan and scale capacity through investment in hiring, technology and innovation to deliver on the NDP. Considering sectoral needs and ministerial decisions, these plans reflect Government priorities, including the national planning framework commitment to balanced regional development. The plans published to date include planned investment and projects, including a range of projects across transport, health, education, justice and utility services. These sectoral plans are available online and provide further detail on a sectoral basis.

The core functions of my Department are expenditure management and reform and this dual remit underpins the Government's approach to accelerating and expanding our delivery of infrastructure to maximise the impact for Ireland. The investment under the NDP is to ensure that we are equipped for the future and that we are making lasting sustainable change to the country. Record levels of expenditure provide us with a generational opportunity to transform our built environment and deliver the homes needed for our growing and changing demographics. However, to maximise this investment, reform is equally important. We are clear we cannot properly tackle infrastructure deficits through increased investment alone. Unprecedented funding allocations must be matched with unprecedented reform to deliver value for money and the projects required.

In April 2025, I established the infrastructure division in my Department and convened the accelerating infrastructure task force with a single mandate, that is, to identify the key barriers to infrastructure delivery and develop a comprehensive action plan to overcome them. The accelerating infrastructure task force brought together experts and stakeholders from across the infrastructure delivery system with the aim of tackling the most significant barriers to infrastructure delivery.

I chaired this task force, which met monthly, and ensured that the work and recommendations of the group were evidence based, practical, targeted and, crucially, capable of delivering measurable improvements in infrastructure timelines and outcomes.

The first report of the task force identified 12 barriers to infrastructure delivery in key areas, namely: the regulatory environment in particularly complex, overlapping consenting processes for submission and review and risk aversion in the system; the planning and legal systems, in particular judicial reviews, causing uncertainty and delay; and internal systems across the public and civil service, noting fragmented governance, procurement challenges and capacity constraints. The final report was published in December last year and focused on how we

address these issues. It highlighted five key objective: to accelerate delivery of critical infrastructure, particularly in the areas of electricity, water and transport; to accelerate the delivery of all infrastructure by simplifying, streamlining and rebalancing the regulatory and consenting processes for infrastructure in general; to reduce delays caused by judicial reviews, regulatory complexity and fragmented approvals; to enhance co-ordination across Government, utilities and local authorities; and to build public and political support for infrastructure projects.

The report also sets out 30 targeted actions across four pillars to deliver on these objectives. Each of the actions outlined is explicitly linked to the barriers identified in July and how they interact with each other. These actions are not stand alone, and the total impact will be greater than the sum of the individual actions. There needs to be a complete mindset shift across our public services to ensure delivery is prioritised. This means a much greater risk appetite, much better regulatory balance and a decision-making culture which ensures that the public and national interest come first.

This is not a report of recommendations. The report is a statement of intent, and the Government is committed to implementing this action plan in full and on time. This is evident with clear deadlines for implementation included - which are concentrated, and the majority of which are in 2026 - clear responsibility for each action and defined measures of success and accountability. The Government is focused on making the step change necessary to have real impact on our infrastructure delivery.

The action plan spans four pillars. First, there is legal reform. This is designed to tackle excessive complexity in the regulatory and infrastructure development environment at the source. These legal reforms are specific and carefully considered to improve infrastructure delivery without compromising on environmental standards, individual rights or good governance. These reforms will work within the bounds of existing EU legislation to reduce disproportionate delays in the infrastructure development process and will create legal frameworks for critical and emergency infrastructure, ensuring that projects of high strategic importance or that are urgently needed can be prioritised by all State bodies and delivered quickly. The key actions under this pillar include: several measures to reform the judicial review process; enacting a critical infrastructure Bill; giving statutory designation for critical projects, thereby allowing them to be expedited through processes; and bringing forward emergency powers legislation to enable accelerated delivery in urgent situations consistent with EU law.

The second pillar is regulatory reform. Our current regulatory landscape is fragmented and overly complex. It is composed of numerous agencies, consents, assessments and licences. However, the system has developed over decades and each of these processes may serve an important function. This reform pillar is not just about removing regulation or lowering standards, and accelerating infrastructure delivery must not come at the cost of good governance or environmental standards. We will focus on simplifying and standardising processes in order that approvals run in parallel, where possible, with clearly stated expectations and statutory timelines for decisions. This goal is to align procedures across agencies, remove duplication and create processes that have predictable timelines and outcomes and that ultimately strike a better balance in the context of regulatory requirements. Some of the key actions under this pillar include the establishment of a regulatory

simplification unit to proactively identify opportunities to simplify, create parallel systems and streamline regulatory processes. The legislation underpinning regulatory processes will also be rationalised. We will publish national planning statements to create legally binding guidance for planning authorities. This will create consistency, transparency and accountability in decision-making on infrastructure projects. We will change how we approach infrastructure in the context of EU law.

The third pillar is focused on reform of co-ordination and delivery. In order to deliver on the commitments in the national development plan and sectoral investment plans, Ireland must be able to deliver infrastructure at scale, year after year. The funding has been committed and delivery is now a real a priority. This can only be achieved with strong, whole-of-government co-ordination and a strong construction sector. The Government has already made significant efforts to orient itself towards infrastructure co-ordination and delivery through the funding allocations and reform plan. The infrastructure division will take on a proactive oversight and monitoring role for this plan. This role will allow my Department to take early action where barriers arise in the delivery of critical infrastructure programmes. These commitments to strengthening the construction sector are supported by other actions in the plan. Shortened delivery timelines, reduced regulatory complexity and a reliable project pipeline will all enable the construction sector to build and maintain the workforce and expertise needed to deliver on Ireland's ambitious capital plans.

Some of the key actions under this pillar include the prioritisation of Government investment in capital, which has already been achieved through the recent national development plan review and continues to be actioned with the publication of sectoral investment plans for critical infrastructure sectors. My Department will take on an expanded infrastructure co-ordination role. The Department will be proactive and will ensure that the action plan is implemented, its effectiveness measured and issues identified and resolved early.

We have created a joint utilities and transport clearing house to co-ordinate road openings, diversions and standards. We will increase construction sector capacity through streamlined permits and visas, expanded training and greater use of modern methods of construction and digitalisation and procurement reform through sharing expertise through the National Development Finance Agency, standardising procurement processes and enabling the use of international forms of contract where appropriate. These actions will create greater co-operation between State bodies, ensuring that all bodies are aligned with Government strategies to deliver critical infrastructure.

The fourth pillar of the report focuses on public acceptance and civic engagement. Infrastructure must earn societal support. We will accelerate infrastructure delivery by reducing land access delays and building public trust and accountability. We will also improve public engagement processes to communicate the real-world value of infrastructure and the improvements it brings to the quality of life of ordinary people. All these actions mean we are fundamentally reforming how we deliver high quality infrastructure in our country. We are not simply adjusting one lever; we are changing the system entirely, reforming our legal and regulatory processes, how we co-ordinate and deliver across the public service and how we engage with the public, because only a whole-of-government effort will convert record investment into outcomes at pace.

Regulation has its place, but it needs to be balanced against delivery. We do not have that balance currently. Our regulatory regime is fragmented, often sequential and overly conservative in its application of EU law, creating delay and uncertainty. Even with increased resourcing, major wastewater plants still face consenting cycles measured in years. Ireland's renewables projects have among the slowest development timelines in the EU.

This carries a real cost, namely higher energy prices and higher emissions, and the threat of judicial review that drives further risk aversion. We will fix it by simplifying legislation, standardising processes, aligning statutory timelines and driving proportionality and parallel processing across consents in order protection of people and nature will be delivered with efficiency, not delay.

Reforming regulation alone is not enough, however. We must reform how Government and the public service work. That means clear risk appetite statements approved by the Government in order that sponsors can commence well-scoped early works, run safe, concurrent steps and forward order critical components where the public benefit justifies it. This is a commitment and a clear programme of action. We will remove duplication, confront risk aversion and build a delivery-first culture while safeguarding the environment and access to justice. The expected combined impact of all the actions in this plan will be faster approvals and reduced litigation, significantly shorter delivery timelines, improved co-ordination and resource allocation, greater public trust and reduced opposition, and ultimately, increased infrastructure output to support our housing, climate and economic goals.

Since it came to office, the Government has taken clear strides to move at pace to address Ireland's infrastructural needs and secure our future, economically and socially.

My Department has taken clear ownership of driving delivery and embodying the strategic leadership that is required for this critical step change for Ireland. Senior officials have been appointed, a newly composed infrastructure division has been confirmed and timelines and responsibilities for actions and sub-measures have been committed and agreed to. The regulatory reform team has been appointed and has commenced its first stage of assessments. Senior managers have been deployed to expand the team for construction sector capacity and procurement and work on external assurance reports to support the major projects advisory group has commenced. Infrastructure delivery and monitoring structures are bedding in, including strategic-level monitoring of implementation, functions for reporting to Government, risk appetite reviews and public-facing communications and project tracking and delivery.

The task force will continue to meet regularly to support the delivery of this plan. My Department has demonstrably committed to driving delivery of these 30 actions. The decisions we have already taken and are implementing show that we are moving at pace. I am confident that we will deliver the respective actions across this year.

This programme of reform, coupled with the expenditure committed to, paves the way for Ireland's continued economic development, achieving climate targets, unlocking housing delivery, creating opportunities across Ireland, enhancing our competitiveness as a place to invest in and to do business and building abundance in our economy and society such that our people and communities will benefit from high-quality services that drive improved living standards. I thank my fellow Government colleagues and Members from right across the House who are engaging positively and constructively on this journey to transform infrastructure

delivery in our country. We have a generational opportunity to shape Ireland's future. Now is the time to get infrastructure delivery right by reforming the system outside of us and the culture within. The people of Ireland deserve no less and this Government will deliver it.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Once again, the Government is talking about reports and plans while treading water when it comes to developing infrastructure. It is a case of more glossy documents, little in the way of targets and timelines and more false dawns. People roll their eyes because what communities need is delivery as opposed to brochures and concrete progress rather than press launches. In Waterford, the gaps are obvious and long-standing. Deputy Cullinane and I have been raising them consistently. The safety upgrades to the N25 and the N72 are long overdue. Upgrades to the N24 linking Waterford to the mid-west and the west have been talked about for decades but still drift, with no funding or prospect of funding. The Waterford to Rosslare rail line has been dropped entirely from the national rail strategy. Waterford Airport was shamefully denied Government support. South East Technological University receives the lowest level of capital investment of any technological university. Dunmore East fisheries harbour waits while opportunities are lost. Even basic maintenance of regional and local roads is falling behind. Schools, childcare facilities and naonraí are left without sufficient capital funding and are falling far below projected population growth and actual population demand.

The failure in this regard has consequences for the real communities, families and people I represent. It is holding back housing in our towns and villages and choking off development where services simply cannot cope. Tá sé fíor go háirithe sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Gan bhonneagar ceart, ní féidir tithíocht a thógáil nó pobal a choinneáil beo. Tá an easpa infheistíochta seo ag cur isteach ar an saol laethúil agus ar an teanga féin. Tá sé ag cur isteach ar thodhchaí na Gaeltachta.

Water infrastructure in Waterford is in crisis daily. Outages, low pressure, boil water notices and do not consume notices have become routine. Kilmeaden and Ballyduff are currently without water, Touraneena is left without an adequate supply and crumbling infrastructure is holding back home building in Lismore and creating uncertainty for businesses, schools, childcare facilities and care homes there. We need to see a dedicated fund to deal with legacy failures regarding water and wastewater. Estates built with inadequate supply or sewage capacity must be upgraded and taken in charge. Woodlands estate in Portlaw is one example. Almost 90 homes on a group water scheme are facing doubled annual fees this week and instability and constant uncertainty when it comes to their water supply. The Government needs to fix the basics before launching more glossy plans and congratulating itself. Delivery is what people need and not another brochure, report and round of backslapping

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Government's plans are an admission of a profound failure on the part of successive Governments that consistently failed to co-ordinate and deliver. In County Meath, the Government's legacy is one of broken promises. We have unaffordable housing without adequate water and wastewater infrastructure in Dunboyne, Duleek, Kells and elsewhere. Communities in Ashbourne, Ratoath, Kells and elsewhere are without working public transport. We have a county waiting decades for Navan rail and families priced off an electricity grid prioritised for data centres. We have estates built without the playgrounds, parks or community centres that make a house a home.

The Government's proposed solution to this self-made crisis is to restrict the public's right to planning justice and silence the very communities it has failed. This is not reform; it is an attempt to avoid accountability. The co-ordination and delivery reform in this plan is meaningless unless it legally binds the delivery of pipes, rail and community facilities to the completion of new homes. It requires a date-certain funded commitment for Navan rail. Without that, it is just more empty words. We will oppose any erosion of democratic rights. Real acceleration requires competence as opposed to the curtailment of community voices. The Minister should show us the binding sequenced plans then we might believe him.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The deep frustration in my county in terms of key infrastructure projects concerns just how long they take. I want to talk about the Letterkenny relief road. Letterkenny is the beating heart of Donegal in terms of inward investment. It has multinational companies. Our university is there, along with our public services and our hospital. A huge volume of traffic goes through the town all the time. It is crucial to the county. Fifteen years ago, there was a business proposal from Donegal County Council for a Letterkenny relief road known locally as the Bonagee link. It was cast aside during the downturn in about 2010 or 2011. All these years later, there is no digger on the site. The Minister has been to the town and spoken in it. He was in it recently. It is a nightmare. It is a real challenge not just for the local communities that have to deal with every day but also for the visitors and the people who work there or take their loved ones to hospital there.

The planning processes in this country are totally exasperating, as is the lack of urgency within Departments and their failure to talk to each other and communicate properly. An article by John Collison in *The Irish Times* captured the imagination of a lot of people. He described a Government that is operating at arm's length. There are all these different agencies and bodies and nothing can get done with substance. I offer up the Letterkenny relief road and the logjam and nightmare that people are experiencing in that town as an example of all that is wrong with Government policy and of the need for change and to get a strong grip on activities of the various agencies and bodies involved.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will give the Minister an example of how out of touch the Government is. He stated that €102.4 billion is being allocated over the five-year period from 2026 to 2030. Zip-a-dee-doo-dah. At the same time, I am being contacted by people in Carrowteige who are being told that they will have to pay €2,359 by Friday or they will not get clean water. How can we be spending billions when we have people in rural Ireland being asked to pay that amount by Friday? We are talking about pensioners who are absolutely distraught and people who are already in poverty because of the cost of living. I am asking the Minister, once and for all, to ensure that there is fairness for people in rural Ireland.

When we talk about infrastructure, we are not just talking about water and the lack of clean water. It also involves our regional and local roads. I have spoken to the Minister many times about roads he knows well such as the R312, which is the regional road connecting Castlebar to Erris. This is the regional road on which Stephen Lavelle has had to travel in an ambulance with other people who are ill and or, on occasion, dying. This is a road that is not fit to put a car on never mind an ambulance, and the Minister tells us that €102.4 billion is being spent and that we should be jumping up and down and happy about it.

I am sorry but there is an absolute disconnect between this Government and what is happening in rural Ireland in terms of infrastructure.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There have been plans in recent years to do with the national development plan, the national spatial strategy and so on. What a lot of them have in common is the prediction that Cork is likely to be fastest growing urban area in the State over the course of the next 15 to 20 years. For that to happen and for Cork to reach its fullest potential, we know that the infrastructure is needed. More than that, we know that it cannot simply be putting more cars on the road. Public transport is going to be crucially important in Cork.

What Cork needs is more of the key personnel on the ground. It is crucially important that we have these national organisations but we need TII, NTA and Irish Rail people on the ground all the time from a national delivery point of view.

One of the major public transport projects we are looking is the Cork Luas. The timelines are not anywhere near ambitious enough. It would be a huge mistake to look at only one route at the outset because it is very likely that there will be a need for a north-south line linking up heavily trafficked and heavily populated areas, such as Carrigaline and Douglas, through the city centre and through to parts of the northside. If it is not mapped out now and the process begun - we know it will not happen overnight - then it will be in 20 years.

In relation to BusConnects, which is another important part in ensuring that public transport for Cork is fit for the 21st century, there is a legislative piece to this. Some of it is capital and some of it is engineering but there is a legislative piece. At the minute, it is not possible to remotely enforce traffic infringements, that is, we are going to have these bus gates that prevent people going back and forth from either side of them to facilitate bus prioritisation and to assist the bus in being the fastest vehicle. Unfortunately, unless we have digital remote enforcement of that, it will not work. People are going to go through the bus gates and it will snare up traffic. Legislation is needed to do this. That is something that would be cheap, easy and quick to do but this Government needs to do it to ensure that BusConnects can succeed.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Government's infrastructure plan is devoid of action with no new ambition but rather it slightly alters existing systems and has little in the way of new ideas. The State has crumbling infrastructure, a housing crisis compounded by the failures of successive housing Ministers and a planning system that is not fit for purpose.

In the mid-west, many infrastructure projects have been glacially slow to deliver. In Limerick, we have the Coonagh-Knockalisheen road. It took over many years before work commenced on this project. The Minister of the day was determined to stop this road and without the intervention of the people of Moyross and others, it would not have been constructed. Once finally constructed and completed, it will serve as an important artery that will unlock economic, employment and educational opportunities in the area.

Functioning infrastructure is crucial to economic development and to a better quality of life. The plan notes that the transport infrastructure deficit gives rise to hours lost to congestion. Nowhere is this more evident than at the Mackey roundabout on the outskirts of Limerick. The northern distributor road is therefore crucial to the development of Limerick city. The

construction of the northern distributor road would remove vast amounts of traffic from the city and would provide a link from the residential areas on the northside of the city to the University of Limerick and its surrounding industrial estates. It would also address the issues at the Mackey roundabout, which is a crucial connection point for those looking to access the M7 and for those coming off the M7 and going to work in the University of Limerick and adjacent industrial estates. On weekday mornings and evenings, it is gridlocked with motorists who, in frustration, sometimes take risks and put their lives in danger as they look to exit the roundabout. You can see cars backed up trying to exit the M7 at the Mackey Roundabout and in other areas in Ballysimon as well. The northern distributor road would address most of these issues.

On bus infrastructure, the Condell road in Limerick is a road that was built in Limerick city. It is a fine piece of road and has had a bus lane for a huge number of years. When I was on Limerick City Council, a bus lane was delivered, yet there is no bus service. You would struggle to find nonsense like this anywhere else in the world where you have a road with a bus lane but no bus. In past number of years, hundreds of houses have been built in the area, many of them social and affordable houses, but there is no bus stop. A simple solution would be to reroute an existing bus service to service the road instead of having to wait for BusConnects which could be years. We now have many people there in hundreds of homes without cars and no accessible public transport. This needs to be sorted.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I would like to bring up the very important and very relevant infrastructure deficit in my town of Enniscorthy. Enniscorthy has borne 16 floods since the year 2000. Homes and businesses have been destroyed by water and raw sewage. Time and again, the people of Enniscorthy have picked up the pieces. It is heartbreaking to watch families being forced out of their homes and small businesses the same by something that can be fixed and remedied.

The latest flooding is one of the worst I have seen in years. Over 35 homes and 50 businesses, including two main hotels, have been affected by this force of nature. Most, if not all, cannot get insurance due to the frequency of the flooding. Some premises are reporting damages up to €70,000 or €80,000 while others are talking about closing for good.

The flood relief scheme for the Slaney was first put forward over 20 years ago and is still unresolved. The latest flood relief scheme was rejected as recently as 2022 on the grounds of a freshwater pearl mussel. For God's sake, that is little comfort or consolation to the people without a home today or facing enormous refurbishment bills or to the workers who will not get paid or to the businesses who might never open again. People in Enniscorthy are hurt and totally frustrated. This situation is soul-destroying. Businesses have been ruined and families are trying to restore their homes.

I call on the Minister to act now to speed up the process of the new planning application. I also call on him to immediately extend the date of the emergency response payment scheme beyond the closing date of 4 February, simply because it will take at least a couple of days before anyone can return to their homes or sort out their belongings, including businesses.

I again ask the Minister to get the ball rolling and to immediately call in the Office of Public Works, OPW, Government Departments and Wexford County Council and to sort this out once and for all and to get the planning application safely across the line.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Every week we come into this Chamber and we discuss infrastructure. It might always be the title of the debate but Ireland's infrastructural deficit lies behind so many of the problems we discuss every day. Whether we are talking about flooding, commuter chaos or housing, what is really under discussion is the consistent failure of the Government to build and sustain the infrastructure that Ireland needs. The International Monetary Fund, IMF, has said that we are lagging 32% behind our peers when it comes to infrastructure. This is the key reason Ireland, a rich country, can feel poor for too many people. The transport links, housing, hospitals and utilities befitting a rich country are just not there.

Over the past decade, this Government has managed to waste a boom. While it was sitting our record tax receipts, it allowed our infrastructure gap to widen and widen. The plan announced before Christmas was at least an effort to take the issue seriously. It was a roll of the dice by the Government to finally tackle the generational problems that it, to a large part, has created for itself.

There are certainly some welcome measures within the plan but these are things that any government worth its salt should have already been doing, so, in many respects, this plan amounts to an admission of failure. The streamlining of approvals for critical infrastructure projects is very welcome, so is the greater co-ordination to be demanded across the public service on infrastructure delivery. A duty for State bodies to co-operate in making land available and accessible for critical infrastructure, something that would seem so blindingly obvious to anyone else and should already be happening, is long overdue and we really do welcome that. The commitment to clear timelines is positive and the Government should further commit to non-negotiable delivery dates for the departmental implementation plans described in this document. That would be an indication of confidence from the Government in its own plan.

Accountability will be key to the success of this report and we welcome the clear lines of responsibility for Ministers and senior civil servants in the document. The Labour Party and the public will be holding the Minister's own performance against this plan to account.

I do, however, have concerns about the Government's over-zealous focus on judicial reviews, JRs. Legal reforms may be a necessary part of a comprehensive process like this but the Government seems to view limits to judicial reviews as a panacea, which will solve all of our problems. It will not. We should be clear that there is no silver bullet here. The Government must tread very carefully. Access to effective justice underpins our whole democracy. Judicial reviews should not be treated as a bogey man as they have been by this Government. The Law Society noted recently that the number of JRs decreased by 25% in 2025, so we must question the evidential basis for the Government's approach here. Not only does the Government's attitude risk undermining effective access to justice and crucial environmental laws, it could also put the whole mission at risk by taking its eye off the ball. What we need is investment and resourcing of our planning bodies and courts as this is where the real delays and backlogs lie.

It is little more than performative to attack those who simply seek to ensure that our laws are being complied with. We should also be honest that these judicial reforms will likely themselves be subject to legal challenge, including in the European courts.

All of us in Ireland need this plan to work. The Government needs this plan to work too, and we will be holding Ministers to account in the years to come to make sure the tide finally turns on our delivery of crucial infrastructure.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Infrastructure is absolutely vital. We can talk about the building of homes, which is absolutely necessary, but as we build homes, we must build infrastructure.

As the Minister knows, I was born and bred in Mallow. For over 30 years now, the people of Mallow have been talking about a relief road to relieve traffic congestion in the town. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, despite promise after promise, have failed to deliver for the people of Mallow. In every single announcement that the 34th Government has made in the Dáil, Mallow has been completely left behind. It is no coincidence that there is no Government TD representing the people of Mallow.

The Government, in announcement after announcement, makes no specific mention of the Mallow relief road. We are crying out for funding, as is Cork County Council, yet there is no commitment to it. There has been no commitment on the Mallow–Dungarvan greenway either. A spokesperson I spoke to in Cork County Council told me that project is dead in the water because the Government does not care about it.

On the matter of the Cork–Limerick motorway, there is no other European country in which the second and third largest cities are not connected by a motorway. That there is no connection between Cork and Limerick is unbelievable. I recognise that work has been done on the Cork commuter rail line, but it is simply not enough.

The people of Mallow are sick and tired of waiting for delivery on projects of this Fianna Fáil–Fine Gael Government. I do not blame them. For decades now, promise after promise has been made around election time, but with no delivery.

As Minister for public expenditure and infrastructure, Deputy Chambers should go back to his Department officials and speak to the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O’Brien, about the development and construction of the Mallow relief road, the single biggest infrastructure project in my hometown and in my constituency, Cork North-Central.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the chance to speak on the Government infrastructure plan. I want to outline a number of issues that have arisen in my home county, Kildare.

Last Monday, councillors in Kildare County Council discussed a variation of the current Kildare county development plan to cater for an additional 50,000 people in the county over the coming years. As everybody in this House knows, Kildare is a very welcoming county and its infrastructure has played its part in population growth; however, the problem that homeowners and potential homeowners raise with me is the already oversubscribed demand on the current infrastructure in the county.

Over recent weeks, I have repeatedly raised in this House how the M7 and N7 become car parks each morning for those commuting to Dublin. My party and I welcome every euro spent on public transport, but even with the news the Minister is announcing today, the relevant projects are years away. The plan itself is very light on delivery dates, yet commuters and people who must attend hospital appointments are stuck in what is a car park every day.

We mentioned several solutions in a Private Members' motion last week, but the Government voted against that motion. I ask the Government once again to consider these short-term measures. In my hometown, Athy, the first train each morning is at 6.40 a.m. Doctors, nurses and other workers cannot get to Dublin for work starting at 8 a.m. This is simply not good enough.

I question the Government's language around the DART+ South West project, which could improve the lives of commuters in County Kildare. We are not sure about the status of the plan or whether it depends on what will happen with trains on other lines in other projects. As the Minister well knows, the DART+ project has full planning permission.

I welcome today's announcement, mentioned in the Minister's speech, of a number of school projects in Kildare South that will make a difference, but given the population of Kildare already, some of the schools will already be full and demand will remain. I again appeal to the Government to recognise the need for another special school in Kildare South and the largest possible number of special classes to assist the more than 50 schools and the already stressed families who contact me every day seeking places for their loved ones.

Towns like Kildare, Newbridge and Kilcullen will now see more welcome new housing estates, but infrastructure has simply not kept pace. The demand for GPs is a huge issue. The out-of-hours service KDOC needs to be extended to Kildare South. The lack of social infrastructure is of great concern to many in Kildare South. There are no playing pitches and there is a lack of swimming pools and playgrounds. The Minister, along with the rest of the Government, will be judged on delivery, and delivery alone.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I want to express my dismay over the pausing of the DART+ project. It is a retrograde step for communities in the Minister's constituency, mine and the greater Dublin area.

I want to talk about health infrastructure. The €9.25 billion allocation is simply not adequate when one considers the digitalisation programme, the National Maternity Hospital and the beds that need to be delivered. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has spoken about the need to do something very real in Limerick, yet the money is not available. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael manifestos committed to delivering between 4,000 and 5,000 hospital beds over the lifetime of this Government, or 1,000 per year, yet we see that just 124 acute beds were delivered up to September last year. The service plan for this year commits to 134 net new beds. That is a joke. The reality, having regard to occupancy, is that conditions in many of our hospitals are very unsafe. Last year, 1,415 beds were lost because of delayed transfers of care. There is a lack of urgency from the Government. We need to ensure a more appropriate amount of money is in place for the health system.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many of us have spoken here many times about infrastructural deficits. In this regard, unfortunately, we see chickens coming home to roost across the State at times. I will speak about County Louth, particularly Dundalk. While we did have heavy rains, undoubtedly, we are impacted in some parts of Dundalk owing to infrastructure, including for wastewater treatment, that is not up to scratch. We are dealing with joint infrastructure, which means both sewerage and storm water infrastructure. We do not have enough capacity, which meant that the likes of Bay Estate, Greenacres, Avondale and Cluan

Enda, and basically anywhere in the surrounds of Red Barns Road and St. Alphonsus Road, which were also blocked, had huge issues. We hope we will not have serious rain in the near future.

Not only do we need CFRAM action taken in this regard and short-term mitigation given the possibility of storms in the future, but we also need to upgrade the wastewater infrastructure. Waiting until 2033 is not going to do it. We were very lucky just over two years ago, and we are just about lucky enough at the minute, but that is not good enough for an awful lot of people.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I welcome the Government's work to escalate infrastructure delivery. Ireland is experiencing strong population growth, a rise in economic activity and increasing demand for public services. These are positive developments but they place pressure on our transport, utilities and regional infrastructure. Therefore, we must ensure essential projects are delivered efficiently.

I welcome the infrastructure plan introduced by the Minister, which will strengthen the planning process, improve procurement and support better co-ordination between agencies. The most important part is to have all the agencies working together.

We want to reduce delays, increase certainty and allow vital projects to progress in a more streamlined way. Balanced regional development is essential. In my area, Carlow–Kilkenny, towns and villages must have adequate wastewater and utility capacity to support housing and growth locally.

Last week, I highlighted here that towns such as Grange and Ardattin in County Carlow are still waiting on necessary wastewater infrastructure. Planning and funding decisions must be aligned so projects can move forward without delay.

Transport infrastructure is also important. Investment in our roads, public transport and active travel improves journey times. We have done a lot on that but, as the Minister always says, safety and quality of life are a priority for us.

We have really done a lot on that too but safety and quality of life, as the Minister always says, is a priority for us.

I want to highlight the Carlow southern relief road, which is a project in the national development plan. It will remove through traffic from the town centre, reduce congestion, improve public transport and make travel safer for pedestrians and cyclists. I note the consultants are in place ahead of the further public engagement and I look forward to reviewing the route option and the project continuing as it progresses. I know I am always on to the Minister about this one.

I also want to mention the N80. Since Brexit, it has become a major national route, carrying more than 4.2 million vehicles annually, including a significant volume of heavy goods traffic. However, it is no longer fit for purpose and if you look at the Carlow part of that, it saw 27 accidents last year alone, including several fatalities over recent years. We need to upgrade the N80 and to look at it as a motorway, creating a link from Rosslare to the M7 at Portlaoise. This would strengthen regional connectivity, improve safety and support Ireland's role as an EU gateway. Deputy McGuinness and I were in Kilkenny last week and we spoke with the chief

executive there. These were projects that came up too. It was mentioned that the N24 Waterford to Cahir and N25 Waterford to Glenmore schemes were in the pipeline, both of which are at different stages. All of this infrastructure is vital. I know the Minister is committed to this and I thank him for all his work. These are all urgently needed.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the proposals that will lead to the acceleration of infrastructure but what I want to talk about today are the people I represent in Galway East and the lives they live. Everyone who lives in Galway East and who commutes into Galway city faces the same issue of huge traffic. I believe - and the national development plan, NDP, backs this up, as it is funded - that there are three or four key solutions that are outlined in the NDP, are now funded and need to be delivered. We need to build the Galway ring road. That has to happen in the lifetime of this Government. It has to get approval from An Coimisiún Pleanála and it has to drive on. Let it not get stopped and leave people in their cars for years.

Second, we have to implement and prioritise the buses through BusConnects because if you have a strong and solid bus service, people can rely on that, use it and it will be a cost saver for them. It will also aid the further reduction of traffic in Galway city.

Third, we have to double-track the line from Galway city to Athenry and build the western rail corridor. The carriages that are on order also have to be delivered and we, as a Government, have to show leadership on that in getting them as soon as possible.

This is a three-pronged approach through road infrastructure, bus services and rail. If those three things were delivered over the next five years, that would transform the quality of the lives of people living in Galway East right now. For the thousands of people commuting into Galway city every day, those few changes, which are funded under the national development plan and are in the planning process or already have plans, need to be delivered. We are at that stage where we have an opportunity to deliver. The funding is there and this Government needs to do it because the people will be so grateful to us if we can do these few things and get them right. People ultimately want freedom in their lives and the reality is that when they are trapped in their cars in traffic, waiting for a bus that does not arrive or squished in on the trains, we need to make their lives that bit better.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I wish to raise a number of issues in Kerry that I have raised previously in this Chamber, starting with the road realignment and footpath out from Laune bridge in Killorglin out as far as the Fexco research, development and innovation, RDI, hub at Anglont on the Killorglin-Killarney road. This campaign by the residents is going on for at least 40 years now. It was going on in my father's time. Residents there, Kerry County Council officials and all politicians in Kerry are frustrated beyond belief that this is taking so long. I ask that it be prioritised as soon as possible and that we get on the ladder of funding this year, if at all possible.

I wish to mention the Cahersiveen town road and footpaths project. That, too, is a chronic situation for the business community, the community at large and indeed visitors to the area. Cahersiveen is probably the longest town on the Ring of Kerry or on any national route in Ireland. The street is completely lopsided. There have been accidents not alone with pedestrians but also vehicles. That is in urgent need of funding.

The Killarney bypass has been raised here on a number of occasions and the town itself is choked with traffic on a daily basis. A bypass is urgently needed. Funding has been provided this year and last year to kickstart the project. I ask that it be expedited.

Killorglin town has a similar story in that the town is also choked on a daily basis, especially in morning and evening time when the schools open and close. For traffic coming through, Killorglin is the gateway to the Iveragh Peninsula. I also wish to mention the Tralee to Camp to Dingle road, the N86. The Ring of Kerry itself is 70% substandard. It is officials who are saying that, not just me.

The last point I want to make is around the development levies in the context of waterworks. The bills are astronomical and prohibitive to development as well. Irish Water needs to look at those.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in this debate. This time last week, I was in Finland with the Oireachtas education committee. We were there to talk about all things educational but naturally the conversation drifted. We got chatting about their elections and our elections. We finally asked the deputy mayor of Helsinki - we had drifted way off topic - if there were any public projects in his city delayed or overspent on in the past five or six years. He turned to his advisers on the left and right, spoke in a language none of us understood, and he eventually answered us and said "No". There were not. I would love to get to the point in five or six years' time where we are giving similar messages here. Things have become overly convoluted and I commend the Minister because he has started unravelling that knot of red tape. It looks good but now we have the litmus test of how quickly this can all happen.

I note the GPO and the National Concert Hall have been picked as two test projects to see how quickly things can be delivered and that is fine. They are both fabulous projects and both mean a lot as they are symbolic to Ireland but, day to day, I would like to see things like hospitals more fast-tracked. University Hospital Limerick needs to be a test bed. We have a plan and pathway forward to develop that, hopefully having a new accident and emergency department in the mid-west region. That should be a test bed project.

The other project I wish to mention is the Limerick northern distributor road. Even though it is a Limerick project, it straddles Clare and Limerick. Phase 1 of that is pretty much complete and is going to open in a matter of weeks but phase 2 is just entirely in the doldrums. As I mentioned to him before, the Minister might remember from our childhood that cartoon with Road Runner, where Wile E. Coyote would chase Road Runner out of town. There was always that road at the edge of town where everything just dropped off; there was a cliff edge. That is what the Limerick northern distributor road will look like when its first phase is completed this year. It just ends at a roundabout in my home village of Meelick. It goes no place else, so I would like to see that activated.

About three years ago, the Minister sat in a car in Ennis and drove some of the exits from and entrances to the motorway. He met with a woman who lost her husband in a very tragic accident. I am glad to say that motorway access is now being fixed, which is part of this. That is largely due to the Minister's intervention that day. He stepped out of the ministerial car and went in her car. We drove through it and he got to see it first hand. That is now happening and it is hugely appreciated.

Deputy David Cullinane: Infrastructure development is really important and is obviously important for every city, county and constituency, so I wish to raise infrastructure development for Waterford city and county and the wider south east.

The North Quays development has received significant Government funding so I want to start by acknowledging that. However, I also have to say to the Minister that, *per capita*, the south east and Waterford are not getting their fair share and have not been getting their fair share of capital funding for a long number of years. Even over the past year, I have raised so many different issues.

I will start with the N24 Waterford to Limerick road. What is really disheartening about that project is it is not a great road. I know a lot of people who use it every day. It is very dangerous and needs to be upgraded. The preferred route is in place. A lot of work was done and then, lo and behold, the Government simply stopped the funding and for the past two years, no funding has gone to that project.

The local authorities have been screaming at the Government to provide the funding because of road safety issues and because it is an economic corridor between Waterford and the south east. It is the same with the N25, the Waterford to Cork road. Again, it has not received any funding.

I was blue in the face in this Chamber raising the need for State investment in Waterford Airport. The Government made us jump over hurdles and jump through hoops. It delayed and delayed, and it got to the point that a venture between a private consortium, the three local authorities in the region and the State collapsed. A private investor had to come in from outside the country, by the way, to put money on the table to build a runway extension that this Government simply failed to do.

We also have the case of the South East Technological University, SETU, which has had to wait years for an engineering block. We are now told funding will come for a One Health building and a pharmacy building in Waterford, but that will take years. Appraisals and business cases have been done and they are sent up to the Department. All of that gets put through all sorts of processes and there is no clarity as to when that funding will be made available.

I have also been raising issues around Waterford Port and the need to invest in it. It has given good, ambitious plans for offshore renewable energy to the Government but funding has not been made available.

I also raise with the Minister an important project I have worked with and also visited a number of times in recent years. Naíonra Philib Barún is home to over 20 young children in Tramore in County Waterford. It does not have a proper building and is housed in a prefab. It is a very small, tight space. It needs capital funding for a new project but because the students are in early childhood care and education, ECCE, they fall through all the cracks. Nobody seems to want to fund it. Unfortunately, these children are being taught and having their preschool in this unsuitable prefab.

The south east is not getting its fair share. I have given the Minister a list of projects, for which I and others have been campaigning and looking for Government funding, and what we have got is a stone wall of resistance.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I will make some general points on infrastructure but I want to say at the outset that the Government decision on pausing DART+ South West, which is not in my constituency and is not an issue for most people in my constituency, is incredibly regressive. The project should be going ahead straight away. It is ready to go in terms of planning. The only delay has been caused by the Government. It is in an area where there has been a huge amount of housing development over the last few years and there is a lot more development to come. DART+ South West is critically needed. I appeal to the Government, as the only entity holding this project up, to go ahead with it. There could not be a more important project to serve that part of south-west Dublin, Kildare and adjoining areas. It is needed.

Overall, our infrastructure is in a critical situation. Our capital stock is about 30% behind comparable European countries due to decades of under-investment in infrastructure. At the same time, this Government has never had so many resources at its disposal. We recently had the largest budget ever passed. There is a real onus to close that infrastructure gap as quickly as possible. This is affecting people's quality of life, their health and well-being and the time they have with their families. In addition, it is having huge implications for our economic development. We cannot take for granted continued economic progress if there is continued lack of under-investment in critical infrastructure. That really does need to be addressed.

We are in an era where many pensioners are afraid to turn on their heating, yet in 2024, for example, €450 million of renewable wind energy was wasted because of under-investment in our grid and our grid's inability to take that energy due to capacity. That is an utter waste and an utter failure by previous governments to take that issue seriously.

Caithfidh muid gníomhú go práinneach. Ní foláir don Rialtas éisteacht agus gníomhú. Teastaíonn ón phobal rathúlacht. Tá sé chomh simplí sin. Tá tráth an ghnímh tagtha.

I welcome today's announcement on not using external consultants and getting expertise within the State. That will be cost-efficient and will lead to increases in our capacity to deliver infrastructure. It is a welcome move and makes sense but we need more of that thinking to drive on delivery of the infrastructure we so badly need.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Infrastructure is the key to getting this country working for people. For too many people, Ireland is not working. When we look at the flooding yesterday and the traffic gridlock across the city and around the commuter belt, people are literally losing years of their lives because of the lack of investment in infrastructure. The Government, in its plans and pronouncements, can blame planning, judicial reviews, local authorities and even the population and immigrants, but the barrier is this Government not investing sufficiently in infrastructure following decade after decade of under-investment. Public transport is inadequate and rail networks are not good enough. In my constituency, the Luas Finglas line is ready to go but has been delayed. Why are shovel-ready projects being delayed? It is absolutely unacceptable.

Alongside building homes, we need community infrastructure. Homes do not build communities by themselves. What builds communities are parks, playgrounds, community centres and swimming pools, the social infrastructure that has to go in. In my constituency, in Ballymun and Finglas, people are crying out for community infrastructure. In Finglas, in particular, there are derelict buildings lying idle that could be bought by the council and turned

into community buildings. The council cannot do so, however, because it does not have the funding. The Government is talking about all this record funding but when we drill down, councils do not have the funding to deliver the community infrastructure that is needed.

We need a step change in how we invest in our public services and public infrastructure. The Minister has a budget surplus. It should be allocated to that infrastructure.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Storm Chandra has once again exposed how vulnerable our country is in the face of extreme weather events and how poorly set up we are to adapt to climate turbulence, which is intensifying with the passage of time and which we know from science will intensify more and more into the future. There was major disruption in road transport across Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford yesterday, causing chaos and leaving thousands of commuters stranded. Professor Brian Caulfield of Trinity College spoke on "Morning Ireland" earlier about how historically poor investment in public transport exposes Ireland to much greater risk in the context of extreme weather.

On an average day, regardless of weather, the N25, which is the main route from Youghal to Cork city, is heaving with traffic. Accidents are frequent and there is a punishing daily grind involved in the most basic of journeys for thousands of commuters. Members of the East Cork Rail Alliance visited Leinster House yesterday to meet TDs. They are campaigning to reinstate the rail link between Youghal and Midleton. The train link is a key solution to the traffic crisis in east Cork, along with the expediting of the Cork city Luas and the development of Local Link. It is also core to sustainable development in east Cork and the basic quality of life of commuters.

We cannot just build our way out of chronic congestion with more and more multi-lane, complicated road designs that essentially amount to widening funnels of traffic, thereby worsening congestion in the long run. We need to see the aim of the East Cork Rail Alliance as one of the most sensible, pragmatic, evidence-based and important solutions to meeting the basic transport needs and regional development needs of a growing population, and we need to see political will behind it.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I welcome the opportunity to speak about infrastructure in the House and that the Government has made time for this debate. This was a huge issue during the general election. It came up at door after door in my constituency.

I will start with a history lesson. Between 1831 and 1834, within three years of the idea being mooted, the world's first commuter train line was built between Westland Row and Dún Laoghaire. Running through my constituency, it cost between €6 million and €7 million per kilometre in today's terms. At the time, it was considered grossly expensive. Today, it is known as the DART. By comparison, the MetroLink is expected to cost between €300 million and €400 million per kilometre, making it nearly 50 times more expensive, and take much longer to complete.

Despite the DART, there are real infrastructure deficits in my constituency that have gone on for far too long. A Luas extension has been postponed in Poolbeg, in an area already choked by traffic every day while construction at the Irish Glass Bottle site for a population of a small town goes ahead nearby. There is regular dumping of sewage into Dublin Bay at Sandymount,

making the water unswimmable and creating a direct threat to public health every summer. In Harold's Cross, Terenure, Rathgar and Rathmines there are no Luas lines or rail lines even though, as my constituents often remind me, there were trams there 100 years ago. The latest incarnation of the national development plan mentioned developing rail in this area exactly zero times. Most recently, the flooding this week in Dartry, Milltown and Ballsbridge from the bursting of the banks of the Dodder even after most of a flood-alleviation scheme has been implemented gives me great cause for concern over our capacity to plan and act for our climate century.

At the core of this dysfunction seems poor political stewardship, poor political will, and a lack of decisive action and good public administration from the very top, from this Government and every government preceding it. While I cautiously welcome the Government taking infrastructure development seriously and bringing this plan forward, I fear it may be the same old rigmarole - reports, committees, speeches like this one, commitments and ideas without the proper governmental leadership that developing our country demands. I hope the Government does better.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister for being here and for facilitating this discussion today. I commend him and his Department on the work done to date in trying to speed up the delivery of key infrastructure projects. Setting up the accelerating infrastructure task force and the action plan that emerged from that with 30 specific action points are very welcome. This progress is welcome.

I want to focus today on transport infrastructure in particular. As the Minister knows, our road network is choked with traffic congestion in many of our urban areas, particularly in the morning and evening peak times. Even outside these hours we come across heavy congestion on our road network. It is debilitating for any economy to have a road network choked with traffic to the extent that we now are, not to mention the impact on people's everyday lives. We have to come up with measures to reduce this congestion. We have to invest our way out of it in terms of infrastructure. Of course, we need to provide people with alternatives to our road network, such as better and improved public transport and of course continued investment in our active travel routes across the country. We also need to invest in our road network. We need to make our road junctions more efficient. We need to invest and we need to design and build new roads where necessary. We have to take a broad approach to this. There is no single answer to reducing the congestion we experience on our road network on a daily basis.

I want to focus on the transportation aspect in Cork. Unfortunately, we have ongoing issues with the reliability of our bus service and the slow roll-out of BusConnects. This is something that I and other Deputies have raised continually to see if we can make progress on this. The Cork Luas project will be transformational for Cork city and is something the city and its people deserve. An 18 km stretch of light rail serving 25 different stops along the way will be transformative and make huge difference but we need to speed up the delivery of this project. It has been estimated it could take up to ten years for this to be constructed and become operational, which is far too long. A final preferred route is due to be announced in the coming months. I ask the Minister and his Department to do everything possible to ensure this project progresses at pace because we simply need it to happen in Cork for everyday life and also from an economic point of view.

It is highly regrettable and a missed opportunity that the Cork Luas project will not serve Cork Airport. This is something we need to look at even at this late stage because connectivity to the airport and the city centre is critically important. We also need to consider the route in the context of the large residential areas on the southern side of the city.

Deputy Joe Neville: I am Vice Chair of the infrastructure committee. I know the Minister will be coming to the committee later on and we may be able to discuss some of these topics in detail.

I welcome the national development plan of €102 billion, which is a huge amount of money to spend. Ultimately, we are only playing catch-up on the money that probably should have been spent in previous years. The percentage that we were spending was not commensurate with the 16% that we are going to be spending in the future. I also welcome the accelerated infrastructure task force and the plan behind it which is an attempt to rid Ireland of the unnecessary blockages and bloated bureaucracy that we have become all too accustomed to in this country.

When people think of infrastructure we think of roads and rail which are overground. We think of water and wastewater which are underground. Often what is not considered is the social infrastructure that is needed to knit communities together. North Kildare, with its rapidly growing population, is lacking vital social infrastructure. I have referenced many times before in this Chamber the need for school improvements, new school buildings and more crèches to be introduced into large growing towns along with other amenities such as playgrounds and greenways as well as obviously the need for a new swimming pool in north Kildare.

In the last couple of weeks, I have been dealing with the need for a new school in Celbridge and we have major issues with St. Patrick's National School. We have an issue with spaces for children going into schools in Naas and Leixlip. These have been coming on my desk in the last couple of weeks and indeed are continuing today. I am working closely with the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, on those but at the same time these are emblematic of the issues we are facing in north Kildare. Houses are being built by the thousand in my constituency, which is great and ultimately that is what the Government desires, but at the same time, we are not delivering on behalf of our communities. The national development plan addresses major infrastructure issues that are needed for the area but at the same time it is not building for the communities behind that.

Kildare has another problem to go along with these issues. Towns like Leixlip, Kilcock and Naas are thriving as regards housing but ultimately their town and village centres are not thriving. Large-scale URDF funding has not gone into these towns and villages in the past and ultimately that is where we need to get to. Overall, I welcome the plan but at the same time we need to renew our communities. We also need to renew our town and village centres.

Deputy John McGuinness: We are at this point in our development as a country because we had no regard for reform or for strategy in the last 20 years. We are now talking about the investment that we are going to make but I want to know what is going to happen to the projects that require the funding and need to be taken out of the bureaucratic mess they are in. The completion of the ring road in Kilkenny is absolutely essential to the perfect development of the city but it is not happening. The N24 and N25 along with the N80 in Carlow need funding

and need to be moved on in the process. The railway station in Kilkenny is blighted by the fact that Iarnród Éireann will not respond on upgrading the goods shed in that area and, as a result, the city is impacted.

The flood-relief schemes in Graiguenamanagh, Callan and Inistioge need to be pushed through the bureaucratic process so that the lives of families are not impacted any more by virtue of the floods that we are experiencing.

The 2006 regulations for wind farms have not been corrected yet. We have not got an up-to-date version of them. It is an unfair playing field in that regard and it is destroying rural Ireland. Where are these regulations? When will they be presented? When will we have some certainty around them?

The school bus system has never been reformed. Every single year there is an issue with school buses. Whether it is in Gowran, Ballyhale or in any other county in the country, it is a huge issue. There is no desire to reform. We have a city bus system in Kilkenny. It has not been extended, as it should be, to places like Hebron Park and hotels and businesses on the outskirts of the city. On the Bennettsbridge roundabout, TII moved in, did an adjustment and caused havoc with traffic. We cannot get it to see common sense and go back and do what needs to be done. When will we see common sense?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: All of us in this room are in agreement that the infrastructure plan has to deliver. We have to be absolutely unapologetic about getting our critical infrastructure across the line and delivered for our people. We have to be honest about increasing housing delivery, which is a huge concern for everyone in this House, no more than for the Minister. What is honesty holding it back? In reality it is our infrastructure deficits.

It is not lack of ambition. It is about constraints on housing and community development. First and foremost, our water and wastewater infrastructure is at capacity in many places. In Drogheda, Dundalk and Ardee, and across north and south Louth, developments that are zoned, viable and ready to proceed are stalled because the water systems, and indeed the electrical grid, cannot cope. Young families are paying the price for years of underdevelopment and slow delivery.

Transport is the next major blocker. Our rail infrastructure has not kept pace with population growth, nor has our road infrastructure. We have, thankfully, increased capacity on the Dublin-Belfast line but we are stuck in the middle because we need additional car spaces. People are curtailed from using train services because they cannot get parking. We have to plan for an additional train station in County Louth, whether in Dunleer in mid-Louth or in Drogheda, to create sustainable commutes and unlock housing delivery. High-density housing without transport capacity simply shifts the problem from planning to congestion.

On roads, the case is equally clear. The PANCR route in Drogheda is essential to relieving chronic congestion and enabling residential and economic development. Ardee is another town long overdue a bypass. It remains gridlocked and choking under congestion and fumes. In Dundalk, we need a link road connecting with the Armagh Road, which is critical to relieving the pressure in the town centre and supporting balanced growth.

Infrastructure does not stop at transport and utilities. Our health infrastructure in Louth is under severe strain. Bed capacity in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital has not kept pace with

population growth, leading to overcrowding and unacceptable pressure on patients and staff. At the same time, there is the need for a surgical hub in Dundalk and for full utilisation of Louth County Hospital to reduce waiting lists, improve patient flow and deliver care closer to homes. Louth's population is growing. That is expected and planned for. It is not acceptable to allow delivery to lag behind demographic reality such that services are constantly in crisis mode. Housing is not just about units; it is about building communities, as the Minister will agree, with access to healthcare, transport, education, culture and social life.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. There is a certain degree of scepticism in my attitude to the Government's new-found interest in critical infrastructure. I have been a Deputy for a decade. I am one of a number of people on this side of the House who have been talking about lack of investment, lack of reform and lack of ambition regarding critical infrastructure and delivery of key projects involving housing, renewable energy and public transport. Despite the fact we have many times proposed changes that are required, only recently has the Government started to join the conversation. I will name some of those. Unless the Government delivers these, its new-found interest in addressing infrastructure deficits caused by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments over the decades will only be words.

Water is a case in point. Most people will name it during this debate. For two years, Uisce Éireann was looking for increased capital funding to improve waste and wastewater treatment; for two years, the Government delayed. Even still, despite the big announcements in the last budget, Uisce Éireann does not have clarity on what additional funding it will get from now until 2030 and for what pieces of critical infrastructure. Those are the facts. Worse than that, reasonable demands of the utility for parallel planning and consenting and for prioritisation of critical infrastructure in the planning system were ignored by Government during the passage of the controversial Planning and Development Act 2024. When the Opposition tabled amendments to give effect to those reasonable demands of Uisce Éireann and others, they were voted down by the Government.

The electricity grid is the other one. I live in a constituency, Dublin Mid-West, where the Castlebaggot supply substation was recently built, primarily, if not exclusively, to service new housing and industry. It has all been swallowed up by data centres. The Government cannot say it wants to increase grid capacity for housing and employment when, at the same time, it lifts the cap and continues to prioritise data centres over critical infrastructure.

Transport is the same. While there are nowhere near enough homes, particularly social and affordable homes, being built in my constituency, it still has significant increased residential development. However, a key piece of public infrastructure, the DART+ South West through Clonburris and Adamstown strategic development zones, has been delayed for five years because the Government is unwilling to fund it in accordance with the original commitment of the Minister in the previous Government. If we do not get those basics right and if we continue to strangle our local authorities and approved housing bodies with too little funding and too much red tape for the delivery of social and affordable homes, then the folks on the other side of the Chamber can talk all they want about tackling the deficits but things will not change.

Crucially, we have to stop scapegoating others for the failures of Government to invest in and resource our planning system and courts to ensure good-quality planning decisions are

made in a timely manner and that, on the infrequent occasions they are judicially reviewed, those JRs happen in a timely manner. The Government has starved our local authority planning sections of resources and failed to adequately staff the planning and environment court to deal with planning matters. Until those issues are dealt with, decisions will take too long. I will judge the Government by what it delivers, not by what it promises. On the basis of what it has not delivered to date, I will not hold my breath.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The national development plan is a plan for continued State failure to provide the basic services that working-class people need. There are no big new ideas in it. It is doubling down on a failed model of relying on the private market to deliver. It never has and it never will.

Since I joined the Committee of Public Accounts, it has struck me that in 99% of cases, the scandals people hear about regarding waste of public funds are really cases of private companies ripping off the State. Hospital consultants set up private companies to profit from insourcing in the same under-resourced public hospitals they are paid to work in as public servants. It is happening in loads of hospitals, not just St. James's; it is also happening in Tallaght where €5 million has been spent on insourcing in the past five years. It is well-connected contractors and legal and consultancy firms getting millions of euro annually in Government contracts to charge the State through the nose for things the State should be doing directly.

A key part of the answer to our infrastructural deficit is a State construction company to deliver the investment and projects we need. It should not be too much to ask in 2026 that, when it rains heavily, we should not have sewage flowing into our parks. I have been raising this issue for years about Dodder Valley Park and Balrothery Weir. What happened yesterday was entirely predictable. Again, sewage came flowing out because we got a high amount of rainfall. For years we have been pursuing Irish Water to invest in this. It has not been doing it. It says it is doing it now and is at stage 4. It simply is not good enough. It should not be too much to ask for that not to happen in our parks.

Deputy Charles Ward: I absolutely support accelerating the delivery of critical infrastructure such as transport, water and electricity network across the country.

I particularly welcome pillar 3 of the infrastructure plan. It looks to build capacity in the construction sector. We desperately need to increase capacity across infrastructure, housing and road projects to meet current and future demand. Pillar 4 will introduce measures to strengthen co-operation between the utilities and local authorities. Too often, there has been a serious lack of communication between public representatives and utility providers. We simply cannot get the answers. It undermines effective planning and erodes public trust when elected officials are excluded from timely, meaningful dialogue, local knowledge is ignored and communities are left in the dark. Clear consistent communication is not a courtesy of infrastructure development; it is absolutely necessary.

Major infrastructural decisions such as the blanket restrictions on building alongside the N56 in Donegal, which Councillor Denis McGee has advocated for for years and which has prevented families from building on their own land, must be reconsidered with clear and early engagement with public representatives when implementing this infrastructural plan.

I am wary of some actions detailed in the plan. Limiting judicial reviews to speed up infrastructural planning is the wrong approach. Judicial reviews exist because there is a genuine need to fill gaps where procedures have failed. People resort to them because constitutional rights to fair procedures, equality before law and access to justice are being undermined. We cannot limit these rights. We must not get rid of judicial reviews.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to register how ludicrously short a time we have on this discussion. Seriously, we have five speakers here getting a minute and a bit each - madness.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is a matter for the Business Committee.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I know, but we are a minority on that. The Minister is not even here, which frequently happens by the time our group comes up.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: On a point of order, the Minister is gone to the infrastructure committee.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes, I know.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not starting until 4 o'clock.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: If you continue on, you are wasting time. Go ahead, Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I know but it has to be said-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is you who has the floor.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am not going to get a chance to bring up all the infrastructural needs of my constituency. There are 140,000 people. We have no light rail system. I will just mention one area which is the Tyrrelstown and Hollystown area. It is so symptomatic of the way developer-led planning happens in this country, which is one of the headings that is used in the strategy. Some 1,400 houses were recently added on in Hollystown, for example, but there is no direct bus route into the city centre. TDs outside Dublin may think we have a Minister there and we are laughing. Far from it. We have had Ministers in Dublin West and we have had taoisigh in Dublin West. We have been tripping over Ministers but we never get the investment we need in infrastructure. We should have a Luas running from Broombridge to Blanchardstown centre, where, by the way, they have just introduced parking charges and all the buses are routed through there. There is no direct bus from Hollystown into the city centre. I have been approached by a woman who ends up walking on her own in the dark late at night trying to get to work in Dublin Port from the Tyrrelstown area. Again, it is ludicrously slow in terms of developing it. Those issues are real issues that people are facing in their lives.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The N80 goes through the town centres of Portlaoise and Mountmellick. It is causing chaos in both towns and no progress is being made on relief roads.

Mountmellick relief road was promised 20 years ago. All traffic from the midlands and the west, including a large number of HGVs, is going through the town centre of Mountmellick trying to negotiate tricky junctions, going through O'Connell Square and past the very busy secondary school. A route has been selected. The surveys have been done. The council has played its part. However, it is being ignored for decades by the Government and that is not good enough. Portlaoise has two national secondary routes going through it, namely, the N78 and the N80. The N80 is the one I live on. There is a huge population around it. The population of Portlaoise is increasing. The towns of Mountmellick and Portlaoise are gridlocked much of the day. People living on the Ballyfin Road, Harpur's Lane and Greenmill Lane have huge difficulties, including the person speaking here, trying to get out onto that road. Trucks have to pass under a very low bridge. They often hit the bridge and everything stops for a number of hours. In the short time I have, I will call for small roundabouts at the junctions of Ballyfin Road, Greenmill Lane and Harpur's Lane. However, we really need the Portlaoise northern orbital route, which will connect the N80 at Fairgreen right across to the Dublin Road. That is a priority project of Laois County Council, as is the Mountmellick bypass, but the Government does not seem to be listening. I want the Government to take this on board here today. It would not just shorten journeys. It would lesson the gridlock in Portlaoise town and in Mountmellick, and it would free up hundreds of acres for housing development. A lot of housing development is being pushed to Portlaoise but we do not have the infrastructure. Both Mountmellick and Portlaoise need relief roads. The Government cannot keep ignoring it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Stanley.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The last thing I want to say is that the flood relief schemes need to be speeded up as 17 years or 18 years is just too long.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Cherrywood in south Dublin is one of the biggest residential developments in Europe and the biggest in Ireland. It is a new town. There is going to be 25,000 to 30,000 people living there. The whole thing was conditional on the development of a town centre with community facilities, supermarkets and all the rest of it. The private developers who built the houses and made big profits are refusing to build the town centre on which the whole thing was predicated and are trying to put the State over a barrel on the town centre the community needs for this new town. They are just refusing to build it and are refusing to build bridges that were committed to. At the same time, I understand a group of private investors have asked the State for between €60 million and €80 million to build an ice rink and stadium in Cherrywood. While the town centre is not being built and grassroots sports groups and so on are crying out for facilities, a group of private investors, and I believe this is being entertained by a number of Departments, want to build a private ice rink for ice hockey. I spoke to the Irish Ice Hockey Association and it is not even in favour of it. Its representatives say for a fraction of that, they could build an ice rink, which would be good to have in Ireland but this is going to be given to private investors at massive cost when there is no town centre and when grassroots sports, including ice hockey itself, are starved of the money necessary to provide sports infrastructure for the people living in places like Cherrywood and in the wider area. I want this investigated. There is no way a €60 million to €80 million handout should be given to big private investors when there is no town centre in Cherrywood and when grassroots sports are desperate for money for sports infrastructure.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I raise again the issue of flood relief schemes in my own constituency of Carlow and Kilkenny. My own home town of Graiguenamanagh and Thomastown, Inistioge and various towns and villages around the constituency have once again been devastated by the impacts of flooding. The miraculous or crazy thing here is that we have known about this for so long. In 2018, the Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, announced funding was to be put in place for six towns and villages in Kilkenny. My home town of Graiguenamanagh was flooded in 2016 and that flood relief scheme was promised. It went to design stage in February 2020. It has only gone for planning last December to An Coimisiún Pleanála. I appeal to the Minister to please get on to An Coimisiún Pleanála and speed up the process so that people, individuals and businesses in Graiguenamanagh will not have to endure yet again the traumatic circumstances around flooding in that town and village. How can it take ten years for these schemes to go ahead?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Not only that but Thomastown was also approved in 2018 and the scheme has not been advanced at all. Why can these schemes not be run concurrently? Why do we have to do Graiguenamanagh and let that get to this stage and all the rest of them are sitting on a shelf waiting to go? Staff are already employed by Kilkenny County Council to progress these schemes. Surely to God, in this day and age, when we are taking about infrastructure, we can make sure that schemes can run concurrently and the ball can start rolling. This has been going on years. I am only in this Chamber a year. This is ten years ago. I saw a photo recently of Graiguenamanagh in 1926 when flooding happened and yet nothing has happened.

I pay tribute to the staff of Kilkenny and Carlow County Councils in terms of the area staff but also all the road crews and the fire services in both counties for the incredible work they have done over the past number of days making sure our people, our citizens, are safe. However, there is a huge clean-up job to be done as well, so additional funding is going to be required. I am calling the Minister of State to speak with his colleagues and with the powers that be to make sure funding is made available for the clean-up operation and for the deterioration of the road infrastructure that is happening right around the country. I have loads of examples from the past couple of days in the Rower, Graiguenamanagh, Skeaghvasteen, Gowran, Ballyhale, Dungarvan, Borris and St. Mullins where roads are falling away due to the devastation caused by and the impact of the flooding or the rainfall in January.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Let us make sure the funding is made available because we cannot let these towns and villages suffer anymore. We need to protect them and look after them. I represent the people of Carlow-Kilkenny and we need to make sure the funding is made available, not next year, not in two years' time-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cleere-----

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: -----but now. I will not be silenced. I will always stand up for the people of Carlow-Kilkenny.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Good man.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: However, it is not right that these flood relief schemes have not been progressed at the speed they should have been. There have been people in this Chamber for years and decades who have done nothing about it. I am not going to do nothing. I am going to stand up for these people. Let us make this funding available-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: We will see what you do now.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: -----and make sure these schemes are delivered as soon as possible, running currently-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: We will see what you get.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I demand that this happen.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The most frequent issue I raise in this Chamber is the issue of infrastructure. While I welcome the infrastructure plan, and there is a lot to it and some excellent developments in it, particularly in terms of national infrastructure, what it fails to do and what we are not focusing on but should be focusing on is the social infrastructure throughout the country, especially in our towns and villages that are growing exponentially. When I speak about social infrastructure, I speak about the Garda stations. Maynooth, Celbridge and Kilcock all have part-time Garda stations. Celbridge has a population of 22,000 and it has a part-time Garda station. Maynooth, with a population of over 22,000 and an additional 17,000 students, has a part-time Garda station.

There is no primary care centre for Leixlip. These are significant issues.

In the context of schools, St. Patrick's National School in Celbridge is falling to bits. There are serious issues with funding for Stepping Stones Special School in Maynooth. The three school campus in Celbridge is still only at design stage 2a. This means that Celbridge Community School, St. Raphael's Special School and St. Patrick's National School are still waiting for their school building projects to progress. Salesian Secondary School in Celbridge still has waiting lists. Maynooth Post Primary School still has waiting lists. There are people still waiting to get into Maynooth Community College.

Families are finding this particularly difficult, and we need to really address what is happening. While it is welcome that we are addressing large infrastructural plans, we need to be ensuring families feel secure in the context of education, health and safety in the communities in which they live. It is incumbent on us to deliver that. This infrastructure plan, as good as it is in focusing on national delivery, which is long needed, does not focus on the critical issues facing families here today. I am speaking specifically of families in Kildare North, but it extends to areas in Meath, Dublin and Wicklow as well.

On the infrastructure plan, one matter to which I want to refer is the skills shortage and the major bottleneck relating to the national workforce strategy. We need to ensure that we have this strategy in place in order that we can, in turn, make sure we have the skills required to develop the roads, hospitals and other the key elements of infrastructure that we need. While the focus should rightly be on national infrastructure, as it is in this plan, which I welcome, we need to ensure that we have a social infrastructure plan that focuses on towns and villages and high-growth areas and delivers what families really deserve.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I take this opportunity to highlight a very strong example of how Government investment in infrastructure and regeneration can deliver a real and measurable impact. That example is Clonmel, which is identified as a key economic driver in the regional economic and spatial strategy. Clonmel has spent the past number of years doing exactly what national policy has encouraged towns to do, namely developing a coherent, strategic, long-term regeneration plan, backed by delivery capacity and local commitment.

The Clonmel strategic transformation plan for the period to 2030 is not aspirational; it is practical, detailed and ready to proceed. Under URDF call 1, Clonmel demonstrated that readiness by delivering shovel-ready projects at a time when very few towns could do so. Those projects, such as the Kickham Barracks Plaza and the regional sports hub, were successfully funded and delivered. Since then, our ambition has only grown. Having regard to the upcoming URDF call 4, Clonmel is uniquely positioned. Planning permission is in place, design work is complete and tender documentation is ready. Tipperary County Council can move immediately on town-centre public realm works valued at approximately €21 million. Matched funding of €5.25 million has already been set aside. The level of local alignment is particularly positive. The local authority is ready. Businesses have stepped up. All stakeholders are willing to work as one. The community is fully behind the programme. This is exactly the type of place where national capital investment can achieve maximum return.

As we look towards the URDF call 4, Clonmel represents a low-risk, high-impact investment that is advanced, deliverable and capable of immediate mobilisation. Supporting Clonmel in a meaningful way would demonstrate the strength of the infrastructure plan in backing towns that are ready to deliver and committed to long-term regeneration. This is a real opportunity to complete a strategic vision that has been carefully built over many years and to show how national and local government can work together to renew our regional towns successfully.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The new buzzword of this Government is "infrastructure". It blames local authorities, Uisce Éireann, the NTA and An Coimisiún Pleanála for things. The Government blames everyone. I do not know if the Minister of State gets it. Does he think we are all fools over here? We are not fools; we know what is happening. Those opposite are in government. Fine Gael has been in office 15 years and Fianna Fáil for 11. All of these problems were caused by them; they were not caused by us. Now, the Government has come out with this new infrastructure plan. It is trying to pass the buck. Will someone in this Government ever stand up and take responsibility for their job?

Ultimately, the Government is responsible but is not providing solutions. We on the Opposition benches are trying to give it solutions. We want to work with it. We want to do so because the people we represent have no housing and cannot get hospital appointments. There

is a crisis in this country. What has the Government done? It has brought out a new, shiny booklet that looks great. It runs to 140 pages, 110 of which outline the problems and indicate why there is a crisis and an emergency in the area of housing. The document does not say that the Government has been in power for the past 15 years. The Government is blaming everyone else.

There are 30 actions in this plan that are listed out across 30 pages. The Government must be trying to destroy the rainforests in the Amazon. It has produced a 140-page document, but for what? One of the actions in the plan for delivering housing - this is going to fix the housing crisis - relates to enhancing Government communication and promoting the importance of infrastructure delivery. Is the Government serious? Can the Minister of State seriously stand over this kind of bull? People are crying out for homes. Nearly 6,000 children are homeless. Three generations of families are living in box bedrooms. There are towns and villages in which houses cannot be built because there is no wastewater infrastructure.

The Government talks about better communication. Will it build houses? Will it get Irish Water to deliver water and the infrastructure we need? Do not blame the NTA. Do not blame Uisce Éireann. Do not blame TII and, certainly, do not blame An Coimisiún Pleanála. For years, the Government underfunded the latter. It knew there was a backlog and it did nothing. It has now come out with this document, which outlines what it is going to do. The Government should do its job and build houses. That is what it needs to do. That is what people want the Government to do. We will work with the Government. I do not believe the Government wants to solve the housing crisis. If it did, it would not be putting forward stuff like this that is nonsensical.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This Government is the worst in the history of the State when it comes to the delivery of infrastructure. In practically every infrastructural space, its projects are either grinding to a halt or going way over budget. For ten years, under this Government, Ireland was at the very bottom of European spending on infrastructure *per capita*. That is incredible. It is really hard to listen to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs line up to complain about the infrastructural deficits in this country when it is their Government who has actually caused those deficits.

Housing is in tatters, and misery is being visited upon young families as a result. It will be 2050 before Uisce Éireann fills the gaps that are currently stopping the building of homes. Leo Varadkar said that the national children's hospital would be built for €700 million by 2020, save for an asteroid hitting the planet. The cost is now €2.4 billion and the hospital has still not opened.

Midleton has been waiting for flood defences for 14 years. In the 14 years since the Government promised flood defences for Midleton, a planning application has not been submitted to Cork County Council.

On the news over the past number of hours, we have seen the number of areas that have been hammered by flooding. The Government is refusing to pay for the damage done to cars. It is refusing to pay for the infrastructure and for the damage done to cars. That is really hard for people to take, given the Government funded the fixing of cars for people from Ukraine in the past year. There should be no payment given to any group of people in this country that is

not available to Irish citizens as well. It is a threat to social cohesion if the Government continues what is doing in that regard.

The Navan to Dublin rail line was built in three years in the 1860s by workers using picks and shovels. The new project in that regard is going to take 42 years, from concept to completion, and that will be if no judicial review takes place. It is really important that the Government gets its act together in the context of infrastructural development.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Fail to prepare, prepare to fail. I welcome anything that will help with infrastructure. The Government's failure is that it shoved people into the cities that had some infrastructure. What did it do then? It closed down every town and village around Ireland. What did that do? It drove up the price of houses because of a lack of supply.

Askeaton has done without a sewerage system for 46 years. It is due to be done some time this year. However, we have been hearing that for 46 years. Dromcolliher has been waiting 15 years for an upgrade of the system. Hospital-Herbertstown had to put in on-site systems after they built 20 houses there. They had to put five of them on an on-site system because the sewerage system could not take housing. By moving people into the cities and driving up the prices, and by not allowing people's children to move home from the cities, the Government has closed down the infrastructure in all our towns and villages. There has been a lack of infrastructure for years and all it has come up with is a plan. Plans are on paper; delivery is on the ground. We have given the Government ideas and solutions to everything it has come up with but it will spend millions of euro again on paperwork with no delivery. When is it going to deliver? When is it going to listen to the Opposition that has given it the answer on delivery? That is what the question is.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are talking about infrastructure here today. We brought forward a motion two weeks ago in relation to Uisce Éireann, and the Government voted against it. It really stood for accountability and timelines. When the Government is not willing to stand up to something like Uisce Éireann in terms of accountability and timelines, that says enough. It sends a clear message to me.

There is a wastewater crisis all over west Cork. It has been 28 years in Shannonvale, 17 years in Dunmanway, Rosscarbery and Ballydehob, and 27 years in Goleen. There is no mains water pipe from Shannonvale to Rosscarbery. It has burst; it bursts every so often. It broke down again during Christmas. People are in an awful state, and they are getting nowhere. It is only a small section of an area that needs to be done. Bantry experienced flooding in 1968 and in 2025. It is one hit on top of the other.

There are also new regulations I need to bring up. It brings me to the utter confusion and the fear new regulations have created in the construction sector. Many small contractors and subcontractors have been contacting me in recent days who are fearful of this January deadline. These contractors do not know if they will be deemed to be breaking the law in February by a change of status that is threatening them. This will drive up the costs, as contractors will have to now take on casual subcontractors as full-time employees just to cover the small-time work they have. There will be no infrastructure built if the Government throttles to death the contractors and subcontractors who are confused over it.

I have to touch on Airbnb, which comes under housing as well. People have contacting me day and night recently about the new regulations. They are going to destroy their chances. One question is being asked by them: do they need planning? If they need planning, that means they are finished. They know Airbnbs are being wiped out. All over west Cork, there are fantastic places offering a brilliant service to people, and the Government is going to destroy that industry.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I read the Government's plan. I read all 140 pages, plus the 17 pages of the Minister, Deputy Chambers's speech in which he called it an accelerated infrastructure plan. I have to say that if that is accelerated, I truly would hate to see the Government in reverse because this is a backward plan. That plan does nothing and delivers nothing. The Government's 140-page document barely talks about Cork. It does not talk about the northern distributor road in Cork. It does not talk about the Mallow relief road in Cork. It does not talk about the Cork to Limerick motorway. It does not mention the northern ring road in Cork. It does not mention that the ESB supply that is needed for the 1,000-acre Industrial Development Authority, IDA, site in Cork to be upgraded to facilitate the southern region. It does not even take into account the 2040 counterbalance plan.

I represent the 42nd most congested city in the world - Cork. How many park-and-ride facilities has it got? It has one park-and-ride facility. The Government has not even put in a plan which connects the Cork Luas. By the way, there is not a shovel in the ground on that. It has not connected the Cork Luas all the way from the airport into the city. We have a situation where buses are coming into Cork city. People who are coming from Thurles, Tipperary and different areas who want to use Cork Airport cannot get a bus directly to Cork city. That is how bad BusConnects and the infrastructure development is there.

Then the Government had the audacity in the House last week to have the minister for silence, otherwise known as Pádraig O'Sullivan, give out to and admonished those on this side of the House, and tell them to shut up and stay quiet about the €1 billion that is needed for the north side of Cork. We should all stay quiet, and we should let people drink poisoned water, according to Deputy O'Sullivan.

We heard the other gentleman from Carlow-Kilkenny just a moment ago. I swear to God but I thought I was listening to someone on this side of the House because he seems to forget that his own party is in power. That is absolutely ridiculous.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows, I have some experience of being angry and losing my rag but it has to be used sparingly. In this context, I would use words like "exasperation", "frustration", "cynicism" and "being jaded overall" in terms of Government promises that have never been brought forward. I am, therefore, trying to put on my positive hat for a second.

Obviously, this plan is trying to employ 62 people in an infrastructure division in the Department of public expenditure and reform with a whole lot of technical experts trying to bring all the agencies together. On paper, that is a good thing because they have not been working together in a holistic way but, unfortunately, the actual amount of investment that is required for our energy grid and water infrastructure is a paltry amount. We should be

borrowing and even breaching the EU growth and stability pact to invest in the infrastructure that will actually gain us revenue down the line. We are doing it too slowly.

I take on board that we do have, let us say, people who take judicial reviews who do not always have the common good at heart. I do take a board on board that we have to restrict that but, equally, there are communities in my constituency and all around the country who put in submissions and object to proposals because they want infrastructure and facilities tied in alongside housing. In areas like the Clonburris strategic development zone, it is a very poor SDZ. Adamstown is a little bit better. There are a lot of areas around my constituency where the Government is putting in lots of houses but no infrastructure. It has to make sure that it follows up like with Dart+ South West, for example, or the Luas to Lucan and increased capacity for the Luas to Saggart. All these things go together. I am quite jaded but prove me wrong.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I want to say something very briefly about this report, which I really welcome. I have only been here a year, and the Minister of State is here a little bit longer, but it is the only one I have seen in a year that has an action plan with dates. There is a very clear statement on what has to be done. On page 71 of the original report are 30 actions adopted with a clear timeline, the responsibility in terms of a Department on each and oversight and accountability clearly laid out. Often, we do not get to see that in the public service. It is really positive that the report is laid out. Now the Government has to keep toes and feet to the fire in the various Departments and groups that are laid out with responsibility for those actions. I know there will inevitably be issues with various actions but as long as they are managed and the overall thrust of this excellent piece of work is delivered, then we will make great progress in the next few years. I ask the Minister of State to make sure that feet are kept to the fire when it comes to those actions so that they happen in the way that it is laid out.

Deputy John Clendennen: I certainly welcome this plan. It is very timely in terms of where we are as a country. There is a commitment from a multi-annual funding perspective, and it shows delivery, whether it be housing, energy, transport or water. In order to achieve delivery, however, we need co-ordination. I can give the Minister of State just one example of where modern methods of construction today are being used to reduce and mitigate the risk from a safety perspective on construction sites and also improve quality. What it is leading to are larger loads, yet we have a situation in the country where our emphasis is on supporting and investing in cycling and pedestrian pathways. When we do that, however, we put obstacles in the way of abnormal loads and exceptional abnormal loads at a time when local authorities are reducing the weight limits and putting more barriers in place for companies that are trying to transport larger loads. This is only going to get worse because of modern methods of construction.

I have seen it first hand in my constituency with Banagher concrete. What it is going to see, in essence, is that if these load restrictions continue, the product portfolio and options it will have will reduce and the cost of what it will have will increase, making it less affordable for people to actually build houses and infrastructure at a time when we need rates to be competitive. I ask the Minister of State to take that point on board.

We need to deliver, deliver, deliver, and that needs co-ordination. I am an advocate for cyclists and pedestrians but we need to be able to advocate, and more so in the future, for

abnormal loads in order to serve and make the contributions we need to infrastructure development sites right across the country.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: This issue is critical, particularly in the context of our need to deliver housing across the State. If we are to deliver homes, we must ensure that we have in place critical energy infrastructure and water and wastewater infrastructure. The first question the person in charge of every State agency should be asking every morning is what is he or she doing to help to address the housing crisis. If those people are not asking that question, their vision is clearly wrong and perhaps they are in the wrong job.

I can cite many examples in my constituency where if we can see the unlocking of lands through investment in roads, water, wastewater and energy, it will facilitate the building of a lot more housing. I refer again to the cases of Ferns and Camolin in County Wexford, where we are dying to build more homes but where there is no wastewater capacity. It is a similar situation in Aughrim, County Wicklow. Allowing private development of wastewater treatment plants to the necessary specifications in those areas would be a very positive development.

Investment in education is a critical part of infrastructure delivery. I acknowledge that the Government has invested significantly in capital projects in education but I am extremely disappointed that in the announcement today regarding the schools building programme under the NDP, not a single school within the Wicklow-Wexford constituency is included in the list. What criteria were used to determine which schools were included?

Two schools have been waiting a very long time for the necessary investment to move beyond stage 2b. I have always referred to that stage as the purgatory within the Department of education, whereby projects get to design stage but then tenders are not issued. The first school is Bunclody Community College, which has only three mainstream classes that are not in prefabricated buildings. The school operates on two campuses, which requires students to walk 500 m from one set of prefabricated buildings to another. It is an excellent school that provides a top-class education, yet it has some of the poorest facilities I have ever seen. The other school, which is just up the road, is Coláiste Bhríde in Carnew. Again, it is an excellent school but it has been waiting a long time to address the problem that its 900 students are learning in completely inadequate buildings.

I have asked what criteria were used to determine which schools were included in today's announcement. Only one school in County Wexford and three in County Wicklow, none of them in my constituency, are included. Fair play to the schools that are getting this investment but I note that ten schools in County Galway were given approval today. I need to know the criteria, particularly when I see the conditions under which some students and staff have to operate within my constituency. I would be grateful if the Minister of State would convey my concerns to the Department.

The Government has a proud record of investing in education and in our capital programmes but we are not seeing that investment being delivered fairly across the country. I fail to see why regard is not being had to the demands of rapidly growing communities and constituencies such as Wicklow-Wexford.

Deputy Pa Daly: I take this opportunity to acknowledge the 60th anniversary of the death of Mike Quill, the great union leader in New York who worked in that city's subway system for many years. He always preached an anti-racist message. He was involved in the struggle for the country of his birth, fighting in the War of Independence, and the struggle for his fellow workers in New York.

Everywhere we turn, we see infrastructure that is undersupplied, overloaded and crumbling. Our creaking infrastructure, a deepening housing crisis, a broken planning system and critical deficits in water and energy are the direct result of a decade and a half of Government inaction, outsourcing and short-termism. What is the Government's answer? It produces another announcement accompanied by a glossy document but without any real action. This is a do-nothing Government scrambling to fix the problems of its own making.

In 2007, planning was deregulated by the then Government. In 2017, it was deregulated again with the introduction of the strategic housing development scheme, which slowed down planning, failed to increase supply and led to smaller and darker apartments. Now, once again, we have an action plan that bows to the interests of major developers rather than empowering local government and communities. It talks about a cultural shift but we need more than that. We need a transformation in our approach and a Government that is willing to step up and deliver for the people rather than being beholden to the corporate balance sheet. For too long, successive Governments have outsourced essential infrastructure to the private sector and left its delivery subject to the whims of market forces. We saw what happened in housing estates all over Kerry when their management was left in the hands of private companies. That approach did not work and the result is what we see today, namely, a seismic deficit in critical infrastructure.

The Government's plan acknowledges that project timelines for essential infrastructure for energy, transport and water have doubled over the past two decades. Electricity substations now take eight and a half years to construct, a small wastewater plant takes up to ten years and a major road project up to 15 years, and the costs are way higher. What does this plan say to the people waiting for wastewater in Ballyduff, Duagh, Castlegregory and Fenit in County Kerry, where all there is, in essence, is a hole in the ground and an Imhoff tank within metres of blue flag beaches? Without that critical infrastructure, no more than one or two houses can be built. These inexcusable delays are slowing the delivery of homes, choking off renewable energy, pushing up bills and contributing to a lower quality of life.

There is nothing in the plan about North-South infrastructure. We have areas of co-operation under the Good Friday Agreement but that is not enough. Cross-Border communities that rely on integrated road and rail networks, like the Belfast-Dublin economic corridor, require joint planning for road safety, port access and freight movement. The Government needs to catch up on that.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan. We need to act to ensure the delivery of housing and other infrastructure. I thank the Minister for his engagement on private wires, which is a huge priority for me.

It is all about delivery for the people of Ireland. The cost problem at the moment, especially when it comes to the electricity grid, is really hitting families in north Dublin. We talk all the time about high electricity prices, rents and construction costs. I am fed up with words. There

are measures that can be taken quickly. At the climate and energy committee, I am constantly pushing for private wires, long-duration energy storage and solar panels to be allowed for plug-in batteries. I do not care who gets the credit for any of this. I have heard these measures mentioned by the Green Party and others. I just want them to be done. As long as they get done and we reduce energy costs, that is the most important thing.

We lack a system of consistent and transparent cost-benefit and fiscal sustainability assessments when it comes to major infrastructure projects. I was delighted that an amendment in this regard was accepted by the committee today. We need this to be done, especially when it comes to the public opposing infrastructure projects. If a cost-benefit analysis is done, it is much easier for us to defend a project. The public is paying the price for these failings and it is absolutely wrong.

One of the most frustrating issues relates to the constraints on grid access. The people making decisions regarding Ireland's grid are not being held accountable, which is why I would love the Minister to have more power in relation to State and semi-State bodies. As I have pointed out 100 times, a wind farm or solar farm cannot directly supply a nearby factory with energy, even if they are only metres apart, without going through the ESB or Eir. That need to change. I welcome the publication by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, of the heads of the private wires Bill. That legislation really needs to progress. It will reduce congestion and lower systematic costs.

Regarding balcony solar, if we are serious about bringing costs down for ordinary people, we must be honest about what is required. Germany has 1.5 million balcony solar systems installed, with some estimates putting the number even higher. The model is simply: allow plug-in systems, finance them through savings in affordable housing and privatise them for households. Doing so could cut bills by €200 to €400.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have an opportunity to ask the Minister of State to prioritise a number of projects in Kerry. The N72 leaves Killarney, going from Ballydowny to the Golden Nugget, and then goes around the Ring of Kerry from the Gap across to Grenagh.

It is otherwise known as the Killalee project. These two sections of road are in a desperate state. The road from the Golden Nugget to the Gap Cross has been completed and a fortune has been spent but we are in a worse scenario now because the road has been narrowed and it is not safe for two vehicles of any kind to pass each other. The road from Blackwater Bridge to Tahilla and from Parknasilla to Sneem, also on the eastern side of the Ring of Kerry, is in a desperate state and it is not safe for rigid lorries, articulated lorries and buses to pass each other. I am asking the Government to look at that once again. I have raised it every year since I came up here.

I am asking for separate funding for bridges. Whether it is on local, regional or secondary and national primary roads, we have to wait far too long, sometimes two or three years, for these bridges to be repaired. These are bridges built in the 1880s. I am asking for real funding for the local improvement schemes in Kerry this year because there are still over 600 on the list that have not been attended to.

All over Kerry we have settlements that either have no sewage treatment plant or are looking for extensions. Castleisland has been looking for an extension for the sewerage scheme there

since 1986. Imagine that. I found it above in my father's shed a number of years ago. He was at it at that time. Scartaglin, Corra and Beaufort do not have treatment plants. In Moyvane you cannot build another house. I could go on and on. When Kerry County Council was operating the sewage treatment services it had a list and there was a priority list. I do not know what the Minister of State is reading now but I am asking him to find that priority list and go back through it. These people were promised, almost 20 years ago, that their treatment plant was to be brought forward.

There are 170 houses waiting to start in Kenmare, where we have not had a private estate built in 20 years. What we are waiting for now is water. Like I said in the House the other day, we have water coming down out of the sky every day and we are surrounded by lakes up on the hill but there is no water going into the pipe. I am asking the Government once again to deal with this because if the 170 houses are not built and water is the cause, I will clear the whole lot of you out of it myself. This has been going on for long enough.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Members for their constructive and insightful contribution to the debate, which affirms the importance of public investment in the delivery of capital projects and programmes and the urgent need to remove the barriers to infrastructure development. What has been made very clear is that, collectively, we know what the challenges we face are and that infrastructure deficits remain in certain sectors. I thank Members for articulating that. That is why this Government has prioritised investment in water, energy and transport, which will provide the necessary structures to boost national competitiveness and deliver more homes, schools and healthcare facilities.

As outlined by my colleague the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in his opening statement, the review of the national development plan sees the largest ever capital investment plan in the history of the State over the period to 2035, with a commitment to invest €275 billion to significantly improve our infrastructure stock. This, in turn, will develop our economy, deliver our housing targets and boost our competitiveness. With such a high level of investment, we need to ensure that the provision of strategic and much-needed infrastructure is delivered in a timely manner, with an emphasis on boosting productivity and resilience and achieving value for money for the Exchequer. That is why the five key commitments for infrastructure delivery outlined in the programme for Government have been implemented.

As Members know, the review of the national development plan set out annual sectoral allocations for the period 2026 to 2030 and overall Government capital expenditure ceilings out to 2035. The review considered the most important challenges facing our economy and society, namely, addressing historical infrastructure pressures, ensuring balanced regional development in line with the national planning framework and meeting our climate obligations. To oversee the implementation of the national development plan, a new Cabinet committee on infrastructure has been formed to drive the delivery, accountability and value-for-money of major capital projects.

All Departments have published their infrastructure sectoral plans, which provide a clear pipeline of the capital projects to be delivered over the coming years. The National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, has been given a broader remit to provide Departments with financial, procurement and project delivery advice on public infrastructure projects.

Furthermore, a new infrastructure division in the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation was established, with a deputy secretary general appointed last December and senior officials allocated and specialist staff appointed since.

A core remit of the division was leading and supporting the work of the accelerating infrastructure task force and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, led the publication of two substantial reports. The first, in July of last year, which followed a considerable process of external consultation and engagement, outlined the barriers to infrastructure delivery across the country and noted the regulatory environment, the planning and legal systems, drawing particular attention to the judicial review process, and internal systems across the public service and Civil Service, including fragmented governance, procurement challenges and capacity constraints.

This initial barriers report was followed by the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan published in December. This report outlined five key objectives. These were: to accelerate delivery of critical infrastructure, particularly in the electricity, water, and transport sectors; to accelerate the delivery of all infrastructure by simplifying and streamlining the regulatory and consenting processes for infrastructure in general; to reduce delays caused by judicial reviews, regulatory complexity and fragmented approvals; to enhance co-ordination across government, utilities and local authorities; and to build public and political support for infrastructure projects.

The report set out 30 targeted actions across four strategic pillars to deliver on these objectives. The first pillar is legal reform designed to tackle excessive complexity in the regulatory and infrastructure environment at source without compromising on environmental standards, individual rights or good governance.

The second pillar focused on regulatory reform with a view to simplifying and standardising processes so that approvals run in parallel, where possible, aligning procedures across agencies, removing duplication and creating processes with predictable timelines and outcomes.

The third pillar is the reform of co-ordination and delivery within and across government, and with the construction sector. Alongside the publication of the NDP review, the departmental sectoral plans provide multi-annual funding certainty and outline a strong and clear pipeline of projects. This is a demonstrable commitment by the Government to the construction sector that gives predictability and supports the sector to invest in the capacity, skills and resources needed to meet the demand. On top of this, the new infrastructure division in our Department will take on a proactive oversight and monitoring role, assessing delivery of the action plan and identifying any barriers to impact.

The fourth pillar in the actions report focuses on public acceptance and civic engagement. Our ability to deliver on the critically needed infrastructure rests on societal support. The work under this pillar will focus on building public trust, accountability and improving public engagement processes. While infrastructure projects will be disruptive to some, they will benefit many and this pillar will build and support this mindset. Each of the actions that will be undertaken are clearly linked back to the barriers identified, accompanied by clear deadlines for implementation and with the majority focused in 2026. There is clear responsibility for each action and defined measures of success and accountability. Each action will have direct

impact but, more importantly, is part of a considered and comprehensive strategic programme of reform. The total impact of the actions will be greater than the sum of the actions individually.

Since the publication of the actions report in December, officials in the Department have moved at pace to implement the changes identified and fundamentally shift the ecosystem underpinning Ireland's infrastructure delivery to support Ireland's competitiveness, deliver transport, water and energy services fit for the purposes of our growing country and, crucially, to deliver 300,000 new homes by 2030. Senior officials have been appointed, a newly composed infrastructure division has been confirmed and timelines and responsibilities for actions and sub-measures have been submitted. The task force will continue to meet regularly to support the delivery of the plan. As outlined by my colleague the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and reaffirmed here, while we have work to do, we have a clear programme of work to effect change, and we will continue to do everything in our power to increase the capacity to deliver the infrastructure needed for a modern and progressive society.

It is simply incorrect to claim judicial review reform is anti-democratic or designed to limit access to the courts. Nothing in the Government's approach removes or restricts the constitutional right to challenge decisions. Judicial reviews remain fully available and all EU-derived environmental safeguards remain intact. The suggestion that the number of judicial reviews is falling is not supported by any official data. The Courts Service report for 2024 stated that 241 new cases entered the planning and environmental list and it has now confirmed that 171 new judicial review proceedings commenced in 2025, out of a total 197 matters, with only 26 relating to non-judicial review applications.

The reform agenda builds on the levels of State investment. There are discussions about flooding. As a result, 56 flood relief schemes have now been completed, protecting 30,580 properties. However, I agree that the devastation caused by the flooding has been worrying. We also have the Enniscorthy flood relief scheme. This proposed scheme was refused under the Arterial Drainage Act in March 2022 on the basis of advice from independent environmental consultants, because of the adverse environmental impact of the scheme. I think it was the Taoiseach who said today that we need to protect people and property more sometimes. We have the environmental aspects as well, but we need to balance them in the right way.

The social infrastructure is committed for delivery, but it can only be done with the delivery of water, transport and electricity infrastructure. They are constituency projects and I appreciate their importance because I am from a constituency, but we have to have Government co-ordination.

I thank Deputies for their insightful participation in today's discussions on infrastructure and I look forward to more questions in the coming weeks and months.

Agreements on Transfer of Passenger Name Record Data: Motions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Liam Quaide): Before I call on the Minister to open the debate, I remind Members that two separate motions are being debated in this slot, namely, the motion regarding the 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 regarding the proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the conclusion of the agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of PNR data. The motions will be moved separately, but debated together and decided by separate questions.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 11th December, 2025.

As the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach identified in his introductory comments, I am seeking the approval of the Dáil to opt in to two European Commission proposals. I am seeking the approval of the Dáil to opt in under Article 3 of Protocol 21 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union. The first proposal is for a Council decision authorising the conclusion of an agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of PNR data. The second proposal for which I am seeking the approval of the Dáil to opt in to is in respect of a decision authorising the signing of an agreement between the EU and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of PNR data.

The reason we are here seeking to opt in is that the proposed Council decisions have a Title V legal basis in the area of police co-operation. Their publication by the Commission on the 13 November 2025 triggered a three-month window for Ireland to exercise its opt-in option under Article 3 of Protocol 21, as I mentioned.

Deputies may recall that Ireland opted in to the negotiation of this agreement in February 2024. This process of coming before Dáil and Seanad Éireann for the purpose of getting approval for the negotiation, conclusion and signing of the agreement between the European Union and Swiss Confederation signifies the extent to which there is democratic input into decisions proposed by the European Commission that need the approval of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The negotiated agreement has two main aims and components, one relating to the necessity of ensuring public security by means of exchanging PNR data with the Swiss Confederation, and the other relating to the protection of privacy and other fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals. It also includes a joint declaration between the EU and the Swiss Confederation, which will promote mutual co-operation and exchanges of best practice and developments in the field of PNR data between the parties.

The collection and analysis of PNR data is a widely used law enforcement tool in the EU and other countries for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime. PNR data is the booking information provided by passengers and collected by air carriers for commercial purposes. It includes such information as names, dates of travel and travel itineraries. It is true that at present we do not have the same ability for people travelling by ferry, but that is being worked on in the European Union. The collection and analysis of PNR data can provide the authorities with important elements, allowing them to detect suspicious travel patterns and identify associates of criminals and terrorists, particularly those previously unknown to law enforcement authorities.

The use of PNR data is governed by the PNR directive, which was transposed into national law via the European Union (Passenger Name Record Data) Regulations 2018. The Irish passenger information unit in my Department is the body responsible for processing PNR data in Ireland. We have already opted in under Protocol 21, as colleagues will be aware, to similar PNR agreements with non-EU countries such as Iceland, Norway, Canada, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. In operational and policy terms, it is considered desirable that Ireland exercise an Article 3 opt-in to these proposals so we can participate in the agreed exchange of PNR data when the agreement has been concluded. That would not be available to us if we proceeded with the option of opting in under Article 4, which is an option that can arise after the agreements are concluded by the EU and the Swiss Confederation.

I commend these proposals to the House and seek the approval of the motions for the signing and conclusion of the agreement concerned.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister for outlining the detail of these proposals. He is certainly keeping us busy this week.

As I have said when we previously debated motions on the sharing of PNR data, this data is important for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of serious crimes and terrorist offences, including drug-related offences and human trafficking. This information forms part of the broader management of our borders, although there are limitations to what the data can be used for. International co-operation in the fight against crime is crucial and the sharing of this information is a key aspect of that.

I will put on the record again that the application of PNR data collection to ports and ferries needs to be examined, although I concede it will probably not be relevant to travel to Switzerland.

These motions relate to a Council decision to sign and conclude an agreement between the EU and the Swiss Confederation.

Sinn Féin is not opposing this motion.

As we are here again to discuss an opt-in under Protocol 21, I want to make a number of general points on the matter. In standing up for the democratic will of the Irish people, the Oireachtas has a responsibility to be on guard at all times against anything that could potentially undermine our sovereignty. We also have to be on guard against attempts to undermine the protections which were crucial for Ireland signing up to treaties that involved further and deeper EU integration. Whenever the Irish people have voted on EU treaties, protecting and maximising Irish sovereignty have been to the fore of many people's concerns. It was for this

reason, and of course to protect the common travel area, that Protocol 21 of the Lisbon treaty was put in place.

There now needs to be a more comprehensive debate about where this State stands on the European Union and the areas described as freedom, security and justice. The regularity in which we faced opt-in motions and the comments of the Minister previously, following the review of Protocol 21 last year, suggest there is a move towards an ever greater ceding of sovereignty to the European Union in these areas. It would be useful if the Minister could outline, following the review, what measures Ireland is currently considering opting in to which we had previously opted out of. Individually, some of these matters might seem minor but the cumulative effect of a drift towards opting in to such measures is not always seen or understood by the public. There is no awareness that we are travelling in the direction of handing more and more powers over to the European Union, with little rationale in some instances. There is no discussion of the far-reaching implications of handing over increased powers in the areas of freedom, security and justice. There needs to be more concern about the ability of the people in this State to make decisions here in Ireland around matters in this area and less concern, in my view, about demonstrating our commitment to protecting and strengthening the EU's control over these areas.

More and more people are alive to the dangers inherent in ceding sovereignty as the practical implications become clear. We lost our veto over international trade deals as a result of the Lisbon treaty. We see now the impact of that with the Mercosur agreement, which is clearly not in Ireland's interests as a trade agreement. It poses serious threats to Irish agriculture, the environment and food safety standards, yet it appears we could be locked in if the European Court of Justice does not intervene. We see it with regard to the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, which provides for an investor court system and exposes this State to the risk of being sued by foreign investors where State actions could be perceived as affecting negatively on their investments.

There will be other trade deals, some of which will be in Ireland's interests, and we will support them, while others may not be in our interests. The truth of the matter is that because we have ceded absolute control to a European framework which only provides for a qualified majority, there are likely to be instances where a deal is clearly not in the best interest of the Irish people and while an Irish Government may robustly oppose it, it will be implemented. For example, we know the EU is embarking on a free trade agreement with India. We do not know what the implications of that will be yet. There needs to be a full debate, which has not been the case in most respects.

All of this reminds us that, even when we make decisions technically or theoretically for the right reasons, any time a decision is made to hand over and cede power to the European Union, that has implications. I fear that the discussions we have are not sufficiently robust or considered and we generally deal with motions that are rushed through the House. There are of course areas where co-operation or collective EU processes are the best and most effective approach. Passenger name recognition is one of those areas, which is why we will not be opposing this motion.

We need to move beyond the simplistic argument that you are either pro-EU, and that means you support every single measure and proposal to cede sovereignty to the EU, or, as I would contend, you can be pro-EU but recognise there are consequences that have to be properly

teased out. That is particularly the case in respect of areas where, under Protocol 21, we have opt-outs. Those opt-outs were secured for valid reasons and those reasons must be respected.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The motion before us asks the Dáil to decide whether Ireland should exercise its opt-in, under Protocol 21, to participate in an EU agreement governing the transfer of passenger name record data between the European Union and Switzerland, for the purposes of counterterrorism and serious crime. Obviously, this is a decision that matters, not because co-operation with Switzerland is in any way controversial on its own but because passenger name record systems are, by design, a form of bulk data processing. They apply to the entire travelling populations, not solely to people suspected of an offence.

The House is being asked to approve this opt-in against a backdrop where European courts have repeatedly warned against general and indiscriminate data collection, where EU-level reviews accept the effectiveness of PNR is difficult to measure with precision and where the legal justification for these systems depends on continuous demonstration of necessity and proportionality. While the motion is presented as technical, it is certainly not neutral in its effect. Once adopted, it extends the reach of a surveillance framework beyond the Union to a third country and does so in a way that is legally binding on the State. That does not necessarily mean it is wrong, but it does mean it deserves more than a cursory nod through.

I accept the basic premise that co-operation between states is essential in tackling terrorism and serious organised crime. I also accept that Switzerland occupies a particular position, participating in Schengen co-operation while not being bound by the EU passenger name record directive in the same way as member states. I understand why an agreement is proposed and Ireland is being asked to exercise its opt-in under Protocol 21. However, understanding the rationale is not the same as switching off scrutiny.

Passenger name record data is extensive. It includes not just names and flight numbers, but patterns of movement, payment details and associations. It is bulk data relating to the vast numbers of people who are not suspected of any offence. That fact alone places responsibility on the House to ask questions about necessity and proportionality. We are told correctly that safeguards exist, that the agreement limits processing to terrorism and serious crime and restricts the use of sensitive data. It provides for depersonalisation oversight by independent authorities and judicial or equivalent authorisation for onward disclosure. Those protections absolutely matter and should be acknowledged. However, safeguards on paper are not the end of a conversation; they should be the starting point.

European institutions acknowledge that assessing the effectiveness of PNR systems is not straightforward. The Commission's review described PNR as contributing to investigation, while also conceding that the data can be inconsistent. Outcomes are difficult to isolate and success is often measured in contribution, rather than in clear causation. That is not a criticism; it is just part of reality. However, it means legislators are entitled to ask whether bulk data collection remains justified as a generalised tool, rather than something more targeted and intelligence-led. This question becomes more important in light of the direction of travel in European case law. Courts have repeatedly cautioned against general and indiscriminate data collection. While PNR has not been struck down, it exists in a narrowing legal space, one in which necessity and proportionality must be continuously justified, not simply assumed.

My concern is not specific to Switzerland; it is about accumulation. Each individual opt-in looks modest and technical. Taken together, however, these measures expand the reach of surveillance gradually, often without sustained public debate. Again, that is not an argument against co-operation but an argument for vigilance.

There is also a democratic point here. Motions of this kind are often framed as routine but, once adopted, they become binding. That makes it all the more important that Members use this moment to place concerns and questions on the record, rather than treating the vote as simply a formality.

The Social Democrats will not oppose this motion but we are approaching it with the required level of scepticism. If we are confident in the framework, then confidence should be accommodated by clarity, clear evidence of effectiveness, clear explanation of how rights are protected once data leaves EU systems, and clear reassurances of what is lawful today will continue to be justified tomorrow, particularly as technology and analytical capacity evolve. Public trust in law enforcement does not rest on secrecy or scale; it should rest on restraint, transparency and proportionality. Those principles should guide how we assess measures like this, even when they are presented as technical and even when the objectives are ones we will share.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputies Carthy and Gannon for their contributions. Deputy Carthy raised several issues in respect of Ireland's sovereignty. The fact these issues are being debated in this House, and subsequently will be debated and voted on in the Seanad, indicates Irish democracy is very much at the heart of the consideration of these proposals.

There have been three parts to the PNR agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation.

First of all, there was a vote by both Houses of the Oireachtas back in 2024 in terms of determining whether we would enter into negotiations between the EU and the Swiss Confederation. Both Houses voted on that and both Houses agreed that we wanted to opt in to the negotiation. Today we are voting on whether we wish to approve the conclusion of that negotiation and then subsequently the signing of the agreement between the EU and the Swiss Confederation. There have been at least six debates in the Houses of the Oireachtas in respect of this ultimate agreement between the EU and the Swiss Confederation. As I mentioned earlier, the EU has entered into PNR agreements with other non-EU countries and, in respect of each or most of them, there has been similar democratic underpinning within Ireland's Houses of the Oireachtas so I think that is very clear evidence that the elected representatives of the Irish people have had a very significant say and vote in respect of each of these stages of these agreements.

I listened to what Deputy Carthy had to say on the ceding of sovereignty. I disagree with Deputy Carthy on this. I think the strength of Ireland derives from the fact that we recognise that in order to have strength and influence in this world, one really needs to be part of a multilateral arrangement. That is why Ireland's membership of the EU makes us strong. I do not believe that by becoming a member of the EU, Ireland has in some way reduced its sovereignty. In fact, I think that our sovereignty is as strong as ever but we certainly have increased our influence. We have seen a very recent example on this island and the island

beside us, where people decided that they wanted to leave the EU because they thought they would be able to exercise greater sovereignty and greater control over their own affairs. That did not happen. I am very confident that the proposal here has a democratic mandate and I believe the sovereignty of Ireland has been increased and strengthened by our continued support for the EU.

Deputy Gannon mentioned issues in respect of PNR data agreements. Obviously, as he will be aware, there are specific rules in respect of the retention of PNR data. It is procured and collected in the first instance solely for the purpose of fighting terrorism and serious crime. He will also be aware that this data has to be processed and controlled in accordance with fundamental human rights. He may be aware that a case was brought to the Court of Justice of the European Union, CJEU, back in 2022 by the Human Rights League in Belgium challenging the PNR directive that had been brought in by the EU. The CJEU upheld the PNR directive. Issues concerning fundamental rights are at the heart of the PNR directive. It has gone to the CJEU and the court has recognised the validity of it because it is consistent in protecting the fundamental rights of individuals.

When it comes to the agreements between the EU and other entities around the world, we have to be able to enter into agreements with countries such as Switzerland and Canada. If we cannot enter into agreements with countries as benign as those two countries, we are going to find ourselves in a very difficult position. I appreciate and welcome the fact that Deputies Gannon and Carthy are supporting this proposed conclusion and signing of the agreement with the Swiss Confederation. I would also look for them to express similar support when it comes to the agreement between the EU and Canada, which is really a fundamental agreement. We should be able to enter into an agreement with a country as benign as Canada when it comes to ensuring that trade operates effectively between the EU and Canada.

Question put and agreed to.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the exercise by the State of the option or discretion under Protocol No. 21 on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland in respect of the area of freedom, security and justice annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to take part in the adoption and application of the following proposed measure:

Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing, on behalf of the European Union, of the Agreement between the European Union and the Swiss Confederation on the transfer of Passenger Name Record (PNR) data for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crime,

a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 11th December, 2025.

Question put and agreed to.

International Protection Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

"That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am very pleased to introduce the International Protection Bill 2026 to the House. Migration has been a distinctive feature of Ireland's history. Few countries in Europe have been as affected by emigration over the past two centuries as Ireland, with millions having left in search of safe haven, economic prosperity and opportunities not afforded to them at home. In recent years, we have become a country that is able to provide the opportunities those who emigrated once sought. We are a safe and successful country with a vibrant economy, which has meant that people from across the globe want to come to Ireland in search of a better life. Over the years, we have seen the invaluable contribution that foreign-born workers have made in Ireland. These include workers in our healthcare system, hospitality industry, construction sector and tech industry. Each of these sectors has benefited from, and relies on, the excellent work provided by migrants who have come to Ireland to work. This Government is very clear about the value of migration to Ireland. The vast majority of people coming to Ireland are here to work or study.

This Government also fundamentally believes in the right to claim asylum. We will always uphold our obligation on this important principle of international law for the sake of those who need our protection. At the same time, migration and asylum have given rise to challenges not only for Ireland, but across the EU. Migration and asylum are shared challenges that are increasingly difficult for any one country to deal with acting alone in a globalised and interdependent world.

In 2025, my Department received approximately 13,000 applications for international protection. Although this is down 30% from the 2024 figure of 18,500, it is clear that issues will arise when attempting to deal with large numbers of international protection applicants in a system that was not designed to handle such demand. Decisions have historically taken far too long. This situation benefits no one. It does not serve applicants who are granted international protection, who face challenges in integrating into Irish society due to these delays; it does not benefit the State to have increasingly high demands placed on an already stretched accommodation system; and it undermines public confidence in the systems and agencies designed to provide effective protection to those who need it. The challenges we currently face in providing an asylum system that is fit for purpose are shared by other EU member states. The overall objective of the migration and asylum pact is to provide a fair, sustainable and efficient asylum procedure. This will be achieved through convergence in asylum practices across the EU.

It is for these reasons that I am introducing the International Protection Bill 2026. This Bill delivers on the programme for Government commitment to implement the regulations and directives agreed by the EU by 12 June 2026. This Bill represents the most significant reform of Irish asylum laws in the history of the State. It will put in place a new framework to manage migration and asylum for the long term. It will improve decision-making structures within the international protection system and provide faster timelines for the processing of international protection applications. The overall objective of the Bill is to provide a fair, sustainable and efficient asylum procedure that is consistent with how asylum laws operate across the EU.

In that context, I would like to address the recommendation of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, which is chaired by Deputy Carthy and of which Deputy Gannon is a member, in its pre-legislative scrutiny report that opting out of the

majority of the EU migration and asylum pact be reconsidered. The pact and the Bill introduce faster processing of asylum claims with a much more efficient decision-making system. Faster processing will mean that applicants spend less time in International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, centres and will significantly reduce the cost of the asylum system to the State.

Faster decision-making will also mean that successful applicants will be granted international protection sooner and those whose applications are refused can be returned to their country of origin sooner. Having a common system across the EU makes sure that all applicants are treated the same in every member state, with no incentive to move from one to another. If Ireland had not opted in to the pact, it is likely that we would face higher levels of secondary movement, slower processing and a less efficient returns system. This would result in applicants staying in the system for much longer, at much greater cost to the State in terms of the provision of accommodation and other supports.

If Members say that we should not have opted in to the regulations and directives associated with the EU migration pact, they should then recognise there is still an ability for them to put into this Bill what they say they would like to see in it. I am conscious that Deputy Carthy will, I suspect, say that he would not have opted in to the pact. That may very well be the position of Sinn Féin but there is an obligation on Deputy Carthy and Sinn Féin to state what measures they would like to see in this legislation that are not in it at present. We can just ignore the pact and decide what Members want to put into the Bill that is not in it at present. That is something that would focus minds on whether or not this is the best method of reforming the asylum process, and I believe it is.

It is for all these reasons that the Government and both Houses of the Oireachtas have given approval in accordance with the Constitution for Ireland to opt in to these measures. The proposal to opt-in was debated at length in the Houses before the opt-in motions were approved. It is difficult, therefore, to understand how the joint committee made the recommendation it did. I should add that it would not be legally possible to seek to opt out even if that was the democratic wish of the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Exactly.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Because there was a democratic vote by the Members of the Houses of the Oireachtas, which I presume the Deputies accept.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It means that the Government is locked in with a ratchet.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In preparation for the commencement of the Act, my Department has already begun to operate elements of the new asylum border procedure and to transition gradually to fully implementing the provisions that will be set out in this legislation. This transition is being undertaken within the framework of the existing legislation, which is the International Protection Act 2015. To begin this transition, new readiness teams were established in June 2025. Operations began in Citywest reception centre in July 2025, in partnership with the International Protection Office, IPO, the International Protection Appeals Tribunal, IPAT, the International Protection Accommodation Service and the immigration

service delivery's repatriation team. This phased approach has enabled my Department to test the ability of the international protection system in its entirety to process cases within the required timeframe of the future asylum border procedure and to make adjustments where necessary. This work has allowed my Department to identify pressure points and practical challenges across the process, to create new standard operating procedures and to set out future training needs.

I will now turn to the detail of the Bill. The Bill is divided into 15 Parts which I will briefly outline. Part 1 deals with preliminary matters. Chapter 2 provides that the Minister for justice is the designated determining authority for the purposes of the pact measures to determine whether a person qualifies as a refugee or is eligible for subsidiary protection. Chapter 2 provides for the application of the concepts of first country of asylum and safe third country.

Part 2 of the Bill sets out matters relating to the taking of biometric data and the screening of applicants for international protection. Chapter 1 provides for the taking and transmission of data to Eurodac as well as the management of this data. Chapter 2 ensures appropriate alignment with the screening regulation. Persons applying for international protection will undergo screening. Chapter 2 provides for the designation of screening centres, the screening process and preliminary health and vulnerability checks.

Part 3 provides for the procedures that will apply where a person applies for international protection. Chapter 1 provides for the making, registration and lodgement of applications for international protection. Chapter 2 makes provision for the appointment of representatives and provisional representatives for unaccompanied minors. Chapter 3 outlines the assessment process for determining the age of an applicant. The new age assessment process will meet the requirements of the asylum procedures regulation and will involve a multi-disciplinary assessment. Chapter 4 provides for an applicant's right to remain in the State while his or her application is being examined and the limitations and exceptions attached to the right to remain. Chapter 4 also provides for the international protection applicant card. Chapter 5 makes provision for explicit and implicit withdrawal of applications. Chapter 6 provides for subsequent applications.

Part 4 implements provisions of the asylum and migration management regulation relating to the determination of the member state responsible for examining an international protection application. Part 4 provides for the determination of the member state responsible for examining an application. Provision is made for matters relating to transfer decisions. Part 4 sets out the procedures that will apply when Ireland is the member state responsible for examining an application. The new responsibility provisions replace the Dublin III regulation.

Part 5 deals with the examination of international protection applications. Chapter 1 provides for the use of a medical examination for indications of past persecution or serious harm. Chapter 2 provides for the examination and, where necessary, the prioritisation of applications for international protection. Chapter 3 stipulates the requirements for interviews of applicants. Chapter 4 outlines the different decisions that can be made in relation to applications and sets out arrangements for the granting of refugee status or subsidiary protection status. Chapter 5 provides for the accelerated examination procedure. Chapter 6 implements the provisions of the asylum procedures regulation relating to the asylum border procedure. This new procedure sets a 12-week time limit for first instance and appeal decisions to be completed for certain categories of applications. The aim is to issue decisions in the

quickest time possible to those less likely to have an entitlement to international protection. That is one of the most significant aspects of this new legislation. It places an obligation on this State to ensure that we process applications, in certain instances under the asylum border procedure, within a period of 12 weeks. That expedited process is fair to the applicant and fair to the State.

Part 6 deals with the right of an applicant to appeal to the new tribunal for asylum and returns appeals where an application for international protection is refused at first instance. The time limits to appeal will be set at the maximum of the range specified in asylum procedures regulation. These time limits will be 10 days for appeals where the applicant was subject to the accelerated examination procedure or asylum border procedure and one month for other appeals. The tribunal will be required to make a decision in respect of an appeal without holding an oral hearing unless the appeals officer is of the opinion that a full and *ex nunc* examination of both facts and points of law cannot be achieved without an oral hearing. That is another very significant change that will arise as a result of this legislation, if it is enacted. At present, most appeals are determined alongside an oral hearing. In future, oral hearings under the new legislative procedure will be the exception. The phrase "*ex nunc*" is a Latin phrase essentially meaning "from now on". It is used as a legal term to signify that the appeal will take account of circumstances pertaining at the time of the appeal and not in the past. In deciding whether an oral hearing is necessary, the appeals officer must have regard to guidelines issued by the chief appeals officer relating to appeals.

Part 7 deals with the rights and entitlements of persons who have been granted international protection. It provides for certain rights for beneficiaries of international protection and permission to reside in the State.

Part 8 sets out the circumstances where voluntary return to a person's country of origin, country of former habitual residence, or a third country where the person is legally entitled to reside, may be offered. The option of voluntary return will not be offered to persons who have committed a serious offence or who are a danger to the security of the State. Part 8 also makes provision for withdrawal of international protection and the right to appeal of a person subject to withdrawal of international protection.

Part 9 provides for the making of a return decision at the same time as a decision which rejects an international protection application. When a return decision is made, an entry ban notice will be issued to require the person to remain outside the State. Where a person opts for voluntary return, complies with all aspects and satisfactorily confirms his or her return, the entry ban notice and return decision will be revoked. However, an entry ban notice will not be revoked where the person poses a risk to public policy, public order or national security. That combination of returns and exclusion is a new aspect to it as well. Chapter 2 provides for appropriate alignment with relevant provisions of the return border procedure regulation. Applicants whose applications are rejected under the asylum border procedure will, with limited exceptions, be placed in the return border procedure.

Part 10 provides for matters relating to programme refugees and the process that will apply where it is proposed that Ireland should request the European Commission to activate the procedure in the crisis and *force majeure* regulation.

Part 11 provides for the establishment, membership and functions of the new tribunal. It will be known as the tribunal for asylum and returns appeals. It will operate separately from IPAT and deal only with appeals against international protection returns decisions made under this legislation, which will commence on 12 June.

Part 12 provides for the establishment of an independent monitoring mechanism, as provided for in the screening regulation and the asylum border procedures regulation, which will be headed by a chief inspector of asylum border procedures. The chief inspector will monitor compliance with EU and international law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, during the screening of applicants and the application of the asylum border procedure. The chief inspector will have the power to investigate allegations of breaches of rights and to inspect asylum border facilities. Part 12 will also establish an advisory board for the chief inspector. The advisory board's purpose will be to consult, guide and advise the chief inspector in relation to his or her duties and the performance of his or her functions.

Part 13 makes provision for miscellaneous matters, including the designation of safe countries of origin and safe third countries.

Part 14 provides for transitional provisions and amendments to the International Protection Act 2015. Existing caseloads of applications and appeals will continue to be processed under the 2015 Act, with the new arrangements applying to international protection applications lodged from 12 June of this year.

Part 15 provides for amendments to other enactments.

The Schedule sets out the text of the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees.

I now want to mention the amendments I intend to introduce on Committee and Report Stages. I will introduce amendments to give effect to the reception conditions directive. These will include provisions for material reception conditions, restrictions of freedom of movement, detention, alternatives to detention, special reception needs and labour market access. There will be amendments to make provision for legal counselling, legal advice and legal aid, as required under the asylum procedures regulation. I will introduce provisions on temporary protection, which will include expanded and clarified provisions to deal with the temporary protection of displaced persons, including revocation of temporary protection.

My Department and the Office of the Attorney General are developing provisions for inclusion in the Bill to give effect to the proposals approved by the Government last November on family reunification. These propose that beneficiaries of international protection must wait for a defined period before bringing family members to Ireland and must be able to show proof that they are self-sufficient. I am reflecting on the appropriate period to ensure the correct balance is struck between the interests of the Irish public and those seeking family reunification, recognising that our resources are not unlimited and that those seeking reunification should be able to support any persons joining them.

Before I finish, I would like to address suggestions that this Bill is prioritising speed over fairness. I do not believe that is accurate. This legislation strikes a fair balance between the two. It reinforces Ireland's commitment to providing refuge and protection to those who need

it. This will be done by building a system that is sustainable, fair and efficient and that meets our obligations under international law.

I look forward to working with colleagues in the House as we continue our discussions on this important legislation in the coming weeks. It is obviously very significant legislation. It is very lengthy and detailed, and I want to give the House as much time as possible on Second Stage for its consideration. That is why I think three days have been allocated for the purpose of debating this on Second Stage. I look forward to hearing contributions from other Deputies in the House. I will listen to them closely, as will my colleague Deputy Brophy, the Minister of State, who has worked very closely with me on formulating these proposals.

Although colleagues are perfectly entitled to be critical of the proposals put forward by the Government, I ask them to put forward how they would change the legislation if they were in the same position as me and the Minister of State. If they had an opportunity to include provisions to change asylum laws in Ireland, what changes would they make? They should not feel obliged to restrict themselves to what is within the parameters of the EU regulations and directives. They should tell us what measures they would like to see within our asylum laws in Ireland. These measures will be given consideration. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As the Minister has acknowledged, the primary purpose of the International Protection Bill is to provide for Ireland's opting in to the EU migration and asylum pact. The State had an opt-out from that pact but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael decided to discard it. They did that for narrow political reasons, so that they could say they had done something about immigration, when in fact all they have done is tie the hands of future Governments in making decisions in respect of immigration policy. It was an act of folly that has now been recognised by virtually everyone, except, of course, the Government itself.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Bill by the cross-party Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, which the Minister has alluded to, recommended that the Government reconsider opting out of the majority of the provisions of the EU migration and asylum pact. During its deliberations, the committee received numerous written and oral submissions on the Bill, coming from very different perspectives, but there was one point on which it seemed everyone agreed: there is no chance that the Government will be able to deliver on the obligations it has signed up to within the timeframe laid out in the legislation.

Reflecting on the evidence the committee received, the report raised serious concerns about the ability of the State to meet the requirements it is signing up to under the EU pact, and noted that failures to adhere to the commitments under the pact could result in infringement proceedings and hefty fines. In other words, the Irish taxpayer could end up paying huge sums in EU fines for not adhering to the terms of a pact that there was no logical reason or obligation to sign up to in the first place.

Sinn Féin has been clear from the outset that signing up wholesale to the EU migration and asylum pact is not in Ireland's interest. We will continue to oppose moves that undermine Irish sovereignty and that hand over more powers to the EU, particularly when that impedes our ability to make decisions in respect of migration.

Here is the point on democracy that the Minister seems to miss. He acknowledges it would not be legally possible to seek to opt out of measures we have opted into and are legally required

to implement. The difficulty is that democracy is not just about the ability of governments to make decisions; it is also about the ability of the people to kick governments out and allow other governments to make different decisions if that reflects their will. The Minister's party and Fine Gael have locked us into provisions that no other Government can opt out of.

The international protection system in this State is close to dysfunctional and riddled with problems. Fixing those problems does not require us to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact. In fact, that approach diverts efforts away from addressing them and into the charade we have today, where the Department is instead concentrating on rushing legislation through the Oireachtas to meet an EU deadline.

As has been said many times, the pact does not consider Ireland's unique position as a divided nation with an EU member state and a non-EU member state, and as a State that is part of a common travel area with a neighbouring island outside the EU, from which most international protection applicants, the Minister tells us, actually travel to Ireland.

Let us be clear: we did not need to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact to sort out delays in processing applications. We did not need the pact to address delays in the appeals system. We did not need the pact to ensure decisions are enforced. We do not need the pact to address the ongoing profiteering that is the hallmark of this system. We do not need an EU pact for any of those things. We need a competent government. Instead, we are presented with a complex and extensive Bill that has been rushed through to comply with an EU deadline. This is no way to legislate or to allow proper scrutiny. Before we even begin to look at this Bill, we are told the Minister will be introducing substantial amendments on Committee Stage. It appears that the Government may also attempt to bypass the committee, again avoiding proper scrutiny of all aspects of this Bill. This rushed, panicky approach leads me to believe it will be only a matter of time before these Houses are dealing with amending legislation to fix new problems, which will undoubtedly emerge in the implementation of this Bill.

If we are to have a robust, fair and enforceable system, concerns that the Bill may not provide sufficient protections for vulnerable applicants, including victims of trafficking and stateless persons, need to be addressed. Significant concerns were raised during the pre-legislative scrutiny process regarding what is meant by legal counselling and who will be able to provide it. These need to be addressed. There are also concerns about the ability to meet the timeframes set out in the Bill, given the current crisis in legal aid and the fact that Tusla is significantly overstretched. Stakeholders and legal experts have told us about other concerns, and if the Minister does not allow the committee to deal with them during the process he will essentially prevent the Oireachtas from doing its job.

I firmly believe, and I will continue to say this, that it should be a priority for this State to retain maximum sovereignty in the areas of freedom, security and justice. That is why we had an opt-out under Protocol 21.

In the context of the migration and asylum pact, I have stated that we should not have opted in to the procedures regulation, the crisis on *force majeure* regulation, the qualification directive, the reception conditions directive or the EU settlement framework. I have acknowledged it and Sinn Féin has said this. It appears that this is what the Minister does not understand. There are a number of aspects of the pact that it was in Ireland's interest to opt into. We supported opt-ins relating to the asylum and migration management regulation and

the Eurodac regulation. That was because these regulations are necessary for the sharing of information and implementing a returns policy. That makes sense, but we also have to recognise that protecting and maximising sovereignty in the context of EU integration has been demonstrated to be an important value of the Irish people. We have seen that with EU treaties. It is the people of this country who are best placed to make decisions and adjudicate on Governments in the context of how they are implemented.

The Government signed up to all aspects of the EU pact but is not prepared to deal with the implications of that. As already stated, there is no consideration of the common travel area, CTA, despite Government asserting that most international protection applicants actually arrive via the CTA. The fact that opt-outs under Protocol 21 exist in the first place is the result - as Government acknowledged in its own electronic travel authorisation, ETA - of the need to maintain the CTA with Britain. What we learned from the justice committee's pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of what has become the International Protection Bill is that while the Government signed up to all aspects of the pact, it is not prepared for the implications of that. Officials acknowledge that there is no consideration regarding the CTA area and that the Department has no idea how much we could be liable for in infringement proceedings if we are unable to meet the requirements of the pact.

I have raised with the Minister on a number of occasions the need for a bilateral agreement with Britain on returns. We need a bilateral agreement with Britain to ensure those international protection applicants who should be processed in Britain can be returned there in a timely way. In 2020, Ireland and Britain signed and agreed informal non-legally binding operational arrangements, but very little has been done to advance these. It is now time to do so. I contend that doing so should be a priority.

As a sovereign state, Ireland can and should put in place an international protection system and migration policy that is robust, fair and enforced and that is based on the unique circumstances and challenges that the State faces. That this is not yet being done is a political failure. It is because of the failures of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government that our migration and international protection system is operating in crisis mode. Decisions and appeals are taking too long. On average, it now takes more than two and a half years for an international protection application to be finalised. Deportations are not enforced. Ministers have acknowledged here time and time again that in many cases they do not actually know whether people who are subject to orders have left the country or not.

Last year, there were 4,700 deportation orders signed and 2,700 confirmed deportations. In 2024, there were 2,403 deportation orders signed and 1,122 confirmed deportations. In 2023, there were 859 orders and 318 confirmed deportations. It can be seen that in each of those years, the figures relating to confirmed deportations were less than half the number of those signed. That is the reality that the Minister has attempted to obscure by focusing on a small number of high-profile deportation flights. By removing profiteering, resourcing the system and enforcing decisions, we could actually have a fair system that works for the people of this country and for those fleeing war and persecution. Binding us to EU rules that do not account for our unique challenges is not the answer.

Any discussion on the international protection system must address the massive, ongoing profiteering from the provision of IPAS accommodation that is often inappropriate. The cost of IPAS accommodation exceeded €1 billion last year. Hundreds of millions more will be spent

on accommodation for Ukrainians. A small number of private operators have made millions from the Government's dysfunctional approach. There is no transparency, including around what qualifies many of these operators to provide services. The accommodation and the services provided at a very high cost have, it must be said, also often been low quality. There have been significant problems in relation to issues such as fire safety. The average rate that is being paid per bed per day for IPAS accommodation rose by 68% between 2022 and 2024. That resulted in massive profits for providers of accommodation.

In one case, we famously saw a company that was previously operating as a café go from making €2,000 in profits annually to paying its directors €4.5 million in a single year. The Comptroller and Auditor General was scathing in his review of IPAS contracts. His report found there was a lack of due diligence, gaps in payment controls and no contracts for properties where substantial payments were being made. There were even issues with a lack of insurance and fire certificates. The report found that the detail in some invoices lacked clarity, that it was not possible to reconcile claimed capacity in some cases as contracts were not available, and that the prepayment checklist used by IPAS did not include a check to verify the correct capacity or occupancy. The review found that for 35% of the samples examined, the invoiced rate was not clear and could not be verified because signed contracts were not available. Those issues emerged on foot of just a small sample of the contracts examined by the Comptroller and Auditor General. What is happening is clear.

I have said time and again that I do not know why the Minister refuses to act. There has to be a thorough review of every IPAS contract because there are, without question, other scandals that have yet to be divulged to Irish taxpayers who are picking up the tab. It is disgraceful that Ministers just shrug off any calls for accountability and transparency in respect of this matter. In the pre-legislative scrutiny report on general scheme of the International Protection Bill, there was a recognition of the profiteering that has taken place to date and a recommendation that the amount paid per day per bed for accommodation in the international protection system be capped. Given what has been exposed to date in regard to contracts relating to IPAS accommodation, the committee also recommended that due diligence, vetting and beneficial ownership takes be required in respect of any company or organisation that seeks to secure a contract for the provision of accommodation or services for those in the international protection system.

If we are to address the problems with the international protection system, then we need to also address the matter of where IPAS accommodation is located. To date, the location of IPAS accommodation has been decided on one criterion alone, namely the availability of a building or, in other words, by the private interests of property owners. It is an approach that has caused division and created anger and frustration in communities who have felt they are entirely disconnected from decisions that affect their local area. Sinn Féin has been clear that new IPAS centres should only be placed in areas where the resources are in place to accommodate them. That means not in areas where people are already struggling in terms of a lack of resources. We have said that the Pobal HP deprivation index should be used to identify communities that should absolutely not be considered for emergency accommodation.

The process of identifying suitable locations should commence with a pre-assessment of the needs of communities. That is the only way to ensure that the needs of both the communities and IPAS residents can be met. The availability of services, including GPs and school places,

proximity to transport and existing levels of disadvantage in areas should govern the selection of locations for accommodations, not simply the fact that a private operator has a building they are willing to allow to be used in this process. Again, the planning exemption for IPAS and Ukrainian accommodation should end now. These were emergency measures that are now being abused as a mechanism to avoid any input from local communities. We have increasingly seen the ludicrous situation across the State where planning exemptions are being sought by property owners for a buildings the Department insists it is not even considering for this purpose. That becomes fertile ground for those with negative agendas to create confusion and division within communities.

As I mentioned, there are serious questions regarding the Government's ability to meet the timeframes for processing set out in this legislation, given the extensive delays that have characterised the international protection system to date. The Government's implementation plan for the EU migration and asylum pact projects staffing numbers in the event of either 15,000 applicants being in the system or in the event of there being 18,000 in July. The staffing complement required to process 15,000 applicants is 1,549. The staffing complement to process 18,000 applicants is 1,769. Last year, between the International Protection Office, the international protection and integration division of the Department and the International Protection Appeals Tribunal, there were 926 staff and 107 vacancies. That is a vacancy rate of over 10%. The total number is nowhere near the projected requirements.

There are also very serious concerns that neither Tusla nor the civil legal aid system will be able to cope with the demands they will face under this legislation. The Legal Aid Board has indicated that it may struggle to meet the demand for its services within the tighter timeframes provided for under the Bill. Of course, there are very good reasons to have very serious concerns about the capacity of Tusla to fulfil the responsibilities ascribed to it under this Bill when we consider the number of unaccompanied migrant children who have gone missing from State care in recent years and the myriad other debacles Tusla has been involved in. It is easy to understand the questions people will ask about the logic of adding to its role. There is understandable apprehension about the ability of the State to keep vulnerable children safe and particularly given the role of traffickers and people smugglers in bringing minors into the State and their involvement in their subsequent disappearance from State care. Given that this legislation contains provisions in respect of vulnerability checks, I want to highlight again the continued links the Department has with a company that was previously found to have supplied fake Garda vetting documents in the context of vulnerability assessments.

It is questionable how the timeframe set out in the EU pact will be met while maintaining a fair and robust system, particularly in view of the current processing timelines, increasing the risk the State will face infringement proceedings and large fines.

It is crucial that those granted international protection are integrated into Irish society, that they are facilitated in participating in their local communities in order that they can get to know their neighbours and wider community and that they be given the opportunities to learn about Irish culture, language, history and values and share their own with us. In other countries where this has not been done, we can see how it has undermined social cohesion and created divisions and ghettoisation.

The Minister has indicated that he will bring forward amendments to delay family reunification by three years. These proposals are a distraction from the real problems with the

system, including delays and the failure to enforce deportations. The latter have had a much more significant impact in terms of numbers. Last year, 669 applications for family reunification were granted, including in respect of 452 children and 153 spouses. That compares with the more than 2,500 deportation orders that were not enforced last year. Family reunification plays a critical role in the successful integration of refugees. There need to be mechanisms around self-sufficiency and we need a robust system that is enforced, but we do not need to either be performative or undermine integration, which is key to social cohesion. Family reunification policies need to be sustainable but also fair, particularly in the reunification of parents and their children.

The Minister mentioned a number of times that there will be lots of opportunities for the Opposition to bring forward amendments. I think he said he would welcome amendments from the Opposition. Will he give a commitment that when the Opposition goes to the effort of preparing amendments, he will show us the courtesy of allowing them to be properly considered and scrutinised? Will he also give a commitment that the select committee will have an opportunity to scrutinise, debate and tease out the amendments he brings forward. The only way we can do that is if we actually deal with Committee Stage at the select committee. Will the Minister to give a commitment that he will not try to guillotine this Bill or bring it in here as a mechanism to try to rush it through? There are things more important than EU pacts. These include the right of the Irish people to know that their legislators looked through every line of what the Minister described as the most significant piece of migration legislation to come before these Houses in many years.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We are talking in a bit of a vacuum here because any amendments the Minister has spoken about bringing forward, either in the media or here, have not actually been brought forward. As the previous speaker indicated, we should discuss any amendments in full on Committee Stage. I also ask that the Minister not guillotine the Bill. As he stated, it is such an important and comprehensive Bill. On foot of that, it should not be guillotined in any shape or form.

There are a lot of concerns about the Bill because so many areas require scrutiny. The detention of unaccompanied children is a major issue. The creation of a disproportionate and overarching power for the Minister is something I will speak about in a moment. The information that will be provided to an applicant as part of this process and what it is in totality does not seem clear. There are issues around age assessments. Safeguarding is a huge area. There is also the issue of vulnerability assessment in the context of the fact that there will only be preliminary analysis done rather than an ongoing process, particularly as some things not be caught or discovered in the initial process. There are issues in relation to the independence of the appeals body. The Government is very unclear about the scope of the chief inspectorate and whether oral appeals will be allowed. There are also issues with the powers the Minister will be granted.

There seems to be a pattern within the Department regarding a lot of the legislation and work it is bringing through. Much of this is not fully finished. I appreciate that there are amendments and legislation that need to be brought in, but there is so much that is not fundamentally not tied down in this Bill. We just do not know whether the provisions relating to many areas are going to be legally sound. I do not know if the Minister knows they will be legally sound. I am genuine in saying that. I admit that this is a very tricky area, but there is a

time conditionality involved. While we are trying to work with the Minister, it is genuinely difficult to do so when we are shooting in the dark, which is what we are doing here.

There are a number of omissions when it comes to the Bill. Legal counselling is not mentioned or defined. My colleague Deputy Ahern will be speaking on this matter. He and I are sharing time.

The Minister has made serious statements on the issue of family unification and the three-year rule. We know this is coming but we do not know what will be involved. We need more information on that. The conditions around receptions and how they will be managed need to be dealt with. Issues relating to a designated authority are not included. Information on age assessments, and how they will be handled and regulated, and how the representative role will be regulated has not been published.

The Bill is very broad when it comes to the powers being given to the Minister. These powers are fairly overarching. The Bill deals with the way the Minister can decide as to what information can be given to an applicant, if other organisations or NGOs can give out information, if applicants can appeal directly, if the chief inspector can be removed in the interests of the Government and the funding of the inspectorate. When we spoke at the committee, the issue relating to the chief inspector gave rise to a range of issues regarding the independence of the inspectorate from the Government.

The Bill does not define what is meant by legal counselling. We had a lot of discussion on this at the committee and about who will provide it. Huge numbers of members of the legal profession are discussing this matter. It is something which really needs to be nailed down. Fewer than five months remain before the pact is due to be implemented. What is proposed creates serious uncertainty about applicants' entitlements to legal advice at all stages of the process. I am very concerned that this is an area in respect of which there will be a huge level of kick-back and a large number of test cases. Dare I say, many people in the Minister's former profession will be licking their lips and seeing dollar signs.

I might as well say it to the Minister inside here - at least I have the guts to say it to him - they are all licking their lips asking if this will be a big payday and if the Minister is the Manchurian candidate for the legal professional in the Department of justice. I say that as a joke but there is serious concern as to whether he will get this through and it will be sound, and that there will not be a whole range of test cases where so much will be tied up. That will be a big problem for the Minister and he needs to get it right. At this point the jury is out on it.

There is a lack of clarity on this and a big question over whether counselling can be provided by the legal profession under existing professional and ethical rules, and whether IP applicants will be denied customised individual advice as they are entitled to rather than just generic stuff. It is a fairly hefty concern. I am sure the Minister has read recommendations 82 to 85 from our pre-legislative scrutiny. If I were him, I would take some advice regarding the explicit provision on guaranteed access to free legal assistance. The issue in relation to legal counselling tied us up in knots. We really need to see where the Minister plans on going on that.

Regarding gaps in age assessment, the Bill lacks clarity on who will do this work and what experience and qualifications they will have. This really needs to be dealt with. There is no

detail on what constitutes a suitable medical means of assessing age. When it comes to the issue of children, this is absolutely essential. This is a serious gap in age assessment safeguards.

There are also concerns over the independent monitoring mechanism, which is obviously essential for the protection of the rights of everyone in the system. Serious concerns remain about the effectiveness of the independent monitoring system as set out in the EU's fundamental rights agency. The chief inspector's powers appear mostly regulatory rather than investigative with unclear authority to initiate investigations of many potential breaches, whatever they may be, including assault, sexual assault and various other breaches.

In relation to a number of other areas, including the detention and restriction of movement, proper procedures must apply with procedural safeguards. We cannot have a situation where it is *de facto* detention. There must absolutely be a prohibition on the detention of children, which is essential. The detention of adults should only be a measure of last resort. The word "proportionate" needs to come into play here. It is not very clear how that will be achieved.

Moving on to the issue of family reunification, to be straight about it, not alone do we feel this is unfair and ill judged, it is downright cruel because it is not three years. Effectively, when everything is added up, it is five years. It is disproportionate and unfair, particularly when it comes to genuine cases. Of all the countries that should know what we are dealing with here, we should know what we are talking about. It is not appropriate that the Minister is pursuing this without the definition of how he is going to do it. As far as the Labour Party is concerned, instigating a three-year waiting period is unacceptable and cruel. It creates a different message from what we believe this country should be putting out in relation to how we deal sensitively with these issues.

When we discussed this topic previously, I said that the issue of where international applicants are refused asylum in other EU countries needs to be looked at as regards how that can be utilised in this country. The Minister has not addressed that, but I expect he will do so in the future because I believe it is a genuine issue and something that could be quite helpful in reality.

Furthermore, how we use language in this area is very important. I am very concerned that the language used, not alone by those in government, in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and, dare I say it, some Independents, but also by Sinn Féin at times, where they are all trying to ride both horses, is completely hypocritical, unacceptable and at times actually publicly dangerous. It needs to stop. As far as I am concerned, the Minister can do better.

I believe in a rules-based system. I also believe that if people fail those rules, they cannot stay in this country. I have no issue with deportation or any of that. However, I do have an issue with balance. In tandem with what the Minister is doing and in tandem with the obvious need to introduce a Bill of some scale like this, there also needs to be a public awareness campaign on the positivity of necessary inward migration. That does not happen. What happens is that the Minister for justice, the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach, Sinn Féin Members, certain Independent Members who are in government and others stand up and say, "Oh yeah, we have workers and they should be respected." They then spend the rest of the time going on about the issues, which at times are frightening and very upsetting for many people who come into this country. For the first time in my career, I have had migrants who are working in this country come to my office saying they are afraid.

I recently heard the story of a migrant, not in my constituency, who is working in care. When they were out one day, they got horrendous abuse from particular individuals in the area where they live. Later on, around Christmas time, while they were working through their work in care looking after elderly people, amazingly, one of the people who gave the abuse was in visiting a member of their family. Who was looking after the member of that family? It was the same person they gave the abuse to.

Let us call a spade a spade here. We need all these workers and we need more because, without them, this country would stop. We need them in care, tourism, hospitality, agriculture and, dare I say it, in very high-end jobs as well. We are failing to send that message. We need proportionality as regards what we are doing in this country when it comes to migration. I say this clearly to the Minister and everybody else in government and in Sinn Féin: if they do not do it, we will do it. Somebody has to present a positive message on inward migration. Those in government are responsible but they are bloody well not doing it. In fact, at times they are scaring people. To mix up the asylum process with inward migration is a disgrace. The numbers are tiny by comparison with what we need to keep our country progressing economically and socially.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The Deputy is making the conflation, not us.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Excuse me, I am not making any conflation. I am actually talking about lived experience. Is the Deputy calling me a liar?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: He should represent the issue and not-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am representing the issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Crowe should direct his remarks through the Chair and allow Deputy Kelly to speak.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I did not start this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does the Deputy want to share his time?

Deputy Alan Kelly: We will get through the meat of the Bill on Committee Stage because so much is missing. The facts are that the Government is deliberately putting out spurious messages on migration and what is going on here is a bloody disgrace. The people who have come into this country from other countries and who work here are welcome.

That is the message the Government should be sending out, rather than leaving us to do it.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: We do it every day.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Tell your colleagues.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Shameful.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Over the course of this Government's time in office, we have seen a disappointing pattern of irresponsible grandstanding by Ministers trying to play tough on immigration. This Bill is the latest example. It goes further than is required under the EU migration pact in restricting the rights of migrants and leaves gaping holes when it comes to protecting those rights. There were real issues with the pact, which were raised in debates at the time, but now the Government wants to go further still in constraining migrant rights.

I want to speak to a couple of specific issues that show this Bill for what it is. First is the Bill's use of the term "legal counselling". Rather than providing individuals with good old-fashioned, tried and tested legal advice from a solicitor during the first stage of an international protection process, the Government is saying it will provide something called "legal counselling". I have never heard this phrase, despite practising as a lawyer for many years. This is a term introduced by the EU pact but it remains undefined to date. We do not know what it will involve or who will provide it. It seems to be little more than a one-way information-giving process in which an applicant would have no ability to interrogate the information given to them against their own personal circumstances, or to ask questions and receive advice and guidance on it. As the Law Society has pointed out, in the absence of clarity as to what it is, we need to ask whether a "legal counselling" regime can be fully set up and resourced by June of this year.

The EU pact does not require this. The Government could and should have used the term "legal advice" but has actively chosen not to. That creates real uncertainty as to the rights of migrants. It risks undermining access to effective legal assistance, as required under the pact. Solicitors cannot be expected to provide general legal counselling while the State withholds individualised, tailored legal advice from people who would otherwise be their clients. It is easy to imagine scenarios where the absence of proper legal advice leads to errors in applications and sees genuine asylum seekers, fleeing war or persecution, fail in their applications or be denied specialist care. That would be an abject failure of the Government to see through our obligations.

Previously, asylum applicants were only entitled to be represented at the second stage of the asylum process, before the Refugee Appeals Tribunal. This resulted in 90% of asylum seekers being rejected at first instance. I was proud to be part of a programme providing early legal advice for asylum seekers, in conjunction with the Irish Refugee Council and my former law firm, A&L Goodbody, which resulted in far higher success rates for applicants. We know how important full legal advice is to ensuring individuals can vindicate their rights. The Minister knows this as well as anyone else. The dilution of this right to advice is a retrograde step and can only be seen as a further cynical attempt to limit the numbers of successful asylum applications.

Another major issue with this Bill is the way in which it significantly increases the criminalisation of IP applicants. It creates a range of new offences for applicants who are lawfully resident in the State while exercising their right to seek asylum. That is the wrong direction of travel. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, has pointed, in particular, to the criminalisation of the use of false or even substitute documents. When we are talking about people fleeing war or persecution, we are talking about people who, by definition, will often not hold official documents from their country of origin. Members can see how easy it would be for documents to be seized by a trafficker or a rogue government, or

just lost in the chaos of fleeing a war zone. If we criminalise this behaviour, as this Bill does, we effectively criminalise the very route to seeking asylum.

The Bill will introduce a new chief inspector of asylum border procedures, as required by the pact. The Government claims this will be an independent role but what is set out here falls far short of that, as I am sure others will go into.

A faster, more efficient asylum process is a worthy aim. A Bill that did just that would be welcome but this is a Bill that seems more interested in limiting the rights of vulnerable asylum seekers than anything else.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I will be supporting the Bill. In response to previous comments, I suggest we should not conflate inward migration with international protection. I agree with Deputy Kelly that racism should have no place in this debate, this House or public commentary.

The right to claim asylum is at the core of international law and Irish values. That said, we owe the public, and applicants themselves, a system that is clear, rules-based and workable. When a process drags on for months or years, nobody wins. Genuine applicants are left in limbo, communities lose confidence and the State ends up paying far more than it should. That is why the central test for this Bill is simple: does it make our system faster, fairer and more effective while protecting rights? In broad terms, I believe it does.

The Bill is, in effect, a reset of our international protection system. It streamlines decisions and the returns process. It introduces a new border procedure, with defined and shorter time limits for decisions, appeals and return orders in appropriate cases. It reforms the appeals architecture through a new second-instance body, the tribunal for asylum and returns appeals, and it reduces reliance on oral hearings when a full and fair examination can be achieved on papers. Importantly, it also establishes a chief inspector of asylum border procedures as an independent rights monitor. I particularly welcome the Minister's remarks on Chapter 3 of Part 3 of the Bill on age determination. These are practical reforms and they go to the heart of what the public expects and what applicants deserve, namely, timely decisions, clearer outcomes and a system that cannot be abused.

We also need to be honest about the wider context. Ireland cannot go it alone on migration and asylum. The pressures are European and the response has to be a pan-European one, acting together. This Bill is closely linked to Ireland implementing the EU migration and asylum pact measures we have opted in to. We have a hard deadline to have the new system in place by 12 June 2026. A common approach matters because it reduces the incentive for secondary movement across member states and it supports consistent decision-making. It also matters because Ireland's position is uniquely complicated by the common travel area.

The open arrangements that benefit millions for work, family and daily life were never designed to be a workaround for asylum. The reality creates added obligations for us, in that we must work closely with EU partners and engage seriously with the United Kingdom so that policy changes on one side do not simply displace pressures onto the other. I note the UK is seeking to access elements of the pact. That, in itself, is proof of its necessity.

I welcome the clearer emphasis and communications from the Minister on his appointment. The shift is towards a rules-based system that is efficient, credible and aligned with how many other EU member states operate.

I also welcome the Minister's engagement at European level. We need this treated as an EU issue, not a collection of countries going it alone. I visited Brussels last year to engage with Commissioner Michael McGrath and his officials, underscoring why co-ordination, convergence and enforcement across the EU matter. The Commissioner's portfolio includes democracy, justice and the rule of law, which are directly relevant to how Europe maintains a system that is both firm and rights compliant.

This Bill will not solve every challenge overnight but it is a serious step in the right direction. It creates a faster system which is fairer. It protects those who genuinely need refuge, reduces unnecessary costs, restores confidence and ensures Ireland plays its part, in partnership with Europe and in close co-operation with the common travel area.

I welcome the Bill, and I look forward to engaging constructively as it progresses through this House.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister and am glad to have the opportunity to participate in the debate. This is a very serious and emotive issue. It matters to an awful lot of people. Sometimes there are debates when the political charges across the House add value but I was disappointed by Deputy Alan Kelly a short while ago. I was quite surprised by his character. It is not something I would expect from him. As my colleague said, he was conflating. Dropping in buzzwords and zingers looks good on the social media video but misrepresents what many of us here want to see, which is a supportive policy for migration that is there to protect people in international protection but that also has a robust set of rules which ensure the policy has integrity.

To misrepresent that is rather shameful. When he is putting up his social media videos tonight, some of us might correct the record underneath with a comment or two.

Anyway, I will get to the point. Seventy years ago, the Hungarian Revolution began. With it, a couple of buses arrived in my home village of Meelick. There was an Army encampment in Knockalisheen right on the border of counties Clare and Limerick. Those old wooden huts that the Army were barracked in during the emergency years of the Second World War became accommodation for people fleeing the Hungarian Revolution. Those little huts, which were only taken down 20 or 30 years ago, became the first refugee centre at that point. It is Ireland's longest continuously used refugee centre and we are so proud of it. Despite what Deputy Kelly might want to say on TikTok or wherever else tonight, the people who grew up there went to school with me. They were at my wedding. I played with them as a kid. They were friends and they still are. I went into the courtroom for some of them when they were being deported back to their home countries when leave to remain applications had failed. I went into the courtroom with a few people because I believed heart and soul in their story, having intimately known it. When I became a teacher in 2006, my first job when I graduated was teaching children from that refugee centre. Therefore, we are incredibly proud of that centre and our community and what it has done over the years. It is not all perfect. It is not rose-tinted. Many people have spent a decade or 12 years there waiting for their application to be cleared. It is

what it is and we are proud of that. Yet, when reforms happen, those reforms need to benefit the likes of the Knockalisheen Accommodation Centre.

The next place I wish to speak about is the town of Lisdoonvarna. These are local examples that are very relevant in the national context. When the Ukrainian war broke out and when international protection levels hit their peak in terms of inward migration to Ireland, Lisdoonvarna was held up as the poster town in Ireland. The population increased fourfold across a six-month period. The population was around 300 people at the beginning of the war in Ukraine and, between that and inward migration, it increased fourfold. Straight away, we had ambassadors down from different countries. We had Ministers and State agency after State agency. There were boots on the ground everywhere. It was covered on the national news every night how incredibly positive this was. Local communities organised collections. One weekend, there was a collection of bicycles for the young children there. Another weekend, it was school uniforms. Every kind of fabulous integration thing happened. Then, suddenly, all of those supports evaporated. The agencies disappeared because the local crisis had become a national crisis. We did not see any of the agencies for ages. Lisdoonvarna went from being the poster child of what international protection should look like in Ireland's best practice model to being an absolute mess that was unsupported and a community struggling. The committees that were set up to welcome started lobbying politicians telling them they needed to come back and fix things. They told them the local classes were being taught in the cloakroom of the school and there were no doctors and no services. They told them no bus services were available. The response at the time was to give people hi-vis jackets and let them walk five or six miles over the road to the local school. It was crazy stuff.

In time, when this legislation passes, there needs to be some case studies done around the country of where this was not very well handled. The Minister's predecessor did not handle some of the communications of this so well either. I welcome the Minister's forthright approach in the Ministry. I think it has been welcomed by the public and by the media. The commentary is good. This Department needs to be led with confidence. Our policies need to be explained with confidence and it explained that they are very fair but are also robust. It needs to be explained that if people are coming to Ireland fleeing war, persecution, famine or turmoil in their home country, this is a very welcoming and inclusive country. Our arms will wrap around them; we will support them. However, if people are coming in under some kind of a charade or false pretences, we have an equally robust system that will examine cases fairly and, if proven to be invalid, people will be deported. That is fair and is a principle we need to defend. This is a liberal democracy but every country has a policy that needs to be robust and fair so that people here in Ireland or people who might be considering coming to Ireland know the rule book of this country and know it is implemented fairly.

I will speak about some of the reasons leave to remain applications are refused. It is very easy to say, "I am from Gaza. There is a war. My country has been bombed to pieces." That is very measurable because the whole world knows what is going on there. However, in my constituency, bearing in mind we have a major refugee centre in my community, I have encountered threats from the home country. Very often, it is sub-Saharan countries in which, if people return home, their daughters will have their genitalia mutilated. I have encountered threats to people of being killed, honour killings for being gay, homophobic attacks or honour killings if there have been acts of adultery. All of these are really hard to measure. They are really hard for the individual to convey when there is a hearing about their application and very

often these people are sent home. I cannot be judge or jury. I often meet people at clinics or my constituency office but I fear some of them are going back to the bear pit and to very hazardous situations. The Minister's team has to be robust and fair but there are certain issues in some countries that are very hard to measure and to verify. There needs to be a consideration of that as well.

During the heat of all of this, people were out banging drums, there were protests and fires were being lit. Thankfully, that has all cooled. It had to because there was a very far-right rhetoric just grasping the nettles here and misrepresenting what Ireland was all about. There is one key point regarding this idea of male-only accommodation. From a policy point of view, we should just get rid of it. I have never seen any group in society segregated according to gender. There are no male-only housing estates. I have yet to see one. There is no female-only housing estate. There is?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Schools.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Schools.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Schools. Okay, fair point. The Deputies might speak through the Chair next time. The point I am making on living arrangements is that there is no one living in gendered segregation. It is not right for the men living there and it is not right for their spouses, girlfriends or family members. It is not right at all and it needs to be part of policy going forward that we integrate.

I spoke in a debate earlier relating to the Minister's Department and the suspension of those gardaí in Limerick. That is concluded. Going forward, will the Minister please appoint the most senior leadership roles in An Garda Síochána from within the organisation of An Garda Síochána? We do not need to be looking north of the Border to find the next leader and the next Commissioner. We need people who understand the spirit of policing by consent and the spirit of discretion that is so central to Garda policing. Those are just my own thoughts but I hope it might be factored into the next appointment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is for another day. I call Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: A little under two years ago, when the EU migration pact was being debated, it was an almost cavalier attitude by the Minister at the time. I understand that migration and the whole issue around international protection is complex. It was particularly challenging at the time when there was a significant increase. However, it seemed to be the attitude of the then Minister, in response to questions from me, not to consider at the time whether it might be wise for Ireland, in our very particular circumstances, not to opt into absolutely each and every element of it. As time goes on, and looking at the reflections of the justice committee, more and more people are coming to the conclusion that perhaps it was not wise for Ireland to sign up to each and every element of it. Ireland had the option to opt out purely because of our circumstances. Our circumstances are very particular. We have, whether we like it or not - I certainly do not - a land border with another jurisdiction, a common travel area with a jurisdiction that is not in the EU, and we require the flexibility to respond to situations that arise because of that. It was foolish not to adjust and account for that. This is

what the legislation is fundamentally about. There are elements of it that we could benefit from but I do not agree we needed to sign up to each and every element of it. The system such as it is certainly needs change. It is failing in terms of value for money. It is failing migrants, communities and the whole of society. Certainly, it needs change and significant investment as well as legislative change.

The final thing I will say is in on respect. That needs to be true right across the system. It needs to be true in terms of communities. Too often, their interests were discarded. Going forward, it also needs to be true in terms of the asylum seekers and migrants themselves. Decisions need to be made quickly but everyone needs to be treated with respect and get decent conditions, and there should be oversight of that too.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This particular pact has put forward a set of recommendations, some of which are positive but many of which are not in line with what we need to be doing in this country. That is widely recognised. We have a situation where the committee has looked at this and it has recognised that there are many aspects of it that do not recognise the unique situation we have where we have a border with a non-EU state which is an open border, as it absolutely needs to be. Yet, this pact does not give any recognition to that or pay any regard to it. There are serious issues with it which need to be dealt with. Doing it all as a package is this notion of one size fits all for all countries in Europe. Ireland is an example of a country where one size does not fit all.

Even at this late stage, that is why the Minister needs to reconsider signing up to all aspects of this pact. The Government needs to look at this again and come back to what most logical people would recognise the situations to be. We have a particular problem in some parts of the country where people have protested. In many parts of the country, including in my community, migrants, in particular people using IPAS, have settled well and done well. For hundreds of years, Irish people went around the world with their hand out looking for a welcome. In general, they got it, and that has to be recognised.

The riots in Dublin were not organised by migrants. The burning of people out of their homes was not organised by migrants. They were organised by far right elements in this country who also need to be stood up to. That is something the Minister needs to take into account.

Returning to the Bill, we have robust legislation in place which needs to be implemented and is not being implemented. Many people who come here do not get a fair crack of the whip because they feel they are not being dealt with adequately. If they are entitled to stay, they should be able to stay. If they are not entitled to stay, that should be implemented as well. This legislation, which takes a one-size-fits-all approach for all countries in Europe, is not appropriate under these circumstances.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There is a world in which this Bill could have been a turning point. This was potentially an opportunity to build an international protection system that would put dignity, fairness, care and, yes, efficiency at the heart of how we treat people who come to our country seeking protection. We had one such vision. We had the Catherine Day report, which stated we should move away from privatisation, build public, not-for-profit accommodation and build trust. We had a chance to honour that. Instead of seizing the opportunity to deliver

a protection system grounded in compassion and rights, the Minister has produced legislation that goes further and harder than the EU pact ever required. He has done so at the expense of human dignity.

The way in which this Bill has been brought forward adds insult to that injury. For the past year, every time I or anyone else raised the failures of our current protection system, the answer, whether from the Minister for justice or other Ministers, has always been the same. It is that the International Protection Bill is coming and we should wait it because it will fix everything. This Bill has been used as a deflection to say real reforms were on the way and we just had to hold tight so the Minister could get it right. At pre-legislative scrutiny, vital heads of Bill were missing and we were told the full Bill would arrive by the end of 2025. We did not get it until last Thursday, nine days after the Minister's press release indicating he had just published it. However, we got conversations with details of restrictions on refugee family reunification. Those were laid out in detail whereas the rest of the detail in the Bill was not. That was not a tactical omission.

Now, in a rush to transpose it by June, we have a Bill that is still riddled with gaps and key protections are still missing or, at best, vague. It leaves the best interests of the child assessments undefined. It keeps legal counselling deliberately ambiguous. It creates an independent monitoring mechanism the Minister can control. There is no clarity on how medical vulnerability assessments will be carried out or by whom, even though they are mandatory under the pact. On family reunification, the Bill refers vaguely back to the pact. All the while, we have the Minister signalling his intention to restrict it further, despite not seeming to know how many people came through the family reunification process last year.

That is to name but a few of the issues, and I will come back to each of them in more detail. These are not minor oversights. They are the core safeguards of the Bill, which are now being promised through later amendments. Amendments that will reshape major parts of the Bill are being withheld until Committee Stage when they will face minimal scrutiny, if any. The Minister presented those omissions almost as an invitation for us to collaborate but I do not believe that for a second. It just looks like homework that was left undone.

This is one of the most consequential Bills in decades and we are being asked to pass it through our legislative process in pieces and without the transparency and accountability it demands. That is insulting. We are debating a Bill that will reshape how Ireland treats people at their most vulnerable and we are doing it in the shadow of a system so broken that the courts have had to intervene. In 2024, the High Court found that the Government had breached its basic human rights obligations by failing to provide even minimal accommodation to people seeking protection. That decision has since been overturned by the Court of Appeal but the matter is now before the Supreme Court. The question of whether the State breached the fundamental right to dignity is still unresolved at the highest level of our justice system. While that question hangs in the balance, the Minister has brought forward a Bill that doubles down on a system that is already broken and found wanting.

The International Protection Bill is needed to transpose the EU migration asylum pact but let us not rewrite history. The Government made a choice to opt in. The Social Democrats voted against that decision, not because there was not an urgent need for reform in our international protection system but because we had serious concerns about the human rights safeguards, the impact on the common travel area and Ireland rushing into alignment with an

EU system, all while our own system is so deeply broken. Almost two years later, none of those issues have been resolved. The question is whether this Bill builds a system that is lawful, rights compliant and capable of being trusted. On that test, it does not just fall short but fails completely.

To go into the substance of that, in the area of legal counselling one of the most consistent and serious criticism raised during pre-legislative scrutiny concerned access to legal advice and representation. The general scheme repeatedly referred to "legal counselling". The Bill defines "legal assistance" and "legal representation", yet "legal counselling" is left almost entirely undefined. It is referenced once but explained nowhere. That is a choice. Legal counselling is not a concept recognised in Irish law. There is no clarity on who provides it, what standards apply, what qualifications are required or what recourse exists when it fails.

Today, thanks to incredible journalism, Shamim Malekmian at the *Dublin Inquirer* found, through a freedom of information request, that officials were actively considering using chatbots and digital tools to deliver this undefined legal counselling. There is no better example of stripping away the humanity of the process than potentially using chatbots. We are talking about people fleeing persecution, trauma or war arriving to a country they believe will treat them with care and being met, not by a solicitor or interpreter, not even by a trained caseworker, but, potentially, by an AI chatbot. That should alarm us all. The notion that a vulnerable person at the outset of a protection process could be guided - or misguided - by an automated system with no legal training requirements, professional accountability or statutory safeguards feels dystopian rather than protective. In the Minister's response, I would like him to confirm if the potential for the use of artificial intelligence is being left open. Is that why legal counselling remains undefined?

When it comes to detention, we have known since pre-legislative scrutiny on the Bill how significantly it expands the State's detention powers, including in the context of border and return procedures. This Bill confirms what stakeholders have warned for months. It remains vague on where and under what conditions people will be detained and what inspection and oversight their detention will be subject to. Concerns have been raised about people with serious medical needs, the lack of clarity around inspection regimes and the potential use of inappropriate locations. If the State is to deprive people of their liberty, it has a legal obligation to spell out in primary legislation the legal basis, conditions and safeguards. This Bill does not do that. It gives the State more power first and promises clarity later. That is not how deprivation of liberty should ever be legislated for.

What is most disturbing is what this Bill does in relation to children. For the first time in Irish law, it allows a child to be detained because of their migration status. Yes, there has been a slight improvement on the general scheme but only because the time limit is now 12 hours. On the principle, that line has never been crossed before and the Ombudsman for Children has said the detention of a child due to their migration status can never be justified. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is clear that it is always a violation of rights and is never in a child's best interest.

The EU migration pact sets minimum standards but it does not require us to detain children. It also does not stop us from going further to protect them. That was a choice. The Minister chose to cross a line this country has always refused to cross. He chose to remove the prohibition on child detention from our law and replace it with legal permission. At a time

when the world is watching in horror the detention of school children at borders in the United States, our Government is choosing to make that possible here.

The Bill establishes an independent monitoring mechanism and a chief inspector of asylum border procedures. In principle, that is welcome but independence is not achieved by branding. A reading of the Bill confirms serious concerns about the mechanism's independence, scope and effectiveness. The chief inspector is appointed by the Government and can be removed where, in the opinion of Government, that is in the best interest of the State. That standard does not apply to genuinely independent oversight bodies in this country because real oversight requires independence from the Executive, not dependence on it. Worse still, the chief inspector's remit is narrowly confined to designated border facilities.

There is no explicit statutory obligation to investigate deaths or serious harm, there is no power to initiate civil proceedings, and the Minister retains the power to redact reports before they are laid before the House. That is not robust oversight. Only weeks ago, the Inspector of Prisons raised strikingly similar concerns about the erosion of real independence and transparency in our prison system, where inspections are limited, reports are delayed and access is controlled. That is a clear pattern. This Government wants the appearance of accountability without any of the inconvenience that comes with it.

When it comes to children and minors, especially those arriving alone, the Bill remains deeply flawed. We are talking about one of the most vulnerable cohorts in the international protection system yet, as drafted, this Bill makes them even more vulnerable because the safeguards promised in the EU pact for the best interests of the child have not been transposed. There are unresolved concerns about age assessment, compressed timelines and a lack of clarity on who even makes these determinations. There is a real risk that children may be wrongly assessed as adults and routed into accelerated or border procedures. Once that happens, the consequences are immediate and severe. They include loss of child-specific protections, exposures to detention and a real risk of removal before errors can be corrected. At the very least, we should expect that these children are visible, protected and properly recognised in every part of our statutory framework. This Bill does not meet that standard, and no amount of rushed implementation excuses that failure.

This Bill completely reshapes the appeals systems, embedding a presumption against oral hearings and vastly expanding accelerated border procedures. While I do acknowledge changes since the general scheme such that appeals officers may order an oral hearing where necessary, which is a modest improvement on the general scheme, this appears to remain discretionary. This discretion matters. The removal of a guaranteed oral hearing significantly weakens the fairness of the process. For many applicants, especially those with trauma or limited documentation, an oral hearing is their only real chance to explain their case in person, respond to doubts, clarity and misunderstandings, and actually be heard. Without that, the process risks becoming mechanical, impersonal and prone to error. At the same time, appeals are not automatically suspended for all applicants. People may be removed unless they successfully make a separate request to remain. In a system this complex, with weakened access to legal advice, again, that is never a safeguard.

We are also discussing all of these vast sweeping changes in the context of a system bursting at the seams that has been left without adequate staffing and resources for years. How exactly will all these enormous new measures be funded? So many of these assessments are mandatory

under EU law. They need to be resourced adequately to be in any way meaningful. The Bill significantly expands mandatory medical and vulnerability assessments, as required under the EU pact, but it gives very little clarity on how the State will actually deliver those assessments. During the Oireachtas joint committee's pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme, front-line healthcare representatives warned that the current system does not have the capacity to cope with the scale of clients and accelerated timelines envisioned by the new legislation. Safetynet's evidence, grounded in daily clinical practice, showed that within guaranteed access to healthcare professionals, including for vulnerability and medical checks, this Bill risks leaving both physical and mental health needs unaddressed. Drills such as medical legal assessments, which are essential for certain claims, are already beyond existing capacity unless resourced properly. The justice committee's report endorsed these concerns and recommended that screening centres be adequately resourced, with proper access to healthcare, and that health checks should go beyond a one-off examination and should allow for follow-up when necessary. In other words, people tasked with delivering these evaluations said they cannot do what the Bill expects without major investment and planning, yet this Bill offers neither clarity nor commitment on funding, staffing or integration with existing public services. The Government's text is entirely silent on how those crucial health assessments will be delivered in practice.

In the area of family reunification, I will speak about how this Bill has been sold and how the Minister has used family reunification as a distraction. It makes up a tiny fraction of protection applications yet it is being treated like a central problem. There is no evidence of rising numbers. In fact, applications fell by 31% last year but still the Minister has chosen to focus the public debate here, manufacturing a crisis that does not exist at all. Worse still, he has deliberately conflated refugee family reunification, which is a basic right in international and Irish law, with other reunification migration schemes. The Bill does not set out the changes. It simply refers back to the pact and we are told the rest will come by amendment. However, the Minister has already signalled his intention of a three-year wait, financial requirements and more hurdles, delays and suffering for people who have already endured enough. Some 669 people availed of that scheme last year. They were, without question, wives, husbands and children and, in the case of unaccompanied minors, they were a brother, sister or parent. Siblings accounted for 45 people. That is where the Minister has chosen to focus his attention. There are so many aspects of this Bill that are cruel. We will bring forward amendments. The Minister is offering collaboration. We have yet to see if that will come to pass.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: In his opening comments, the Minister said that the Government fundamentally believes in the right to claim asylum, yet, this legislation brings us in exactly the opposite direction as a State. That has been the case since we have seen this Government take office, where we have simply seen an attack on international protection as a concept, and language and rhetoric that demonises people in their most vulnerable moment, despite our history and our own experience as a people. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Minister is jumping on this opportunity.

We did not have to take on all of the modules of the EU migration and asylum pact. We know that. We were an exception, and this Government chose to do it. Not only that, it is choosing to interpret it in such a way that this legislation that will make our system one of the most severe in Europe. It is not surprising to me because, for multiple governments now, we

have seen that they, as governments, have had to be dragged kicking and screaming or pushed by the courts to recognise any rights within the international protection space. We have never, ever got to a point of meeting either our domestic or international obligations, and we certainly have never got to a humane and dignified system that recognises the difficulty people experience when they are in this system. Instead, under the banner of efficiency, speed and fairness, we are seeing a system that is going to dehumanise people, detain them and further take away their basic rights because that is the direction in which we are headed.

The letter and the spirit of this legislation are about curbing the right to claim asylum. Even if the Minister does not believe us in the Opposition, he should believe civil society. There are very well-documented and well-articulated concerns, which include that there are significant gaps remaining in this legislation that undermine the scrutiny within the legislative process. We know that because, for example, there is now nothing remaining on family reunification and that is just not good enough with such an important piece of legislation. The detention of an unaccompanied child will be permitted under this legislation. That is absolutely incredible. This Bill creates overarching and disproportionate power of the Minister across the protection process. The information provision to the applicant is unclear. Many recommendations of the justice committee are not implemented, and key safeguards are still absent. Age assessment provisions are unclear and missing key principles of child age-assessment safeguarding. Vulnerability assessments are only preliminary and not ongoing. Oral appeals are allowed only if deemed necessary. There is a rake of concerns coming through from the experts in this field who deal with international protection on a daily basis. The reality is that we do not have to be like this. We could go in the other direction. We might look at Spain. It is naturalising people who have been there. It is welcoming the concept of international protection and what it does for an ageing and growing population, which is exactly what we should be doing.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I echo my colleagues' concerns in relation to this Bill. I will make some broad points and question the nature of what is being brought forward, the Government's approach, its language around migration, the words that have been used, what it says and what has been done. I do feel, and I know colleagues share this, a deep concern about the direction this Government has taken. There is an element of what feels and looks like performative cruelty, that is, to be seen to be hard on immigration in order to, essentially, capitulate to people who are making some deeply disingenuous and wrong claims about immigration and asylum seekers. We might look at what migration and immigration has done for this country. I was talking to a number of asylum seekers this week who are in direct provision. Does the Minister know what they are doing? They are working in construction. They are going out every day and building the homes we need. The Government, with these policies, could very well deport these people because it says it wants to take this hard line on immigration and asylum seekers.

It is deeply disappointing. Asylum seekers up and down the country are working to provide care for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They are building our homes. Yet, what we are seeing from the Government is their demonisation.

I have spoken to a number of lone-parent mothers who were living in direct provision and who talked about the eviction letters that were going out. The Government is evicting people from direct provision to forms of emergency accommodation that are not even being classed as homelessness. They are being ripped out of the communities where they are building links and integrating. I ask the Minister to stop this demonisation. The Tánaiste said he was

concerned about the level of population growth and that it could damage social cohesion. What is damaging social cohesion is the performative cruelty that is, in essence, trying to take pressure off the Government for its failures and put it onto vulnerable people who have come to this country, who want to contribute and are contributing, and who are part of our communities. We need to take a different direction.

Deputy Barry Ward: This is a subject on which I have been back and forth. I would say I am generally in favour of immigration. It has done this country almost nothing but good. When I think of the Ireland in which I grew up in the 1990s, it was homogenous and, by extension, quite restricted. There were no foreigners to speak of in Ireland, certainly in the early 1990s, and the homogeneity of our society meant we did not have the experience of multiculturalism and all the positive things that come with it.

I say that in relation to immigration because migration had not even come onto the horizon at that stage. Some people talk about migration and immigration as if they are the same thing but it is really important to distinguish between the two. When I talk about immigration, I am referring to people who come here under a work permit system to take up positions, not to avail in any way of supports from the State but 100% to contribute to it. As has been noted in this House on a number of occasions, we need those people. They are keeping our hospitals and restaurants open, staffing our hotels and contributing at every level in their communities. As a country that is in some ways a victim of its own success in that we have full employment, we need people from other countries to come here to do jobs, work with us and contribute to our economy. Of course, they are also paying taxes, spending their income here and contributing at all kinds of economic levels, as well as solving employment problems for employers and companies all over the country. Immigration has been an unqualified success for Ireland. In fact, the problem with immigration is the slowness in granting work permits and in responding to the needs of particular sectors for skilled workers in a specific area. That is another subject and another day's work altogether.

With migration, on the other hand, we are dealing with a couple of issues. First, we have our international obligations. I have always supported what we do as part of the international community to recognise that just as our citizens in the past went to other countries seeking shelter, support and asylum during tough times here, we must play our part in welcoming people from other countries to Ireland, giving them shelter and succour and allowing them to live the lives we would like everybody in the world to be able to live. I also recognise that we cannot accept everybody from elsewhere into this country. There is a balancing act that must be done all the time.

In this regard, one of the issues I have found myself discussing, particularly with Danish colleagues in the context of their Presidency of the European Council, is what the Danish Government has done in regard to migration specifically. Interestingly, Denmark has a social democratic Government and it is probably at variance with many of the social democrats in this Chamber on this issue. When I first heard what the Danish Social Democrats Government was doing, I had my reservations about it. However, I have had a lot of conversations with Social Democrats members of the Folketing who have explained why they have pursued what I would say is a fairly hard-line policy on migration. We often use the term "social cohesion" perhaps a little loosely but they recognised the problem that there was a growing far-right movement within Denmark. There are still problems, of course, which is something every

country is dealing with. Fortunately, Ireland does not have any real mandate for far-right people or people expressing that ideology. The Danish Social Democrats were concerned about that ideology getting a grip and, so, what they did was try to get out ahead of it. That is how they would explain it. They sought to neutralise the arguments being made by far-right politicians to ensure they could not use migration as a tool to get themselves into elected office and into positions of power and influence where they could continue to propagate what is, in essence, a racist ideology.

I understand why they did that and I have been back and forth on the question of whether we should do something similar from the point of view of acknowledging that we, too, have certain people, albeit a minority and without a mandate, expressing those views within our polity, on social media and in other media. However, I also think there is a danger that if we just do their job for them, then there is no point in keeping them out. Therefore, I come back to the point that we must constantly work to balance up these issues.

It remains a topic I grapple with because in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, the experience we have had with migration has been universally positive. Of the IPAS centres within the constituency, the one on Eblana Avenue in Dún Laoghaire town is substandard. It is solely occupied by single men, who have not received the respect or treatment from IPAS that they deserve and who are living in a substandard building. Notwithstanding that, they continue to contribute to the community in Dún Laoghaire. The problems many local people foresaw with their arrival simply have not materialised. In Blackrock, where there are two IPAS centres, albeit right next to each other, the families living there have contributed so much to the community. They are part of the Tidy Towns organisations and have joined local clubs. They are contributing in so many ways, including working in local businesses. A larger centre has opened on Merrion Road in the Minister's constituency, although I would submit it is more directly connected to mine. In terms of residential areas, Booterstown is probably closer to me. Again, at that centre, Merrion House, none of the problems foreseen by some people locally have materialised. Just over 100 people are living there, which is a small number really.

The problems I foresaw when that development came to my attention were problems with education, healthcare and, as raised by others, in terms of what the people living there would do all day. I will come back to that third point momentarily. Schools in the area are delighted to see them. In fact, there has been an unqualified welcome for them from the principals of primary and secondary schools in the area. They add diversity to their classes, bulk up their numbers and make a contribution. The schools are delighted to have them. Regarding healthcare, I have raised this issue a number of times with the Minister's colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I know there is an international protection medical service serving that centre. However, there is a real problem with access to GPs in south Dublin. The residents get medical cards, which is all well and good, but GP practices in Dún Laoghaire will not take medical card patients because they simply do not have the capacity. That is a problem but the dedicated health service solves it to a certain extent.

On the question of what the residents would do all day, it simply is not an issue. We should remember these are people coming from places where they cannot live their lives - war-torn places and places where they are discriminated against because of who they are, whether on the basis of their sexual orientation, ethnicity or whatever it might be. They come here looking to make a new life and to contribute in whatever way they can. Let us welcome them in to do

that. In fact, the issue in this regard is that we do not let them work early enough. They should not have to wait six months before they can work. Let us allow them to contribute now because that is what they want to do. None of them wants to be sitting in an IPAS centre thumb twiddling and trying to find something to occupy the time every day. What a waste of human capital that is at a time when we need them to contribute, which is what they want to do. Let us solve that problem. The Bill does nothing, for example, to address the right of international protection applicants to work here. I hope this is something the Minister will consider changing by way of amendments at a later Stage. It would be easy to make changes to employment legislation under the guise of this Bill to allow people who are here for whatever length of time, and before a determination has been made on their application, to work.

Perhaps the most important action we can take for international protection applicants here is to invest in the International Protection Office to ensure their applications are processed in a timely way. The most unfair thing is when people come here and wait years for a determination and, even worse, then get a determination that goes against them. They have built a life here. They may have met a partner here and started a family and now they are being told they have to leave, when this country might be all their children know. That is unreasonable. I welcome the elements of the Bill that seek to change that and speed up the process. I also welcome the EU migration pact because it equips us with the tools we need to speed up that process. Although it might be controversial in some respects, it is really important, if it is going to deliver for people, that we use it.

In that regard, I do not have a problem with the changes proposed to the time period within which people are allowed to apply for citizenship or naturalisation.

The notion you would come here under a work permit to work in this country as part of an immigration scheme and you have to wait five years to apply, whereas if you come here under international protection you have to wait three, is not right. It is not fair to disadvantage people who have come here under an immigration scheme as opposed to those who have an international protection status, so let us even that out. If it is to be five years I do not really have a problem with that.

I have a problem with the family reunification aspect. It is miserly and unfair. I do not think it is going to achieve very much in terms of changing the environment or in any way dissuading people from coming here. When people leave or flee their home country seeking international protection they are not putting together an Excel spreadsheet of the terms, benefits and opportunities in the countries they might end up in. They go to wherever they can to avoid the persecution they were suffering. I doubt there are people coming here thinking the family reunification benefits in Ireland are fantastic and for that reason they will go there. It does not work that way. As such, I do not really see the need for us to tell those people they are going to have to wait three years. Where before they had to apply within 12 months, now they have to wait over three years. I do not appreciate that, do not think it is necessary and do not think it should be in the Bill. I ask the Minister to consider that on Committee Stage.

I also have a concern about the legal counsellors provision and the provision of legal counsel. "Legal counsellors" is not a term I understand. I understand what it means in plain English, but I do not understand whether it means qualified lawyers in Ireland. One of the criticisms I have of the International Protection Office and the way it administered the legal scheme for people coming here was it did not properly engage barristers or solicitors. The

office aimed at junior members of the profession, especially barristers as they are self-employed and they had the capacity to do this work, and it took advantage of them in no uncertain terms. The office required them to train for free and often for more than a day at a time. If they did not do a report within a certain period they had to retrain despite their being highly qualified individuals. They were taken advantage of by the IPO and it is a shame on the office that it did that. Is this a further step down this road? Is this again what we are doing? We are trying to circumvent the fact we have a coterie of highly qualified, highly capable professional people who can provide a service. Is it the case the State simply does not want to pay for it or wants to avoid paying for it? It should not try to avoid this. In the same way we would provide proper legal representation for people before a court in family matters under legal aid schemes - or for people accused of a crime, for that matter - we should be looking after people who come here to bring international protection applications with proper legal representation. I do not know what legal counsellors are. I do not know if they are lawyers and I do not know if they will be up to the pace on that.

I have heard quite a lot of rhetoric here and do not agree with it all. I suspect I am more sympathetic to some of it than many of my Government colleagues but the reality is that we have obligations and we need to make good on those obligations. We do good things but we also do things that are substandard. Rather than trying to implement things that will not make a difference but will make life harder for international protection applicants, we should be looking at this Bill as an opportunity to streamline a system that delivers for us as a country and, God forgive me, as an economy, but also for the people who are coming here seeking and deserving our protection.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Irish, across the centuries, have been forced to emigrate. We know the pain of having to say goodbye to loved ones at bus stations, airports and ports. In the summer of 1988 and having graduated from third level, I, like thousands of others, boarded a plane at Shannon Airport with a tourist visa and headed to New York city. I worked there for 18 months and returned to Ireland. Unfortunately, due the policies of the Government of the time unemployment was rampant. As I was unable to access employment in Ireland I secured a job in London, where I spent nine years. I was fortunate to be able to come home. I am sure there are many more Irish people across the world who would love to return but see the housing crisis and ever-rising cost of living as barriers. We must do more to encourage and help them to return.

However, there is no doubt our international processing and enforcement needs reform. The delays in processing applications and appeals do not serve the State or the applicants well. We need a system that is fit for purpose. Those who are entitled to be here should be processed quickly so they can begin their new life and integrate into the local community. Equally, those who enter the country and are deemed to not be entitled to stay must be processed quickly.

The Bill is designed to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact in its totality but this is not in our interest. It goes against the recommendations of the Oireachtas justice committee and hands over power on migration to the European Union, thereby ignoring the unique challenges we face in this State, including the Border and the common travel area with Britain, which is a non-EU entity. While we have the right to opt in to and out of legislation governing the areas of freedom, security and justice on a case-by-case basis the Government is instead opting to plough straight into the adoption of all aspects of the pact. This erosion of our

sovereignty does not serve the people of Ireland. The implementation of this Bill will hinder our ability as a State to make decisions on the issue of migration. The people should decide ourselves how to do this, not the EU.

Deputy Mark Ward: Ireland is an independent, sovereign state and should not be beholden to Europe on matters we can resolve ourselves. It has been the attitude of successive governments that we want to be the best person in the class when it comes to the EU. Ireland's position is unique and has its own very particular challenges. We are in the EU but we are not in the Schengen area and we are part of a common travel area with a state that is outside the European Union. That is why this one-size-fits-all approach to migration and asylum is not in our best interest.

There are many problems with the international protection system in this State but most of them are of the Government's making. Decisions are taking way too long, appeals are taking too long, deportations are not being enforced and there is massive profiteering from the provision of inappropriate IPAS accommodation. Fixing these problems does not require us to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact, however. Ireland is a small, neutral country with an independent foreign policy. We should not allow the EU to dictate which conflicts we should take people seeking refuge from. This should be a matter for an Irish government to decide. I am on the justice committee and as I have said numerous times about different legislation I believe this Bill is being rushed to fit in with a timeline set down by the EU and agreed by the Government. It is disappointing the Government did not accept the unanimously agreed cross-party recommendation from the justice committee to reconsider opting out of the majority of the pact. This is very regrettable. There are also serious concerns that neither Tusla nor the civil legal aid system will be able to cope with the demands they will face under this legislation.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I cannot remember the last time a government brought forward a Bill that was so universally condemned by human rights organisations. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has said there are "substantial gaps and ambiguities ... [in the Bill] in areas that directly affect the rights and safety of ... vulnerable applicants such as children and victims of trafficking". It also said that without clear, enforceable safeguards, which do not exist at present, the State's human rights and equality obligations will not be met. The civil society Coalition on the EU Migration Pact is made up of organisations like the Irish Refugee Council, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, LGBT Ireland and the Irish Network Against Racism and it has said, "This legislation will be a stain on Ireland's international reputation, and it undermines the very core of what being Irish means".

Everyone out there should know that in this Bill Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and your friendly, local, right-wing Independent TD are all legislating for the detention of children. Shame on them all. It should not take human rights organisations to tell us detention is never, under any circumstances, in the best interests of innocent children, but the human rights organisations are forced to scream this and still the Government does not care. Reading through the Bill and reading the reaction to it something I could not fully understand at the time makes sense, namely, why the Government shamefully put its name to a statement led by Denmark before Christmas requesting the application of the European Convention on Human Rights to migrants be reviewed. In other words, these human rights are not human rights at all but will be selectively applied rights. The changes demanded here are so far-reaching that it is not really

a review of the application of the convention that is being demanded but the wholesale disapplication of human rights to migrants. The socialist Tony Benn famously pointed out the way a government treats refugees is an indication of how it would treat the rest of us if it thought it could get away with it.

That is precisely what is indicated by this Bill. It is a frontal assault on human rights. In this case, it starts with asylum seekers, including young children, but if we tolerate this, our children will be next.

The Minister is leading the charge in attacking the legal basis of the limited rights and limited legal equality that protect ordinary working class people and oppressed groups in this State, but internationally, he will be aware he is no leader. Internationally, he is following the lead of Donald Trump and the global far right. We have seen with our eyes in the US where this goes. First, the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, came for illegal immigrants. Now, it is executing US citizens in broad daylight on the streets of America. Protesters are especially at risk, criminalised as terrorists and allowed to starve to the point of death in Britain, brutalised and hit with trumped up charges by An Garda Síochána here. It is no coincidence that this appalling Bill goes hand in hand with plans to create additional covert surveillance and interception powers for An Garda Síochána, all in the name of national security, a term the Minister's Department refuses to define, presumably so it can be interpreted as broadly as it likes.

I will go into some of the worst aspects of this Bill in more detail. First, it introduces a new system of border detention to be imposed even on the children of international protection applicants. People Before Profit is fundamentally opposed to this. Migrants are not criminals. Their children are not criminals. It should go without saying that they do not deserve to be treated like criminals simply for exercising their human right and legal right to apply for asylum.

Second, the Bill fundamentally undermines the right to legal representation by providing only for access to so-called legal counselling. What "legal counselling" means, we do not know. It is not defined by the Bill, but we do know for certain that it does not mean access to proper legal representation because the Bill clearly does not provide for that.

Third, it imposes a series of much tighter legal timeframes without providing the resources for them to be met. It is no wonder that the Legal Aid Board is raising the alarm about its ability to cope. This apparent negligence is, of course, deliberate. The Government is on purpose creating a system that will not be fair in order to deport as many international protection applicants as possible, as quickly as possible and to hell with the consequences. The Minister knows what the consequences will be. Even under the previous system, applicants have been deported to their deaths. In 2014, Mohamed Sleyum Ali was deported from Ireland to Tanzania where he was attacked and left to die within hours of arriving. Last June, a Congolese human rights activist disappeared after being forcibly deported and handed over to the authorities at Kinshasa airport by An Garda Síochána. This Bill will lead to more refugees being deported and then tortured, disappeared and killed. The Bill even allows for this to happen while appeals are still under way.

Fourth, all provisions on family reunification have been removed from the Bill. The Minister may say they have not been finalised yet, but that is completely unacceptable. They

are some of the most important protections and must be included in primary legislation so they can be scrutinised by the Oireachtas and vindicated by the courts. Family reunification is too important to be left to ministerial regulations or departmental policy. It is a question of fundamental human rights. This underlines the point that the rights of children are being trampled on and ignored by the Government. It does it to children with additional needs, teenagers with mental health problems, children exploited by big tech and used for child sex abuse imagery, and vulnerable children who fall through the cracks. It is doing it again in this Bill. It should not be allowed to get away with it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am the first to say that reform of our international protection system is necessary, not simply because of the changes at EU level, but because there is international agreement and universal agreement that we need a system that is fit for purpose. I say that because I saw first hand the consequences of years of compounded bad policy decisions, along with a failure to recognise the nature of modern asylum and plan for a system that responds to the reality of asylum today.

I want to make a genuine effort to be fair because managing this is one of the hardest tasks in politics today. The asylum and migration pact, though imperfect, is important in that it ensures the whole EU works together on these issues. That is what I argued for in government and what I continue to believe today. Going it alone, as the UK did, solves no problems; it only makes things worse. However, how this reform is implemented and what wider reforms are being brought forward at the same time is where we need to be extremely careful.

We have the benefit in Ireland of being able to learn from the experiences of other jurisdictions, such as the UK, about what is effective and fair, but also what does not work. Speaking objectively, some elements of the Bill are needed. The Government is attempting with this Bill to address the two decades of policy failure that led to an international protection system that left people waiting for a decision about their status for years. It was a system that buckled when Ireland started to experience the same number of people seeking international protection as other European countries, compounded by the war in Ukraine at the same time. It was a nightmare confluence of factors for which our State was utterly unprepared.

Therefore, we arrive today at this Bill. I acknowledge the efforts of the Minister's officials in what has been a complex drafting process. However, given the tone of the debates around migration - the heightened context under which this comes before us - it is the duty of Opposition TDs to ask whether we are solely advancing solutions to real world problems or we are bringing forth policies that have more to do with playing to a particular political line than improving our system. If it is the latter, what are the consequences for those this law claims to serve? What are the consequences for our country of focusing on areas where problems do not exist, like with draconian family reunification changes, but failing to focus on the acute problems, such as those in reception and accommodation?

I need to call out the persistent efforts across the Minister's party to muddy the waters about the approach taken to these issues by the last Government. The Taoiseach persistently says that he is glad migration is back in the Department of justice. It is worrying that he was under the illusion that migration was not the responsibility of the Department of Justice in the last Government, particularly considering he was Taoiseach for two and a half years during that period. For the record, in the last Government, responsibility for immigration control, the

International Protection Office, the refugee appeals tribunal, decisions on visas, family reunification policy - responsibility for every one of those areas - remained with the Department of Justice. The one area that was removed to the Department of children was responsibility for accommodation for those seeking international protection. As the Minister will be aware, that has now returned to the Department of justice.

Now we are seeing a series of changes being loudly flagged in the media, including family reunification being tightened for no real reason, a diminution of legal advices that tests the limits of established due process, and fully desk-based reviews with no oral hearings. In today's Bill, some of that is formalised into new structures that look to weigh the balance against someone accessing refuge here. That may be the signal the Government wants to send from today's debate, but it is storing up new problems for the future and it penalises people in desperate situations for no real policy benefit.

We absolutely need reform. We need decisions to be made more effectively and quickly. I acknowledge that, following investment and reform made under the last Government, the International Protection Office is now delivering its decisions on status in a far more timely way. However, we have to separate the policy we need from the policy that plays well in political theatre. That means adopting the pact and making our decisions more efficient, but it also calls for the Government to preserve basic legal rights and to put the same relentless focus on the accommodation side and moving away as quickly as possible from private providers. It calls for a border procedure that does not involve the incarceration of minors and their guardians.

The cold house approach, the kind of hostile environment beloved of the UK Conservative Party, simply does not work. It is not supported by the evidence. Look at the post-Brexit migration numbers in the UK. The Minister knows as well as I the overriding factors determining international protection numbers in Ireland are decisions made at the Cabinet table in Downing Street. Right now, the numbers are lower. The relentless pressure I faced in sourcing accommodation has lessened and openings are consequently fewer. This is all because we have a moderate, co-operative Government in London, but what happens if Reform UK wins the next UK general election? What happens if the Minister faces Richard Tice as home secretary? What would have happened if the Starmer Government had pushed forward its mandatory ID cards policy? Which UK land border, which an entire peace process depends on being completely open, would have been the first to see an impact?

With the lower arrival numbers, the Minister's Government has been given a moment to act decisively. While our international protection decision system must be more efficient and that will reduce numbers overall, if the Government fails to take advantage of the lower arrival numbers to change the accommodation system and to begin that move away from the expensive private providers of international protection accommodation, the Minister and his Government will find themselves hopelessly exposed when some international event outside of their control creates the next wave of migration across Europe.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Without a doubt, the system we have had to date has not been fit for purpose and there have been several problems outlined here on that. The delays in the system have not been fair to anybody, particularly genuine and successful applicants.

We need to be able to deal much more quickly with people who are fleeing war, persecution or famine. We need to be able to help them. If the faster processing times that have been set out happen, I will welcome the 12 weeks and the further 12 weeks on the second appeal. That will benefit successful applicants. Unsuccessful applicants, obviously, will have to leave. The current system is way too slow and there are examples of people waiting years within the system.

The family reunification implications in the Bill are cruel and excessive, particularly in immediate families. We have to recognise that people - mothers and fathers - are separated from their children. I appeal to the Minister to go back on that. I am not too sure where the ask came from to put in that three-year clause. We have to be fair about this. We have people who may be working here in Ireland who are separated from their children and their partners, wives, husbands or whatever else. That is a cruel system. Imagine any of us being exposed to that. That is not fair and I appeal to the Minister to change it and to make it fairer, particularly for immediate families. That is the big point I wish to make here today.

On return and departure, I want a fair, efficient and rules-based system. If something is not rules-based, it does not work. I do not have a problem with the rules being implemented once they are done in a fair and proper manner. The return and departure of unsuccessful applicants is not verified. At the Committee of Public Accounts two years ago, I asked the Secretary General of the Department what happened when somebody fails all the appeals processes, including through the courts. I was told that they send a letter to the last known address. How do you verify what is going to happen there? These people are living in rental accommodation much of the time, so much of it is temporary by nature. They may have moved on. There needs to be verification where somebody fails. Where somebody is successful, we have to make sure we look after them and they are treated properly, but where somebody fails the system and the appeals, we have to be able to verify. We can verify that less than half of those who have failed over the past three years have left the State. That is not a system that is working or is fit for purpose. You cannot look after the genuine cases if you are going to have a system that works like that. The resources are not there to cater for them and they are not being targeted for the help or supports they need.

I do not have a problem with the approach being taken in respect of those convicted of serious crime. If we are being honest, we must accept that the right to stay can be terminated for people who are convicted of serious crime.

We have to be careful when it comes to the issue of unaccompanied minors because children who are coming from dangerous countries, after fleeing a dangerous situation, must be cared for. However, my understanding is that many of these children are being brought to the front door of Tusla and being left there to be looked after. Tusla has to try to arrange bed and breakfast for them and to supervise these arrangements. Let us think about this for a minute and try to work it out. Unless there has been a change recently, this is what is happening and it is not acceptable. We must have a better way of dealing with these cases. If an unaccompanied child or minor arrives from a safe country, the safe country needs to be contacted to say, "We have a child from your country here" and they need to be safely returned into the hands of safe authorities. If they are from a country where there is any risk of war, persecution, famine, harm or exploitation coming to that child, they should not be returned. Let me be clear about that.

On the issue of the IPAS centres, the Day report has been gathering dust for a good few years. We know it recommended that large centres be owned, run and controlled by the State. That has not happened. There is money being made and some people have got very wealthy off the back of this. Being honest, there is rampant profiteering and all sorts of chancers who have made huge money off the back of it and have got very well off in a short period. We need to move to those facilities recommended in the Day report. As far as I know, the only one we have made progress with is the Citywest centre and I welcome that.

We have to recognise that England, Scotland and Wales - three foreign countries - are not in the European Union but we have a common travel area with them. They are outside the EU, so this EU agreement means nothing. As the previous speaker said, if there is an extremely right-wing government in England, which is highly possible in the form of Mr. Farage and his pals, we could wind up in a very difficult situation here. We need to reach binding agreements with Britain as regards what happens. It is accepted that the vast majority come over the artificial border on this island; that is a fact we cannot ignore. It is a difficult one to deal with but it has to be dealt with by the Department of foreign affairs while there is a friendly or reasonable enough government in Britain, even if it may be criticised in other ways. We need to be doing it while the Labour Party Government is in place because, my God, if Reform UK is elected into government there, it will change it.

We need to help people who are successful applicants and those who have a reasonable case to put forward. Those who cannot obviously cannot stay. We need to help people to integrate with education, training and work. We need a fair, efficient and rules-based system. I appeal to the Minister to revisit the family reunification piece. That is a cruel proposal, and it needs to be revised.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the opportunity this evening to discuss the International Protection Bill, which will make Ireland's asylum processing system fairer not only for those who wish to come here but also for those who are already here.

Most of us in the Chamber can agree on the enormous benefits that migration brings to our country. The Ireland of 2026 is a diverse, multiethnic society where people can celebrate and share their cultures free from fear, and long may that last. The Ireland of 2026 has also bucked historic trends. It is no longer a place that people are forced to emigrate from due to conflicts, but a safe harbour for those fleeing global conflicts. We must all realise we have a duty to those who come to our shores seeking protection. At present, our asylum and international protection system is not adequately prepared to carry out this duty effectively. If a person comes to Ireland seeking international protection and is then faced with up to a year and half waiting before their application is decided upon, they are essentially left in an uneasy limbo.

While applicants are languishing in a system that was not built to cope with today's demands, they are forced to build their futures on sand. The delays caused by this cumbersome process, in turn, do a disservice to us all. Last year, just over 13,000 people sought asylum in Ireland. While this was down on the figure for 2024, it was still substantially higher than the numbers arriving a decade ago. In the face of renewed pressures on our asylum-processing system, comprehensive change is required. The State can and must do better. With this Bill, I firmly believe it will. The Bill will bring Ireland in line with the European pact on migration

and asylum, provide a firm, fair and consistent approach across the Continent, and streamline and speed up our current processes.

A common approach, as envisaged in the migration and asylum pact, will reduce the pressure currently on our processing system by curbing the secondary movement of people through the EU.

I also welcome the proposal for a new border procedure with a three-month time limit for decisions and new institutional arrangements for international protection decisions and appeals. Whereas, currently, people applying for international protection can expect to wait an average of 29 months to process through the system, these new procedures will bring that down to nine months, which is a marked improvement. Whether someone is granted asylum or not, this proposed system will let him or her get on with his or her life sooner rather than later.

The State currently faces a cost of over €120,000 per applicant processed in the international protection system as it currently operates. However, the projected future costs based on the proposed streamlining measures will make that cost less than €50,000 per applicant, which is a 60% reduction in the current cost to the State. I am of the firm belief that this money is better spent building tomorrow rather than stalling today.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I acknowledge the work that has gone into this Bill. There are two issues I want to raise in respect of it, both of which the Minister is very familiar with. When Simon Harris was elected Taoiseach in April 2024, one of the first pressing concerns he faced was what was effectively a humanitarian crisis taking place on Mount Street because of the proliferation of international protection applicants who simply did not have anywhere to reside. To cut a long story short, agencies that perhaps were not working together started working together and a system developed involving Dublin City Council, IPAS, the IPO and An Garda Síochána working hand in glove. Over the long term, because of the work of the Minister and his predecessor and the fact that we have moved IPAS back under the umbrella of the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, largely speaking, there is sufficient accommodation for international protection applicants. Yet it is still the case, and the Minister will be familiar with this, that in our own constituency, individuals arrive at Mount Street and well-meaning volunteers provide them with tents while they wait to be provided with accommodation. Very often that accommodation is found within 24 to 48 hours, yet these individuals are settled in tents in public parks in our area, which are not appropriate places for international protection applicants to be. In addition to the humanitarian crisis, this is what ultimately instigated the changes we saw. If legal change is necessary to ensure that a place can be found for an international protection applicant when he or she arrives at Mount Street at whatever hour of the day, let us make that change. If it is an administrative change that is needed, let us make that change too, because there is no longer a reasonable excuse for or logic behind why an international protection applicant should be in a tent in a public park in any area of the city.

The second issue I wish to raise, which is perhaps more substantive and relevant to the Bill, is age assessment. It was reported in *The Sunday Times* that, in submissions on the Bill, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality and the Minister for Health expressed misgivings regarding age assessment. I want to put on the record of the Dáil what was reported in respect of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. What was reported was that the

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality and her Department said that, given the clear legal requirements for the presumption of minority, any delay in the undertaking of the age assessment process greatly increased the serious risk of adults being placed in accommodation with unaccompanied minors. It was further noted that there do not appear to be provisions in the Bill for the undertaking of a preliminary age assessment process that may support the identification of persons falsely claiming to be minors, a number that is rising year on year. The Minister went on to say that the application of a robust and timely age assessment process that prevents the placing of adults with unaccompanied minors in State accommodation requires strong consideration and needs to be clearly addressed within the Bill's provisions.

The Minister for Health's concerns related to her Department. What was reported was that she would welcome clarification of the legal basis on which medical data arising from a preliminary health assessment may be accessible to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration or a tribunal. The Minister went on to reportedly state that she had concerns about the proposed assessments to determine the age of an applicant and that, in particular, a medical examination to determine age is not considered a reliable method of age verification and may represent a waste of health resources.

There is no question that age assessment is a complex issue and there is no silver bullet to get an absolutist outcome. What is abundantly clear, and what was clear to me and every other member of the Committee of Public Accounts, is that Tusla is very concerned about the rising number of unaccompanied minors, its responsibilities relating to them and the timeliness with which age assessment referrals it makes to the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are returned to it. I have a principal concern, which is that there is this legal obligation of assuming the person is a minor. Tusla's responsibilities are exceptionally different from those of the IPO, the statutory function of which is to assess whether the person has a valid entitlement to make an application for international protection in the first instance. The job of Tusla is to look after every child in this State irrespective of nationality. I do not think it is appropriate that, for the past number of years if not longer, unknown to many Members of this Oireachtas, the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has effectively outsourced age assessment to Tusla, notwithstanding the fact that the intention of the Oireachtas in the existing legislation has been that this role and statutory function would remain vested in the Department. The Department is effectively relying on social workers employed by Tusla who carry out these age assessments. Why is this so important? We know it is so important because the risk of adults mingling in child settings is a significant one. Members do not need me to point to recent incidents about why that is so serious. Children being placed in adult-only sections of accommodation is also a concern.

It does not matter where one is from. We have an absolute obligation to look after children in this country. It is also clear that, for whatever reason, the number of unaccompanied minors seeking international protection, and I am sure the statistics are not unique to Ireland, is growing. We have a responsibility to those children. We have a responsibility to ensure that, if somebody is seeking international protection, if he or she is being handed over to Tusla, which has an additional ratio of staff or carers, he or she is actually a child and meets the requirement.

It is impossible for the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to adequately scrutinise the provisions of this Bill in the absence of draft regulations. When this

Bill comes to Committee Stage, the members of the committee should have access to the regulations the Minister intends to propose. I am not a member of this committee but I think it should hear from Tusla regarding its views on the provisions because we really only have one chance to get this right. Issues arising from age assessment challenges for Tusla have been festering for a number of months if not over a year, and this is the chance to get it right, to get it right in this legislation. What is so important is that the Minister and the Department hear from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Department of Health and Tusla to get this Bill right.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fair to say that the EU migration and asylum pact does not take into the account the issues that persist in Ireland, including the fact that we have a shared border and, unfortunately down to British jurisdiction, that means a shared border with a state and entity that is not in the European Union. That was Britain's determination not ours, but, in fairness, it has never done anything that has suited Ireland. We saw the recent near imposition of the Brit-card, an absolute defiance of logic, the peace process and all of the hard work that has been done.

Let us be absolutely clear that we are dealing with this common travel area and it greatly pains me that this particular border exists in Ireland. The reason I am standing here today is that, like my colleagues, I am utterly committed to the removal of this particular border, which as we know is very porous, as do the many who have tried to cut off some of the approximately 300 border crossings. It is an impossibility. While accepting that we can do a lot better, having a fully-fledged and proper immigration system in operation in Ireland would need to remove said border and create a united Ireland. The Minister may be in a position to do more in the near future, but we really need to see a move to Irish unity and the preparations that are necessary from this particular Government.

We are dealing with legislation that was agreed to by both Houses. I am deeply disappointed that the Minister and the Government did not consider the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice's recommendation that we have a determination. We could have looked at an opt-out for the considerable parts of this pact that do not suit the situation that exists in Ireland at the minute. Unfortunately, these are not the circumstances we are in.

Others have spoken about the issues around the civil legal aid system and Tusla. We are talking about systems that are absolutely stretched and under pressure. We really do not see how this is going to be fit for purpose and going to work. The Minister is under pressure timewise because he has to deal with ensuring the 12 June deadline happens. I am not quite sure that all of the ducks are going to be in a row beforehand. The fact is we are talking about the further imposition of fines and infringement proceedings.

There has been huge unease about international protection. That is because communities that were not communicated with very well and have lost hotels and other amenities saw an element of chaos. The Government has spoken about how it is going to remedy this. I accept that over the years it did not have the same number of people who are now applying for international protection. I also accept that people, who are here, apply for international protection and fit the criteria in the sense that they are fleeing persecution and war, should be looked after. They should not be languishing for years. Processing should happen fast, but if you do not have a right to be here, you should be gone.

The Minister has put many proposals forward. We really need to see that proper and adequate procedures are in place. We have all talked about faster processing. I also want to ask him about the 12-week time limit for the first instance and appeal decisions to be completed for certain categories of applicants because he has also spoken previously of six months for the initial application and six months for appeal. We really need to get to grips with this because it is not fit for purpose.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I welcome the comments by Deputy Geoghegan about obligations to children. I am delighted to see that someone in Fine Gael is finally realising that we have obligations to children and, in particular the 6,000 homeless children in Ireland and that our obligation should be to them.

Ireland's international protection system has been exploited for far too long. The problem has never been the compassion of the Irish people but the problem was the permissibility of the Irish State. The fact is we were too obliging and too quiet. We sat down, took what we were given and said nothing as if this was just the way it was and we could not do anything. There were extremely weak controls and by having weak controls, it led to abuse. There was also slow decision-making by this Administration and the previous Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Administration. Weak administration rewards incompetence and the lack of co-operation. The failure to enforce laws and return people undermines the rule of law.

The measures in the Bill are serious measures. I accept that. They are the right measures to introduce but they do not go far enough. These are measures that should have been in place a long time ago. Mandatory screening is basic governance. Biometric identification is non-negotiable and non-co-operation with the State should never be an option.

I previously mentioned in this House people who entered Dublin airport and when asked how they arrived in this country, which is one of the standard questions, replied: "I arrived by hot air balloon; how else do you think I got here?" That is not somebody who is interested in being a good citizen in this country. Anyone who refuses to co-operate should not be facilitated in this country. I refer to the number of people who are entering this country without a passport or any sort of identification. Thousands of those people have entered this country.

When some is running and fleeing for their life and getting on a boat and arriving in Spain, Greece or Italy, which we see a lot of the time, I understand why they may not have passport on them. However, I cannot understand how someone can enter this country after flying from France or Britain because there were no direct flights from their own country without any passport or identification.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Mistakes were made in the past and we were slow to block the door. I do not have an issue with people who want a better life coming into this country; I really do not. It does not matter what nationality they are. If they are coming in to make a better life for themselves and I know who they are, I do not have an issue. They will be part of our workforce and part of rebuilding Ireland. The problem I have is with the people who come into this country that we know nothing about. We have had a lot of people come into this country that we know nothing about. We have had people who come to this country and look for asylum and there were genuine cases. I do not doubt that, but we had a lot of people who were brought in here and trafficked in here for the wrong reasons. I have an issue with that.

We were slow to close the doors to airlines that allowed people from other countries on their aircraft who had paperwork to get on the planes over there but had no paperwork when they landed here. What we should have done at that time was turn them around straight back to the place that sent them here in the first place.

People in this country are very welcoming to anyone. They will do whatever they can to make people feel welcome, but because of different things, people are also scared of the unknown. If someone arrived to the Minister's house tonight and knocked on the door, would he open the door and invite them in if he did not know them? Would he open the door and invite him in if they did not have the paperwork needed to enter his house? No, he would not. Why do we use one law for one thing and another law for the other?

This Bill is very important and it is very important that we get it right. It is very important that we look after the people who are coming in here who need to be looked after. It is also equally important that we have a way of whittling out the ones we do not want here and who are a danger to our society and everyone else's society around them.

This is not just coming from me. It is actually coming from different nationalities who have settled here. These people have integrated and their lives and their children's lives are now here, which I welcome.

Deputy Michael Collins: On 19 June 2024, I spoke in the House against Ireland opting in to the EU migration and asylum pact. I made it clear then that this pact represented a serious erosion of Ireland's ability to control its own immigration policy and that its implications had not been honestly confronted. Just over a week later on 27 June 2024, I joined my Independent colleagues in voting against the pact. We did so because we believe that decisions of this scale, decisions that affect our sovereignty, our communities and the future direction of our country must not be handed over to Brussels without full accountability. That is why I also call for a national referendum. The Irish people should decide whether this country accepts a pact that will impose new obligations, financial pressures and limits on our ability to manage migration in a fair and responsible way.

My stance has not changed. In January 2026, I continue to raise concerns about comments by the EU Commissioner for migration, warning that Ireland risks being held up as an EU example without any regard for the pressures our communities are already feeling.

We have a two-tier society. There are genuine, hard-working people in this country for whom we are fighting to get visas. We cannot get them, so the system is broken. The Government has continued to introduce a system that adds pressure.

I want to highlight the very genuine, serious problems within our own immigration system. These are affecting individuals, employers and entire communities across the country. I have constituents in west Cork who have been in committed relationships for many years. One person has a fiancée who previously lived here with him, but circumstances required her to return to her home country. She has now re-entered Ireland on a short-term three-month visa, yet we are still waiting for clear information from the Department of justice on whether her de facto visa application will be accepted. This uncertainty is causing enormous stress for a genuine couple simply trying to build a life together.

Another case involves an Indian national who has, in fairness to him, been working hard in Ireland for the past 20 years. He has been waiting months for his Garda National Immigration Bureau card to be issued. Since he has not got this card, he cannot travel home to India. He would not be allowed to re-enter Ireland without it. He has missed his brother's funeral. These delays trap people in limbo, despite the fact that they are legally resident here and contributing to essential services.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Deputy Collins has more time.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: He has two minutes and 45 seconds.

Deputy Michael Collins: That is what I have been told. Will I keep going?

An Ceann Comhairle: My information states two and a half minutes each, but the Deputy may go ahead.

Deputy Michael Collins: The man is now stuck outside the country because the document was not processed in time. The relevant company was forced to send another highly skilled employee back to their home country due to red-tape issues that should never have arisen.

An Ceann Comhairle: The screen states two and a half minutes.

Deputy Michael Collins: These situations disrupt businesses, damage productivity and place avoidable burdens on employers.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Fitzmaurice. The screen in front of me states two and a half minutes.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is 20 minutes between six. It should be two minutes and 45 seconds for each of us.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are six minutes for Deputy Lawless and three for Deputy Gogarty, so the Deputies' co-ordinator needs to keep in contact.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Okay.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. The Minister was not here when a previous Minister signed more of our country's sovereignty away, to put it very simply. We should still be in control of our own affairs. That has gone. It is water under the bridge now.

We have two systems in Ireland. We should make it very clear that we value people who have come here through the visa system and who are doing great work throughout the country. They need to be appreciated for everything they are doing. However, the sad reality is that

when a renewal is needed, or when an employer wants to bring somebody in through the visa system, it is a nightmare. That is the fact, whether we like it or not.

Then there is the other system, whereby someone may come in on a plane without a passport. They could be here five, six or seven years before being dealt with. I understand that the Minister has made improvements. I acknowledge that and I have said it openly, but the reality is that while the Minister says applications will be processed or decided upon in 12 weeks, if the applicants go to the courts they will be here for another two, three, four or five years. That is a major problem.

What has happened in this country, not in the Minister's time but before it, is that many decisions made within the Department saw rural communities pitted against each other. Businesspeople have gone around the country like vultures looking for places, including nursing homes that were closed. We lost nursing homes in this country and they became IPAS centres. Maybe it was not the Minister's Department that was involved at the time, but I am referring to the Department that made the decisions. What has happened has caused havoc in rural communities around the country. Those concerned should hang their heads in shame for what they have done. Civil servants in some Department made these decisions without any of us knowing as politicians. We were left looking like fools, not knowing what was going on. Local councillors were left looking like fools because they could not be told what was happening. A liaison person was sent out who would not tell you X, Y or Z, and that was absolutely sickening. I hope the Minister changes this. I realise he is caught now with this European legislation and that if he does not adhere to what we have signed up to, the pact that gives sovereignty away, we can be fined.

I welcome what the Minister has done over the past six or seven months, but I will say time and again that there are people who have come here from countries not because they were fleeing war or other such things. They are coming in through the North and by other ways and we have no control over it. We do not know who is coming in.

May I be very clear? If people come here through the visa system, they are very welcome to work. Let no one say they are not. Let people not be putting out, especially in the media, that we are against people working. Nobody is against anyone working. Irish people have opened their houses, businesses and properties to people in this regard, but they will not put up with what is going on at the moment.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome some of the Minister's moves in this space over recent months. It must be said, however, that it is deeply regrettable that, as a sovereign nation or state, we tied ourselves to the EU migration pact. We signed up to EU fines, irrespective of the fact that we have a common travel area with Britain, of movements in relation to the BritCard and of the potential change of government in Britain and what that will mean for Ireland. Tying ourselves to the migration pact will result in devastating and potentially significant fines down the line.

I welcome the change in rhetoric from the Government. The Minister has been a welcome change from his predecessor, it must be said, but when we drill down into the detail and the cost of the IPAS system, we find it is extraordinary. It is very clear that nothing has changed as of yet. We submitted a parliamentary question and the data in the response are staggering. Up to the end of last October, nearly €1 billion was spent on IPAS. Therefore, last year's budget

for IPAS will have exceeded €1 billion. In 2024, it also exceeded €1 billion. An extraordinary amount of money is being spent on the IPAS system. Imagine what we could do with an additional €1 billion every single year. We could build the Galway ring road, for example.

People, including taxpayers, are frustrated, for a number of reasons. One is the litany of financial failure by the Minister's Department in relation to contracts and the oversight of spending. These are not my words; it is in the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General. What the report reveals is extraordinary. One company overcharged VAT by €7.5 million, and only €1.5 million was recovered. The report found serious issues with compliance and the potential for the State to overspend by millions of euro on contracts. What is happening is extraordinary.

Another reason for frustration is the abuse of the system itself. The vast majority of applicants ultimately fail. Many remain in the system for excessively long periods, sometimes years, and this ultimately means we are spending a significant proportion of billions of euro unnecessarily. That is the truth of it.

Meanwhile, we have so many issues with infrastructure and services for the Irish people. This must be cleaned up. Financial oversight must be cleaned up. We must address this issue. I am still unclear on the processes the Department has put in place since the Comptroller and Auditor General's report was issued.

We must address the fact that approximately 90% of applicants come through the North from Britain. That is a major issue. I appreciate that there are complexities and significant challenges but, equally, this is a beast we must tackle. We must get a handle on the issue of thousands of people coming here from Britain via the North.

We have to get a handle on it and I think it is crucially important. We should do that ahead of potential changes in Britain.

I also want to raise the fact that, as Deputy Fitzmaurice quite rightly said, there are businessmen coming around rural communities and speculating on properties. There are businessmen in County Mayo from the east, the north and all parts of Ireland coming around rural villages in souped-up cars, sports cars and Range Rovers, speculating on warehouses, closed hotels, nursing homes, etc. That is the reality and the Government has facilitated this. I have raised this on many occasions. If the Minister wanted to change this, he would remove the planning circumvention immediately. In Ballina, for example, in the former school site of St. Mary's Secondary School, the people were told it is a nursing home. There was even a sign saying that a nursing home was coming soon. Meanwhile, the planning circumvention for a section 5 was submitted.

The Government is treating the people like fools. I have raised this with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste and every time, they and the Government says that they basically agree and will do something on it. Meanwhile, businessmen are driving around rural communities in sports cars, convertibles and Range Rovers speculating and making millions of euro off the back of what is happening. I welcome some of the changes in relation to it but a significant body of work must be done to get a handle on this issue.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Ireland needs a tougher, faster and more enforceable international protection system. Communities are under pressure around the country. Services

are stretched and the current system is not working for anyone - not for the State, for genuine refugees or for the public, which expects a fair but firm approach.

I have said before that most economic migrants are decent people looking for a better life but these need to be dealt with through a work permit system. Yes, we need quicker decisions and a system where a final refusal actually means a person leaves the State. However, agreeing with these broad aims is not the same as being able to support the Bill in front of us because I am not sure this legislation strikes a balance that a modern, rights-based democracy needs to have. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Ombudsman for Children and others have raised serious concerns about how things could operate in a real-life situation.

The Bill expands the arrest and detention powers, which I welcome in certain circumstances but it also includes the possibility of detaining unaccompanied children. That is a line we should not cross without absolutely necessary and watertight safeguards. We are not the Trump Administration, and those with a better knowledge than me are arguing that provisions on legal counselling are too vague, leaving applicants, including vulnerable people, without clear access to independent advice at key stages. Vulnerability assessments are preliminary only and are not ongoing either, meaning victims of trafficking, people who have been tortured or people with disabilities, including mental disabilities, may fall through the cracks. The age assessment procedures are also unclear and oral appeals are restrictive. Surely best practice is to always allow people to be heard in person whenever they want.

It is not wrong for the people of Ireland to want a tougher system but as a democracy, they also want a system that can withstand legal challenge; protect the vulnerable, especially children; and ensure faith in the process, which I am not sure the Bill, as it is currently proposed, will do. Maybe we need to explicitly prohibit the detention of unaccompanied children, except in very exceptional circumstances with automatic judicial oversight. Maybe we need to guarantee access to free, independent legal counselling at all stages, including detention decisions and age assessments and strengthen age and vulnerability assessment procedures. We should maybe restore oral appeals as the default and not the exception to make sure there is fairness in the system, and finally, guarantee the full independence and adequate funding of the appeals bodies and the chief inspectorate.

If these changes were made, we could have a Bill that is firm, fair and, crucially still, fast, if the proper resourcing is put in. In many circumstances, the reason it took so long before was down to processing and staffing issues. We could have a Bill that protects our borders and respects basic human rights. It is not a case of either-or.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I would welcome any Government Bill if it will deal with the present chaotic system of IPAS processing enforcement, as well as the speculation that is going on in villages all across this island. We definitely need to see faster processing of asylum claims, a more efficient decision-making process and less time spent by applicants in State accommodation, which is enriching cowboy developers and speculators all over this country, with systems being imposed on local communities. I would welcome it if it sees quicker processing for successful applicants, and if it stops the trafficking of many unaccompanied minors. This is something I raised with Tusla in the committee. Many of them end up in Tusla or many go missing. Over 30 of them went missing last year. I would also welcome it if it

deals with a faster return of those who have been refused to their country of origin or a previous EU country.

I would welcome the Bill if it was to deal with these because, to date, the system has been quite farcical and reckless. The State simply has not been bothered to apply its own rules. We had the farcical situation of knowing about people arriving and flushing or shredding passports down the toilets in the aeroplane and going into airport bins, which was widespread. The State was ignoring its own rules. If the Government started to deal with the application of the rules, it would be welcome. That said, I do not think it should be something that is imposed on us by faceless EU bureaucrats. The people of Ireland should be making these decisions. I look up at the statues of all the patriots around this building. To be giving our sovereignty away to the EU is a betrayal of these people, who we are supposed to be honouring in here.

I had previously written to the Minister's office and the Department of justice separately in relation to deportation orders. I was told the following:

As there are no routine exit checks at Irish borders, it is not possible to accurately provide the number of people who are currently in Ireland subject to deportation orders.

There you have it.

On the cost, the State has spent an estimated €1.2 billion on IPAS for the past year. That is an estimation for 2025. It means a large portion of that money - that €1.2 billion of the public's hard-earned money - is going to speculator cowboys throughout this country. If it puts an end to that, it would be welcome. It should also put an end to the process by which the State has been taking local community facilities and buildings, imposing systems on local communities without consultation and dividing communities. This is something that definitely has to end.

We have been clear from the beginning that if a person is not entitled to be in Ireland, they should be returned safely to their country of origin and the deportation order should be both enforced and tracked. We also need to have the powers to immediately return those who are not entitled to be here. I believe an Irish Government is best placed to make these decisions in the interests of the Irish people, not these unelected bureaucrats in Brussels or faceless EU institutions that make the decisions for us, which undermine our democracy and sovereignty. If the Bill could tackle these issues, it is something I would very much welcome.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I want to start by clearly saying what I was elected on in the election a year ago. I was one of the only TDs to have immigration on my leaflet, which the people of north Dublin elected me on. I was elected on a belief that immigration must be handled in a dignified and proactive way based on dialogue between communities and Government. Since sitting in the Chamber and in my office, I have heard many Deputies speak about the previous Government and how the Department was not engaging with local representatives, TDs and councillors.

No constituency can see that better than Dublin Bay North, with the former Crown Paints site and the way it was dealt with. I have spoken in this House multiple times about how an inquiry needs to be done on how it was dealt with, how people were put in danger as a result of how it was dealt with, and how it can never happen again. I knocked on nearly every door in the area. There were people from all around Ireland who came there to aggravate the current status but the people are the most welcoming, hard-working people. People in north Dublin

are the most welcoming people and this was treated completely wrongly. I know this was not the Minister, it was a previous Minister, but I welcome how swiftly his Department dealt with the Crown Paints site.

The mandate I was given is the standard to which I will always hold myself in this House. I welcome some of the changes in the asylum system that this Bill brings in. What is proposed is sensible and faster decisions are better for everyone. Clear procedures are better for applicants, communities and the State.

Three weeks ago I met a refugee. We had a lovely meeting. He said he really wants an easier system so he can get to work. The Department has already brought out statements on that and I would welcome more being brought in. They are coming here for a better life. They want to work. If they cannot work easily, that sets them out as a target. He was begging me. He asked was there anything he could do to be in the system. Leaving people in limbo is something we cannot support. The fact the Minister is speeding it through is much better.

To create trust, we need to communicate with communities. I have already said that. Deputy Fitzmaurice said that. Where communities are feeling ignored and you do not communicate with those communities, it creates a vacuum for misinformation and hatred to spread. The Minister is aware of this and I welcome the work he has done on this. I call again for an inquiry into how the Crown Paints site in Coolock was dealt with. The fear, anger and division was completely avoidable. We need to learn from it and not repeat it. Some parts of the Bill will help with that.

Previous speakers spoke about solidarity. I think it is very true. Recently I was at a launch in Beaumont Hospital and heard directly about nurses and doctors being attacked when leaving work. I welcome the statements from the Minister's office recently. It is important that we stand united with the Indian community. They are part of our community. They look after us when we are sick. They looked after my granny when she was in hospital. For anyone to say these hard-working men and women are not contributing to society need to go and see. I know it is not just that community but the entire migrant community in our health system. I stand with them and everyone who comes to this country to make this country a better place. I believe in a country where immigration is managed with respect and where people are safe in their workplaces and on the streets, and where communities are included and not ignored in any communication. That is why legislation like this must be discussed. Some people in this House do not want to discuss this legislation, but when you do not discuss this in the Parliament of our country, in Dáil Éireann, cén áit gur féidir leat labhairt faoi na rudaí seo? Toghtar daoine ón phobail le teacht chuig an áit seo chun caint faoi na rudaí seo. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeimid inár adults to be able to talk about these situations. This sits on top of the housing shortage and the blame for this along with the overcrowded schools. I have been speaking about this. If we ignore the reality, we gift it to those who wish to exploit fear and create vacuums. Again, I commend the Minister for how quickly he dealt with north Dublin.

I want to bring this back to the Bill. The accelerated procedures in the new tribunal for asylum and returns appeal and the new biometric screening and return mechanisms may improve efficiency, but efficiency without fairness will fail. I spoke to people in sector. I know this is only Second Stage but they are worried enforcement will fail without it being properly discussed. We cannot process people quickly enough. I heard other Deputies talk about the €1.2 billion spent in 2025. People are angry. There is a range of issues but they are also angry

at people becoming millionaires off a system that is broken. It is very important this gets brought through and implemented as soon as possible.

Coming back to the Bill, I support the aims of creating a system that is fair, consistent, lawful and workable. I welcome that part but I will judge it by does it respect human dignity and what this country has always stood for. From speaking to constituents, there is public confidence as a result of the announcements by the Government at the moment. It is important to recognise that migration policy must go hand in hand with public engagement and with housing, infrastructure investment and everything.

Ireland has a strong history of emigration. I have spoken about this in the House multiple times. We understand what it is like to leave home. We understand what it is like to seek safety and opportunity in places where we are trying to make better lives for ourselves, but we can be firm and organised in how we manage migration and immigration. If you look at statistics, it is very difficult, and I have heard other Deputies mention this, that we do have an open border. Looking at any of the parliamentary questions which have been submitted by Deputies, including by my own office, on this, it is very difficult in the sense that I do not think we will have completely secure borders until we have a united Ireland. That is another point I would push for. I support measures that speed up decisions to protect the vulnerable and I will continue to argue for proper community consultation for north Dublin. What happened there can never happen again. It put people and refugees in danger. What I have said I will do is what people elected me to do and I intend to keep doing it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The way immigration and bogus asylum seekers have been managed to date is nothing short of a social and economic catastrophe. I am utterly convinced this issue will come to define previous governments. Warning after warning was dismissed and was reframed. Warning after warning that the State was effectively being ripped off were ignored with the excuse that we were in an emergency and therefore proper controls did not apply. Billions have been spent and very likely billions more will be spent because this State has adopted the slowest possible approach to managing a crisis that has been plain for all to see except for those who wanted to push the de facto open border policies.

If the Minister wants to see what talking tough and taking no meaningful action on the asylum chaos looks like and where it will lead to, then he may look no further than the UK. There the entire political establishment is being convulsed by defections from the establishment parties. The people are fed up of governments which promise much but do little but deliver tough-sounding rhetoric with no actions. The same is true here. Our people here are angry at how unwilling or how powerless governments have been in dealing with this generational crisis. This Bill promises much, but my fear is that it will be bogged down in bureaucratic nonsense and loopholes sought and found by the overpaid NGOs which are determined to oppose all necessary reform.

I have very serious concerns which I have raised many times in this House about the vetting, or lack of vetting, of bogus asylum seekers, the delays deporting asylum seekers with criminal pasts, many of whom come from safe countries, and no vetting of the providers of IPAS accommodation. They have been described here as businesspeople but they are not all businesspeople. Some of these providers could be better described as gangsters and they have question marks over their suitability or the appropriateness of having those people involved in

the provision of any type of accommodation. What vetting is being done there? I do not believe there is any vetting there either of the providers and who is involved. We need an urgent overhaul of both our dysfunctional immigration system and the IPAS system in terms of who is providing the accommodation. Are those people checked? My sense is that none of them were checked at any stage. Some, as I say, are totally unsuitable. The people involved in the provision of IPAS accommodation, some of them gangsters and chancers, continue to profiteer from an unchecked, unregulated and broken system. This is extremely alarming. We need urgent action on this before it is too late.

I, as a representative here, want action. I want a dramatic reduction in the numbers of economic migrants and in the numbers of bogus asylum seekers entering our country. I want no more excuses and deflection. We need reform urgently in terms of the people coming in, the vetting system and lack of vetting, and the lack of urgent deportations and timely deportations, but also there needs to be a vetting process of the suitability of some of these providers because there are serious question marks there.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to talk on this very important Bill this evening. I thank the Minister, Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, for taking this issue by the scruff of the neck because, since he came into office and took over this role, he has already put people on the plane back to the countries that they came from if they were not entitled to be here. That has not been done in the last number of years with previous Ministers, and I am grateful to him for doing that.

We have to differentiate between the people who are coming here. There are people who are coming here with work visas and they are very welcome to work here. Many of them are badly needed and they have trouble in getting permanent visas or getting their family, wives and children brought over here. Reputable employers are raising concerns about that. They may have men they have trained in and people who have very skills in the areas where they are working. We appreciate those people and we need them. We need the system to help them to progress and to stay here when they are working like this and they are needed.

The other ones we can do without are the people who come here with no passport, and seem to arrive here and demand everything. We know what it was like for the people on the Muckross Road in Killarney when 70 or 80 asylum seekers were put into a house alongside elderly women on that road. They were not vetted and nobody knew where they were from or why they were there. That is very wrong because vetting is seriously important and if they have no passports or identification, they cannot be vetted and they should be sent back exactly to where they came from in the first place.

The changes to the international protection system will ensure that anyone who has been granted asylum in Ireland is only permitted to avail of family reunification when they are financially self-sufficient and can provide for those they wish to bring here.

The Minister is also proposing to introduce power to revoke or refuse a residence permit for refugee in circumstances where they are found to be a danger to the security of the State or have been convicted of involvement in serious crime. While these situations may be rare, there are a lot of them at times. It is important that these powers are provided for in law and that these people are sent back to their country of origin.

The scheme will be implemented over a planned 12-month period, allowing for the development of systems and resources to assess eligibility, share data securely, and collect and process payments. While not all international protection applicants are working, many are. It makes sense and it is only right for these people who are earning an income and paying tax to also make a contribution to the State for their accommodation costs. Other member states operate those systems already.

There are two rules for applying for citizenship. The Minister is proposing to update the rules around how people qualify for citizenship. At present someone wanting to apply for citizenship by naturalisation must have been resident here for five years. The rule for people granted international protection is different in that they only need to be here for three years. The Minister is proposing to update that so that they will have to be resident here for five years before they can apply to be citizens here.

It would be very important to see if there is any way that we can fast-track the pathway for people who are working to stay here. As I said, many employers are having difficulty in sourcing staff. They may have them on a time limit or whatever it is and when that time is up, they are ordered to go back and they are not able to get an extension. I ask the Minister to review that and ensure that people who want to work and are working here are facilitated in their quest to remain here. At the same time, those people who come here without any identification, have no vetting and are not prepared to say where they came from or how they came to be here, must be sent back by return plane to wherever they came from last - whatever airport they got on.

I will be supporting this. It looks like we will have some plan or some form of order to follow now because we did not over the past number of years. Many people were hurt in rural communities when they saw people landing there and they were not sure where they were from. They did not have any vetting and they were worried about them, especially women who were walking the walks they used always walk in the evenings but had to stop. That is not right. This is our country and our women, men and children must be protected from whoever new is coming in. If the Minister, I or anyone else inside in this Chamber is going for the job, we have to be vetted and vetted several times. The same thing has to apply to people coming in here. They have to be vetted. It is the most important thing. We have to understand and be sure where they come from.

I urge the Minister to continue in his work because he is a massive improvement on what we had under the previous Government. We look forward to supporting him.

Debate adjourned.

Estimates for Public Services 2026

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Revised Estimates:

Vote 11 — Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €151,551,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, for certain services administered by the Office of the Minister and for payment of certain grants, and that a sum not exceeding €950,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 12 — Superannuation and Retired Allowances (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €902,982,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for pensions, superannuation, occupational injuries, and additional and other allowances and gratuities under the Superannuation Acts 1834 to 2004 and sundry other statutes; extra-statutory pensions, allowances and gratuities awarded by the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, fees to medical referees and occasional fees to doctors; compensation and other payments in respect of personal injuries; fees to Pensions Authority and other professional fees, miscellaneous payments, etc.

Vote 14 — State Laboratory (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €16,540,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the State Laboratory.

Vote 15 — Secret Service (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €2,000,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for Secret Service.

Vote 17 — Public Appointments Service (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €26,794,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Public Appointments Service and that a sum not exceeding €150,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Vote 18 — National Shared Services Office (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €85,346,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the National Shared Services Office.

Vote 19 — Office of the Ombudsman (Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €18,359,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2026, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office of the Commission for Public Service Appointments, the Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner, the Standards

in Public Office Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Office of the Commissioner for Environmental Information.

Question put and agreed to.

Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026, taken on Thursday, 22 January 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 80; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Collins, Niall.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	

Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		

Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Paul Murphy.

Question declared carried.

Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I understand it is proposed to refer this Bill to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188. Will the Minister move the motion of referral now?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

River Boyne Task Force Bill 2023: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the River Boyne Task Force Bill 2023, taken on Thursday, 22 January 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 65; Níl, 81; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Crowe, Seán.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cullinane, David.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cummins, Jen.	Callaghan, Catherine.	

Daly, Pa.	Calleary, Dara.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Canney, Seán.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Chambers, Jack.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gannon, Gary.	Clendennen, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Connolly, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cummins, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Currie, Emer.	
Kelly, Alan.	Daly, Martin.	
Kenny, Martin.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dillon, Alan.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dolan, Albert.	
Lawlor, George.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Feighan, Frankie.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Fleming, Sean.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Foley, Norma.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Murphy, Paul.	Geoghegan, James.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Harkin, Marian.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Nolan, Carol.	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.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Smith, Duncan.	Murphy, Michael.	
Stanley, Brian.	Neville, Joe.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	

Ward, Charles.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Connor, James.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Duncan Smith and George Lawlor; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Emergency Winter Payment for Disabled People: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Eoin Hayes on Wednesday, 28 January 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- disabled people in Ireland are among the most socially excluded and disadvantaged in the State, with some of the highest poverty, deprivation, and unemployment rates in Ireland;
- one in five disabled people live in consistent poverty, nearly four times the national average, while nearly 40 per cent live in enforced deprivation;
- in the context of escalating costs in energy, food and housing, disabled people are particularly vulnerable to cost pressures, especially as they are more likely to spend more of their time at home;
- the State-commissioned Indecon Cost of Disability in Ireland - Research Report, published in 2021, estimated the extra cost of living with a disability to be in the range of €8,700 - €12,300 (€10,490 - €14,830 adjusted for inflation);

— Budget 2026 reduced income for disabled people by an estimated €1,400 per year, according to the Disability Federation of Ireland; and

— the Disability Federation of Ireland has called Budget 2026 a "devastating setback for disabled people... which leaves disabled people poorer, unsupported, and excluded";

further notes that:

— the need for a cost of disability payment has been identified as far back as 2004, something which was reaffirmed by the Indecon report;

— a 2022 Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled "Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare" found working-age adults with disabilities experience "distinctively high rates of income poverty, deprivation and consistent poverty";

— the 2025 Programme for Government committed to the introduction of "a permanent annual Cost of Disability support payment with a view to incrementally increasing this payment";

— the Government has failed to deliver any such permanent payment, and instead delivered a Budget which cut the incomes of disabled people and left them worse off; and

— as a result of the Government cutting their incomes, disabled people have been forced to make unconscionable decisions about how to live on more limited means, forgoing necessary levels of home heating, nutrition, and greatly reducing their mobility and independence;

recognises that:

— the Government repeatedly claims that it wants to target resources at those who need it most and an emergency winter payment for disabled people would do just that, meaning it is in line with purported Government budgetary policy;

— disabled people need emergency financial support as they are experiencing an extremely challenging winter period, due to cost pressures associated both with their disabilities and seasonal costs, including energy, housing, and food costs;

— an immediate emergency winter payment would serve as a vital support, which would protect against the increased risk to disabled people of falling into poverty and deprivation; and

— an emergency €400 winter payment is affordable and fiscally sustainable, given the cost of the measure, €124 million, amounts to a small portion of the budget surplus last year, which was even larger than the Government forecasted; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately (within a month of this motion being agreed) introduce an emergency winter payment of €400 to all qualified recipients of;

— Disabilities Allowance;

- Invalidity Pension;
- Blind Pension;
- Incapacity Supplement;
- Disablement Pension; and
- Domiciliary Care Allowance; and
- immediately progress the introduction of a permanent cost of disability support payment, as promised in the Programme for Government, as a matter of urgency.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

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

"recognises that:

- the Government acknowledges that disabled people face additional costs in their daily lives;
- the Government's determination to address this issue is reflected in the Programme for Government commitment, to introduce a permanent Annual Cost of Disability Support Payment;
- delivering on this commitment is a core objective of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which the Government published in September 2025;
- a dedicated Disability Unit has been established in the Department of An Taoiseach, to drive progress in enhancing supports for disabled people;
- progress will be driven and monitored by the Cabinet Committee on Children, Disability and Education;
- under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was developed with the involvement of disability advocates and representative groups, the Department of Social Protection is mandated to lead a cross-Government Strategic Focus Network Summit on the Cost of Disability; and
- work is already underway to establish and define the detailed remit of the Strategic Focus Network Summit:
 - the Strategic Focus Network Summit will be organised by the Department of Social Protection and, as a cross-Government endeavour, will include, other Government departments, and importantly it will involve disabled people and their advocates;
 - this work will inform the approach to be taken in delivering on the Programme for Government commitment;
 - officials have held meetings with a number of organisations to discuss the structure and content of the Strategic Focus Network Summit;

— the views of disabled people and all relevant research, such as the Indecon Cost of Disability in Ireland - Research Report, and the more recent Economic and Social Research Institute report entitled "Headline Poverty Target Reduction in Ireland and the Role of Work and Social Welfare", will be given due consideration when progressing this work; and

— a public consultation process on how a cost of disability can best be delivered will also be launched shortly;

notes that:

— there is already a broad range of income support payments for disabled people;

— there are approximately 231,000 recipients of disability income support payments and 170,000 recipients of caring payments, including the Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA), with estimated expenditure of €6.5 billion across illness, disability and carer's schemes combined in 2026; and

— Budget 2026 provided for a €1.15 billion package of new social protection measures, and this contained significant targeted measures to support disabled people, including:

— a €20 per month increase in the monthly rate of DCA bringing it to €380 per month from January 2026, this represents an increase of over €70 or 23 per cent since 2022;

— a €10, or 4.1 per cent increase in the weekly rates of payment, bringing the personal rates of payment to €254 per week from January 2026, this represents a €51 increase in weekly disability income support payments since Budget 2021;

— the highest ever increases in the Child Support Payment, an increase of €16 to €78 for children aged 12 or over, and of €8 to €58 for children under 12, these payments have increased by €48.20 and €28.20 respectively since 2017;

— a €5, or 15 per cent increase in the Fuel Allowance, bringing it to €38 per week from January 2026 providing recipients with an additional €140 during the annual Fuel Allowance season; and

— an increase of €325 to €1,000 in the income disregard for single carers and €750 to €2,000 in the disregard for a couple, these increases mean a couple with an income of just under €140,000 can still qualify for a carer's payment;

— both the increases to personal rates of payment and the Fuel Allowance were ahead of the general inflation rate reported by the Central Statistics Office of 3.2 per cent in the year to the end of November 2025, and an energy cost increase of approximately 3.5 per cent for the same period; and

— to make the welfare to work journey as smooth as possible, and to support disabled people into work, Budget 2026 provided for:

— people moving from Disability Allowance or Blind Pension to take up work to retain their Fuel Allowance payment for five years;

- people getting Disability Allowance or Blind Pension who have children being eligible for Back to Work Family Dividend when taking up employment and moving off those payments;
- expansion of the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) to people who acquire a disability while in employment, and to those who transfer from Invalidity Pension to Partial Capacity Benefit; and
- increased rates under the WSS, which will take effect from April;
- in Budget 2026, the Government allocated €3.8 billion to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for disability services in 2026, including funding for community-based specialist disability services to ensure people with disabilities receive the right support, at the right time, in the right place;
- this represents a 20 per cent increase year-on-year and represents an overall increase since 2020 of €1.8 billion; and
- a dedicated unit has been established in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, to drive reform and to lead a full review of Ireland's disability service model and this unit will work hand-in-hand with disabled people, their families, and representative organisations to shape a long-term vision for services to 2030; and

further notes that:

- under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme, a special Heating Supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances that have special heating needs, for example, in the case of ill health, infirmity or a medical condition;
- an Additional Needs Payment may also be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which an applicant is unable to meet out of their own resources;
- in 2025 there were over 2,300 Additional Needs Payments made towards household bills and heating at a cost of almost €1.3 million;
- there were 692 recipients of Heat Supplement at end of 2025; and
- any person who considers they may have an entitlement to a payment under the SWA scheme is encouraged to contact their local community welfare service, and the National Community Welfare Contact Centre is in place - 0818-607080 - which will direct callers to the appropriate office."

-(Minister for Social Protection)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding an emergency winter payment for disabled people. On Wednesday, 28 January 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon

Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	

McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Eoin Hayes and Cian O'Callaghan.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	

Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	

Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Eoin Hayes and Cian O'Callaghan.

Question declared carried.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.51 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 29 Eanáir 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.51 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 29 January 2026.