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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 29 Eanáir 2026

Thursday, 29 January 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Inshore Fisheries

1. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will engage with an organisation (details supplied) to progress its proposal for an inshore fisheries income stabilisation and climate compensation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6545/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister will know that the National Inshore Fishermen's Association has made a submission to all of us on an inshore fisheries income stabilisation and climate compensation scheme. Essentially, this would be a basic income scheme similar to that which was provided to artists in recent times. This is critical. As the Minister knows, in the past fishermen would have said, "We just want the fish; we do not want financial assistance." They need the latter now, and they will need it moving forward. I wish to engage with the Minister on that.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy for the question. I know that, like others, he has had a considerable ongoing engagement with all aspects of fisheries, and his input is welcome and being considered.

I am very aware of the challenges facing inshore fishermen and fisherwomen and have met with representatives of the sector, including the National Inshore Fishermen's Association, NIFA, on a number of occasions in recent months and have received a copy of the submission to which the Deputy refers. Our Department also engages regularly with representatives of the inshore sector, including NIFA, the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, IIMRO, and the National Inshore Fisheries Forum, NIFF, on developments affecting the sector.

There are many common challenges facing Ireland's seafood producers and many interdependencies across the fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing sectors. The reductions in quotas for 2026 present a significant and particular challenge to the affected fleet segments, with the potential for downstream impacts on inshore fishermen and fisherwomen and seafood processors.

When considering and developing the measures we can put in place to respond to these challenges, it is important we consider all impacts, and all opportunities, across the sector as a whole. That is why I have announced the establishment, with the support of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, of a group under the framework of our food vision strategy to consider and respond to the challenges facing the seafood sector. Preparatory work is under way to establish this group. I expect that it will be in place in the coming weeks. As I have previously indicated, Mr. Michael Berkery, former general secretary of the Irish Farmers Association, has been invited to act as the independent chair of this group. All fishery producer organisations will be invited to participate in the group, and it will provide the appropriate forum and opportunity for NIFA to outline the challenges its members face and to put forward the proposals outlined in its submission. This will allow its proposals to be considered in the wider context of challenges across the sector as a whole.

I do not intend to comment on the substance of NIFA's submission at this stage because to do so would pre-empt the work of the group we are establishing and would not necessarily be appropriate at this time. However, there will be plenty of opportunity, and I know the Deputy is an active participant in the fisheries and marine committee. As we work through the framework of this, I think we will have the opportunity to discuss it.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: As the Minister of State knows, the impact of Brexit hurt all fishermen, not just offshore fishermen. There was no tie-up scheme and no fuel subsidy for inshore fishermen. They have really struggled, and I have seen a big change. As I said at the outset, when I talked about a support scheme similar to what farmers have received for many years, the initial response from fishermen all around the coast was that they just wanted to fish. I absolutely respect that, but we have now got to the point where I think the likes of a basic income scheme would allow them to fish but also to have some type of financial support. This is crucial for coastal communities and fishing communities. This is about protecting this crucial heritage for our people, as we did with artists, and rightly so. This is a timely proposal. I accept that the task force needs to be established. I ask that this happens as a matter of urgency and that we engage on these matters, make quick decisions and get these financial supports to fishermen.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I assure the Deputy that it will happen as quickly as possible. Later today I will be meeting with Michael Berkery, the independent chair, to continue the discussions we have had about establishing this as quickly as possible. There is concern among the representatives of inshore fishermen and fisherwomen that the task force is a response to the large quota cut for the pelagic sector. That is true, but because we are doing this under Food Vision 2030, it is my view that we need to take into account all those who are affected. The pelagic sector has experienced a dramatic impact in terms of the fishermen and fisherwomen and the processors involved in that regard, but there is a downstream impact regarding the cost of bait, etc., in addition to the difficulties the inshore sector has already

encountered, as the Deputy said, as a result of Brexit and other losses of fish. I am very conscious that the response we are putting in place as a result of the quota cut is not just concentrated on the pelagic sector. There will be an interim report to address that aspect of it, but my desire would be to see a longer term and more strategic approach to see how we can sustain that fishing effort within the inshore sector. It will be broadly based and all-encompassing.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I welcome that. It is crucial that the likes of NIFA, NIFF, the regional inshore fisheries forums, RIFFs, and the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation, IIMRO, are at the table too. There are about 900 inshore fishermen, according to NIFA. Imagine if we could protect their livelihoods with a basic income scheme, which would mean that they would not have to go on the dole. It is economically sensible to do this, as we did with artists, but such a scheme would acknowledge that it is just not sustainable any more for them to be on their own and try to earn a living due to conditions beyond their control, including climate, increased costs and so on.

This is a really positive contribution. It is real leadership from NIFA on this issue. My view is that it has been coming for a long time. There will be engagements in the Oireachtas fisheries committee on this soon. I imagine there will be strong cross-party support for this proposal. We need to deliver it in the short term as opposed to the medium or long term. I look forward to continued engagement with the Minister of State.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am very conscious of the impact the small inshore fishermen and fisherwomen have on their communities. Sometimes it is just a living for their own families, but it is also part of the cultural life of some of these little villages and hamlets along our coast that many people take the opportunity to visit as part of their getaways from the larger cities, a tourism component. At the heart of it, however, are the people who are struggling to survive. As regards the loss involved, there are other opportunities. They could probably leave and get other jobs more easily, but that would be a huge drain and a loss to the communities involved in terms of the cultural and historical dimension, and it would suck the life out of those communities. We have a responsibility to address that. I heard some statistics on the news earlier about the population drain in certain rural areas, including a few in Donegal, where some schools are down to having maybe just two or three students now. We have to address that aspect of this as well insofar as we can.

Farm Safety

2. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his response to a recent fatal farm incident in County Limerick involving a farmer in his 90s; and, in light of provisional Health and Safety Authority figures showing that 23 people died in the agriculture sector in 2025, accounting for 40% of all workplace fatalities despite the sector employing approximately 4% of the workforce, the urgent actions his Department is taking to improve farm safety and prevent further loss of life. [6544/26]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The Minister and the Minister of State are aware of the recent fatal farm incidents involving Donal O'Connor, who was in his 90s, in County Limerick and

T.J. Sweeney, who was in his 30s, in Clare, in light of the provisional Health and Safety Authority figures showing that 23 people died in the agriculture sector in 2025. That is 40% of all workplace fatalities, despite farmers being only 4% of the workforce. What actions is the Department taking to improve farm safety and prevent further loss of life? I take this opportunity to send condolences to Mr. O'Connor's and Mr. Sweeney's families and friends.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising what is a really important issue. I also offer my condolences and sympathies to those affected by recent bereavements, whether they finally get categorised as farm safety fatalities or otherwise.

The HSA, as a statutory body, has work to do. There are an unacceptably high level of fatalities on farms and, as the Deputy quite rightly outlined, ours is the most dangerous workplace in all of Ireland - disproportionately so when you consider the size of the workforce in comparison with those in other industries.

My colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, has special responsibility for farm safety, who unfortunately cannot be here today, and I am very concerned by the sharp increase in the number of fatal incidents on farms in 2025, with older farmers proving particularly vulnerable. That was the tenet of the original point of Deputy O'Donoghue's question. As regards the nature of these things, circumstances have changed in the Limerick region since the Deputy submitted the question, as he has outlined.

The 24 confirmed farm fatalities in 2025 were double the number for 2024. The Health and Safety Authority, which has primary responsibility for health and safety on farms, is investigating the death of an elderly farmer in a farm incident earlier this month. I extend my deepest sympathies to the family of this elderly farmer and the many other families dealing with the loss of a loved one in a farming incident.

Farm safety, health and well-being are an absolute priority for the Government. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to continue to prioritise improvements in farm safety, health and well-being. My Department supports the efforts of the Health and Safety Authority and the Farm Safety Partnership to improve health and safety on Irish farms. Last year, I allocated €1.6 million in funding for 36 farm safety, health and well-being projects under an open call.

9 o'clock

I secured dedicated funding of €3 million for farm safety, health, and well-being initiatives in budget 2026 to build on existing, and to support new, initiatives in this area, which the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, has responsibility for. I will go into more detail in my supplementary response.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister for putting that funding in. Given the many fatal incidents involving farmers attending livestock alone, can the Minister outline what targeted, practical measures are in place to support farm workers to work safely and whether he will consider enhanced supports and conditions through farm schemes or incentivised safer practices? We need measures as we have an ageing agricultural workforce and many farmers are isolated. We need better measures to protect them. Will the Minister consider introducing

a targeted wage subsidy or financial support scheme to enable older, more isolated farmers to hire part-time assistants to reduce workplace risk? Has the Department already examined models that would allow lone farmers on farms to access safety-focused employment support. We will need to implement such schemes to protect farmers' health and safety and workers' rights.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Obviously, anything we say now is in general and not in relation to any specific case.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Yes.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We talked about a range of issues. Generational renewal has a role to play here as well because, in general, the figures show a disproportionate number of old people are dying on our farms. When people asked me before why so many people in their 70s, and some in their 80s, are dying on our farms, it is because so many people are farming in their 70s and 80s. In any other profession, they would not still be working and in harm's way to that extent.

In terms of the practical measures in place, when I was a Minister of State, I secured a dedicated budget. I got a separate funding stream under TAMs for farm safety measures, and that has been hugely popular. As well as the farm safety budget, my Department provides 60% grant aid for a range of farm safety-related investments under the farm safety capital investment scheme in TAMs. Further health and safety guidelines are included in all building specifications and all TAMS applicants are required to complete a half-day of farm safety training. That training is included as part of ACRES, the knowledge transfer programme and the suckler carbon efficiency programme, SCEP, as well.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: We do know this is a problem. It is acknowledged. We have the statistics going back many years. As an aside, I wonder how much loneliness has to do with people still farming into their 70s, 80s and 90s, like Mr. O'Connor was? We know there are certain schemes out there but if a targeted wage subsidy could be considered as part of the Department's work, that would be fantastic. I welcome the funding, the €1.6 million and the €3 million, that is going in. We have acknowledged the problem and, hopefully, the measures the Minister is taking will bring us to a better place.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy. I also want to mention the accelerated capital allowances scheme for farm safety equipment which was expanded to cover a broader range of farm safety investments in budget 2025. A suite of different financial supports are there.

In relation to older farmers, three quarters of farm fatalities last year involved farmers over 60 years of age. The HSA's farm safety partnership has designed a leaflet entitled, *Farming in Older Age*, and this will be distributed along with the 2026 BISS, basic income support for sustainability packs to over 125,000 farmers. It will be going out in the post to them. Additionally, my Department is providing funding for the delivery of farm safety awareness programmes for primary and secondary school students to instil the message of farm safety into children from a young age. It is not just to make children more aware. As a father of four young kids, I can tell you the pester power of kids to give out to the older farmers who are

doing stuff that is dangerous. Ultimately, at the heart of all this, we have a poor attitude to risk on our farms. We take risks, we put ourselves in harm's way and we think near misses are a normal way of life. No other industry finds that acceptable, and until we change that attitude to risk, we are going to continue to have an unacceptably high level. There is no level that is acceptable because one death is one too many and where are now right now has to change.

Agriculture Industry

3. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide increased powers and resources for the Agri-Food regulator; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6709/26]

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Agri-Food Regulator has an important role in Irish agriculture. We need to restore confidence in the system because it has broken down. We still do not know the names of the three companies that imported Brazilian beef earlier this year. Has the Agri-Food Regulator told the Minister the names of these three companies? When are we going to find out? Was Dawn Foods one of these three companies? I ask because we have a situation where the head of Bord Bia is also importing Brazilian beef. He simply has to go, yet the Minister seems to be absolutely determined to protect the well-connected rather to protect the sector. That needs to be called out.

Deputy Martin Heydon: That was quite a pivot, Deputy.

First, the recall and the food safety elements are a matter for the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, FSAI, which comes under the Department of Health. Any queries in that respect should be directed towards it.

The Deputy has touched on the Bord Bia issue here. There needs to be a proper debate and explanation. Obviously, Mr. Murrin will be in front of the joint committee, and happy to engage in that. There is a complete lack of perspective in this debate given the integrated nature of global trades and the fact that this specific trade deal covered over 42 countries.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is in reference to the sector in general. The farming community has lost confidence.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We have the IFA protesting, and the people who are protesting are being denied that detailed briefing by their leadership. Of all the things I am dealing with this week-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The confidence of the farming community has been lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry, Deputy-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am dealing with a lot of things this week, including the outbreak of bluetongue, working on issues around the Agri-Food Regulator, making sure the carbon border adjustment mechanism, CBAM, does not have a bad impact on farmers and reform of

the CAP. I was in Brussels on Monday doing that. I was in the Seanad yesterday on nitrates. This other issue is one being conflated and hyped up, and farmers are being done a disservice because there is not-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The writing is on the wall.

Deputy Martin Heydon: ----practical and fair space for the discussion on this issue. The Deputy standing up here calling for a head and for a witch hunt against someone who has not broken rules, and not wanting any debate-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Have a debate.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----and like the IFA, not wanting clear information out there, is not doing farmers any service. It is not. I am going to leave it there.

In relation to the actual question the Deputy put down, I am satisfied that the Agri-Food Regulator is fulfilling its overall statutory role to the highest standards, in particular on the unfair trading practices, the UTP legislation, and continues to work on behalf of stakeholders along the agrifood supply chain. In relation to its price and market analysis role, the regulator reported that while the majority of operators had submitted all information requested, a number of operators failed to comply with its requests for information on a voluntary basis.

As a result, in December 2025, I signed new regulations to fulfil the programme for Government commitment to confer on the Agri-Food Regulator enhanced powers to compel price and market information from businesses to deliver additional transparency in the agrifood supply chain.

Deputy Martin Kenny: On the agrifood sector, the regulator has stated it does not have enough powers and resources, and this needs to be brought up to speed. As I said, confidence has been lost in the system. The Minister may say this is a pivot but it is all part of the same issue. The farming community has lost confidence in the system because it is being forced to keep standards, and it is quite welcome that they keep to the standards Bord Bia sets and the standards Europe sets in terms of food safety and all those things. They are all in place. Yet they see the people at the top, who are in charge of marketing Irish beef, importing Brazilian beef at the same. It is just untenable that this man can stay in that position. The Minister knows this and the writing is on the wall. Everybody knows it. The farmers are not protesting because they want to. They should be at home. Their cows are calving at this time of the year and they do not want to be up here protesting. They want the Minister to do the right thing by the sector. That is the problem here. It is not a witch hunt against this person.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The price of beef-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is a witch hunt against the sector. The Minister is standing over something that is totally untenable.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is ironic that we are standing here dealing with a question about transparency, the Agri-Food Regulator and the importance for farmers of having transparency-

Deputy Martin Kenny: Absolutely.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----when the farm organisation that is currently protesting outside Bord Bia is denying-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The farming organisation did not import Brazilian beef.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hold on now, the Deputy wants to-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Kenny, allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The heckling is a Sinn Féin trick. Let us park that one for a minute. The farm organisation currently protesting outside Bord Bia is refusing to allow its county executive chairs and the chairs of its commodities committees to receive the detailed briefing from that very chair about the nature of that deal that is being conflated and sold in a soundbite way to farmers. No wonder farmers are upset the way it is being sold to them, and the way the Deputy and others have sold this to them. There is a level of detail there. Once the board of Bord Bia received that briefing, 12 of its 14 members found it absolutely acceptable because--

Deputy Martin Kenny: Was Dawn Foods one of the companies?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Kenny, please.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----that specific trade deal is worth hundreds of millions of euro to Irish farmers and to our industry. The chairman of Bord Bia has overseen exponential growth in the value of Irish food exports year on year-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: All the more reason to restore confidence in the organisation.

Deputy Martin Heydon: When the CSO figures come out in the next couple of weeks, we will see more record growth. This is money going straight into farmers' pockets. They benefit from the integrated nature of global supply chains.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This is all the more reason to ensure we have confidence in Bord Bia. It has done an excellent job in marketing Irish beef and Irish food around the world. We all know that and it is not in dispute. What is in dispute is that the chairperson of a board charged with marketing Irish food is importing Brazilian beef.

It is untenable for him to remain in his position. Everyone knows that. The Minister is trying to suggest that the IFA is to blame. Come on. With respect, the Minister has to recognise that there is a serious issue for the whole system. He is eroding the confidence of farmers and consumers in that system. That is what is happening. The Minister is trying to suggest that this is a witch hunt. If that is the case, then it is a witch hunt to ensure that proper standards are maintained and that people can have confidence in the systems that are in place, which they have to adhere to. If the Minister is going to erode that confidence by keeping this person in place and standing by him, he will have to look at his own position because it is simply untenable to allow these circumstances to continue while farmers are outside the gates of Bord Bia's headquarters protesting about this. They are not there because they want to be there. They are there because the Minister will not take appropriate action.

Deputy Martin Heydon: For once, I agree with the Deputy on something. Responsibility for confidence in Bord Bia is spread broadly. It is not on any one entity or farming organisation. Deputy Kenny also has responsibility. The soundbites he is coming out with here, which lack information and are designed to whip farmers up, are also undermining Bord Bia.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister has known me long enough to know that is not the way I do business.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The IFA's rash decision not to listen to the explanation and to rush straight out to protest - it had its mind made up before the meeting that it was going to do that - has also played a considerable part in damaging Bord Bia's reputation. We all have to work to rebuild that reputation. That does not mean getting a head on a plate. Government does not operate by mob rule in such scenarios. I will leave it at that, because this question was supposed to be about the agrifood regulator, which is a very important issue. That will take time. This is novel legislation. We are going further than the rest of Europe. This is about providing the transparency that some others are denying to farmers.

Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers.

Common Agricultural Policy

5. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that increased funding of the Common Agricultural Policy is a key objective during Ireland's Presidency of the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6780/26]

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister has known me long enough to know that I do not engage in soundbites. I engage in genuine debate. I hope we have respect for each other in that context.

The Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, is the most key element in farmers' income because it is sustainable and long-term and they know it is there. However, there is talk of cutting it by 20% to 22%. That equates to a shortfall of about €2.4 billion. What measures will be taken to restore that level of funding for farmers in the forthcoming CAP?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss a matter of real substance and of real consequence for farmers for this year and from 2028 to 2034. The decisions we make this year and going into next year will be absolutely critical. I look forward to engaging with the Deputy and colleagues on the Oireachtas joint committee and to working in the very collaborative way we have done for the past year. Members on all sides of this House have delivered. While not everyone is of the same perspective regarding the approach I have taken, we have largely delivered for our agriculture sector on major matters like TB reforms and fixing issues with ACRES. I have had support from around the House in doing those things. I have also been held to account, which is only right. I have also had support on the nitrates derogation and the steps I took to defend farmers' interests by opposing the Mercosur deal. Farming is in a better place because of the work we have done together over the last year.

Nowhere will that be more important than in the context of the CAP. We will have to make loads of small decisions. Last week, we spent three and half hours in a committee meeting discussing a range of different measures and how this will turn out. At the heart of the question are the decisions that are to be made on the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which is the overall budget for Europe. As the Deputy outlined, we do not have a sufficient amount of money ring-fenced for the CAP. It is not that the decisions we make will be academic, but they will absolutely be impacted by how big a slice of the cake the agriculture sector gets. If the CAP gets less, that will be a major issue.

I have raised this consistently at every meeting of the AGRIFISH Council. Commissioner Hansen wants the same thing as us. He wants more funding in that area. I said last summer that the 80% that has been ring-fenced is a starting point we can build on. There is also a proposal regarding a national regional partnership plans structure. As I again raised in Brussels last Monday, some of the constraints within that structure are concerning. The percentage for social cohesion could impact our ability to use that mechanism with absolute flexibility. There is also the question of how the rural clause 10% will be used in the end. These are key decisions that have not yet been made. With regard to the overall amount of money, we need a CAP that is sufficiently funded.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There was a meeting of the EU's AGRIFISH Council this week. Was progress made on additional funding at that meeting? What is happening? Farmers and people in the sector want to know where matters stand and what progress has been made. I appreciate that the Minister is saying that everything possible is being done and that he is trying to talk to people and so on but we need information and communication around this issue. Without that, farmers will naturally feel they are not being sufficiently looked after.

There is also talk of scrapping entitlements. Many farmers, particularly young farmers, had to spend a lot of money to buy entitlements. How is that going to work out? That is key for farmers, particularly young farmers who are not seeing a return on big investments they have put in. Is the Minister in favour of scrapping entitlements? Does he want to see a one-size-fits-all payment across all hectares? What are we looking at in the future? We need information in respect of all of this.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The overall level of funding will obviously be dictated by the negotiations on the MFF by the Heads of State and Government. The Departments of Finance

and foreign affairs are the lead Departments in these negotiations, in consultation with the Department of the Taoiseach. Ireland's position is very clear. We cannot support a weakening of the CAP budget. Our priority in the negotiations is to secure an adequate overall budget and a CAP that is simpler, fairer and sufficiently flexible to respond to economic, social and environmental needs. I will continue to engage actively with the Commission, the European Parliament and other member states to ensure Ireland's interests are fully reflected as discussions progress.

On the Deputy's specific point about entitlements, these are key decisions that we will have to make but, right now, there is no provision for entitlements. This is not a major issue for most member states because most of them have fully flattened and converged payments, as discussed at Cabinet last week. We have to make decisions on what to fight for. If we did get entitlements back as part of our element of flexibility, it would probably be conditional on further movement on convergence. These are the types of negotiations and discussions we need to continue to have. We will be able to make decisions in some areas earlier but others will take a bit more time.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I appreciate that. The Minister also mentioned simplification. Most farmers who have been hearing about simplification for the past 40 years would almost wish that somebody would talk about complication, because it seems to be the opposite that always happens. Every time schemes are brought out, we are told there will be simplification but, in actual fact, it means more paperwork, more red tape and more measures to comply with. We need to start doing what we say. If things are to be simpler and easier for farmers to comply with, it needs to be like that. ACRES is an example. The Minister might say that has been ironed out. I accept that there has certainly been progress in his term as Minister. However, when that scheme was brought out, it was such a mess that the Department did not know how to administer it at first. That again erodes farmers' confidence in the whole system. That is what I am getting at here. All of this is about farmers' confidence in the system. They need to know that, when they are set a particular objective, they will be rewarded when they attain it. That is not how they feel. They are afraid the next CAP will be very much the same.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I share the Deputy's concerns about simplification. Historically, we have seen complication. You see this with measures coming forward from Brussels, particularly from directorates general other than DG AGRI. We have the carbon border adjustment mechanism, CBAM, and we had the EU deforestation regulation. Those proposals came from a good place but their practical impact on farming and so on had not been fully considered. We then had to unpick some of those measures. We discussed CBAM for a considerable length of time on Monday.

The Presidency of the EU in the second half of his year, when I will chair the AGRIFISH Council, which comprises me and the 26 other ministers for agriculture, gives us a huge opportunity to shape discussions. I am on record as having stated clearly before that I really do want to deliver simplification. If our budget is going to be constrained, or even if we get it up to 100%, the purchasing power of those funds in 2028 and 2029 will be very different from what it was in 2021. That is a challenge for us. Ultimately, simplification means fewer schemes. It means the greatest amount of money possible is directed at farmers and that it is

not tied up in bureaucratic schemes. The Deputy mentioned ACRES. I am very proud of the work my Department and I did to address those issues.

It is operating like a perfectly normal scheme now, with more than 96% of farmers paid. On the record of the House, just to clarify, almost €750 million has been paid to farmers since 2023 through this environmental scheme. This is a serious success in supporting our farmers in the work they do.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 6 and 7 taken with Written Answers.

Animal Diseases

25. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are adequate amounts of bluetongue vaccine here to carry out a vaccine programme in the spring, if needed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6708/26]

Deputy Martin Kenny: This question is on the bluetongue outbreak. We saw yesterday that three more farms have been found to have animals with bluetongue. It is a very serious problem and a lot of farmers are very concerned. What is missing from all of this is that we do not know what the plan is. I appreciate we will have a meeting with members of the agriculture committee in respect of this after these questions. We do not know what the plan is. We know that vaccines have been approved. Are there stocks of them? What will happen as we move forward? Where did this come from? That is one of the big questions a lot of farmers have and it is their real concern. What do they need to watch for? How do animals get infected?

Deputy Martin Heydon: The positive case was found last week due to stringent routine investigations and testing of a culled cow that had been slaughtered. Antibodies were found, which showed the culled cow had been infected with bluetongue virus, BTV-3, last year on a farm in Wexford. We went in with our follow-up tracing and testing of all of the animals on that farm and the contiguous farm surrounding it. As of yesterday, unfortunately, we are up to 11 positive cases across that farm and three neighbouring farms. There are 11 positive cases on four farms.

We were monitoring all last summer. I pay tribute to farmers for their surveillance and to our private veterinary practitioners for how they all work with our regional veterinary officer teams from the Department. We worked well to do our best on surveillance last year, when it was rampant across Europe and the UK, to keep this disease off the island until now. It is unwelcome but it is not hugely surprising. We were monitoring wind activity and the risk of this blowing over in warm weather. Midges are the vector for spreading this disease from animal to animal. They are likely to be blown over in the wind from Wales and France in the warm weather, and that is most likely where it came from.

We have responded in real time. Our approach was always to identify this early, lock it down and try to eradicate it. We have lost our disease-free status. It is important to reassure the public that there are no human health or food safety concerns with this disease. It is very

much a production disease but it is a big cause of concern for farmers. Some of their animals will get sick from it and there are trade implications now that we have lost our disease-free status. We have lost our beef access to China, which I announced yesterday. We have been working with third countries over the past two years to reform our veterinary health certificates we will continue to do so.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister and I appreciate all of the work that has been done. When I ask where it came from, there is the monitoring of the wind but we are in the winter and the weather is very cold. The likelihood of it coming from midges blown across the Irish Sea is probably minimal, I expect. How much investigation of this has been done? A lot of straw is being imported. Could the disease come with midges in the straw? These are the kinds of questions farmers ask me. People are perplexed that it is here at this time of the year. While I doubt it is the case, is there a connection with the outbreak in County Down before Christmas? That is very unlikely seeing as the cases were in two opposite ends of the country. People would like to get information in respect of this. We tell farmers to be vigilant but what do they need to be vigilant for? This is really what we need to focus on. The Minister did not get to speak about the vaccines and where that is at. Perhaps we will hear about it at the meeting later.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I focused on one part of the question. I will respond now on the vaccines. The first animal that tested positive did so for antibodies, which proved the culled cow had it last year. As we know, midge activity can only spread disease when the temperature is over a constant 12°C, so we are really in the high-risk period from April or May until October. This animal had it last year and did not present symptoms. The other ten animals that have tested positive since are not displaying symptoms. Many of them tested positive for the antibodies, which means they had it last year. An animal is only infectious for approximately 60 days but it retains the antibodies. When we test we can see they had it last year but they did not present symptoms. Most do present symptoms, and when we ask farmers to be vigilant what we are saying is that if an animal is sick or if farmers see unusual behaviour, they should contact their private vet. The private vets are completely plugged in with our regional veterinary officers and beyond. I am out of time again but I have a reply on the vaccines and I will provide it in the response to the next supplementary question.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank the Minister. I want to follow up a little on this. Obviously, these are animals that probably got infected last summer. This will concern many in the agricultural community. Does this mean there are animals on a lot of farms around the country that contracted it last summer but it was not identified, they presented no symptoms and it will only be when they go to the factory and a test is done that it will be found? This is a big concern I have learned about this morning from the Minister. I was not aware of that before now, and I am sure a lot of people were not either.

With regard to the spreading of the disease, we are in cold weather now but climate change is probably at the root of a lot of this. With the weather getting warmer, we will see a lot more of these diseases, which have probably been confined to hotter climates, starting to move up. This will be an issue as we move forward. We could get a couple of weeks in March when

temperatures are 15°C or 16°C. What will happen then? That is the issue we need to focus on and it is where the vaccine comes into play.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is not as big a concern that an animal had it here last year. A number of animals displaying antibodies now, showing they had it last year, gives us the concern that midges in that area were infected with it last year. These midges are lying dormant at present. Will some of them still have the disease when the temperature goes back up to spread it? That is the real concern. This disease is not passed from animal to animal. It is passed through a midge landing and biting an infected animal and then biting another animal. That is how it is spreading across Europe and beyond.

It is fair to say that the response in January is very different from what our response would be if we were in July. The fact is that an animal is only infectious for 60 days, so an animal testing positive now will not cause the disease to spread through a midge landing on it because by the time the temperature gets warmer, the animal will no longer be infectious.

In terms of the vaccine, we changed our approach. Our approach was always to identify it and move in quickly. If we vaccinate, we mask the disease because we cannot tell the difference between a positive test result and a vaccinated animal. Late last year, when the disease appeared in Northern Ireland, I approved vaccines for this year. That was a commercial decision. I ask people to engage with their veterinary practitioners to see whether vaccines are suitable for them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the permission of the House, I will go back to Question No. 8.

Climate Action Plan

8. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has contingency planning in place to protect the future of Irish farming if the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, AMOC, collapses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6975/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: Over the past few days, we have seen how unprepared the State is for even moderately extreme weather, with the likes of yellow weather warnings and Storm Chandra. My question is about something much more severe, which is what contingency planning the Minister has in place for Irish agriculture if the AMOC, which includes the Gulf Stream, collapses, as researchers now believe is likely to start happening between 2050 and 2063.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Murphy. Is "moderately extreme" a thing or is it an oxymoron? When I was in Australia somebody pulled me up for saying something was "terrible bad". I was told something is either bad or terrible but that it cannot be both. Deputy Murphy caught me with "moderately extreme".

All joking aside, I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this important question concerning the resilience of Irish farming in the event of a significant disruption to the Atlantic Meridional

Overturning Circulation. AMOC is a massive system of ocean currents, often called a conveyor belt, that transports warm, salty surface water from the tropics north toward Europe and North America. The movement of this warm water plays a crucial role in regulating our climate and helping to keep Ireland and much of Europe warmer and milder than other regions at the same latitude. This circulation helps Ireland to maintain generally mild temperatures, reducing the severity of prolonged cold weather, and plays an important role in shaping rainfall patterns and the occurrence of extreme weather events across Ireland and Europe.

The Department played a key role in developing the climate risks identified in the national climate change risk assessment, working closely with the Environmental Protection Agency, Met Éireann and other Departments to ensure that risks to agriculture, forestry and seafood were fully reflected.

Climate adaptation and long-term resilience planning are core priorities for my Department under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2021 and the updated national adaptation framework, NAF.

My Department does not treat the AMOC risk in isolation. Rather, we continuously review climate risks as part of our co-ordinated cross-government planning frameworks, including through the national climate change risk assessment, NCCRA, and subsequent adaptation planning processes, which provide evidence-based assessments of hazards that could impact the economy, environment and society. These things cannot be looked at on their own. We have just been discussing a virus, bluetongue, that is found across Europe and climate change is probably having that impact. These things are all interlinked.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What is the contingency plan? The Minister says he does not treat AMOC in isolation. That is good, but does he treat it at all? The national climate change risk assessment explicitly states that events such as the collapse of the AMOC are not addressed in the scenarios used within the NCCRA. The assessment does not account for this type of scenario. What is the contingency planning? It will be utterly devastating. It is a sign of the severity of the climate catastrophe. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC, said it might happen by 2100 or later. Now, it could begin to happen from 2050. There was a report in June by Dutch scientists who said the collapse of AMOC could see Dublin experiencing temperatures of -22°C, with one day in three out of the entire year having sub-zero temperatures. Met Éireann said that an AMOC collapse would be a high-impact, transformative event with severe consequences. Obviously, the consequences for agriculture would be very severe.

Deputy Martin Heydon: When I first got this job a year ago I got many regular briefings on disease threats, risks, plant diseases, animal diseases, weather risks and everything else. It is a bit overwhelming and then after a while one realises we have our mitigation plans and our approach, which I will go into in a minute. However, it is important we do not catastrophise. The NCCRA, published in 2025, identifies over 100 climate risks and prioritises 43 significant risks across sectors. While AMOC is noted as a system concern, a full collapse is considered a low-likelihood, high-impact event. More immediate risks to agriculture include increased weather variability, storm impacts and shifts in rainfall and temperature patterns. My sectoral adaption plan for 2025 strengthens resilience in agriculture, forestry and seafood. The key objective is to embed adaptation, enhance resilience and integrate adaptation and mitigation

measures. Priority actions cover a wide range of areas, to respond to the direct question, such as advisory and technical capacity, sustainable land and water management, which involves improving soil health, water retention, hedgerows, flood resilience and other measures, which I can address in my next supplementary contribution.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I heard the Minister's answer and, unfortunately, he is saying we do not have any contingency plans for the collapse of AMOC.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I just listed actions.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, those actions are all based on not addressing AMOC. The NCCRA explicitly states that its assessment is not based on the collapse of AMOC.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It says it is low likelihood.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not know if the Minister knows that climate scientists are now saying this is likely to begin in 2063. AMOC is already weakening. There is lots of evidence to indicate AMOC is already weakening. A high-risk event, even if there is a low likelihood of it happening in the next 20 or 30 years, is something we need to plan for. The year 2063 is not that far away. There are people who are taking up a farm now who could be affected by the collapse of AMOC. Are we looking at things like drought resistant crops, nature-based solutions, early warning systems and community resilience building? These are all measures recommended by Professor Peter Thorne, chair of the Climate Change Advisory Council's adaptation committee. What work is the Department doing on those?

Deputy Martin Heydon: To finish the point I was making on the sectoral adaption plan, as well as priority actions in areas such as advisory and technical capacity, sustainable land and water management, we also have forestry resilience, species diversification, improved management and early warning for pests and fire. We are the fourth largest spending Department on research and much of that research is focused on the impact of our changing climate and building our resilience, whether it is in forestry sector, the crop sector or animal health and welfare; the marine and coastal adaptation; climate resilient aquaculture infrastructure and coastal protection; research, knowledge transfer and innovation; or sector-wide learning, innovation and local preparedness. These all feed into the broader approach. I know the Deputy's question is focused on AMOC but we have to have a hierarchy of risk. The plan is delivery focused and evidence based, with 102 actions designed to mainstream adaptation across policy, regulation, funding and advisory systems, to demonstrate measurable progress over time on all of these key areas. We cannot just focus on one specific area, as the Deputy's question does. It is the broad range of issues and changes that are coming in that space.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will move to Question No. 11 before returning to Question No. 9 to give Deputy Ó Murchú a chance to-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am ready.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Can I be indulged as I am supposed to be chairing a committee?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is fine.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I appreciate the collegiality from my constituency colleague, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Artificial Intelligence

11. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has considered the potential use of AI to develop a carbon map for a national audit of carbon sequestration on farmland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6848/26]

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is great to see such collegiality among the Louth Deputies.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Louth and proud.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy McGreehan for raising an important point on the role carbon sequestration can play in agriculture and the opportunities there are in this space. I acknowledge the Deputy is wearing a St. Brigid's cross. Both Louth and Kildare are very proud of Brigid. We are looking forward to the public holiday this weekend in her honour.

Innovative technologies to improve our measurement of carbon sequestration on Irish farmland are important. My Department is committed to improving the measurement, monitoring and reporting of carbon sequestration, which is central to both climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. We are actively considering all innovative technologies to enhance the accuracy and efficiency of national carbon assessments. This may include AI in future work, in line with Government guidelines on its use.

Initiatives such as the soil sampling and analysis programme, the National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory, and the Teagasc Signpost programme are currently helping to provide a more detailed and spatially resolved insights into carbon stocks and changes over time. This investment in research helps develop the science that shapes and improves the accuracy of our national greenhouse gas, GHG, inventory reporting. The Deputy will be aware that the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, is responsible for the reporting of emissions and removals associated with land use activities on an annual basis to the EU and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Developing accurate, evidence-based tools to track carbon sequestration is a key priority and my Department will continue to investigate other emerging technologies to support Ireland's climate and farming objectives.

In essence, to be able to monetise and give a financial return for farmers on carbon farming down the line, and to ensure we are in line with what Europe is coming with, we have to do our baseline measurement. We have invested a lot of money, through Teagasc and the Department, in flux towers to measure the baseline activity of carbon in current soil types. We will have to be able to prove additionality down the line in order to monetise it with increased land management measures.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: We have a real opportunity here. Louth could lead on this. The use of AI to develop a national carbon map for farmland could be a game-changer, not just for our climate targets but for fairness, accuracy and farm viability. Farmers deserve clear, credible data that recognises the carbon they are already sequestering through hedgerows, grasslands, wetland and soil management. I see the potential in Louth. I live in a rural area. I see the biodiversity highway we have in our hedgerows and what it is producing. We are sequestering carbon every single day. That network of hedgerows and field margins is so important. An AI-driven map would be beneficial for Irish farmers.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We continue to monitor the latest technology and the opportunities and the amount of work under way in this area is significant. The National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory is part of my Department's strategic investment in soil carbon research. Funding was supplied to the establishment of the observatory by supplying the scientific infrastructure to measure GHG fluxes from soils under agriculture management. There are 28 flux towers across a range of soil types. The observatory will place Ireland at the forefront of EU carbon sequestration research and enable Ireland to better quantify soil carbon emissions and sinks from agricultural land on peat soils, enable mitigation measures to increase carbon sequestration to be included in the national inventory, participate in the EU Integrated Carbon Observatory System, ICOS, network, and enable Ireland to benefit from the 2018 EU effort sharing regulation.

The Teagasc signpost programme has a critical role to play. Our national soil sampling programme has also played a role, as have farm carbon research projects. I mentioned earlier the Department of agriculture has the fourth biggest State Department spending on research. A lot of it is in the areas of climate mitigation and carbon.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am really glad to hear there is a lot of work going on. AI can make it collaborative, bring the work together and make that carbon map.

For the weekend that is in it, we will think of our nature and heritage and what our plants and trees mean to us. St. Brigid's tree was the birch. It is about fertility, new life and rebirth. If you slap the arse of a cow, you would have a fertile cow and a healthy calf. Trees and nature are entwined with our history and our carbon future. Protecting that history and native Irish flora and fauna is really important. Our farmers know this and have known it for thousands of years. We need to appreciate it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: As we head into the weekend of Imbolc and the start of spring, St. Brigid taught us many great things. She might have been connected with the birch but in Kildare she gave us our county name - Cill Dara being "the church of the oak" - where she built her first male and female monastery. She was ahead of her time. As the patron saint of milkmaids and brewers, she had a huge connection to all things agricultural and would very much approve of the work we are doing to improve the sustainability of our agricultural system.

Renewable Energy Generation

9. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the uptake of the latest solar capital investment scheme; whether his Department is working on

proposals to improve or streamline the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6877/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am delighted the Minister has recognised the huge importance of St. Brigid from Faughart, not to get into a contentious issue.

The Minister dealt earlier with the question of using AI to develop a carbon map. Sequestration is something I would support. We need to get to grips with renewables. We are talking about solar schemes that work for farmers. We know they have issues at times when the best of land is being used. Regarding other renewables, relations of mine have spoken of issues around getting wind turbines, particularly replacement wind turbines. That is everything from planning right through to the schemes that work for farmers.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy. We will not let St. Brigid completely dominate today but while the people of Louth are proud that she was born in Faughart, I note she moved to Kildare pretty quickly and spent most of her life there. You cannot choose where you are born but you choose where you live.

The targeted agriculture modernisation scheme, TAMS 3, which is EU cofunded, provides grants to farmers to build and-or improve a specified range of farm buildings and equipment on their holdings. The solar capital investment scheme, SCIS, is one of the measures in TAMS which provides support to farmers wishing to invest in renewable energy, thereby reducing their dependence on fossil fuels. The objective of the scheme is to enable farmers to consume solar PV-generated electricity onsite to meet their farm electricity demand, including in respect of the dwelling house. In order to encourage the purchase of solar investments, the scheme is ring-fenced with its own investment ceiling of €90,000, and grant-aided at the enhanced rate of 60%. The SCIS has been hugely popular with farmers, with 5,529 applications received under the first ten tranches of the scheme. To date, a total of 3,167 approvals have issued, with payments of €22.9 million issuing to 1,232 applicants. Approvals continue to issue on a daily basis.

TAMS 3 operates in tranches, with generally four tranches per year. The timeline for approval of applications under TAMS 3, including those received under the SCIS, has been agreed with the relevant farm bodies and laid down in the farmers charter. The issuing of approvals following the selection of valid applications will take place within three months of ranking and selection of files under each tranche, and no later than six months following the closure of a tranche. Ranking and selection is the process whereby the overall cost of applications received in a particular tranche is assessed, taking into account the available budget. It is a regulatory requirement that ranking and selection must take place on all eligible applications. On average, all eligible TAMS 3 investments, including solar PV applications, where there are no issues with the application are processed within three months following the ranking and selection process. I believe the processing of applications using the current structure is the best way to ensure applicants receive timely approval to proceed with their investments.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I appreciate most of what the Minister said and am doing my absolute best to ignore the disgraceful commentary he made at

the beginning. I commend the work being done to remember St. Brigid by the community in Faughart. Dundalk BIDS and Martin McElligott have done a great piece of work. We need to ensure not only Kildare but also Louth gets Government support in relation to that.

I welcome the information the Minister has provided on TAMS 3. I have heard anecdotally of issues. We have all heard farmers say they want to ensure the majority of the ground they have that could be used for solar, particularly sheds and so on, is used. That could be of benefit to farmers and the wider environment.

I would also ask the wider question about wind turbines. I have been at many meetings of the IFA and I know farmers sometimes get hammered in relation to their position. A huge number of them want to do more. Can we review this to provide the best solutions for farmers and renewables? That will bring real benefits in the future.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will make a last reference to St. Brigid. I was jesting earlier. Kildare and Louth will both enjoy our public holiday next week, the third since it was established. I fought hard in government for the public holiday for St. Brigid. It makes great sense in many ways. With Councillor John Reilly and the community in Faughart and the broader area, we all share in the legacy of Brigid. There is a phenomenal opportunity for tourism and so on in that story, even beyond our shores. We all share that in Kildare, Louth and beyond.

There are different elements to the question the Deputy is posing, and all are relevant. TAMS support for the rooftop solar scheme was largely for large energy users on farms to offset against large energy bills. Not every farmer has a large energy bill. If you are dairy farmer, you certainly do. It has been an intensive cost on the TAMS budget. That budget is not infinite and has to be managed out to the end of 2027, hence the ranking and selection. My colleague, Deputy Peter Burke, the then Minister for planning, brought in an exemption for solar PV on rooftops of agricultural holdings in 2022 and that was a key component in Government facilitating this roll-out.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I suppose I would agree with the Minister's commentary. It was a lot less contentious that time. I would probably have agreement from my councillors, Antóin Watters and Fiona Mhic Conchoille, on the necessity for support. At times, the county of Louth probably did not get the support and recognition for St. Brigid's close connections.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Martin Kenny): I think we will have to have a special debate on St. Brigid on a later occasion.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Maybe it is down to lack of representation. I do not know.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That will be the last reference. I thought we might have been having a row about other issues. I had another question on Bord Bia that might have been taken but we will leave that for another day.

I accept what has been done is working for a significant number of farmers. I ask the Minister to meet farmers on the whole piece on renewables to a greater degree. Deputy Kenny,

who I nearly called "Minister", has spoken - and we have spoken before - about the need to streamline schemes and facilitate people. The Minister spoke of the perfect scenario of having one scheme to deal with everything. We need a piece of that done, both technically and from an administrative point of view. Can we look at a review of everything from solar to wind turbines and what works for all farmers and wider society?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Absolutely. This is all about balance and giving farmers opportunities to offset costs. It is open to farmers, as landowners, to pursue opportunities to derive or manage income from renewables. That is where rooftop solar has been important. Under TAMS, it is only to offset high energy bills but if farmers put it on their rooftops through a normal system whereby they can sell it back to the grid and make an income from it, there is nothing to stop a beef or sheep farmer generating an income of €5,000, €6,000 or €7,000 per year from the roof of a shed while the core agricultural activity involving cattle, shed or grain continues in the shed.

When one thinks of income volatility and the ups and downs in market prices, anything that can provide a steady income for farmers that offsets that income volatility definitely helps with incomes, but also helps in terms of generational renewal and providing certainty for the next generation to look to take on. We all agree that we want to work here in a balanced way.

With 3,167 approvals, almost €23 million paid out to 1,232 farms and approvals on a rolling basis, this has been hugely popular and hugely successful. I just have to manage the overall TAMS budget under my priorities.

Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.

Agriculture Schemes

12. **Deputy David Maxwell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the current compensation paid to farmers who have to cull animals under a notifiable disease order, such as TB and bird flu, will be reviewed so that a fair compensation is paid, over and above the market value of the animals, to include a proportion of consequential loss; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [70152/25]

Deputy David Maxwell: Will the Minister consider the current compensation paid to farmers who have to cull animals under a notifiable disease order, such as TB or bird flu, and can this be reviewed so that a fair compensation is paid, over and above the market value of the animals, to include a proportion of the consequential loss? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The control of all animal disease is an ongoing challenge for Irish farmers and my Department. I am acutely aware of the emotional and financial impacts that an outbreak of any disease can have on farmers and their families across rural Ireland. My Department provides a range of financial supports for farmers affected by certain animal disease outbreaks. Section 31(2) of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, as amended, provides that compensation shall not exceed the open market value of an animal before its killing or natural death or destruction - less any salvage value or payment under a policy of

insurance in respect of it - as if the disease did not exist. I am, therefore, obliged to work within the provisions of the Animal Health and Welfare Act when compensating farmers for the loss of animals associated with disease where a compensation scheme exists.

The primary support scheme in relation to the valuation of animals affected by a disease outbreak is the on-farm market valuation scheme under the bovine tuberculosis, TB, programme. Most people are familiar with that scheme. Further supports are available through the income supplement scheme, depopulation grant scheme and the hardship grant scheme. In 2025, of the 39,790 animals valued under the on-farm market valuation scheme, just over 91% of animals were valued below the scheme ceilings. Other examples include financial supports for farmers under the bovine viral diarrhoea, BVD, programme, where animals are removed from a holding under the programme, as well as compensation to farmers who had birds culled due to an outbreak of avian influenza.

Significant financial resources are expended each year by my Department on supporting farmers affected by animal disease outbreaks directly as well as supporting farmers to reduce their risk of an animal disease outbreak through facilitating engagement with their private veterinary practitioners on improving on-farm biosecurity, which is the first line of defence in preventing an outbreak of disease on a farm.

Deputy David Maxwell: I suppose every TD's office is getting phone calls from farmers. Farmers are losing out. Over the past 18 months, the price of cattle has increased and that is good for Irish farming. In one case, a farmer reckoned his animal was worth €5,000 in the mart and he got the €3,000. It is a big loss. Cattle prices could drop, though we hope they will not. Going forward, can we look at a scheme whereby, if prices have increased and they stay at that level for six months or so, farmers will be compensated? Never mind the monetary loss for a farmer, it is the emotional loss that a farmer feels when a cow or bullock goes down with TB, the herd is restricted. It affects the whole farm. Is there something we can look at, on the side of the compensation, when prices remain high over a number of months?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I absolutely empathise and understand. I remember when we had a reactor at home in the 1990s. I was still at school at the time. The devastation and the impact of having a restricted herd and of the cow going off to the factory was devastating. Financially, it had a significant impact, but emotionally, even beyond that, it created huge turmoil.

I would very much like to be able to not have any caps on ceilings here but I have to manage a budget within the constraints and balance the interventions and the allocation of that money to make sure that ultimately it is driven to reducing the overall incidence of this happening and having fewer farmers having to deal with this awful impact on them, their families and their farms into the future. That is what my new TB programme does. I will monitor this situation. As we say, we do not have a crystal ball as to what the price of beef will be over the course of this year. We do not want to see it drop. Farmers are getting an income now that they need to get and that is very important. In terms of managing my budget, the TB programme in 2025 alone cost €121 million.

Deputy David Maxwell: That is good news. I want to move on to the poultry. Before Christmas, a couple of flocks in Monaghan were affected by bird flu. From speaking to one of

the owners, I know that, never mind the loss of the birds you have in your house, it is the cleaning of the house and the disposal of the bedding and shavings. Even shavings that were on-site had to be sent to a specialist for disposal. Following the cleaning of the house, you have let the house lie fallow for a number of months before it can be brought back into use. The owner was saying that, never mind the loss of the birds, that year you will lose at least one more rearing session, probably two, and that is a big hit. For the poultry end, is there anything we can look at or what is the set-up with compensation for those poultry farmers who were unlucky enough to lose out before Christmas with the bird flu?

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy will be aware that last week we received our HPAI disease-free status again because we have gone three months without an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza. I pay tribute to our poultry farmers, to private veterinary practitioners, to my staff in the regional veterinary offices and my chief veterinary officer and her team in my Department because this has been a huge effort. At the start of the high-risk period in November last, it looked as though we would have a lot of instances. Everyone worked together. Obviously, I introduced the housing order and we had the mandatory biosecurity measures, but people really worked together in the sector and what could have been a very bad outbreak was controlled.

From the compensation perspective, last year €2.384 million was spend on compensation for avian influenza across five different sites. Compensation occurred in turkey flocks in Ireland in November. Ireland is still in a higher-risk period for further incursions of the HPAI, as winter is a higher-risk period for avian influenza, as the Deputy will be aware, due to the migration of wild birds and the extended survival of the virus in colder periods.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Martin Kenny): Deputy O'Rourke is the longest waiting, although we have two more Deputies coming in. Will we go to Deputy O'Rourke and then revert to the list?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I do not mind.

Trade Agreements

16. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the assessment which has taken place of the potential impact of the Mercosur trade deal on the Irish beef industry; the measures he will take to mitigate this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5369/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What assessment has taken place of the potential impact of the Mercosur trade deal on the Irish beef industry? What measures will he will take to mitigate this?

Deputy Martin Heydon: In 2019, the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment commissioned an independent economic and sustainability impact assessment, ESIA, which both my Department and Teagasc fed into. The ESIA, which was published in July 2021, estimated that beef imports from the Mercosur countries into the EU would increase

by approximately 53,000 tonnes. The study noted that, assuming the additional imports were in high-end cuts only, and depending on other factors, producer returns in Ireland could fall by around 2%, due to the increase in imports to the EU. This would translate to a maximum reduction in the value of Irish beef output of between €44 million and €55 million based on export figures available at the time of publication.

On sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, standards, the study notes that the implementation of the agreement does not in any way lower EU standards regarding market access for Mercosur, including on beef. The EU's SPS standards are amongst the highest in the world and are non-negotiable. The Government is firmly of the view that these standards must continue to be rigorously upheld for the benefit of European consumers. This is a matter I raised directly with the Commissioner, Mr. Várhelyi, following the recent recall of Brazilian beef and the need for Europe to increase the number of inspections, both in third countries and at our border control posts, which was agreed to by Europe before Christmas. We have Mercosur beef coming in to Europe and have had 200,000 tonnes at a very high tariff rate. The Mercosur agreement is about what the tariff is for it. It is not that it does not come in. In some ways, the food safety and SPS standards are non-negotiable. We do not allow hormone-fed beef. We have very strict control on our antibiotic use here among our farmers and consumers are reassured of that, and we expect any produce that comes in from anywhere outside of Europe to meet those same standards. The issue for farmers has been on the environmental standards, which I can talk to later.

10 o'clock

The Government has been very clear about Ireland's concerns in relation to the EU-Mercosur agreement over a number of years, particularly its potential impact on the beef sector, the strength of its climate and sustainability commitments, and the food safety and environmental standards in Mercosur countries, due to which we had to have safeguards, irrespective of what tariff rate the product comes in at.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The impact is tens of millions of euros and a very significant question mark over food safety, standards, quality and the environmental impact. "Non-negotiable" is an easy thing to say but we know in practical terms, whether in food safety or technology, that there are many examples and huge potential for this to be the thin end of the wedge. That is the reality of this. It is a concern, and all we have to do is look at the *Irish Farmers' Journal* to see this. All of the incentives are there, of course.

Regarding the environmental concerns, the Minister said "non-negotiable" but what measures are proposed? It is my firm opinion that there are no cast-iron guarantees that the standards that currently apply to European countries, including Ireland, will apply to these products coming in.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I remind the Deputy that the Government opposed the Mercosur trade deal, for very good reasons, which I have articulated. In line with our programme for Government commitment to work with like-minded countries that oppose the deal, I very much took a twin-track approach over the course of the last year. Every month that I attend the Agri-Fish Council in Brussels, trade is on the agenda. I have raised our concerns on the sensitivity of the impact of the Mercosur trade deal on our beef sector in particular. There is an economic

impact of somewhere between €44 million and €55 million a year on a beef sector worth over €3 billion.

On the environmental element, our farmers have been on a journey and a trajectory of increased ambition around environmental sustainability, while producing top-quality food in line with the regulations set down by Europe, which farmers have signed up to. That has increased the sustainable credentials of their food but it has impacted their margins, and it has definitely had an impact on the cost of doing business. We then chase the higher markets to get better value for that product. That is why we do not compete with Brazilian beef abroad. We are in the higher value markets, where we get a better return. We are not in the commodity market in that space. Therefore, those environmental standards have stood to us well. However, allowing other beef into Europe to displace us in this market is inherently unfair to our farmers.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The twin-track approach the Government took in relation to Mercosur was that it was for it and against it at the same time. If we look at the Government's actions and efforts to oppose it, they fell far short of what was required, and they certainly were not successful in delivering what Irish farmers needed. We look at how Government MEPs voted on the referral to the European Court of Justice. They literally did both things, yes and no, and spoke with both sides of their mouths. There are real concerns as to the potential for the European Commission to move to provisionally apply the Mercosur trade agreement, which would be completely unacceptable, given the vote by the MEPs and the referral to the ECJ. What efforts will the Government make to ensure the Mercosur trade deal is not provisionally implemented?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Irrespective of what way the Deputy tries to spin this, the record shows very clearly what way Ireland voted. If he talks to anybody in Europe who is in favour of the deal, they are very clear that the Irish Government opposed it. Irrespective of what he tries to tell people, the facts are the facts, and they are there. The Deputy can put down questions to the Minister for trade on all elements of trade deals. I do not have that competence but I have the role, as Minister for agriculture, to defend my sector and talk about its important role.

The point I was making was that our beef farmers meet all of that extra conditionality around environmental standards, which means they have been able to chase a higher return for their produce. It was the right thing to do. However, giving a preferential tariff rate to 99,000 tonnes of beef that comes in from outside third countries, and does not satisfy those same environmental standards, would cut to the hearts of farmers, who have continuously raised these issues. We know that beef already comes in due to the integrated nature of the global supply chain but it comes in at a high tariff rate. It was the giving of the preferential tariff rate for beef that is of a lower environmental standard that was unacceptable to me.

Trade Agreements

13. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has undertaken any analysis on the scope of potential job losses or profit losses

which may be faced by farmers in Ireland as a result of the Mercosur trade deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5981/26]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We all know that Mercosur will have a significantly detrimental effect on farmers throughout the country. The Minister mentioned the headline figures for the damage it will do to the sector. What kind of modelling and research has the Department done in relation to the downward pressure it will have on farmers' incomes and the loss of jobs that Mercosur, if implemented, will create in the sector?

Deputy Martin Heydon: In 2019, the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment commissioned an independent economic and sustainability impact assessment, ESIA, which both my Department and Teagasc fed into. As part of the ESIA, and specifically on the macroeconomic impacts of the agreement for Ireland, it was noted that shifts in employment across sectors were forecast to be marginal and to mirror changes in production across sectors. Employment was found to generally increase in manufacturing and decrease slightly in the agrifood and services sectors.

The forecast change in employment in the agrifood sector is minimal. The main impacts were found to be in other processed foods and extraction, where a 0.3% decrease in employment by 2035 is noted. For beef, sheep, other red meats and other primary products, the decrease in employment by 2035 is predicted at 0.1%, whereas dairy and other meat products see no change. In terms of the agrifood sector market impacts, the study primarily focuses on the impacts on beef producers. Assuming that additional imports would be in high-end cuts only, and depending on other factors, it states that producer returns in Ireland could fall by about 2% due to the increase in imports to the EU. This would translate to a maximum reduction in the value of Irish beef output of between €44 million and €55 million based on export figures available at the time of publication.

I put on the record of the House earlier the impact on farmers who have attained higher environmental standards but then see food coming in at a lower environmental standard given a preferential tariff rate. This is not about blocking food. The nature of global supply chains is that they are highly integrated, and we need to explain that. In the context of other rows that are happening here at the moment, there is a lack of honesty in this debate. However, giving preferential access to 99,000 tonnes by Europe was unacceptable to me, and I continuously articulated that. We all have a responsibility regarding the challenges we face in agriculture, and we have talked about bluetongue this morning, CAP reform, CBAM and different things. It is important that we do not catastrophise this. Our farmers are the most resilient businesspeople in this country. They have faced many headwinds in the past, and they will face and deal with this as well. We did our best to try to stop it with the Government vote. There is still a way to go as to whether it will come in or not, but irrespective of what happens, farmers have proven their resilience in the past and will prove it again.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister talks about resilience. A third of farmers are making their living off the farm, according to Teagasc, a third are only making a living because someone in the household is working off the farm, and a full third are currently either going into debt or are in poverty. That is an incredible figure. Every year, the number of farmers is reducing in this country. The Minister is saying there will be an extra reduction in employment

as a result of this particular deal, and he refers to a €55 million reduction in income in the sector over this period of time. That is catastrophic for farmers, who are already clinging on to economic survival.

Last week, my colleague, Deputy Paul Lawless, was in Strasbourg lobbying MEPs. Luckily, he and others won the vote there. Incredibly, MEPs in the Minister's party voted against farmers in Strasbourg last week, which is shocking. Is it going to be a situation where the Minister makes sure this deal is not implemented unless it gets the democratic assent of Europe, or is he going to allow this deal to be implemented before there is even a proper vote or judgment on it?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I have been very clear in my role since 23 January last year on every given occasion. Four days after I became the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I was in Brussels at my first Agri-Fish Council, and I put on the record my concerns and opposition to the Mercosur trade deal. I have worked very closely with individual like-minded countries to build a coalition and try to get a blocking minority. I have also worked to get the safeguards improved so that if the blocking minority failed, the safeguards would better protect the very farmers the Deputy is speaking about. The change in the safeguards from 10% to 5% will be very significant if this deal comes in. Nonetheless, our view was very clear: that is not enough for us and we oppose the deal.

I would challenge the Deputy's catastrophisation of the issues. We have seen record year-on-year growth in the value of our agrifood exports. I have no doubt that when the CSO figures for 2025 come out in the very near future, they will again show another year of record growth to over €21 billion in the value of the agrifood exports that our farmers produce, compared to €8 billion or €9 billion a little over ten years ago.

Teagasc income surveys last year for every sector proved very significant percentage increases for each sector as well, and those percentage increases are income going into our family farms on the ground all across rural Ireland.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The problem is that anybody can pick an individual year and say, "This year is above the previous year." The fact is that in the previous year Irish farm incomes were extremely low. In the beef sector they were a fraction of the average industrial wage in this country. Most beef farmers in this country were making a fraction of the average industrial wage two years ago. Plucking last year as an example of movement in income does not give a long-term trend with regard to the figures. The figure I mentioned, that one third of farmers are in poverty or in debt, is a Teagasc figure. One third of farmers are operating in another job off the farm to be able to make sure the farm works. That is a Teagasc figure. The Minister said he has been very clear but I still do not know what he, as Minister, is going to do to prevent Mercosur being implemented before there is a court judgment or a final vote in the European Parliament.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I am sorry but I think the Deputy is mixing me up with the Minister for trade and that sector. The Deputy is welcome to put that question down. What I talk about is the role I have played. I have said very clearly on the record of the House, in response to the Deputy's first question, exactly what I have done over the last year and what I continue to do

to advocate for our sector. I would pull the Deputy up on the fact that he is catastrophising here. We face loads of challenges and I will always defend the agriculture sector for the best interests of our farmers and our agriculture sector first. That is my job. It is my job in the Department and at the Cabinet table. I do it to the very best of my ability and I will continue to do it. I will also protect our farmers who feel vulnerable to being told that any one thing, whether it is this or the bluetongue virus, is the end of the road. We grew up as young children on farms hearing that there would be no future in farming because Maastricht was going to change everything. We have heard that the Fischler reforms, Covid, Brexit and the high cost of input following the Ukraine war were going to change everything. Farming has endured and continued and it will continue to do so in the future with the support of the Government, like it always has in the past.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not the same. Why can the Minister not push back against-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Please, Deputy-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Why can the Minister not push back-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Sorry, Deputy-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Why can the Minister not push back against the deal being implemented?

Deputy Martin Heydon: We voted against it.

Animal Welfare

14. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding the increase in funding for animal welfare groups as committed to in the programme for Government; if multi-annual funding can be considered to allow for longer-term planning by these groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6000/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: We can all recognise the importance of animal welfare groups and the work that they do. I particularly welcome the increase in funding to them, to €6.5 million, in accordance with the commitment in the programme for Government. The 94 groups which will benefit from that do incredibly important work. Can we, however, put a bit of certainty in place for organisations like that? Multi-annual funding allows them to plan more into the future and increase the quality of the work they do, for example to provide support for the Minister's Department in prosecutions under the animal welfare Acts. Can we provide that multi-annual funding and that certainty for them?

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank Deputy Ward for raising what is a very important issue. It is fair to say that sometimes we sit in here for oral questions on agriculture, food and the marine, and predominantly the questions are raised by rural-based Deputies but animal welfare is in everyone's interest. I have no doubt that Deputy Ward's constituents in Dublin and Dún

Laoghaire are passionate about animal welfare. I am determined to continue the improvement we have made in these spaces. Society as a whole is changing and our standards and expectations change along with that. I reassure the Deputy on this very important point that animal welfare is a key priority for me as Minister and for the Government. Considerable funding is provided to support eligible animal welfare charities nationwide through the animal welfare grant programme, which is administered by my Department. I thank the Deputy for his kind comments on the increase in that space.

Each year my Department invites eligible animal welfare charities to submit a funding application under the animal welfare grants programme. To qualify, applicants must meet specific requirements that are clearly set out in the application process. The process is robust and comprehensive. Applicants are asked to provide information on their activities, including reporting specific data and metrics, with successful applicants allocated funding on the basis of objective criteria which are reviewed on an annual basis.

The awards support a wide range of criteria and can include: the number of animals assisted; rehoming figures; the provision of education and knowledge-sharing to the public on animal welfare and responsible pet ownership; and helping to raise animal welfare standards. Veterinary inspection results are also taken into consideration when grant amounts are determined. In December 2025 I provided funding of almost €6.5 million to 94 animal welfare charities across the country. This figure represents the highest allocation of funding awarded under the animal welfare grants programme, greatly exceeding the programme for Government commitment to double the €2.4 million funding available to animal welfare charities from the 2020 budget. Eligibility is determined each year and allocations and grants are dependent on resources available and the number of applicants. I am happy to discuss some further supplementaries and other work I am doing beyond grants in terms of reform of animal welfare legislation as well.

Deputy Barry Ward: I note the Minister's comments about rural Deputies raising issues here but I agree with him that agricultural issues and animal welfare issues are not just for rural Deputies. There are farms in the Dún Laoghaire constituency. I am a member of the Irish Farmers Association, IFA. They are mostly drystock farms in the south west of the constituency but agriculture affects everybody and it is important. Animal welfare is something that is very close to my heart. As a barrister I prosecuted animal welfare offences for the Minister's Department in the past. I worked with organisations like the ISPCA and the DSPCA which did incredible work supporting the Minister's Department in bringing those prosecutions and bringing evidence in relation to them. Those are the organisations I am talking about. They are the ones that supplement the work of the Minister's Department. They carry out hugely important work to ensure there are people on the ground who are familiar with animal welfare issues and have the capacity in the context of a prosecution to help rescue those animals and present the Department with evidence so it can proceed in those prosecutions. I also acknowledge the Minister's commitment to reforming that law so that those prosecutions can be more effective.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy will be aware that I have just concluded a public consultation on my new animal welfare strategy for 2026 to 2030, which I will introduce this year. I thank everybody who made contributions on that. Animal welfare crosses so many

different areas. The control of dogs legislation came back in under my Department since last summer with some significant work. I am really happy about that. As part of the negotiating team on the programme for Government I was very keen on this. There had been a fragmented nature to the control the dogs. It was under the Department of rural affairs but my Department has the main responsibility for animal welfare legislation, as the Deputy is aware from his other work. I am also mindful that the role of animal wardens and animal welfare officers in our local authority system remains under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, but it is better co-ordinated. There is a huge opportunity for us, working together across this House, to identify ways of improving the structures around animal welfare while also ensuring the very high level of enforcement that exists at present continues. We really do take animal welfare very seriously. It is something I am passionate about. I want to continue this and grow it in the future.

Deputy Barry Ward: I absolutely accept the Minister's commitment to these issues. With animal welfare, everyone in this House has something to do with animals, whether they are domestic pets or agricultural animals. I think the prosecutions in the Department focused particularly on agricultural stock, and obviously there is a food safety issue there as much as anything else, but it needs to be expanded to include domestic animals. I remember as a child getting a rescue dog. He was a cross between an Old English sheepdog and a black Labrador. We still talk about that dog and there are pictures of him in the house. These animals are so important and they are part of all of our lives. Animal welfare, as the Minister has acknowledged, is more than just the prosecution of offences that are plain. It is also about the maintenance of standards for animals, whether it is in the agricultural or the domestic context. Part of that strategy has to be about improving the standard of animal welfare across the board, and I know that it has been because I am aware of submissions that have gone into it. Reforming the system has to be about doing that but, perhaps more importantly, also funding the organisations that do it on the ground, funding the prosecutions of those who refuse to abide by the law, and ensuring that animals are safe and well in this country.

Deputy Martin Heydon: We are very much at one on this. This is something I want to work on with colleagues. This is something we discussed in the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party. It will also be debated and discussed at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture and Food, and beyond the House, working with my colleagues at the Department of agriculture, the Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley, Grealish and Healy-Rae. It transcends and covers all parts of society. I genuinely believe, as somebody who grew up on a farm with animals, that you can judge a person by how they treat animals. If you teach a child to treat animals well, they will probably also treat humans well. This gets to the heart of our core values as a country. This goes to the Deputy's points on domestic animals as well as farm animals. Obviously, the enforcement of animal welfare legislation is a key component in our trade element because of our very high standards. We normally talk about high environmental standards and high traceability standards but our high animal welfare standards are a very important part of the higher value markets that we export into. I am determined to build on this and to grow it. Although we have extremely high standards that are beyond the European norm, there are always things we can do better and improve and I will drive on further with them.

Fishing Industry

15. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the urgent actions he is taking, at EU and Council level, to reverse or challenge the severe loss of approximately 57,000 tonnes of Irish fishing quota for 2026, representing an estimated €94 million blow to the Irish fishing sector; whether he plans to initiate or support legal action at the European Court of Justice to defend Ireland's interests given the collapse of Hague Preferences at the recent EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6850/26]

Deputy Michael Collins: We know of the 70% losses that were announced in early December in the EU for Ireland's fishing quota. This 70% loss in our fishing quota means that 57,000 tonnes will be lost.

What has been happening in Europe to turn matters around since this dreadful announcement was made? Are we taking legal action in the European courts in the context of the Hague preferences, which are a guarantee and safeguard and which appear to have been discarded?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: As the Deputy knows, the Hague preferences are negotiated annually. Over the years, many member states have objected strenuously to their application because the additional quota for Ireland comes from their allocations. These objections have intensified in recent times, arising from reductions in quota due to quota transfers under the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement and scientific advice based on a considerable reduction in fishing stocks. Some of that reduction has been as a result of overfishing by other countries and some, potentially, as a result of climate change.

Regrettably, during the December Fisheries Council, a group of member states chose to block the invocation of Ireland's Hague preferences for 202. The Danish Presidency did not include the Hague preferences in the final Presidency compromise on the fishing opportunities regulation. This will unfortunately result in severely reduced fishing opportunities for Irish fishermen and fisherwomen in 2026. While Ireland voted against the regulation because it did not include the Hague preferences, the regulation was adopted with a qualified majority.

Ireland has already expressed to the Council, the Commission and other member states its intentions to invoke the Hague preferences at the appropriate time in respect of fishing opportunities for 2027. The Department is currently examining the position to determine potential next steps, including in the context of what legal redress is available to us. The Deputy will be aware that the European Court of Justice, ECJ, addressed this issue in a past finding, which indicated that the acceptance of the Hague preferences was a matter for the Council. That creates potential challenges.

I have stated publicly that we will look at all potential opportunities to try to address this matter. With the support of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, we are establishing a working group under the auspices of Food Vision 2030 in order to develop a framework of supports to address the substantial challenges currently facing the sector as a result of the significant reduction in quota to which the Deputy referred.

Deputy Michael Collins: It appears that there was scientific advice available, but the nature of that advice was to destroy the Irish fisheries, and it worked. They used that weapon to beat Irish fishermen out of Irish waters. It did not affect the quota of other countries that are taking fish from of Irish waters. I have often stated that between 16 and 18 articulated truckloads of Irish fish leave Castletownbere and head off through west Cork. There is no gain out of this, other than the council trying to repair the roads as a result of the damaged done by the articulated trucks going up and down with fish that have been taken from of our seas. People are telling me they cannot buy Irish fish. Irish fishermen are not allowed to fish in our waters.

The bottom line is that the decision in this regard has to be appealed. Surely there has to be some mechanism that can be used to lodge an appeal. The Hague preferences are there to provide protection, but this has not happened. The scientific evidence was used against Irish fishermen and to protect foreign trawlers. How is that going to be turned around?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I understand that the Deputy comes from an area where fishing is important. To be clear, the quota reduction, based on the scientific advice, applied across the board regardless of the member states involved. It did not seek to penalise Ireland in favour of any other state. It sought to try to protect, insofar as possible, the future of certain species. The Deputy is right in the sense that Ireland has a significant quota when it comes to species like mackerel, in particular, blue whiting and boarfish. In the case of mackerel, we have 50% of the European quota based on track record. However, stocks of that species are considerably low. The quota reduction of 70% was applied to each country in the context of its quota allocation. It would be wrong to suggest that what was done was unnecessarily discriminatory towards Ireland.

As stated, the Hague preferences have been under pressure for some time. We will seek every possible way to try to find a mechanism to have them restored in due course.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State indicated that there have been quota reductions across the board, but Irish fishermen have been hit with a 70% cut - the greatest of all. Basically, that is sending them home. People have massive debts having paid for trawlers. They are paying back bank loans they got in order that they might have the best trawlers available to allow them to compete. I am not referring to competing with super-trawlers from Norway, Spain and other countries that are stealing our fish. However, they bought those boats to allow them to compete in some way and to be safe out in our waters. This is a terrible infliction on them.

When is the task force being set up? Has it held any meetings yet? As far as I am concerned, this is an urgent crisis that has, very unfairly, been foisted on Irish fishermen. It is similar to what happened with Brexit, decommissioning and all of that. I hope to God that the task force is not being set up to talk about further decommissioning, because if it is, the Irish fleet will be wiped out completely. When is the task force going to be set up? What bodies will be represented on it? When will its first meeting be held? What will its role be in the context of bringing fishing back to the top of the agenda?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The task force will be part of the Food Vision strategy. Later today I will be meeting with the independent chair, Michael Berkery. We have a draft of the terms of

reference, which I hope to have agreed shortly. I hope that the first meeting can take place within the next two weeks. We have a clear agenda about the necessity to address the crisis in light of the fishing opportunity that has been lost for 2026. I also want to broaden it out to include the impact of the reduction in fishing opportunities for this year. Its work will also address not just the impact on the pelagic sector, which has been hit to the greatest extent, but also the impact on inshore fishermen. Their representative bodies will certainly be part of the task force because they will be impacted by the cost of bait, etc. We have to look at this in a comprehensive way. I am of the view that a multiplicity of actions will emerge from the work of the task force. I look forward to engaging with the Deputy and his team on that.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Defence and National Security has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 36.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Student Accommodation

82. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when the student accommodation strategy will be released, and whether it will contain proposals to allow the providers of private student accommodation to hike rents more often than for those in purpose-built student accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7343/26]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: When will the student accommodation strategy be released? Will it contain proposals to allow the providers of private student accommodation to hike rents more often than those in purpose-built student accommodation?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): I intend to publish the national student accommodation strategy in the coming weeks. The strategy will support access to suitable housing for full-time students in publicly funded higher education institutions and aims to deliver additional student beds to meet projected demand out to 2035, without the need to have additional recourse to the private rental market. The aim behind the student accommodation strategy is to address the student accommodation requirements relating to purpose-built student accommodation without imposing additional pressures - the idea is to relieve such pressures - on the wider private residential sector.

The provisions relating to tenancy legislation fall under the remit of my colleague the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne. His Department sets the rules and implements the legislation relating to rent, rent resets and so forth. I have worked closely with the Minister to ensure that the legislation relating to the new rent pressure zones, RPZs, which was published on Tuesday, having been approved by the Cabinet, contains a provision to protect students by

means of a three-year moratorium on rent resets within purpose-built student accommodation. As a result, we will avoid the scenario that was feared by many, including me, of an annual reset as students left their accommodation each summer. It would have been unfair to have such students facing rent resets. The legislation was predicated on the end of a tenancy. For student accommodation, we have predicated it on the property, which means that regardless of how many students come and go - and I expect that there will be a group of students coming in each year and that they will be replaced by another set of students the following year - they will not be facing annual resets. There will be a three-year moratorium for all those students in the purpose-built student accommodation sector. That is important, and I thank the Minister for housing for taking my submissions on board. We had detailed engagements on this matter and, as a result, that protection will be built in.

As well as rent protections, there are significant supports in terms of affordability. This was one of the reasons why I increased all the non-adjacent maintenance grants in the budget, thereby assisting 30,000 students and bringing the total allocation for the non-adjacent student grant to €146.5 million. There are also things like rent-a-room relief, the student assistance fund and significant other funding I have put in place for students in order to help them to meet their accommodation needs.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: On 6 February 2025, the Minister announced that a new student accommodation strategy was in development, which would be completed in 2025. We were then told that the much-awaited strategy would be delivered in quarter 4 of 2025. We are now in 2026. While we are told the strategy will be published in the coming weeks, we still do not have a definitive date and the gap between strategies is growing further apart.

From March, student-specific accommodation providers will be able to reset rents to market value, and every three years thereafter. Is that correct? While it is welcome that these rent hikes will be attached to the property rather than the tenant, is it fair that students are being unfairly targeted for more rent hikes than others? While I welcome the rise in extra payments to help them, it simply is not enough.

We know the majority of students rent from the private market. What protections is the Minister fighting for to be put in place for these students who, as we know, renew their lease on an annual basis?

Deputy James Lawless: I do not know whether the Deputy listened to my answer but that is exactly what I just talked about. I know she has probably prepared a script but I will reiterate and repeat what I said a minute ago. Working with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Browne, I have secured protections for students in purpose-built student accommodation to ensure they do not have that annual rent reset every year. I wish to be crystal clear for the benefit of the House and everyone listening: I have secured a three-year protection window for students in order that they will not be facing rent resets until 2029 at the earliest, that is, three years from now.

The original situation that was put forward in the rental Bill - I appreciate it applies to the wider residential rental market - talked about rents being reset when a tenant left. We were all students once and we know that the nature of student accommodation is that students typically leave every summer. It would, therefore, have been unfair and unduly adverse on those students

to have those same rules. I have managed to negotiate with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and ensure they do not have those same rules. In fact, they have a three-year protection window. The reset will be allowed on the student property in three-year cycles rather than when the tenancy ends. That is a significant achievement. I talked to AMLÉ and other student groups about it in advance. I hope the Deputy will welcome it.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: As I said, it is welcome that the rent hikes will be attached to the property rather than the tenants but the Minister is talking in the context of purpose-built student accommodation. What about those in private accommodation such as digs and private homes? Will they get any protection? We know housing is one of the biggest costs in a student's life, and the majority of students are in the private rental market. While rents are already unaffordable, if we continue to rely on private rental supply, rents will continue to increase to the point where they will push young people away from attending college because they simply cannot get student accommodation or afford it. What will be put in place for those in private accommodation?

Deputy James Lawless: Students living in the private residential sector have the same rules as anyone else living in that sector. This is something I have looked at and discussed with the Minister, Deputy Browne. I have a limited remit because the Minister for housing and the Department of housing have full control over the rental rules and landlord and tenant legislation. I make submissions and I have engagement with them, as I successfully did in the case of purpose-built student accommodation, PBSA.

With regard to the private residential sector, there are challenges in trying to come up with student-specific rules for houses in which students might be living. To take a typical three-bed, semi-detached house in one of the university towns as an example, of which there are many in Maynooth in my constituency as well as all around the country, how can it become a student house if four people are living there, two of whom are students and the other two are working? What happens if there are three people in a house and one of them is doing a course at night? Similarly, I refer to houses in which there are a couple of student doctors or teachers on their first year of placement. Are they student houses or not?

I will be publishing my strategy in the coming weeks. I would have liked to have published it by now but it is complex with regard to the rules. I have implemented a number of the measures within it already, such as the increase in grants that I spoke about to help with affordability. Purpose-built student accommodation is the sector I will be focusing all my efforts on to deliver more beds.

Expenditure Reviews

83. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps his Department is taking to investigate the significant overspend on the new SUSI IT system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6842/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: I am taking this question on behalf of my colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny. Will the Minister inform the House of the steps his Department has taken to investigate

the significant overspend on the new SUSI IT system, and will he make a statement on the matter to the House?

Deputy James Lawless: The City of Dublin Education and Training Board, ETB, made reference in its annual accounts to a legacy IT project for SUSI that started in 2015 – before either of us were in this House - but experienced a number of problems and delays. Ultimately, it did not result in the successful delivery of a completed system.

Although unacceptable, IT projects, unfortunately, can encounter difficulties both in the public and private sectors. It is often the case, having worked in IT many years ago, that IT projects fail. Sometimes, they can be rebuilt or remodelled and other times they are thrown away. Sometimes they are consolidated into a new system. In any event, where projects are funded by public money, it is imperative, as the Deputy suggested, and I expect he shares this view, that the reasons for the issues are fully understood and specific actions are taken to prevent any recurrence.

In the case of the SUSI project, a decision was taken in 2021 to terminate the contracts on the basis that it was not on track to deliver the expected benefits. Effectively, it was pulled up. It was realised in 2021 that it was not going to deliver the benefits expected. It was not on track or meeting the cost targets, etc., and the project was pulled and halted. I welcome that because sometimes, we see projects running overboard and over budget and no one shouts, “Stop”. In this case - it was the previous Minister not myself - credit is due that the rug was pulled and the decision was taken that enough was enough and that the project was out of order. Of course, that was done in line with the public spending code and legal advice following consultation by City of Dublin ETB with departmental officials.

An independent report was then commissioned which looked at why the problems occurred and it made multiple recommendations for any future project. I might get into those recommendations in my supplementary reply.

Notwithstanding the cancellation of this project, the need for a robust digital system for SUSI is as strong as ever. We need to deliver a resilient, efficient and modern service for over 100,000 students and their families who depend on the scheme. In this context, the City of Dublin ETB has a new IT project up and running since then, which is progressing. I will come back to that in a moment.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister will be aware that this was highlighted by the Comptroller and Auditor General at a meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts recently. Obviously, concerns were raised at that meeting that, as the Minister correctly said, this project was initiated in 2015. At that stage, the cost was €2.2 million. The cost indicated to my colleague, Deputy Kenny, is that it has now risen to €6.4 million, and we are still at the pre-project phase. What lessons have been learned? The Minister mentioned the report he received. What lessons have been learned about the overrun of almost €4 million? I have no doubt, given the job the Minister is doing, that an extra €4 million in his budget would be very welcome for him as well as for the many students about whom I and all colleagues in this House ring the Minister. What has happened in the meantime in the Department? What is it doing about the €4 million overrun? What will the final cost be on this project which, as the Minister said, is badly needed?

Deputy James Lawless: I agree with the Deputy. Following the notice of termination in 2021, the City of Dublin ETB commissioned KPMG accountants to draft a report focusing on lessons learned arising from the project and what had gone wrong, which included looking at supplier issues, the delays and all the factors that combined to render the project unsuitable. A number of recommendations came out of that. I will not go into them all because there are almost a dozen of them but I can share them with the Deputy afterwards. I think they are on the public record already. They include things such as having a clear business vision, the importance of getting the requirements right at the outset, having a layered approach and having a front-loaded design stage front and centre. For example, the new project uses a cloud-based architecture which means it sits on the web as opposed to a single server. That is meant to have better distribution and fewer failover issues. There are a number of recommendations that range across procurement, business planning and IT robustness. There are ten recommendations and they are all being implemented. The new project is up and running and adhering to those recommendations.

Deputy Mark Wall: I will ask the Minister again whether he can give the House some indication as to what this project will finally cost. I am sure he has that information by now. The initial cost was to be €2.2 million. A total of €6.4 million has been spent on it so far. Questions remain as to what steps the Department has taken to investigate this. Has anyone been held accountable for the fact that there has been a €4 million overspend on money that is so important? We all appreciate the importance of education in this State and the job the Minister does day in, day out for third level and higher level education. Has anyone been held accountable? What steps has the Minister put in place? What will the final cost of this project be? In 2015, it was to cost the Department €2.2 million but - I will say it once again - there is already a €4 million overspend on this project.

Deputy James Lawless: In respect of the cost overrun on the project, the figures that I have available to me tell me that the cost of the project was approximately €3.8 million between 2015 and March 2022.

That figure emerged at the Committee of Public Accounts recently. The project included internal staffing costs, external providers, coding and software that were built up and engineering work that was carried out. Some of that was carried forward, but much of it was not. Approximately two thirds of it had to be abandoned but around one third of the work product was carried through into the new phase.

Some of the process improvements include things like better business requirements. Before one starts to write a line of code, one should know exactly what one wants it to do. That would be good practice in any software system, as would mapping the processes, the ins and outs, the workflows and the toll gates within it. That basic process mapping is important. Improvements to reporting structures will catch these things early or earlier than was the case previously. Project management capability is so important in this, as does ensuring that somebody has an eye on things and that there are reporting structures, toll gates, Gantt charts and all of the things we would expect. That is all ongoing and under way within the new system.

I have asked my officials for a detailed report because I am not satisfied with this. It happened before my watch, but, at the same time, it is not good enough. I have also asked for a detailed investigation.

Grant Payments

84. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of applicants who applied for SUSI grants in each of the years between 2020 and 2025; the number that were unsuccessful in their applications; the measures he will enact to the appeals process to maximise the number of applicants who are successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7344/26]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Why do SUSI grants show a steady yearly rate of difference between funds awarded and funds paid? Given the consistent numbers being refused SUSI grants annually - with the largest number of refusals being on the grounds of insufficient documentation to confirm eligibility - will the Minister introduce reforms to reduce the rate of refusal?

Deputy James Lawless: Over €351 million has been allocated for students supports and related activities this year. In addition, it is estimated that the free fees initiative costs for the current academic year will be in the order of €450 million. That is just shy of €1 billion in student supports in the current year alone. When we are engaged in budget planning and negotiations, student supports are the primary item on the agenda and take up the lion's share of available moneys. Significant moneys and effort are being put into supporting students across a very wide range of needs and areas. Taken together, the allocation figures I have just given reflect the Government's continued commitment to ensuring student access. Access is the fundamental premise here. We want to create maximum opportunity for people and that means access. Nobody should be deterred from going to college because of the cost involved. If people feel deterred, I very much want to hear about it in order to figure out why and to get into the permutations of each individual case such that I can fix any loopholes or anomalies in the system.

The student grant scheme, with which the Deputy is very familiar, provides assistance to students attending courses. A part-time fee scheme was introduced last year in respect of a number of undergraduate courses. This provides fees support to eligible part-time students for the first time. Previously, part-time students were outside of the system.

Just under 80% of applicants are successful every year. The Deputy's question is about those who are not successful, but it is worth pointing out that around 79% of applicants are successful. The vast majority of students who apply actually succeed and are awarded grants. In the context of the 20% who do not get grants, 3% to 4% of those students pull their applications themselves. For whatever reason, they withdraw their applications and leave college. That is one issue. There are a number of other reasons that I will get into when I make my supplementary reply.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: In 2023 and 2024, approximately 22% were unsuccessful. In the subsequent academic year, the figure was 21%. There seems to be a percentage that is

common across the years. I am given to understand that SUSI is a demand-based scheme. In other words, whatever moneys are not spent are handed back. Is there a cap on the number of SUSI grants that can be paid out or is the fund indefinite in nature?

While I welcome the year-on-year drop in the numbers refused due to the increase in the household income threshold, I am still concerned about the number of applicants being refused due to a lack of documentation and, more generally, the number of refusals and grants not paid out. Mature students who are 23 or older have no choice, due to the housing crisis, but to live at home. They are being unfairly treated because they are being assessed on the basis of their parents' income, despite the fact that they are trying to live independently. What can be done about that?

Deputy James Lawless: SUSI operates an appeals process. It continues to refine its processes. I have asked it to do that. We ran advertisement campaigns last summer for the first time. I initiated that because some students were not aware of their eligibility for the grant. The income thresholds are now very high. They are up to €120,000 for certain grants, which was unheard of previously. Some families on middle incomes may not have been aware that they were eligible for grants. As a result, we ran advertising campaigns to make sure that they found out.

In terms of the reasons students may not succeed in getting grants, sometimes they are in receipt of other State grants. For example, if a student is receiving the back to education allowance from the Department of Social Protection, he or she cannot be paid on the double. Another reason is if an applicant does not progress. If students get to a certain point and drop out of the course, fail exams or do not progress for various reasons, they obviously cannot get grants. In addition, grants are not awarded if the course selected is not eligible. There are various courses, some of which are outside the system and would not be eligible. Another reason for refusal is if students have been studying for beyond the maximum period. Students who have been studying for a number of years and have exceeded their allowable term will not be awarded SUSI grants. Likewise, those who are in receipt of scholarships or bursaries from somewhere else will not be awarded grants.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I have the figures in front of me. A total of 4,924 applicants were refused because they were over the income threshold. However, the means test applies to the previous year and does not take into account things like job losses, although I am aware that there is a fund for people to whom that happens. One of the main reasons for refusal is insufficient documentation to confirm eligibility. Within that, many applicants from the North are not able to access SUSI because they do not conform and do not have the right documentation. That is a big concern. A total of 5,373 applicants were in that bracket, up from 5,064. It is a big concern. What can be done for those applicants? I am particularly concerned about those trying to claim independence from their parents who cannot do so because their parents will not give them a letter because they are not talking to each other. It is a big concern.

Deputy James Lawless: I understand the issue the Deputy raises about mature students and returning emigrants. Deputy Roche has tabled a question on that matter to which I will respond to in more detail later.

In terms of documentation, that is a difficult issue. I am sure the Deputy is not suggesting that we should give grants out without any application process or robust checks. It is taxpayer's money that we are talking about. The last question I answered was about the MySUSI project which went over budget and I am sure we would all agree that we need to get value for money and be prudent and robust when it comes to taxpayer's money. Obviously, certain documentation is required. If students are not providing it, that is a Catch-22 situation. They cannot really get their grant until they provide the documentation and I would not expect the system to work any other way, frankly. What we can do is provide guidance. We have online wizards and I intend to continue to improve and streamline that process and provide information earlier. As I mentioned, we ran advertisement campaigns last year in the various media to make sure students knew what they had to do and knew how to get the grant.

The Deputy mentioned that some students miss out because of income. The income levels are now at €120,000. As a result, the children of Members of this House can now avail of SUSI grants. That was not the case historically. We have gone right into the squeezed middle and beyond to a situation where 80% of households are now eligible for some kind of SUSI grant. That is historic.

Grant Payments

85. Deputy Jen Cummins asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to support students that are estranged from family, to access SUSI and other supports on campuses. [7275/26]

Deputy Jen Cummins: I would like to discuss a sensitive issue with the Minister. How is he planning to support students who are estranged from their parents? How can such students access SUSI grants and other supports on campus? A number of students who are in quite challenging situations due to estrangement from their parents have contacted me. Their circumstances leave them financially vulnerable and potentially prevent them accessing third level education. The current system is bureaucratic and difficult to navigate. Sometimes the systems are seen, not the people.

Deputy James Lawless: This is a difficult issue, and it is one that I have engaged with the students unions on. I have also spoken to my officials about it on a number of occasions. If students are living with their parents, there is a working assumption in the system that they are being supported by their parents to some extent at least. Perhaps that support is not through direct funds. Rather, it comes in the form of accommodation, meals and so on. These are the supports that we would normally expect within a family environment. How can we fairly and reasonably, with a view to prudence with taxpayer's money, correctly identify the student who may be still living in the family home and still having meals at the family table but who is not dependent on his or her parents or is estranged from them? That is not an easy one, and I am very mindful of the need to support any students who find themselves estranged from their parents. I have had individual representations made to me by Members in that regard. How do we ensure that we do not broaden support too wide such that every student suddenly becomes eligible? Effectively, we would see the millions of euro in student supports referred to by Deputy McGettigan mushroom into several billion.

It is a difficult one to get right. Having said, a number of the measures that I introduced in the last budget do not actually involve a means test. The €500 permanent reduction in fees, for example, does not require any means testing.

There are a number of other benefits available such as the student assistance fund, which now stands at €19.3 million, an historical high. That funding did not even exist until recent years. I increased it again in the latest budget. There are a number of discretionary measures and in many cases they are not means tested, so the estrangement issue does not apply, but I get that it is difficult. I am continuing to engage with student unions on this. If it is any comfort, although I know it is of no comfort in the individual cases, it is a very small percentage of applicants, a couple of percent, who are refused for reasons of estrangement not being proven. I might come back to the detail in the supplementary response but that is a general observation.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The number of people involved is not huge. I accept that in cases where people might be taking advantage of that potential, it would have to be ruled out because we have to protect taxpayers' money. However, I am focused on the small number of people who are estranged from their parents, for whatever reason. There has to be a trauma-informed mechanism in our education system and through the SUSI grant to support those students. What I mean by that is, if you are estranged from your parents, something awful has happened. I am aware of students who live in the same household as their parents and their parents have nothing to do with them. AMLÉ, formerly the Union of Students in Ireland, has made a number of suggestions to simplify proof of estrangement. The system still needs to be robust and broader reforms need to be brought in.

Deputy James Lawless: The trauma-informed view is extremely important. Having chaired the justice committee in the previous term, we saw many examples of trauma and how it led into addiction and triggered a certain path in life. I fully support a trauma-informed approach. It is one of the reasons I committed additional funding to the mental health budget in higher education institutions this year.

On mature students, to recap the rules, a student can be assessed as independent if they have reached the age of 23 on 1 January of the year they start and have not been ordinarily resident with their parents from the previous October. As such, if a student is outside the home and is aged 23 years or over, they can apply. For the avoidance of doubt, there is an estrangement option within the SUSI system. Applicants can declare on their application form that they are irreconcilably estranged and a specialist team works on those applications. Sometimes student unions and others will say this or that document was not accepted. I am told there is no prescriptive set of documents. It is case by case; it is discretionary. It may be a court order, although it does not have to be, a letter or a form.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We hear from students and groups who support them that the current system cumulatively creates hardships for those students. It is bureaucratic and burdensome. The proof requirements are narrow and assumptions about family supports perhaps do not match the student's reality. Given that there are so few of these students, could a body be set up to meet these young people and take a trauma-informed approach? I am not talking about the over-23s. I am really talking about finding a way to support those at undergraduate level who have come straight from school and are aged 18, 19, 20 or 21. The SUSI grant is one part

but there are other grants. I am happy to see the Minister has put resources into mental health because, as we know, at third level, that is important, as are other aspects of health, for those young people who are estranged and living an independent life at a premature age in terms of what they need. As we know, being in your early 20s is still quite a challenging time for many young people.

Deputy James Lawless: I have the figures for those who cited estrangement on their application form. In the 2023-24 year, it was 184 students; in 2024-25, it was 165 students; and in the most recent year, 2025-26, it was 213 students. When I said it was a couple of percent, I exaggerated. It is 0.19% of total applications. However, that makes it even more pertinent that we address it. There might be a tendency to say it is a very small number but if it is very small, let us fix it. That is my view. I welcome submissions and inputs. It would be very constructive if the Deputy or AMLÉ or other Members of the House were to share their thoughts on that in a way that protects taxpayers' money, involves a robust process that is fit for purpose and has checks and balances, while ensuring that students who are estranged are supported appropriately.

Third Level Education

86. **Deputy Charles Ward** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will review the means test for SUSI grants for households impacted by the defective concrete crisis, in order that essential outgoings such as mortgages and rent are taken into consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7279/26]

Deputy James Lawless: I fully recognise the distress that has arisen from defective concrete block situation in the Deputy's constituency and in other constituencies. The Deputy may be aware that I met some members of his group. I have not had a Ministry directly relevant to the issue but at the MacGill Summer School two summers ago, I sat down with some of the group's councillors and we had a very good discussion. It really brought home to be the trauma the Deputy and his people are experiencing due to that.

I am pleased to tell the Deputy that payments under the enhanced defective concrete block grant scheme constitute a grant for a specific purpose which has been put in place to support homeowners to remediate their dwellings, and we know how that works. That will not be classed as reckonable income for a SUSI application. Effectively, it is disregarded and will not be taken into consideration in assessing. That is good news and very positive. There is a means test in the system for all. Other things are considered as part of that but in the Deputy's particular case, the defective blocks scheme remediation payments will not be taken into account as income.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Minister. To elaborate, for someone in Donegal, the cost of getting through a course at the Atlantic Technological University will be around €24,000 and it will cost €60,000 for someone who goes further afield and rents accommodation. For parents living in structurally unsafe homes, the issue is that when they go to rebuild the home, there is a shortfall. With the shortfall comes a decision as to whether to send their children to college. Over a five-year period, they have to decide whether to rebuild the home, at a cost to

the family, and then whether they can get the funding from the banks. It comes down to that. I am glad and grateful the Minister is committing to this, but I want to make him aware that this shortfall will come into place for people as the scheme starts to ramp up, particularly in Donegal and in less economically well-off areas.

Deputy James Lawless: More broadly, in terms of supporting students and families, particularly on lower income levels, my focus has always been on targeted supports. While I have introduced universal measures on fees, and I will continue to do so, my focus is on ensuring that, for people who are on the verge of missing out and would not experience college otherwise and for vulnerable families and people who may be the first in their family to access third level education, the focus of student supports is to get those people elevated into a situation where they can make that leap. At the moment, some of those students just cannot make it, which is a tragedy. I want to target measures to help students do that. To give an example of that, the student grant was increased this year. I also increased all the non-adjacent grants so any student travelling beyond 30 km will now benefit from that, some by up to €430 or €350, depending on the band. I did likewise for postgraduate courses and apprenticeships, which are equally important. All those figures have been addressed and brought down through increased subventions.

Deputy Charles Ward: That is all welcome but looking at the University of Ulster study on the impact of defective concrete crisis, the profound lasting effects on mental health and well-being going down the line have to be addressed. Last year, there was a 34% increase in youths seeking mental health service supports in Donegal, which is crazy. From day one, I know the Minister has been focused on making education more affordable. He said that and we can see it. Most of all, these young people need support. They have gone through trauma. The Minister has committed to funding mental health supports for students. Will he commit to ring-fencing mental health funding for students impacted by defective concrete? That will be vital as we move forward. We have 25,000 houses to rebuild in Donegal. It will take a long time. Families are developing and growing and we need to make sure they are looked after in the long run.

Deputy James Lawless: To reflect on the educational opportunities in Donegal, the Deputy's constituency, and I know he is a proud Donegal man, the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and Deputy Gallagher have also made representations to me on many of these matters. I launched the veterinary school in ATU Letterkenny recently. It is great. There will be 40 vet places in the north west, primarily for large animal practice. This was badly needed because students had to go to either the UK or Dublin and many also travelled to Poland previously. Some did not come home so this is important.

11 o'clock

I also visited the ETB in Killybegs with Deputy Gallagher and saw some of the supports it has put in place, in particular around the fishing community and changing lifelong learning there as people adapt to different skills. There is a lot of investment going into Donegal. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, opened the new sports facility adjacent to the ATU campus, which is a big win.

I increased the mental health budget. The Deputy referred to ring fencing but I try not to be prescriptive in terms of telling colleges how they award that funding. There is significant discretion for access and welfare officers. I also increased the student assistance fund to just under €20 million this year. Again, there is discretion. The Deputy knows very well the situation around defective blocks. I expect colleges to have regard to that. Local knowledge will be important.

Third Level Admissions

87. Deputy Catherine Callaghan asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of extra college places being created in September 2026 and September 2027 to ensure adequate supply of new speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, to meet the increasing demands of the care system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7277/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I would like to ask about the number of extra college places being created in September 2026 and 2027 to ensure there is an adequate supply of new speech and language and occupational therapists to meet the increasing demands of our care system.

Deputy James Lawless: This is an all-of-government priority in terms of meeting the disability needs of our people. We made a decision at a Cabinet subcommittee early in the term that my Department can increase the number of therapists coming through third level and into the workforce. An interdepartmental working group is working with the Ministers for Health and Education and Youth and will examine the number of places we need to fill.

We have produced a list of the occupations with the most critical skills shortages in terms of disability and health care supports. That has led to a first-round call. Having worked with my colleagues to identify the particular therapies and occupations that were most critically needed, I made a call, through the HEA, to third level providers to ask what colleges were in a position to meet the call and demand. From that first response, starting in September an 478 additional places are being created across the different therapies. There is a second call under way at the moment.

The first call asked colleges with existing course provision through schools of nursing, therapy, medicine and healthcare whether they could increase the number of places on their courses. That call has now been completed and, I understand, 461 places have been created, rising to 478 over the next year or two. The next call asked colleges that do not currently provide those sort of courses and do not have schools in the relevant area whether they are in a position to provide such courses. For example, Maynooth launched a school of nursing which did not exist this time last year. That is one among many colleges that will ramp up its provision of different therapies. This is an all-of-government priority. As I said, I am happy to be able to deliver an additional 478 places in the first round. I have many more rounds to go, and I continue intend to continue to grow that workforce.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister for the response. It is very heartening to hear that there will be at least 478 new places coming on stream next year, or even this year if possible. The situation facing families across the country because of staff shortages in critical

posts is beyond difficult. I am sure every Member of the House has heard from families on a CDNT list who are waiting for care. Across the HSE Dublin and south east region, which covers Carlow and Kilkenny, over 1,700 children have been waiting for CDNT services for over a year. Nationally, that figure stands at over 6,000 children. We must urgently prioritise the provision of these crucial services. I acknowledge that, as the Minister said, over 478 places coming are on stream but I ask him not to spare any ambition in the number of additional places he can provide for speech and language and occupational therapy students.

Deputy James Lawless: We are very much on the same page. I will give the Deputy a list of courses that have been identified in consultation with the Ministers for Health and Education and Youth and myself. Occupational, therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, dieticians, radiation therapists, radiographers, medical scientists, podiatrists, social workers and educational psychologists are on the list. That is not to say that there will not be further courses within that but they were the courses identified for the first round of expressions of interest.

The Deputy mentioned CNDT groups, which I deal with in my constituency at a local level. I can provide training courses through the system, and have done and will continue to do that, but they need to be matched by placements in the HSE and health service. Without that, people will not complete their courses. Some colleges have told me they have or can make capacity for additional places but they need a guarantee from the health system that there will be placements when people get to the relevant time in their course. I have engaged with the HSE and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this. It is a critical gap or challenge in the system.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister for the response. I am heartened to hear that solid measures are being taken to provide more training places, not just for speech and language and occupational therapists but also for dieticians, physiotherapists and educational psychologists, in particular. It is a welcome measure.

We are all aware that this challenge is not just about training staff; it is also about retaining them. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is working on reforming how therapies are delivered to ensure services are delivered more efficiently and effectively to those who need them without undue delay. However, Carlow CNDT still faces one of the highest rates of staff shortages. The most recent figures show that almost 45% of positions in the CDNT are vacant, despite sustained efforts to provide specialists. With that in mind, does the Minister have any plans to introduce an apprenticeship-style avenue for health and social care personnel to allow for continuous professional development in while in employment, perhaps even up to PhD level, to encourage higher retention in the sector?

Deputy James Lawless: I have explored that and my officials are actively exploring the apprenticeship route. There is also the recognition of private learning where somebody has worked in a related discipline and rather than starting on day one in year one they could come into the system midstream or at a more advanced stage, if we take into account their prior learning.

The issue the Deputy mentioned in respect of CDNTs is a common one. She referred to Carlow CDNT as having vacant places. A placement often determines where a student progresses long term in their career. A student who has a placement in a private practice, for example, may be more likely to stay with that practice and in the private sector long term. However, if a student is placed, for example, in a local facility in Carlow, Kildare or wherever it happens to be, they are more likely to stay there. It is critical that during their training students are exposed to different practice types. I have discussed with my colleagues on the Cabinet subcommittee the need to rotate placements so that a student has exposure to many different fields rather than just one and is more likely to return to that field.

They can be difficult and stressful environments in which to work. We need to encourage our graduates to go into those sectors when they leave college. I agree with the Deputy that we also need focus on retention measures.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Further and Higher Education

88. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the plans within his Department to develop a further and expanded phase of programme for access to higher education, PATH, 4 funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6868/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy John Connolly. The programme for access to higher education, PATH, 4, is the universal design for learning. It supports HEIs in making teaching assessment and student supports more inclusive. Does the Minister or Department plan on developing or expanding any phases of PATH 4?

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. The PATH 4 programme is extremely important. I am very proud of it and the Taoiseach is very supportive of it as well. We have discussed it directly in Cabinet. It supports the goal of enabling all learners with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, to avail of higher education. I have visited a number of PATH 4 locations, including in Cork - I think it is called the field of dreams. I have been to the Trinity centre for people with intellectual disabilities. Each one is remarkable in terms of the participation, enablement and autonomy it provides students who can avail of the service. I am keen to continue to support the programme.

The two phases of PATH 4 aim to strengthen universal design for all students. Universal design means making sure that buildings, courses and how we navigate them internally are geared towards students with various different disability types in mind. The programme also enhances opportunities for the engagement of students with intellectual disabilities to fully participate in courses in a way that suits them and from which they can fully benefit.

A total of €5.8 million has been allocated under PATH 4 since 2022. Some €3 million was allocated in 2022 and I was pleased to bring forward last year a further €2.8 million for the period 2025-2026. To date, that funding has been introduced on a phased basis year by year and is something I hope to mainstream. I plan to update my Cabinet colleagues on proposals

in that regard to make the funding a permanent feature of the system. I expect to make an announcement on that in the near future.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister for his reply. There has been a concerted effort from the Minister and the Department to ensure that PATH 4 is expanded. It is about realising the potential of every young person through education, in particular. PATH 4 certainly offers that.

There has been strong uptake across higher education institutions, improved staff capacity and awareness, and inclusive training and teaching. There is early evidence of more accessible learning. I pay tribute to some positive examples. Maynooth University has delivered universal design for learning, UDL, training to academic staff and developed inclusive assessment pilots; University College Cork has embedded UDL principles into first-year curriculum redesign projects; and Technological University Dublin has introduced UDL-aligned digital learning standards and staff workshops. However, there does not seem to be a standardisation or an even implementation across higher education institutions. I know we are still at the early stages of UDL adoption, but if there were a standardisation across the higher education institutions, that would make it more accessible to more people.

Deputy James Lawless: Yes, that is fair. I think 193 students are enrolled in PATH 4 phase 2. The original target or expectation was that it might hit 160 students, so it has gone well beyond that, which I am delighted to see. They are running across 11 different programmes. I will not list them out but there is a reasonably good spread geographically and they include the technological universities and the traditional universities right across the board, with multiple institutions participating. The way in which those courses or colleges were identified and chosen followed a competitive call for proposals. The Deputy asked how this was decided. There was a PATH initiative under strand 4 whereby an independent expert panel was commissioned to say which of these applications should be supported and, following a competitive call, these 11 were chosen. The courses are typically between one and two years in length. I hope this does not need to be said but I will just say it anyway. The courses are free and there is no charge for participation. There was a significant consultation across many Departments. The National Learning Network, SOLAS, the Irish Universities Association, the inclusive national forum, Down Syndrome Ireland and many others were also consulted in devising the courses and the allocations.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I understand the phased approach, but ensuring multi-year funding would allow higher education institutions to move from pilot phases to full implementation. I ask as well that a national UDL benchmark be established so we can measure consistency across higher education institutions. We need to ensure there are benchmarks that show what is success, what is working and not working, and what we can learn from, change and improve. Finally, I ask for further support to institutions with dedicated UDL co-ordinators or teams. Having a team on campus supporting these students is particularly important. Seeing those types of measures in place will certainly benefit those students now and into the future.

Deputy James Lawless: I will address the UDL piece first. I thank an Teachta Connolly. I know Deputy Ó Cearúil is taking this question in his stead. Deputy Connolly has invited me

to a UDL conference in University of Galway later this year, which he is involved in arranging and which I very much hope to attend. That will be a very important milestone in rolling out UDL more widely and discussions about this issue.

In terms of mainstreaming our permanent funding, this was, to an extent, a new pilot programme when it was introduced in 2022. It was funded until, I think, 2024. When I came into office I allocated a further €2.8 million to it to continue for this year and last year, the intention being, having done a second phase or second tranche of funding, and all going well, and it has done very well, to look then to mainstream that and put it onto a more permanent, sustainable footing. As I said, I intend to bring a memo to Cabinet in the near future on that note. I hope I will have good news to share with the Deputy in the House at that stage.

Third Level Costs

89. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the measures being considered for 2026 to support students with accommodation and living costs, including any planned adjustments to SUSI thresholds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6882/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: What measures are being considered this year, in 2026, to support students with accommodation and living costs, including any planned adjustments to SUSI thresholds, particularly in our constituency of Kildare North and the Maynooth area but also as students from across our constituency are travelling into Dublin. Not everybody goes to Maynooth, as I did. A lot of people go into Dublin. What plans, if any, are there for 2026?

Deputy James Lawless: I am very familiar with the challenges of commuting from Kildare to various colleges. I have two daughters, one attending Maynooth and one attending UCD, both of whom recently graduated, and I have seen the commute, the grind and so on. The Deputy and I have worked together on improving public transport on many of those services.

When I came to review the grants this year, I was mindful of non-adjacent students, that is, students who live 30 km or more away from college. The Deputy will appreciate, representing as we both do a commuter-belt constituency, that non-adjacent previously meant 45 km and it is now 30 km. Just because we are close to a college, be it UCD or any college in the city centre, does not mean it is easy to get there, put simply. That is because of congestion, commuting and so on. I was very mindful of that, so the distance is down to 30 km.

As to what supports are available for students facing accommodation pressures, commuting costs and so forth, I have increased all the non-adjacent grants this year - the first five levels, from the base grant right through - some by €350 and some by up to €420. Every single non-adjacent grant for students living 30 km or more away from their college has increased this year.

I have also increased the postgraduate contribution fee. That means that postgraduate students have €500 less to pay this year. I have increased the subvention to the student contribution fee more broadly, in a universal fashion, which means there is a €500 permanent cut to student fees across the board. In particular, in terms of targeted measures, that additional

money allocated to people on non-adjacent grants is real money into their hands, additional money that I expect will support them significantly in making the costs add up.

I also increased the student assistance fund. That is a discretionary fund available through college hardship officers. I am increasing thresholds as well. The threshold to avail of the various grants has increased now to €120,000, which means Members of this House, for example, can benefit from a SUSI grant, which would not have been the case historically.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I acknowledge the efforts and measures the Minister has taken in increasing the non-adjacent grants, the student assistance fund, etc. I spent a year in student union politics just after university in Maynooth students' union. An issue then, which continues to be an issue, is that there are those who sit right above the threshold for grants, for whatever reason. It is similar in a way to when somebody is applying for social housing and there is an income limit of €40,000. In circumstances where there is a €40,000 income limit, as in that instance, or a €50,000 limit, in terms of the SUSI grant, there is sometimes a reason that the threshold should not apply to someone earning €51,000. In that circumstance, is there any way view of assessing difficulty or hardship or reasoning when assessing that hard line of a threshold?

Deputy James Lawless: In any social democracy, where do we draw the line and where should income levels and thresholds be? We are at a situation now where the threshold to avail of the minimum form of a grant is €120,000 per household, which means 80% of households in Ireland are eligible for at least some form of SUSI grant intervention.

To the Deputy's broader point about how we draw the line, and there are a number of lines as you go through the graduated system, I mentioned to Deputy Charles Ward earlier that there is a disregard for mica scheme payments. There are also disregards for disability payments and bursaries, for example, the 1916 scheme. I think there are several dozen of those because I signed a statutory instrument last year to give effect to them. The many disregards should go some way towards making it easier to hit the thresholds. One thing I intend to explore in the upcoming budget is whether, in the case of larger families with a number of children in the household attending college at one time, there is a measure we could take to ease the burden on them and whether that is a factor or criterion we could take into account. I am pursuing that at the moment to investigate for this year's budget.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I welcome that. It is really positive. Deputy Jen Cummins mentioned earlier children who are estranged from their parents, etc., and having to rely on their parents then when they are looking for student grants or if they are not getting student grants, even though they are estranged. The Minister's response to that made complete sense. It could increase the number of people claiming they are estranged when they might not be.

The Minister spoke outside the House about the other issue I raise. He stated that about 80% of the population are eligible for some sort of SUSI grant. I do not know if this is being planned but it would be great to see the Department promote that message in secondary schools. It could also work with the CAO to get that news out to students.

A lot of people who are eligible for it do not claim it, like me. As we spoke about before, I did not claim it in first year, but I did in second year when I realised I was eligible for it.

Deputy James Lawless: I wholeheartedly agree with the Deputy. Many of the thresholds are now so high and some of the benefits are so broadly available that maybe people have not realised they are eligible for them. I did launch a communications campaign in the national media last summer as a result of that to make people aware. Deputies may have seen it running across national radio and TV. That did actually drive an increase in applicants, which I was glad to see because we devise these schemes so people can avail of them. That is the whole point of having them. I agree with that and we will continue to do more of that as well.

I will mention too, because I think it is relevant in terms of the wider supports, that the student assistance fund, which the Deputy might be aware of from his students union time, is a broad-based fund at the discretion of each individual access officer or welfare officer in the colleges. It is a pool of money worth €19.3 million. That is there and I increased it again coming into the new year. That is for things like books, the cost of materials, rent subvention if necessary, food, travel and medical costs. There is a relatively wide list and it is not prescriptive. Significant trust is rightly given to the access officers or welfare officers in each college to make a call when they have a student coming to them for assistance. They can judge and I think they get that call right.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy James Lawless: That broad-based fund is available and it is an additional student support on top of the other schemes there.

Apprenticeship Programmes

90. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress made in expanding apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities; whether additional measures are planned to increase participation and completion rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6757/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: What progress has been made on expanding apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities? Are additional measures planned to increase participation and completion rates? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy. His question relates to expanding apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities. As he is aware, work-integrated learning, where learners apply their studies in real-world settings, is a cornerstone of Ireland's tertiary education system and this includes apprenticeships and traineeships. Apprenticeships provide structured routes into employment for roles requiring hands-on learning and guaranteed workplace experience, whereas traineeships offer shorter, much more flexible options where work experience is essential. My Department remains committed to investing in apprenticeships and traineeships.

In budget 2026, the Government invested €79 million in apprenticeship delivery, bringing the 2026 current apprenticeship budget to over €410 million. That is more than double the

allocation in 2020, when this Department was established. The investment has grown the number of apprenticeship programmes from 58 in 2020 to 78 currently, so we can see that investment is increasing significantly, as is the number of different apprenticeship programmes available. Regarding traineeships, SOLAS allocates funding to the education and training boards, ETBs, and that depends on local needs, where they support flexible, targeted training. There are over 75 traineeship programmes available nationally across sectors from construction to retail.

A wide range of supports are also funded by my Department to support the participation of apprentices and trainees. I can elaborate on some of those in my further replies.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. I wish to briefly underline the importance of apprenticeships in the context of the very significant investment the Government is making in infrastructure and housing. If we are serious about delivering on our housing targets, retrofitting programmes, transport projects and wider public capital investment, we must ensure we have a strong and sustainable pipeline of skilled tradespeople to match that level of ambition.

In that regard, I wish to acknowledge the excellent work being carried out at Mount Lucas in County Offaly, where the Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board is delivering high-quality apprenticeship and training programmes that are making a real difference for learners, employers and the local economy. We also know that many qualified tradespeople are now earning substantially more than their peers who pursue other degree pathways, with strong job security and clear progression opportunities. Apprenticeship is no longer a second-best option. It is increasingly an attractive and viable first-choice career. Given this reality, can the Minister of State outline how her Department is actively promoting apprenticeships?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I absolutely agree with the Deputy regarding the great work being done at Mount Lucas. I think I have been there three times at this stage, looking at its work on modern methods of construction, MMC, its flagship development. Of course, it also has what is called the Skillnet MMC Accelerate platform. That showcases the different career pathways that are available to participate in MMC. It is one thing to have it and to have it developed and have really good work going on, but is another thing to make sure apprentices are aware of it and of the opportunities.

The Deputy's question is broader, though, and includes reaction to our NDP, our climate plan, our housing targets and how we are going to ensure we have a sufficient pipeline of apprentices and trainees. Just this week, the Minister and I launched the careers in construction action plan. It includes 36 actions building on the previous plan, which was quite successful. Actually, it was very successful. Again, if the Deputy wants more detail, I can tell him more about it.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Many young people enter mainstream third level education and subsequently drop out for a range of reasons, including being pushed into or choosing the wrong course. There remains a degree of snobbery within our educational system and wider society that prioritises traditional college routes at all costs, even where apprenticeships would better suit a young person's skills, aptitude and learning style. Given that many young people

are well suited to apprenticeships and would thrive in that model, what steps is the Minister of State taking to challenge this mindset, ensure apprenticeships are presented as an equal and respected option in schools and better capture those students who disengage from traditional third level education but could succeed through apprenticeship pathways?

Deputy Marian Harkin: This is again a very important question. I agree with what the Deputy is saying. Perhaps up to now, though it is changing, apprenticeships and sometimes traineeships were seen as a second or third option. They absolutely must be a first option for those for whom they are suitable. We are starting in the schools. There are a number of programmes in transition year. We have the initial vocational education and training, iVET, programme, which is a taster programme in construction available to transition year students. We have SafePass programmes. We are also looking at other programmes to not just encourage students to look at construction as a possible career, but also to break down some of those barriers that exist, including the gender barriers and the underrepresented groups. We are dealing with it from that aspect first of all. We are also having quite a number of promotional activities. The Deputy may have heard of Building Heroes, an excellent programme, with 12 ambassadors who are already in the construction sector undertaking peer-to-peer engagement, telling their colleagues about why it is a career of choice, why it is a top-class career and why they should consider it. There is a lot of work going on.

Grant Payments

91. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has examined the impact of the current means-testing arrangements for the SUSI grant on adult and mature applicants who, due to the lack of available or affordable housing, continue to reside in the family home and are therefore assessed on parental income; his plans to review the SUSI means test to address this issue, particularly in respect of independent or mature students; whether his Department is engaging with the Department of Social Protection regarding potential reforms to these arrangements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6932/26]

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Peter Roche. Has the Department examined the impact of the current means-testing arrangements for the SUSI grant for those applicants who continue to reside in the family home and thus have to be assessed on their parental income? Obviously, the number of people in this situation is rising, potentially, because of the housing crisis. Has the Department engaged with the Department of Social Protection regarding potential reforms to these arrangements?

Deputy Marian Harkin: I think the Minister will be back in a few minutes, but I will respond to this question. The reply states the student grant scheme is a universal scheme and the rules including the means-testing of reckonable income are applied on an equal basis to all students who make an application. In general, for student grant purposes, students are categorised according to their circumstances, either as students dependent on their parent or legal guardian or as independent mature students.

Students may be assessed as independent students if they have attained the age of 23 on 1 January of the year of first entry or re-entry to an approved further education course or an approved higher education course and they have not been ordinarily resident with their parents from the previous 1 October. Otherwise, they are assessed as dependent students, that is, assessed with reference to parental income. Applicants who do not meet the criteria to be assessed as an independent student for grant purposes or who cannot supply the necessary documentation to establish independent living for the required period may still apply to the awarding authority, SUSI, to have their grant eligibility assessed as a dependent student.

Mature students living at home may have benefited from recent improvements to the scheme. This academic year, all income thresholds to receive a student grant increased, with standard rate thresholds increasing by at least 15%. In budget 2026, the Minister introduced the first permanent reduction in the student contribution of €500. Families whose household income is under €115,000 can also receive a €500 grant towards their student contribution for this academic year. The threshold for this grant will also increase in September to a very significant €120,000.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: According to the Skillnet Ireland talent report for 2025, 58% of businesses report that they have difficulty in attracting required skills. There is a huge opportunity for society and for the individuals themselves in people reskilling and upskilling, thereby contributing more to society and improving their own lives. However, we are effectively putting barriers in place, preventing people from engaging in this upskilling by not enabling them to fully access all the supports that would be available to them were it not for their personal circumstances. In order to finance their return to education, people are returning to live at home, having been in rental accommodation or overseas. Many people in Dublin Rathdown have been in touch with me to highlight how they were not aware that, if they allowed their children to move back home, they would suddenly no longer be eligible. These are individuals who regard themselves as fully mature and independent. They just want to make a greater contribution to society and improve their own opportunities.

Deputy James Lawless: I think an Teachta O'Connell is standing in for an Teachta Roche. I acknowledge that he raised this issue with me during Questions on Policy or Legislation earlier in the week. It is an important issue. This is a universal scheme. Means testing of reckonable income is applied to students on an equal basis.

I will recap the rules that pertain to mature students. A student is considered to be independent or mature if he or she has attained the age of 23 at the start of the calendar year and has not ordinarily been resident with his or her parents from the previous 1 October. By contrast, if students are living in the family home, they are assessed as dependent students. I know the Deputy is asking whether it is correct for that to be the case. I appreciate it is difficult, particularly at a time when housing needs are not always met and people are living in the family home by necessity rather than necessarily by choice. It is a difficult situation intergenerationally as well.

A number of improvements have been made to the scheme. The eligibility thresholds have increased by about 15% across the board. The student contribution was permanently cut by €500, which could contribute towards affordability. In addition, all the non-adjacent grants have been increased. The student assistance fund has also been increased to an historic high.

Various other supports for things like disability and mental health were also brought into the system through the recent budget.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I acknowledge the improvements that have been made to the various schemes. The overall scheme does not take into account how the world in which we are operating has changed. We are now in a world where people are expected to engage in lifelong learning. People return to education, then go back to work and then return to education. We need to demonstrate our support for that. As we know, we are also facing a housing crisis. As part of that, we are changing the rules to allow modular homes to be built on the site of the family home. We will now see in Dublin the situation that pertains in the country where people share an eircode with their family while living completely separate from them, resulting in all of the income being rolled in together. The system as originally designed is not fit for purpose in the modern era. It needs to be looked at. We need to ensure that people can access these supports because we need to have people consistently upskilling and reskilling in order to contribute to society and improve their own outcomes. Of course, we need to ensure the system is not taken advantage of but we need to provide those supports for people to encourage that lifelong learning.

Deputy James Lawless: Lifelong learning is at the core of everything I seek to do in the Department. It is one of the reasons I brought the proposal for a national skills observatory to Cabinet last week. This dataset will enable future labour force needs to be forecast and emerging occupation trends to be modelled, predicted and met well by the education and training systems. Just last Friday, I attended a Skillnet event in Dundalk with my colleague, the chair of the committee, Deputy Erin McGreehan. We saw at first hand how Skillnet working with local employers can be extremely useful. We also have microcredential courses. These are short courses that can last six weeks or six months and can be offered online, through a hybrid model or in a local centre. Those microcredentials can be stacked upon one another. You walk away with a qualification that can be increased and augmented over time.

The reason a student living at home is not considered to be independent is that they do not necessarily pay rent, although I appreciate that they make a contribution in some cases, although not all. They also benefit from certain supports that are not provided to students living in an independent residence. I take on board the point on the prospect of modular homes and the planning system. That is progressing and it is something we need to look at to see what its knock-on effects might be.

Questions Nos. 92 and 93 taken with Written Answers.

Third Level Fees

94. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to reduce university fees; if the Government is committed to fully abolishing university fees; when this will be realised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6908/26]

Deputy Mark Ward: What are the Government's plans to reduce university fees? Is the Government committed to fully abolishing university fees? When will this happen? In the

context of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, these fees are putting undue pressure on families and students.

Deputy James Lawless: The Government's commitment is set out in the programme for Government. It is no more and no less. The programme for Government commitment is to reduce the student contribution fee in a financially sustainable manner over the lifetime of the Government. Budget 2026 was my first opportunity since taking up office to begin delivering on that programme for Government commitment. I did so with an immediate permanent reduction of €500 in the student contribution fee. That became effective straight away. Students are benefiting from that in the current academic year. That flat-rate reduction is universal. It is not means-tested and is available to all students, regardless of income. It has resulted in the base-rate fee reducing from €3,000 to €2,500 for the current academic year. That is the first permanent reduction in fees since free fees were introduced in 1995. It is significant and I am proud to have been able to deliver it. That fee reduction will benefit around 108,000 undergraduate students. A further 14,000 apprentices will also benefit, as will postgraduate students.

In addition, I have increased the income threshold for grant applicants to €120,000. As I said earlier, there are Members of this House who could now benefit from that. The new threshold reaches into the middle income bracket and, I would suggest, even a little bit beyond. Some 80% of households are now eligible for at least some form of SUSI intervention, whether in respect of fees, maintenance or both. I would welcome debate as to where to target further moneys. Further moneys have been pledged. I am of the view that we should be progressive and target these funds. We should look at investing moneys in the sections of society where they are really needed and where they will make a lifelong difference. That is why, as part of the budget, I invested in mental health and disability supports and increased all of the maintenance grants for the first five basic layers. I also increased the student assistance fund. We give help to everybody but we should give the most help to those who need it most. That is a fundamental principle of social democracy and social justice. I would welcome the Deputy's comments on that at some stage.

Deputy Mark Ward: As the Minister mentioned, 108,000 students and their parents will get a second bill for student fees through the door. I know because I am one of those parents who got a bill this week. I am in the privileged position of being able to afford to support my daughter but many parents are not in that position. I was interested in the Minister's response to Deputy Ó Cearúil earlier with regard to parents who have multiple children going through college at the same time. He said there may be a commitment to address that further down the line or in the next budget. That would be really welcome.

I know the Government has a promise to reduce fees but the reality for most parents and children out there is that there has been an increase of €500 from last year to this year. The reason I know this is because I am one of the parents who had to pay the money. Is there any commitment to address this?

Deputy James Lawless: I was also one of those parents, not this year but in recent years, and I will say I did not need that support. I will be honest about it. Those on an upper income, such as Members of the House for example, are in a privileged enough position. Having said

this, I have extended the threshold and Deputy Ward will now benefit from the €500 cut. Presuming his income is the TD's income we all have, he will benefit from the €500 subvention. This means the fees will be €2,000, the same as they were last year. It is arrived at through a different formula but it is the same thing. It is a little bit fairer and more progressive because it is based on means, albeit the means threshold is at €120,000 now, which is the highest it has ever been. The combination of the flat cut of €500 and the student subvention cut of another €500 on top means that effectively it is the same thing. As much as I can, year on year I will continue to reduce the figure.

There are many other aspects to it, such as the cost of accommodation, the cost of travel and the cost of books. I have engaged with student unions across the board on this in terms of their needs and there is a range of measures. The minimum thing I will do in every aspect of my brief is to follow the programme for Government. Deputy Ward can take it as read that I do my very best to follow the programme for Government in its fullness. I also look to go beyond it. For example, reaching the families that I mentioned is not in the programme for Government but I want to do it. There are many other things I want to do to support students and families.

Deputy Mark Ward: I do not want to talk about my own stuff but if there is more than one income coming into a house, it is taken out of the threshold. Talking to students and parents, all they see is that the Government broke its promise. They thought they would get a reduction of €500. The simple maths is that last year I paid €2,000 for my child's education in university and this year the cost is €2,500. You do not need to be a college professor to work out there has been a €500 increase. There is a bit of spin in this and the Minister has to admit this. What parents want to see is actual change in their pockets. The question they want me to ask is when they will see a further reduction in college fees and when they will see college fees totally abolished. This is what that people right across Dublin Mid-West and throughout the country want to know.

Deputy James Lawless: I am not sure where the mention of abolition came from. It certainly was not in my party's manifesto. I never promised it to anybody, not once in this brief, and not once in the campaign did I or my party promise this. I do not know what other people might have done. It is for them to speak about that. I am not aware of any such promise in any manifesto. What my party promised to do was to address the cost of education and this is what we are doing aggressively. We are going full steam ahead on it. This is why I have introduced a range of measures. The €500 permanent cut is the first of its kind. There is the fee subvention for households with an income up to €120,000. The student assistance fund is being increased. All of the basic layers of maintenance grants are being increased. It is worth recapping and restating that 80% of households, if we look at the ESRI income distribution chart, will now benefit from SUSI grants. The question is whether we will continue, and we will, with flat reductions, but the 20% of top earners are the ones who will benefit most from ongoing fee reductions. I will do this but I will also do things that support those in the 80% and the 20% at the bottom because it is socially just to do so.

Deputy Ward raised the issue of fees. His party in the North recently had an advertisement about student fees being £4,800. This is two and half times more.

Deputy Mark Ward: The money comes from Westminster. If the Minister is that interested in the North he should run in an election up in the North.

Deputy James Lawless: Deputy Ward's party boasted about fees being £6,000 on social media.

Deputy Mark Ward: The purse strings are held by Westminster and the Minister knows this. He is being disingenuous.

Departmental Funding

95. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the capital funding available to his Department for developments in the further education sector in 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6900/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: I very much welcome the substantial provision the Minister secured in the national development plan for capital developments in the further education sector. Thankfully, there has been a welcome emphasis in recent years on the development of the further education sector. Will the Minister outline some of the projects that will be progressed and will benefit from the funding available to his Department in 2026 for capital developments?

Deputy James Lawless: As part of the national development plan review, which was conducted last summer, I secured for the Department a capital allocation of €4.55 billion over the next four years from 2026 to 2030. This is significant and it is almost double what it was previously. It is the largest budget in the history of the Department. It is aligned to the overall capital envelope of the NDP. Part of this is because the Department's activities are so aligned with the whole-of-government missions, such as infrastructure needs to roll out housing for our people, the metro, transit, grid upgrades and water upgrades. The Department will train the tradesmen to do these jobs through the apprenticeship paths and programmes. There are also all of the skills that go with the digital agenda. We are entering an AI age. There is also the energy revolution with offshore wind and all of the opportunities that come with this. There are also healthcare and therapy needs, and we are scaling up the provision of courses for nine different occupations.

Additionally to this, the research and innovation aspect of the Department has received significant funding. Before Christmas I launched the €750 million INSPIRE research framework programme, which is fundamental to our knowledge economy, the ideas that we generate and how we succeed, innovate and remain competitive in a very robust and changing world. These are all significant capital projects. I was delighted to be able to secure these moneys and we have published the sectoral plan for the Department which provides a detailed breakdown. One project that might be of interest to Deputy Smith is the college of the future in Cavan. I thank him for the invitation to visit Cavan Institute recently. I still wear the top with pride; I was presented with a sporting jersey which I wear on my runs every week. The Cavan Institute is very much one of the projects I look forward to seeing progress in the time ahead. I might come back to it in a supplementary reply.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his response. With regard to Deputy Ward's concluding remarks, I very much welcome the fact that the Minister was the first Minister who was able to announce an all-Ireland university. He has worked very assiduously, along with Dundalk Institute of Technology and Queen's University, to have Dundalk Institute of Technology as a college of Queen's University. It is the first all-Ireland university we will have. This is practical and I very much welcome it.

I very much welcomed, as did the board of management and the staff and students in Cavan Institute, the Minister's recent visit. As Councillor Clifford Kelly, the chairperson of the board, indicated that day, a number of us have worked over the years to develop the college. We have seen it grow from being an extra class at second level in Breifne College to being a substantial provider of further education. Today it is one of the largest colleges in the country. We need additional accommodation, as the Minister saw himself at first hand. I sincerely hope his officials, working with Cavan and Monaghan ETB and Cavan Institute, will be able to progress the particular college of the future to the next stage so we can advance towards construction.

Deputy James Lawless: To pick up on Deputy Smith's remarks about Queen's University and Dundalk Institute of Technology, I had a meeting on it as recently as yesterday. I am really excited about it. Going back to the wider question, I will do everything in the programme for Government to the best of my ability but I will do other things. The Queen's University and Dundalk Institute of Technology merger was not in the programme for Government but I am doing it anyway. It is something that is very important and I am very excited about it. The all-Ireland dimension is huge. Deputy Smith is a big supporter of the all-Ireland dimension, as is Deputy McGreehan. We were at a function yesterday in connection with it. It is progressing and it is a very important milestone.

With regard to funding and capital for the Cavan area, with the relocation of the army barracks Cavan Institute received €5.3 million in funding in 2023. The centre of excellence for supply chain logistics was completed in September 2024 with €207,000. There is a minor capital works application in the pipeline at present for Cavan town. There are also electrical works, roof works and other ongoing and emergency works. The college of the future campus on the Cathedral Road is progressing and I am glad to be able to inform Deputy Smith and the House that I was successful in progressing it to the next stage of development. It is at pre-tender project design planning, procurement and supply stage and I very much hope to be in a position to update Deputy Smith and the House on further progress on it in the near future.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his response and I know of his personal commitment to the project. As I assured him previously at the Oireachtas committee and at other meetings, when the project gets to tender stage it will be advanced as quickly as possible by Cavan and Monaghan ETB. We have an opportunity to work in conjunction with Monaghan Institute and South West College in Enniskillen. It is being practical, for which the Minister and I have advocated for many years. Thankfully, we are in a position today, with the political initiative since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, to have greater collaboration across different aspects of society. We have seen the all-Ireland economy grow. We now need to upskill our people, and to provide skills and training on an all-Ireland basis. Earlier today, the Oireachtas committee on further and higher education heard from representatives of IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Skillnet.

They were talking about a skills shortages. Thankfully, today we are talking about skills shortages in Ireland because in the past, unfortunately, we did not have employment opportunities. There is a great opportunity to utilise the potential of the further education sector to contribute to training and upskilling people for very worthwhile employment.

Deputy James Lawless: There is a real skills shortage. It is a factor of success because we are at almost full employment in the economy. Recently my Department produced a labour force modelling report which looked at our construction skills needs. I am working closely with Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, on the development of that report. That showed we need to continue to grow our pool of skilled tradespeople from our craft trades right across the board - all the skills we need to build the big infrastructure projects we aspire to develop over the course of this term which are funded through the national development plan. For almost the first time we actually have funding. What we need is an intermesh between the labour force and the skills to deliver. There are a number of ways we can do that but primarily it is through skilling and training our people. Things like modern methods of construction can be embraced which, as well as being more productive, also bring the employment opportunities to a more regional level because there can be factories developing modern methods of construction in a regional, rural location which are then shipped off to a building site in the big town or the big city without the worker having to commute every day. It addresses the gender balance in the workforce and things like that as well because it permits women with caring responsibilities and people with disabilities to work on a site like that because they may not be able to travel to a traditional construction site. It is beneficial for many reasons and is something we will continue to progress.

Further and Higher Education

96. **Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the work being undertaken by his Department to secure pathways to further and higher education for people with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [5970/26]

Deputy James Lawless: I thank Teachta Ní Raghallaigh. Supporting students with disabilities is a key strategic priority for me, for my Department and for the Government. Indeed, we have a Cabinet subcommittee on disability which I sit on. My Department has taken on a number of actions through that because it is something we are determined to address across all of Government.

The National Access Plan identifies students with disabilities as a priority target group for subvention and supports. I spoke to the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, and others in the House about targeting supports. It is important that we target resources at those most in need. That is a fundamental principle we should adhere to.

The most recent figures show that new entrants into higher education with a disability have increased from 12.4% to 14.7%, so we are getting more participation in higher education from students with disabilities. That is really positive. We have a target of 16% which I think we will surpass. That is very good news but we need to continue to do that and to continue to explore the ways we can support such students.

One of the ways we can do that is through a flexible and agile system with many different pathways for learners to take as they navigate the further and higher education systems. One of the vehicles for supporting that is the fund for students with disabilities. That is a critical fund and in the recent budget, I was pleased to increase that by €3 million across both further and higher education. That will make a significant difference to over 22,000 students with disabilities for targeted supports they can avail of in the further education and higher education spheres.

We are also looking at things like the universal design which asks how we develop buildings with everything from sensory needs to textures to colours to navigation of spaces. That whole area of universal design for learning approach is critical and under the programme for access to higher education, I have provided €5.8 million to improve universal design across higher education institutions and to further educational institutions. It should not just be the colleges that get it; it should be across the board in every centre.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an cheist seo a fhreagairt. I thank the Minister for outlining the work being carried out by himself and his officials. I will specifically turn to PATH 4 funding. I wholeheartedly support the advancements made in relation to universal design the Minister has been speaking about for learning in phase 1 and the course offerings provided for people with intellectual disabilities in 11 HEIs across the State under phase 2. I have had engagement with Trinity College, in particular, and I have been learning about the immense benefits of its programme in terms of empowerment, agency and work readiness. The programme for people with intellectual disability is state of the art. It is a world leader in the design of inclusive education and is ambitious in what it envisages for its students.

I look forward to reading the review of PATH 4 when it comes out and I hope to see funding for the programme mainstreamed in the next few years. However, in the meantime, there is a lot of uncertainty. Phase 2 funding is coming to an end this year and, as it stands, planning for the academic year 2026-2027 is at a standstill. Students do not know if enrolments will continue. Staff do not know if they will have jobs in September. Some colleges will not have an entire cohort through the programme by the time funding is due to expire.

Deputy James Lawless: The PATH 4 programme is a wonderful programme. It is a programme I am very passionate about. I am glad to hear the Deputy visited the Trinity Centre for Intellectual Disabilities. I have also been there. I met with the students, the learners and the educators. I have also been to the Field of Dreams in Bishopstown in County Cork and a lot of other centres, including in my own area of Naas and Sallins. The project there is for people with disabilities participating in education. They are all wonderful centres, and it is really great to see them doing so well.

We have, under PATH 4, a target of 160 students to participate. We actually have 193 students participating through PATH 4 in higher education institutions. That programme is currently spread across 11 different HEIs with a budget of €11 million. There is good regional spread. It was done on a competitive call basis with an expert independent panel to assign the funding. That has proven very successful. The model has to be responsive.

I take on board the Deputy's points about mainstreaming the funding. Our colleague, Deputy Ó Cearúil, raised that earlier as did others. It is something I am very mindful of. When I came into office I increased the funding by €5.8 million for a further two years, which was this year and last year. I will return to that very soon. I aspire to put that on a more sustainable, long-term basis.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I believe the goal in this sector in the medium term, alongside mainstreaming courses for students with intellectual disabilities in our colleges and third level institutions, must consider a national centre to co-ordinate those courses and ensure standards across them. We should be looking at introducing a separate stream of funding to pilot a programme for neurodivergent learners, learners with complex needs and learners with rare diseases based on the same model.

As all-Ireland education has come up already in this debate, it relates to the potential to expand this model to the North. I see the real potential here to export a world-class model and make a 32-county initiative of this. Strandmillis University College has produced a feasibility study and there is plenty of scope and interest. At the moment, there are 11 courses open to learners in the Twenty-six Counties but there is none available across the Border. I have spoken with my colleague in the Six Counties, Caoimhe Archibald, and she is enthusiastic about this project, and I am sure she would be interested in collaborating with the Minister's Department on this issue. Dundalk IT and Strandmillis University College fall under the same governance structure, which should facilitate this. I encourage the Minister to consider extending PATH 4 funding to support this initiative through DkIT.

Deputy James Lawless: Absolutely. The PATH 4 initiative is something I am very committed to and intend to mainstream. Certainly, I will be revisiting that in the coming weeks. I intend to speak to Cabinet colleagues on that and to look to roll that out on a more permanent basis.

The Deputy makes an interesting point about the opportunity to have wider participation for students with complex needs. That is a good point and something I will take on board. We have a thing called the disability demonstration project at the moment, which is an exercise supported by academic research and a dedicated researcher to look at what interventions are appropriate at different levels and how we can broaden that. The Deputy mentioned Minister Archibald. I meet regularly with her and we have a very good working relationship. There is a number of items on our agenda which are shared. Just before Christmas in Farmleigh we announced all-island apprenticeships and the accounting technicians' body is on an all-Ireland basis. We talked about the Queen's University Belfast and DkIT consolidation. That is something I am really excited about, namely that all-island university potential that is coming to bear there and the disability supports and what we can do on an all-island basis. It is certainly something I would be very happy to support and explore with Minister Archibald. I do meet with her regularly in the North South Ministerial Council and in bilaterals. I have visited both Magee Campus in Derry and Queen's University in Belfast on a number of occasions since my appointment as well.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Matt Carthy: Caithfidh an Rialtas bata agus bóthar a thabhairt do Larry Murrin mar chathaoirleach ar Bhord Bia. Tá muinín na n-eagraíochtaí feirmeoireachta agus an phobail i gcoitinne caillte aige. Caithfidh sé imeacht. We are now nine days into a serious and escalating crisis of confidence in Bord Bia. It is a crisis entirely of the Government's own making. At the heart of it is a clear and undeniable conflict of interest. The chair of Bord Bia is head of a company that imports Brazilian beef that is produced to lower standards and is the subject of weaker safety requirements. At the same time, he is presiding over the State agency charged with promoting Irish beef, which is produced to the highest environmental, welfare and food safety standards. The contradiction goes to the core of Bord Bia's credibility, and farmers know it.

Yesterday, the Taoiseach's response to my party leader was confused, evasive and, frankly, all over the place. Instead of showing leadership, he appeared either unwilling or unable to grasp the clear powers the Government holds in relation to this appointment. Instead of addressing the substance of the issue, Ministers have resorted to dismissive language, talking about witch hunts and hikes and suggesting that farmers are somehow doing their own sector a disservice by speaking out. I met with the farmers protesting at Bord Bia headquarters yesterday. I spoke directly to them and to their representative organisations. All farming organisations are unequivocal: Larry Murrin's position is untenable, confidence has been lost and he has to go.

Matters deteriorated further this morning. In response to Deputy Martin Kenny, the agriculture Minister launched what I consider to be an unprecedented attack on the largest farming organisation in the country, the IFA, seeking to blame it for this crisis. That was, frankly, unbelievable and deeply irresponsible. It shows a Government lashing out rather than facing up to its own failures.

Bord Bia, we all acknowledge, plays a pivotal role in promoting Irish food on global markets, but that role is based on trust. Above all, what is required is the trust of our primary producers. Farmers are out in all weathers. They are meeting ever higher environmental, animal welfare and regulatory standards. They are doing what the State asks of them. Their confidence in Bord Bia is depended upon. Their confidence in Bord Bia has been broken.

Irish agriculture is already under immense pressure, facing new challenges all the time, including the emergence of bluetongue disease. Farmers do not need a self-inflicted crisis of governance at the very top of the agency that is supposed to support them. The Government appointed Larry Murrin. It has the power to act. My question is direct and plain: will it use its powers to restore confidence in Bord Bia and remove its chair?

The Tánaiste: We will not remove the chair. The Deputy has come for a head and he is not getting one. That is the position of the Government of Ireland. This is a Government that follows due process. This is a Government that does not decide that protest removes people from office. This is a Government that listens and engages. We believe that if a person puts up their hand for public service, which is what serving on a commercial semi-State board is, and makes a positive contribution, then they have the support of the Government.

The Sinn Féin position on this has not involved looking for explanations or facts. Its deputy leader is not here today, but he was here last week. Before the board meeting had even taken place, Sinn Féin wanted the chair of Bord Bia gone. It did not even want the meeting to take place. The position was "Go. Off with his head" before there was any chance to engage at all.

I said to Deputy Doherty then what I say to Deputy Carthy now. Conflicts of interest and perceived conflicts of interest are always important to raise in any corporate governance structure - 100% - but it is also important that processes are followed and that people are given an opportunity to discuss information. I will get to that in a moment. I believe there is information and complexity here that are deliberately being overlooked - possibly even suppressed - in Sinn Féin's presentation of this situation.

Mr. Murrin appeared before the board last week. That was the right thing to do. He is the chair of the board. He answered all the questions board members had and had the support of the overwhelming majority of the board of Bord Bia. I understand that he is happy to appear before the Oireachtas agriculture committee, and he should do so. Again, that is an important process. The committee is the right place for the people's representatives, including those from the Deputy's party, to have the opportunity to probe, ask questions, discuss and see, beyond social media posts and gut instinct, whether there is an issue here or whether the chairman actually has a robust and credible explanation. The Oireachtas agriculture committee either has invited or is about to invite the chair to attend a meeting. I know he is willing to attend. A date is being arranged. I hope that meeting can take place next week. It would be helpful for everybody to have a proper, thorough examination.

I agree with the Deputy that there are more important issues we should be discussing on the floor of the Dáil today, including bluetongue, which deserves more than a passing reference, the Common Agricultural Policy and the fact that significant parts of the country are under water. Let the agriculture committee do its job, rather than having a rinse and repeat of the same question I was asked last week. The Government's position has not changed.

I also want to say that Bord Bia and its chairman, Mr. Murrin, have presided over massive growth in Irish exports. Does that count for anything in Sinn Féin's book? We have not seen the full figures for 2025 yet, but I will be surprised if the value of Irish food exports does not exceed €20 billion. That is a remarkable achievement and would be a new record for our largest and oldest indigenous industry.

There is complexity involved in any trade deal. The Deputy is around here long enough to know that in 2008, when we had the pork dioxin problem, there was a global recall of Irish pork and contingency plans were needed. In any major global deal, contingency plans are needed. To win major global deals that benefit the Irish economy, Irish workers and Irish taxpayers, we have to have a contingency plan. If Sinn Féin's position is that a food company cannot have a contingency plan in place, then that company cannot compete. If Sinn Féin's position is that if a person is running a food company that has a contingency plan in place in case anything goes wrong with Irish produce and there is a recall, that person cannot be on the board of a semi-State, then I believe our commercial semi-States would be the worse for that. I hope it emerges at the committee that Irish farmers have benefited significantly from the deal this company, Dawn Farm Foods, has in place.

The position of the Government is clear. We look forward to an opportunity for the agriculture committee to pursue this. I would also ask the IFA and ICMSA to take up the offer of meeting with the chair of the board. Every country chair in the IFA is welcome to meet, together or on their own, with the chair of Bord Bia. It is very disappointing that the IFA has not taken up that offer.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Tánaiste talks about the success of Bord Bia-----

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----but it appears that he is oblivious to what that success is built on. It is built on the work of our farmers. It is not Larry Murrin or Bord Bia that are out in this weather milking cows. It is not Larry Murrin or Bord Bia dealing with cows calving in the middle of the night.

The Tánaiste: Wow. We do not need Bord Bia. Get rid of Bord Bia.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is not Larry Murrin or Bord Bia that is delivering the highest standards met by farmers anywhere in the world. It is our primary producers, who are doing so. They - not just me or some backbenchers in the Government parties-----

The Tánaiste: Not in mine.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----are telling the Tánaiste that confidence has been lost in the chair of Bord Bia. The Government is trying to be evasive and to look for different ways out of this situation. The ultimate truth is this: the chair of the State agency charged with promoting Irish produce across the world is also head of a company that is importing beef from Brazil.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Soundbites.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is untenable. There is a clear conflict of interest.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is not right.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Stop trying to dodge. Stop trying to protect your man in Bord Bia. Instead, protect Irish family farmers by removing the chair of Bord Bia and restoring trust in that organisation.

The Tánaiste: Usually when you deliver your response, it should be in some way linked to what I just said. You have accused me of being evasive. Here it is, really clear: I support the chair of Bord Bia. I think the chair of Bord Bia should continue. I think he should go in front of the agriculture committee. I do not accept Deputy Carthy's smears. I do not agree with his position. That is my position. How is that evasive? It is pretty clear to me. That is a pretty clear position to have.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is an unacceptable position.

The Tánaiste: Instead of the prepared lines that he has been working on in front of the mirror this morning, maybe the Deputy should listen to what the Government is saying. We are very clear in relation to our position on this.

There is significant value. I do not like the way the Deputy just dismissed the work of those in Bord Bia because they are not out in the rain. Bord Bia is doing incredible work across the world at a time of extraordinary global-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: On the back of our farmers. Do you not accept that?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy just dismissed them.

Deputy Matt Carthy: You have to accept that it is our primary producers who are doing the hard work.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: Bord Bia is doing incredible work promoting our farmers' goods right across the world. I am so proud of the work of our farmers and of Irish produce.

Deputy Martin Kenny: And the financial malaise being experienced by our farmers.

The Tánaiste: Do not come into this House and attack the Minister for agriculture, who has achieved more-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: He is the one who attacked the farming organisations.

The Tánaiste: -----for Irish farmers than Deputy Carthy will ever achieve-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: He attacked our farming organisations.

The Tánaiste: -----whether it was nitrates-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: -----whether it was Mercosur, whether it is TB or whether it is work on bluetongue. Let us be honest-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The IFA is not at one on Brazilian beef.

The Tánaiste: -----when it comes to Sinn Féin, this is not about food on the table; it is about a head on a plate.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The housing completion figures announced earlier show that we are thousands of homes short of the target the Tánaiste set. The number of homes is almost 5,000 short of the 41,000 that he promised to deliver. Of course, the Government is trying to run away from that target now. The housing Minister has decided that annual targets are a distraction. A distraction from what? This is the number of new homes that the Tánaiste said are needed and that he promised to deliver. The 41,000 target is there, in black and white, published by the Government just weeks before the election. If the Tánaiste needs to jog his memory in this regard, he can consult the Fine Gael election manifesto because the 41,000 target was printed in black and white in that as well.

We all know that this is not the only housing target the Government has missed by a country mile. In the run-up to the election, the Tánaiste was categorical that 40,000 new homes would be delivered by the end of 2024. That was another bogus figure, trotted out despite mountains of evidence that it was pie in the sky.

Out of ideas and with their housing plan in tatters, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have now reverted to type. They are offering tax breaks for developers and sweetheart deals for investment funds, along with new legislation with the sole purpose of letting already record rents rip. Instead of providing affordable homes for people to buy, the Government is, in the words of the Taoiseach, pivoting "more strongly to" the private sector. This means turning hard-pressed renters into cash cows for investment funds and bleeding them dry to feed the vultures.

This is not an academic debate about numbers. It is about people in their 20s, 30s and 40s who are still living in their childhood bedrooms and feeling hopeless and helpless because their lives are passing them by. They are missing out on milestones, relationships, career opportunities and even starting families. It is about the growing number of elderly renters who are at risk of homelessness. It is about the 5,321 children who are growing up without homes, all because successive Governments have doubled down on failure. What is happening is not an accident; it is a choice. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have led us here. Today's housing numbers are yet another monument to their failure.

Under the Tánaiste's watch, a housing crisis has morphed into a housing disaster and from a housing disaster into a social catastrophe. Despite this, the Tánaiste is going to stand up in a minute and tell us about what a great job he is doing. The gall is incredible. Will the Tánaiste admit that he has broken yet another election promise. Why did the Government publish annual housing targets just before the election and then tear them up straight afterwards?

The Tánaiste: You would swear the number of new houses was down today, based on that. The number of new homes completed last year represents an increase of 20% on the previous year. For the people listening at home - and just in case they missed the bit at the start - there were almost 6,000 homes built last year than the year before. We are now living in a country where 600 first-time buyers are buying their first homes every week. The Deputy talks about people living in box rooms. Yes, there are too many. He talks about hopelessness. It is not hopeless for those 600 people this week who will get the keys to their homes and begin their lives. These are the people I see, right across my community in Wicklow and right across this country as well.

We have completion figures today that show momentum. They are a positive sign. There is now momentum back in the housing market. The Deputy is correct. That did not happen by accident; it happened as a result of the policies that we are pursuing and that are injecting confidence again in an ability to build in the private sector and a realisation across all parts of the State that this housing emergency is the responsibility of all parts of the State to fix. I refer here to Uisce Éireann, the ESB and local authorities, which need to zone more land as opposed to just passing motions condemning the housing situation. The local authorities actually need to help.

Let us be honest. I would say the Deputy was a bit surprised that the figures are as high as they are today. I would not go as far as to say that the Deputy was disappointed, but I would say he was surprised.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Stop.

The Tánaiste: The ESRI forecast that 35,000 homes would be built. We have exceeded that. The Central Bank of Ireland forecast that 33,500 would be built. We have exceeded that. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council forecast an assumption for this year of 34,500. We have exceeded that. We need to continue to do much more. The plan that this Government has is to deliver 300,000 homes by the end of 2030. This is a positive contribution towards that. It is a significant increase. If the Deputy looks at the graph, he will see that it was the highest number of housing completions since 2011. The Deputy likes to talk about my party being in government a long time. When I came into the Dáil, there were approximately 7,000 homes completed. Has the Deputy looked at the graph? It is the highest number since 2011. Do we want it to be higher? Of course, we do. There is momentum now, and we have to build on that.

The Deputy and I have different policy views, and I respect that. We debate them and we will continue to do so. However, I suggest that some of the policies that we adopted in the budget we have yet to even see the full potential of because they were obviously introduced later in the year. During the course this year, we will begin to see their impact. That is not just my view. The Deputy will have seen the Bank of Ireland economic analysis published this week and what it is hearing from the market in terms of the positive signs of the decisions that we took.

We will work constructively with anybody in this House. We have seen the number of planning permissions increase significantly. We have seen positivity on commencements, namely a doubling of the number between December and November. More first-time mortgages were approved in the first 11 months of 2025 than every before. There is a housing emergency in this country,. It is an emergency if you do not have a roof over your head or are trying to move out of the box room. However, today's figure represents an increase in housing supply, and that is a good thing.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Just over a year ago, the Tánaiste promised voters 41,000 homes in his party's election manifesto. Just weeks before the election, the Government promised the delivery of 41,000 homes in 2025. The Government failed to meet the target it

set for itself by almost 5,000 homes, and the Tánaiste is dressing up this failure as some sort of success.

The Government is presiding over a situation where rents are at record levels, where the numbers of adults living in their childhood bedrooms are at record levels and where house prices are at record levels. Almost 17,000 people are now homeless. That is a terrible indictment of the Tánaiste's and Fine Gael's time in office. Two hundred and sixty-seven of those people are pensioners. There are 5,321 children growing up without homes. That is another record level, and the Tánaiste is presenting this as somehow being progress and success. Will he admit that he has broken his election promises? Will he explain why the Government has ripped up its annual housing targets? Why does it not have annual targets anymore?

The Tánaiste: We have a target. We have a whole plan. It is fully funded, it is published and it contains a commitment to deliver 300,000 homes. We are making progress in relation to that as well.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Why did you get rid of annual targets?

The Tánaiste: We have explained that very clearly. We made a decision. Whether a home is built in December or January does not make a fundamental difference.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It does.

The Tánaiste: What makes a fundamental difference is the total amount of supply built over a five-year period.

Deputy Rory Hearne: We do not know your targets.

The Tánaiste: Sorry, Deputy O'Callaghan is the deputy leader of his party. Maybe Deputy Hearne will get a turn one day. Deputy O'Callaghan is well able; he asked the question.

We built 6,000 more homes last year than the year before. That is progress. We built 30,330 in 2024 and 36,284 homes last year. The Deputy does not want any hope in relation to this. The Deputy wants to continue to talk down the progress that is being made. It is the highest number of completions-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: That is untrue. You are so cynical.

The Tánaiste: The cacophony from those opposite is hard to take. It is the highest number of completions since 2011 - from single-digit thousands to 36,200. Let us build on that. Let us come forward with ideas as to how to take that forward, but let us take at least one minute or a couple of seconds to acknowledge that the number of housing completions for last year exceeded the forecasts of the ESRI, the Central Bank of Ireland, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and, probably, the Deputy's own expectations as well.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: You are going to evade your targets and your promises.

The Tánaiste: Let us build on that work and help more young people get out of their parents' homes. While we are comparing figures, let us compare apples with apples. The population of this country has increased by more than 750,000 over a ten-year period, but the Deputy never wants to factor that in-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: You have known that for a decade. You have been in power for a decade and you have not delivered.

The Tánaiste: -----as well when the term "highest ever" is used. We have had the highest number of first-time mortgage drawdowns ever since figures began and 600 people are getting keys to their first home every week. That is progress. We have a lot more to do, but these figures today give us momentum to build on.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am amazed that the Tánaiste is trumpeting success in light of the housing disaster that people face in this country. Tomorrow, we will have the end-of-month figures for homelessness. At the end of December, 16,996 people were homeless. A record number of people, including 5,321 children, were living in the misery of emergency accommodation.

Whatever the figures are tomorrow, there will be an unacceptable level of homelessness.

Next week, the Government plans to bring in a Bill that is going to lead to some of the most, if not the most, unaffordable rents anywhere in Europe being increased even further because market rents will then dictate what any tenancy that ends can be set at. Market rents are currently €2,600 a month and in much of Dublin they are more often €3,000 or even €3,500. These are shocking levels. We now have the CSO figures that show 36,000, which, honestly, is a marginal improvement.

Deputy John Cummins: We would have more if the Deputy did not object to them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: According to the Central Bank, we need 50,000 to 60,000 houses a year in order for the Government to meet its 2030 targets. There is not a hope in hell of reaching the housing need that has been agreed on by many bodies, including the Government.

Deputy John Cummins: Stop objecting to them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: By the way, Mitchell McDermott today proved that this has nothing to do with planning permissions. We have loads of planning permissions.

Deputy John Cummins: Stop objecting.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not planning objections that are the problem, as Mitchell McDermott said. We have 32,000 planning permissions that are being sat on. There are no

judicial reviews, they have the planning permission, but they are not happening because of viability. What does that mean? It means profits - profits for your developer friends - or the lack of infrastructure, such as water infrastructure. We know from Irish Water that it is only being given enough money by the State for 30,000 units a year when we need 50,000 to 60,000 units. The Government is not putting in the infrastructure.

What about the developers, landlords and investors? The Minister, Deputy Lawless, summed up the Government's policy earlier this month. He said:

[Housing] is about international markets. It's actually a spreadsheet in Zurich or New York or Antwerp, more so than a builder looking at a site in Longford or Roscommon, that's actually deciding what happens here.

That is it. That is the policy. The investors in Zurich, Antwerp and New York, profit-driven, tell the Government to jump, and it says, "How high?" Meanwhile, the housing misery continues, with the most unaffordable rents, record numbers of people homeless, totally unaffordable house prices, speculation and land hoarding, as developers and investors sit on planning permissions, waiting for the Government to pass even more legislation in their favour, so profits can go up.

The Tánaiste: I know we come at these things from a very different place ideologically, but we need private investment to help build homes. We do not wish to live in a country where every house is built by the State. Can I just be clear about that? We want to build social homes. I think we are on track to build a very significant number this year, and we will have the figures for 2025. We want to build affordable homes and, heaven forbid, we would also like more private homes, and that ain't a bad thing either. There are lots of people who want to move out of their box room for the first time. They are not looking for a local authority home in all instances; they are actually looking for a home to buy. Planning objections are a factor in relation to that. They might not be in RTÉ, when the Deputy was out there the other night, but people do care about planning objections.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and Deputy Barry Ward are coming to work every day, pursuing policies to deliver more houses. Deputy Boyd Barrett is seeing housing schemes in his constituency, and saying, "We don't want that one, that one and the other one." That is not helpful or constructive.

The Deputy is right that homeless figures are too high, of that there is no doubt. That is why we are continuing to invest more in emergency accommodation. It is also why we have to continue to understand better the composition of our homelessness figures so we can pursue the correct policies.

Viability is important. Again, we have different ideological views. However, unless the Deputy's view is that the State must build everything, then we need to make sure that it is viable for people to build homes because if it is not, they will not build them. That is how business works, as the Deputy knows. We have already seen very positive indications from the decision we took to reduce the VAT rate in terms of people now being much more interested in building apartments in this country. That is not just my view, by the way. The Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland looks at apartments, and it has said there are five categories that it looks at.

Before our changes, only two were viable, but now a number more are deemed viable as well, so that is progress.

At a European level, there are real housing challenges, so we are not the only country grappling with this. In Europe now, we actually have one of the strongest rates of home completion in the entire European Union. For every 1,000 people living in Ireland now, 5.9 homes are being completed, whereas the EU average is 3.3. I stand here very aware that there is a housing emergency, very aware that it is the biggest domestic issue bar none, very aware that people are putting life decisions on hold until they can get a home, absolutely, but also very confident that the decisions we are making now, hard at times as they are, will yield real benefits in terms of increased supply. Supply, supply, supply is the way forward in relation to this.

We have taken a number of actions. The Deputy made a fair point in relation to the infrastructure that is needed to enable housing. I agree with that. I hear, right across the country, "We have zoned land here. If only it was serviced." That is why, this week, we announced a €1 billion fund that every local authority, including in Dún Laoghaire, can apply for. It opened this week, and it closes at the end of February. There is an onus on every local authority to realise it is part of the solution here, or part of the problem. It is up to them. They need to put in their applications now to draw down that funding to help put in the road infrastructure, water, wastewater or whatever is needed to open up more sites. In relation to infrastructure, I agree. In relation to viability, we have different views on that, but I believe we have taken a number of measures. We will continue every day to engage constructively with any idea that can help to increase supply further.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We do not need a single further unaffordable home, not a single one. What we need is affordable homes. I did not say they should all be social. I said they should all be affordable or social. The problem is that houses being delivered with rents of €3,500 or for €600,000 or €700,000 are totally unaffordable to ordinary people, but are very good for investors. We are saying we need a State construction company to deliver the infrastructure that the Tánaiste accepts the Government is not delivering, and to deliver social and affordable housing. We need a no-fault eviction ban so people do not get evicted through no fault of their own into emergency accommodation, including, increasingly, older and very vulnerable people. We need to stop the speculation and land hoarding. We need to stop dancing to the tune of investors in Zurich and so on in order to deliver the housing that we want.

By the way, on my own personal record, for one of the developments we opposed, we said there should be more social and affordable housing because it was only getting 10%. We opposed it-----

Deputy John Cummins: One of them. What about the other ten or 12?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Cummins, please.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We opposed it, and we got the social housing. We said there should be more social and affordable housing, and we got the 100% because we opposed it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: You opposed it. Then you go looking for votes at the same houses you objected to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. The Minister should be showing a good example.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is disgraceful.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was only 10%. We got 100% because we put in a submission on it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: None of those families would be living there if it was down to you.

The Tánaiste: The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is reminding us of the irony of knocking on doors, looking for votes, at the same doors that you opposed ever being built. It is something we should all reflect on in this House. We all come under pressure in our communities to object to this and object to that. Sometimes-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not true. We said we should have social and affordable housing.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is true.

The Tánaiste: You guys can take this up in Dún Laoghaire. I think it is a point worth considering.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will happily list them out.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Says the special adviser to Eoghan Murphy.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will happily list them out.

The Tánaiste: Sorry. Hang on a second.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: She is getting personal but I cannot.

The Tánaiste: She is the democratically elected TD for Dún Laoghaire.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is about his record as a TD.

The Tánaiste: The Minister is well able to handle herself, and I am sure she will pursue this.

There is a direct correlation between supply and demand and affordability. The Deputy is right. We all want to see more affordable homes. We know that one of the things that drives up prices is if there is more demand for homes than supply, and, therefore, we have to increase supply. I think we agree on that point. I fundamentally disagree that we do not need more planning applications or more planning permissions granted. We absolutely do. We also need more land zoned. I am getting pretty tired of the local authorities that think they have done enough. We need to over-zone land because not all zoned land actually correlates to new housing developments. Every local authority now needs to look at what it can do to make sure there is enough zoned land. What we will do in partnership with them is help to provide the funding to make sure that land is then serviced.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Much of the country is inundated with floodwater at the moment. The Government cannot control the weather, but it can control the delivery of flood defences and the forecasting systems that can protect people in this country. In those two areas, the Government has been a disaster. Two years ago, I asked the Minister for public expenditure the timeframes for the delivery of flood defence schemes in the country. He did not give an answer. Government Ministers are allergic to measurables in case they can be held to account.

The Minister told me there were 46 schemes at the design stage at that time. Let us look at a couple of those. In Midleton in 2023, during Storm Babet, 600 homes and 300 businesses were flooded. The damage was estimated at €200 million, which is incredible. People came within a hair's breadth of losing their lives in Midleton. The damage was unprecedented but was not unforeseen because Storm Frank had devastated the exact same area in 2015. In 2015, flood defences were promised, with a completion date of 2020.

Today the planning application for those flood defences has still not even been submitted to Cork County Council. It is an incredible situation. When it rains in Midleton, an elderly gentleman often stays awake at night to watch the height of the river in order to be able to warn families of impending danger. Eleven years after Storm Frank, Midleton is dependent on a human water gauge for the protection of lives under the Tánaiste's Government. Enniscorthy has been waiting 25 years for protection. In 2014, €55 million was allocated to flood relief schemes in Enniscorthy. This week Enniscorthy is a lake. There have been 12 floods in 25 years and planning permission for these flood defences has still not been granted.

Practically every single piece of infrastructure development in this country is grinding to a halt. Housing is in reverse. It will be 2050 before Uisce Éireann has the gaps in the infrastructure filled. The grid cannot take the renewable energy that is created at the moment. Commuters are sitting on motorways that look like car parks. Tens of thousands of families are currently at risk due to flooding because those defences are not in place. Why? It is because the Tánaiste's Government has the slowest planning, licensing, permitting, tendering and judicial reviews in the whole of the European Union.

Flood forecasting too has been incredibly slow. Met Éireann does not provide flood forecasts to the public. It provides rainfall forecasts that do not give a full picture in terms of ground saturation. There are no real-time weather stations recording rainfall in mountain areas and in the catchment areas of the major rivers. The national flood forecast and warning service was announced in 2016, yet ten years later none of these flood forecasts are being made available to the public. Councils know this information and people will get it but only if they

ask the councils what is happening. I believe that the glacial pace of infrastructural delivery in this country is costing lives and is costing people dearly. Will the Tánaiste detail today when the outstanding flood defences that are promised will be delivered?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Tóibín for raising the issue and asking the questions. First, I just want to be conscious in my own comments that there are still weather warnings in place in our country. The weather event that many communities are experiencing is still ongoing, with particular warnings for Dublin, Carlow, Kilkenny, Wexford, Wicklow and Waterford. There is more rain forecast over the coming days and flooding will continue to be a risk due to saturated ground conditions and very elevated river levels. I urge everyone to continue to exercise caution as conditions can change quickly, to monitor the Met Éireann forecasts and to follow the advice of local authorities. I want to thank all the local authority crews, the ESB crews and others who are working hard with communities and often in very adverse conditions.

I remind people that the Government financial schemes of assistance are now both open. There is a scheme in relation to homeowners under the Department of Social Protection, and the Minister, Deputy Calleary, has made that clear. There is also a scheme under the Department of enterprise for businesses affected, and the Minister, Deputy Burke, made that clear yesterday. Our national emergency co-ordination group, and the humanitarian subgroup of that, are meeting daily and will meet again today to continue to assess the situation and co-ordinate responses as required.

The Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, is currently visiting communities that have been affected. I know he was in Dublin earlier today and he has been in Wicklow. I believe he is going to Enniscorthy to meet with people there today. That is important. He will be looking to see what can be done in the here and now to assist communities as well.

The Deputy made two specific points. I could stand here and list a number of flood relief schemes that have been delivered, the significant benefits of which we are seeing in areas of our country that used to flood but which do not now experience that flooding. That, however, is cold comfort to the communities that are waiting and I am conscious of that. The Deputy will understand why I do not accept the assertion that nothing has been done in relation to flood relief. In fact, I would point to significant progress and money that has been spent right across the country delivering flood relief schemes that are really helping to protect homes, communities and businesses.

I accept the Deputy's point that it is taking far too long to deliver far too many. The Deputy referenced Enniscorthy and I too want to reference that. This is a scheme where we have committed the funding. Some €51 million is committed to the Enniscorthy project under the national development plan. That remains the position. We now need to see how we can accelerate flood relief schemes. I am not just saying that today. The House will remember that we published the accelerating infrastructure task force report just before Christmas. We will be bringing to this House a critical infrastructure Bill. We have to recognise there are some things, such as environmental issues and individual views people can have, that matter but there is also something else that matters, which is the public good. Lives, livelihoods and homes have to be at the top of the pecking order when it comes to our planning system. Let us be honest that sometimes that does not always seem to be the way. We hear about the mussel delaying the flood relief scheme in Enniscorthy. It is the people of Enniscorthy that I am

concerned about. Our critical infrastructure Bill will specifically address the fast-tracking of flood relief schemes.

In my second answer, I will come back on the flood forecasting piece. We will be having a Cabinet committee specifically on storms and floods in a very short time to stock take all of the various flood relief schemes and to look at the lessons of Storm Éowyn and the progress that has been made in relation to that. I am very happy for the relevant Minister to provide an update.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I can remember a long list of Ministers splashing around floods in their top boots for photographs. I can even remember former Minister Joan Burton falling out of a canoe when looking at a flood system. None of this gives any confidence at all to people who are being inundated at the moment. The Tánaiste talks about the critical infrastructure. My problem with the Tánaiste is that he has been here for 15 years yet if we remove the future tense he is silent on delivery. This is an incredible situation. In Clontarf, flood defences will have been 30 years from concept to completion. A scheme in Sandymount was promised 20 years ago but will not be delivered until 2032. Galway was promised works in 2019 but it will 2035 before delivery. These are all with the caveat, "If everything goes well". The Tánaiste must be embarrassed by the length of time it is taking for the delivery of infrastructure in his area.

In terms of the clean up, I know of homes that are not getting sandbags from their communities. Business people I am talking to are still not clear about what exactly is covered in relation to this. Will their earnings be covered? Will it be means tested? People have lost their cars. We have seen cars submerged. They will not be paid for their cars. People feel it is unfair that people from Ukraine had their cars fixed by the Government a year ago and yet these cars will not be fixed in this particular situation. Everybody should be treated equally in this country in relation to fixing of cars. When will the Tánaiste fix these issues?

The Tánaiste: I am not sure how the Deputy segued Ukraine in there but he did.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am just saying that everybody should be treated equally.

The Tánaiste: I agree with that but I am not sure how helping people from Ukraine links to a flood situation.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am saying it because cars are not being paid for.

The Tánaiste: That is the point the Deputy made and our response to Ukraine is another point. I am not sure the conflation of the two is particularly helpful on this occasion.

Deputy Rory Hearne: You still have not-----

The Tánaiste: I am going to answer Deputy Tóibín's question. I am very proud of the record we have in delivering many flood relief schemes across the country. I can think of Clonmel, west Cork, Mayo, and I can think of many. I am equally frustrated, as is Deputy Tóibín, but

nowhere near as frustrated as the people of the communities affected, that it is taking far too long to deliver far too many. That is why in our general election campaign we talked about a new approach to infrastructure. That is why when this Government came together we agreed to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure. It is why we are identifying specific areas of need as critical infrastructure. It is why we intend to legislate for that this year with the co-operation of the Opposition. Instead of all just coming in here and slinging insults at each other, let us actually pass legislation that might make a blind bit of difference to people. That is our job. We will bring forward critical infrastructure legislation.

On the flood forecasting, Met Éireann does a very good job. I thank Met Éireann for the job that it does but we need to have a conversation about what information we can usefully make available to help. When people hear that there is a yellow rain warning that has a very different context depending on the river levels and depending on the levels of saturation. After every storm, it is important to reflect on that.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Today I raise the question of the sustainability of section 39 organisations. The Tánaiste will be aware that these organisations in all of our communities, and there are hundreds of them around the country, are vital for health and social care services particularly in the area of disability, hospice care, and care for our elderly. They engage in service level agreements with HSE. They are very heavily reliant on volunteers. All of those volunteers are a wonderful part of all of our communities.

I have to acknowledge there is a very extensive investment by the Government in disability services, which is critical, and a lot of pay and conditions issues are being addressed. However, when the next round of public sector pay talks take place, those section 39 workers should be considered as part of that. Certainly it should always be the case that somebody who does the job in a section 39 organisation as a nurse, for example, is treated in the same way as somebody who works as a nurse directly employed by the HSE.

There is a requirement, obviously, on those section 39 organisations to meet the required standards that are set out by HIQA and the HSE, and to adhere to all the Charity Regulator's standards. That is right and organisations expect to do that. It does, however, place a huge workload on those organisations and there are costs involved in that.

The challenge is that we ensure we have sustainability for those section 39 organisations, so they can deliver the best services in all of our communities to the service users. I know the Tánaiste knows many of the organisations in my constituency. I think of Saint Aidan's Services in Gorey, with which I have a deep personal and family connection. It is providing services to over 300 people and their families. Cheshire Home in Shillelagh was the first Cheshire Home in Ireland. There is also the Irish Wheelchair Association in Ballycanew and Carnew Community Care, an organisation the Tánaiste is familiar with. I was also in with the service users in RehabCare in Arklow last Monday. I had a useful conversation with them. One of them told me that the Tánaiste was a very good TD, but that his brother, Adam, would be far better because he speaks out about autism services. Engaging with those service users shows how important those services are in our communities. However, when it comes to the cost of

operating section 39 facilities, it should not have to be all about having to fundraise for core services. Can we provide some sort of guarantee for the sustainability of those services across the country?

The Tánaiste: That person has very good judgment, and I agree with them about my brother. I thank the Deputy for this raising this important issue. As he said, I also know well many of these organisations in the counties we represent, Wicklow and Wexford. I join the Deputy and everybody in this House in thanking them for the work they do. I remember visiting Saint Aidan's Services, Cheshire Home, Enable Ireland and many of these projects and services across the country. We value their work. We must have, as I hope and think we do, a collaborative and mutually respectful relationship. So much of our service provision is provided by these organisations. We value and respect that, and we want to work with them. That is why my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, who has responsibility for disability services, met with the National Disability Services Association this morning. I know of her direct engagement with four section 39 organisations, including some the Deputy mentioned, namely, Cheshire Home, Enable Ireland, Vision Ireland and Acquired Brain Injury Ireland as well. There was a conversation with them on many of the issues relating to sustainability and how they continue to deliver vital disability services across the country. They are playing a constructive role. They are fully part of and embedded in the national disability strategy and the direction in which we are taking that.

The Government, right up to the Taoiseach, takes this issue seriously. We have a Cabinet committee on disability and we now have an implementation structure to drive forward the national disability strategy. I will be clear, as the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, were, that we need to continue investing in and supporting organisations like section 39 bodies. We need to do that in the short and medium term as issues arise and we work our way through that. We also need to do it in the longer term.

As Deputy Byrne knows and acknowledged in his contribution, we have seen a significant increase in disability funding this year. There is legitimate commentary, as there always is, after a budget about different decisions we took or did not take. One of the better decisions we made as a collective this year was to significantly increase our funding for disability services. From memory, I think there was an increase of approximately 20%, or €618 million, in funding this year. A significant portion of that will work its way, for want of a better phrase, into many of the disability organisations referenced.

The Deputy also referenced the issue of pay, which is valid. The Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, pay funding agreement, reached last year between Departments and unions, includes funding for a 9.25% pay increase for workers in community and voluntary health and social care organisations. It recognises that staff in these organisations need to be fairly paid for the vital work they do. This was a landmark step. The Minister, Deputy Foley, in particular, did a lot of work on it, and I acknowledge that. The agreement also includes an automatic link to future public sector pay agreements for these workers to match the terms of all future pay adjustments. In many ways, we were rightly trying to deal with legacy issues in that deal. We now have that link with future public sector agreements, which I hope will be of great assistance in the time ahead.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Tánaiste for his answer. The WRC decision and the commitment that section 39 workers will be part of future public sector pay discussions are critical. There is a challenge for a lot of the section 39 organisations in meeting standards. I will give the example of cyber resilience. We know the impact of the cyber-attack on the HSE, and the hundreds of millions it is costing to ensure the HSE is cyber resilient. However, we expect the same level of cyber resilience of section 39 organisations, which carry a lot of health data. Yet, they are expected in many ways to pay those costs themselves. One of the problems is that meeting the standards set down, the regulations and so on, as they rightly have to do, takes up a huge amount of time. The costs there are not experienced by organisations that are part of the HSE. I want to see that commitment to long-term sustainability and multi-annual funding to ensure those organisations can continue to plan and best serve the service users in all our communities.

The Tánaiste: That is fair. The Government wants to have constructive conversations about how we meet the shared challenges. All of this is about the service user, the person with the disability and making sure that, regardless of whether you attend a section 38 or section 39 service or a fully funded HSE service, it should not make a difference to you as a service user. Therefore, we have to work out sometimes innovative ways to make sure there is that consistency in approach, while recognising there are different structures in these organisations. Of course, this is not news to anybody. We will continue to want to have a shared discussion about reform and making sure we are all delivering as much service as we can to the front line. I know that is a shared objective across the sector. I do not doubt that. Obviously, the linkage between public funding and ensuring we have some degree of public oversight of the directive of travel is important. I say that from a position of being pretty sure there is good collaboration, good relations and good structure. The meeting the Minister of State had this morning with the National Disability Services Association is an important and constructive example of that, and we will continue to have that engagement.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: For the information of the House, Deputy Brian Brennan has been appointed to the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight and the Committee on Standing Orders and Dáil Reform, to replace the Minister of State, Deputy Frank Feighan, on both committees.

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

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yesterday, VHI announced a third increase in health insurance premiums in less than 12 months. It will kick in from March. These three increases over the past year will see many families paying more than €500 extra per year in insurance bills. It seems for many people that there is no end to the rip-off and price hikes. It is not just health insurance. It is energy bills, rent, groceries, motor fuel and childcare. Households are being hammered non-stop, yet Government sits back and does nothing to stop the rip-off. There is something the Tánaiste could do on health insurance costs. The Government has real leverage to tackle to the insurance companies and get a break for customers. Private healthcare relies

completely on the public system. Private health insurance is supported by generous tax subsidies of up to €400 million every year. The Government needs to grow a backbone and use the leverage it has. Will the Tánaiste call in the top brass of these insurance companies and private hospitals to demand they stop ripping people off?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has missed an important point, which is that this Government is advancing Sláintecare. It is advancing the creation of a universal healthcare system, and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is leading on the full implementation of the public-only consultant contract. I hear much commentary about vested interests who have pushed back against making sure that public facilities are used for public patients and there is not that inequality that existed in the past. That is further reducing any suggestion that private health insurance is benefiting-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: How many people have health insurance? The costs are going up. People have it because of-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude the answer, Tánaiste, and move on.

The Tánaiste: Is Deputy Carthy now the champion of the private health insurance sector? I am confused here. We are delivering in the public sector. Everything we are doing is about making sure that, regardless of means, you can access healthcare in a time-efficient manner. That is the policy direction of the Government.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not the reality.

The Tánaiste: That is what we are doing. That is why, whether you are with the VHI or anyone else, we are decoupling private health insurance from access to public hospitals and particularly to consultants on public-only contracts.

Deputy George Lawlor: Yesterday, on South East Radio, the Minister, Deputy Browne, who is the Minister with responsibility for the national emergency co-ordination group laid the blame for the latest flooding incident in his home town of Enniscorthy firmly at the door of Met Éireann. Incredibly, today, on the same radio station, the same Minister, who also has responsibility for local government issued a statement effectively blaming Wexford County Council for the lack of a planning application for a new flood relief scheme. On 15 April 2025, I attended a meeting in Enniscorthy with the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, and senior officials of the OPW at which they outlined the new flood relief scheme plans to public representatives and Wexford County Council officials.

The long-suffering people of Enniscorthy deserve much better than this. When a Minister in control of agencies and Departments with direct responsibility will not take responsibility for their portfolios, what hope do they have? I ask for the Tánaiste's direct intervention to resolve this dreadful ongoing nightmare for the homeowners and businesses of Enniscorthy.

The Tánaiste: First, I absolutely recognise the Deputy's characterisation of this as an ongoing nightmare for the people of Enniscorthy, a town that has flooded many times. Government

announcements have been made and Government funding of €51 million has been put in place and people want to see the flood relief scheme delivered. I know we have that as a shared objective.

I listened to the Minister's comments with regard to Met Éireann. My view of what he said was that he was certainly not blaming Met Éireann. We need to have a discussion about the information that we can put out there. We had a yellow rain warning. That is not a criticism of Met Éireann.

Deputy George Lawlor: What about the national emergency co-ordination group?

The Tánaiste: A yellow rain warning is very different in the context of flooding when river levels are so high. We need to see how we can all work together, including local authorities, Met Éireann, the OPW and the Government, at a time when we are seeing more frequent adverse weather events. The Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, is visiting Enniscorthy in the Deputy's constituency today to engage directly.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Despite repeated assurances from the Government, there is still a crisis in special education. Children are travelling miles outside their communities and some are still without a school place. Assurances were given to me that the closing of the portal on 1 October would not mean that any child would be shut out. However, children are being shut out because the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has failed to engage with them. Only 7% of post-primary schools have opened with the target set by the Department of education. In my constituency of Dublin South-Central, Clogher Road Community College was told by the NCSE last academic year that it would open, but it has not been on the sanction list.

At the same time, special schools are facing redesignation and we are still being told that children do not have a school place despite being told that there are plenty of spaces. Why are the NCSE and the Department of Education and Youth running parallel systems? They seem to be running in parallel. I am being told different things and children are being locked out. It is causing confusion and it is very concerning.

The Tánaiste: I appreciate the genuine interest the Deputy has in this issue. There is a challenge in this regard. I can point to the fact that we are spending €3 billion on special education, and quite rightly so. We are seeing more classes open. A good idea, or the germ of a good idea, was trying to open the process earlier to be able to forward-plan and get classes in place. I also accept the reality of the world and that some parents, through no fault of their own, were not able to meet that deadline. A solution will need to be found. I cannot see a situation where there is not an opportunity for them to reapply because that demand is real. Their child is real and their need needs to be met. I will speak with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, on it and ask her to link directly with the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The announcement by the Government of the new childcare scheme is welcome. The idea is that the Government will buy or build childcare facilities, particularly in areas where there are shortages. It is a small start. Similar to a lot of Members of the House, I would like it to be a lot more expansive but it is a welcome start. It is reported that €177

million will be available over a five-year period and eight buildings will be bought or acquired in the first year. There is a desperate shortage of childcare and early years learning places in Laois. The 84 registered places in the county are full. Parents contact me to say that they cannot get a place for their child, particularly when it comes to full-day services because a lot of people in Laois are commuting. The following towns are short of services according to parents, providers and the childcare committee: Durrow, Abbeyleix, Rathdowney, Graiguecullen, Mountrath, Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Portlaoise. Every town in the county needs them. We have had a population surge in the last 15 years which is going to continue according to the Government's plans. I am not against that, but we need more child places. My ask is for one of those eight premises to be designated in Laois. We need it desperately.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

The Tánaiste: He could not conclude until he got the most important line in at the end-----

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am getting in first.

The Tánaiste: -----which was, quite rightly from his perspective, a view in relation to Laois having a need for this. I thank the Deputy for his acknowledgement that this is a positive policy direction. I am eager that the State invests directly in trying to acquire public space to provide capacity. We rightly have debates in this House about reducing childcare fees. We have a clear view on where we want to get to over the lifetime of the Government. Alongside that, we are going to need places and capacity and to support staff. We have identified that money. There will be an exercise done in identifying areas in which there is a need for that intervention. I am sure there will be many such areas. The Deputy has obviously made his case for Laois. I will ask the Minister to consider those matters and link with the Deputy.

We will see increases in simplification this year. One of the big bugbears we are hearing from childcare providers is the amount of bureaucracy. We need to cut that back. In September, we will also see reductions in childcare fees for the 47,000 lowest-income families.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Fine Gael used to be known as the farmers' party but those days are well over.

The Tánaiste: Ah now.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Its MEPs voted against farmers last week in Strasbourg. Today, its Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, when I asked him whether he would use his office to stop Mercosur from being implemented before the European courts make a decision, he stated that he would not and that it was another Department's responsibility.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government also refused to hold Bord Bia and its chairperson, Larry Murrin, to account. He has the job of promoting Irish food and I understand he is paid

just under €200,000 to do it. Instead of that, he is actually importing Brazilian beef. This is a conflict of interest and the fact that the Government's judgment does not understand that shows it is compromised on this. It is, "Do what I say, not what I do".

One third of farmers at the moment are living off the farm. One third are only living off the farm because someone from that farm is working off the farm. One third of farmers are in poverty or going into debt. Every year, the number of farmers is falling in this country. Will the Government listen to the farmers for a change and do as they ask and remove Larry Murrin?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I do not appreciate being misrepresented. During questions on agriculture earlier, a debate about farmers and agriculture went into the area of a trade deal and what trade policy was, and I highlighted that it was not my direct role.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Exactly. The Minister said he would not do it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I fought my sector's corner on the Mercosur trade deal. The Deputy knows what way the Government voted. I made that very clear.

With regard to the point the Deputy raised around Bord Bia, what I implore everyone-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No. There is no misrepresentation here at all.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Tóibín to resume his seat.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Keep going.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister said exactly the same thing to me this morning. He said that it is not his responsibility.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I want to answer on the substantive point the Deputy raised.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want the Minister to withdraw the allegation that there was any misrepresentation of his view today.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to resume his seat.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Can the Minister withdraw the allegation as false?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask Deputy Tóibín to resume his seat. I am chairing the session, not you.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Deputy Tóibín made a political charge.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I want to answer the substantive point he raised, if he lets me.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Minister withdraw the allegation that is incorrect?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Either the Deputy wants me to respond to his question or he does not. On the point about Bord Bia, there is nuance and detail involved. A calm space is needed for this to be explained. We have dealt with soundbites, attacks and rash actions and comments by some people in this House that do farmers a disservice. Farmers benefit greatly from the integrated nature of international trade deals. We export 90% of our food and drink produce.

With regard to the specific business case of the chairman of Bord Bia, it is absolutely explainable. It was explained to the board of Bord Bia and 12 of the 14 members absolutely accepted that. It was explained to me. The offer is open to both the county chairs and commodity chairs of the IFA to have a direct meeting with the chairman. He is coming before the Oireachtas committee next week as well. Let us have the space for that. Do not do farmers a disservice by going with soundbites and playing on the sensitivities-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: They are the ones who are-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should conclude.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Of course they are angry. They are angry because they are being fed soundbites from this Chamber.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister is doing a disservice here.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Let us have a proper, meaningful debate on the importance of integrated global supply chains that benefit our farmers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should resume his seat. I call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I wish to raise the issue of the emergency works grant for Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, Glanmire. It is my former secondary school and I used to teach there many years ago. The reason I am raising this - I typically do not raise individual issues like this on the floor of the Dáil - is out of pure frustration, especially given that this is the week when we are announcing a large capital programme in education, which I welcome. I have been working with this school since November trying to get a roof repaired and we cannot get a positive outcome from the Department. I would like to read an extract from the principal's latest email to me:

The condition of these rooms is shocking. Not alone that, water is entering the light sockets and creating a very serious health and safety issue. The lights have to be switched off and both staff and students are often working in the dark.

I know the nature of the emergency works scheme and how restrictive it can be. It is for emergencies but if this is not warranted or deemed an emergency, then I do not know what is. It is very frustrating and I cannot a straight response. Deputy Malcolm Byrne asked a parliamentary question in this regard last year and the reply stated that €77 million had been spent on roofs in the previous four years by the Department of education. I know, therefore, that the Department can fix roofs. In this case, I ask the Tánaiste to please intervene to help get the school roof fixed.

1 o'clock

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this issue. I can completely understand how it must be a cause of frustration when on the one hand that school is seeing lots of new school buildings being announced, which is a good thing, while also having its own battle to try to get what sounds to me to be a serious repair issue resolved in the interests of the welfare of its students and staff. On foot of the Deputy raising it here in the Dáil today I will speak directly with the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton. I will ask her to revert to the Deputy on this and see what options there are to address it.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I ask the Tánaiste to provide an update on the proposed college of the future for Clonmel. It is a project with which the Tánaiste is very familiar. The proposal is the first of its kind for a fully integrated tertiary campus of further and higher education on the one site in the heart of Clonmel. I pay tribute to all of the stakeholders involved, particularly Tús and Tipperary ETB. We are very much ready to move forward to the detailed design and planning phase. It is on the former Kickham Barracks site in Clonmel. It is the final phase and we are anxious to realise the ambition and vision we have for the site. Phase one, the plaza, is complete and phase two is under construction. The latter is the new south Tipperary Garda headquarters. In terms of the college of the future, I ask the Tánaiste to engage with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to drive this project forward.

The Tánaiste: I certainly will because, as the Deputy said, I have an interest in this project. I remember being in Clonmel with Deputy Murphy on many occasions. The work of Tipperary County Council, Tipperary ETB and all of the really good interagency work being done on the Kickham Barracks site is really impressive. It is a really good example of people pulling together to see how they can improve, modernise and rejuvenate their town. I know Deputy Murphy played a role in that as the mayor and now as a TD. I am delighted to see the Garda station under way as well. I was there for sod-turning of that. I have seen the plaza too. There is great work going on. The key piece now is to get this college of the future in place. It will provide extraordinary access to education for people in south Tipperary, involving partnerships with Tús and the university too. It is my understanding that the Minister, Deputy Lawless, who is very committed to this project and the further education and training, FET, college programme in general, had a meeting recently with all 12 of the chief executives, including in Tipperary. The message to them was to be ready and to ensure that their design teams are

appointed this year. Let us get the design team appointed for the Clonmel project and power on. I will certainly keep a close eye on this too.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Last summer I attended a demonstration protesting a pilot cycle lane between Timolin and Moone in south Kildare, a project known locally as the road to nowhere. Delivered by TII and the council under the national cycle network plan, over €2 million has been spent installing concrete islands and hard kerbs. Instead of improving safety and access, locals describe the road as an obstacle course and a death trap. Crucially, members of local cycling clubs have told me that they will not use the lane. Since the summer there have reportedly been 80 incidents on this stretch, including two serious ones where cyclists were hospitalised. Many vehicles have been damaged too. There was no meaningful consultation before this pilot began. No funding has yet been allocated for maintenance. An urgent safety audit was completed last December but it remains unpublished. Can this situation be addressed before a life is lost? Will the audit be published and will an end be put to yet more waste of public money?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue on behalf of her constituents. My understanding, although I need to look into it some more, is that this, as the Deputy rightly says, was a pilot, an effort to try out new things. Encouraging people to try out new things is always important but so too is learning lessons and answering the questions and views of communities. On foot of the Deputy raising this today I will ask TII and the Minister for Transport to respond to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Tony McCormack: There was great news today with the announcement of 36,284 new housing unit completions, a 20% increase on the 2024 figures and the largest number since we started recording these figures. I meet people every day who believe that owning their own home is beyond their reach but when we sit down and go through the figures, it often becomes clear that with the help-to-buy scheme and the first home scheme, home ownership may be achievable for them. I have no doubt that a huge number of people out there do not know these schemes exist or do not understand how they work and as a result, they never even try to buy a home. We need to review how these schemes are promoted because the evidence on the ground is that the current approach is not working. Far too many people remain unaware that these supports are available and continue to believe that home ownership is out of their reach when, in reality, it is not.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McCormack, who makes a really valid point. I join with him in welcoming the fact that more homes were built in this country in 2025 than in 2024. It was not marginally more, but 20% more and the highest amount of homes completed since 2011, effectively since the crash. We now need to build on that. We have a lot more to do, absolutely, but we need to build on that. The Deputy's point is really valid and I find it myself in my own constituency. There are lots of schemes out there, whether it is help-to-buy, first home, croí cónaithe and so on, which do benefit people. From memory, about 60,000 people have benefited from the help-to-buy scheme but there is often a worry that people think that the schemes are for somebody else or somebody else's child and do not necessarily apply to them. I will talk to the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, to see what more can be done to promote

these schemes and maybe to streamline the information as well. I thank the Deputy for the suggestion.

Deputy Emer Currie: New parents are in a catch-22 situation. The flat rate, per-week payment for maternity, paternity and parent's benefits makes extended leave unaffordable for many families, although it has improved. The reality is that they have no option but to go back to work to cover the costs of rent or mortgages or the cost of living. They then need childcare. Baby rooms in childcare services should be the solution but, since the introduction of core funding, the number of baby rooms across the State has dropped by 25% and by a whopping 35% in my own county of Fingal. Parents are in a catch-22 situation. They have no option other than to go back to work but the childcare is not there. We need a joined-up review of early years policy and family supports to relieve pressure on parents. We need that quickly so that we have the findings for budget 2027. There are policy solutions out there, including better supports for providers of baby rooms, pay-related benefits and the inclusion of children under one in the State-led facilities because, at the moment, the reference is to those aged from one to three.

The Tánaiste: As always, I want to thank Deputy Currie for the very constructive suggestions she makes constantly with regard to childcare and how we support parents, particularly with the early years. We have done a lot in relation to parental entitlements in recent years, including extending the parent's benefit to nine weeks. That is available for both parents now although the figure is still significantly lower for men. However, we are all living in the real world in terms of our interactions with people and we know that for young people who are paying a mortgage or whatever else, it might not be financially viable for them to take that leave, even though they want to. Government policy wants to help people be able to spend as much of the first year with their newborn as they can and divide that up in a way that works for the family but sometimes there is still a financial viability gap. The Deputy is right that the programme for Government commits to examining pay-related parent's benefit. We have pay-related benefit for people who lose their jobs. We introduced that last April and it is working well. We need to take the learnings from that and see whether they can be applied to other areas, including in relation to parent's benefit. I am happy to raise that matter, as well as the other constructive suggestions the Deputy has made, with the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, and more broadly across government.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Yesterday the Minister for Education and Youth listed 105 priority new school building and extension projects to proceed to tender and construction in 2026 and 2027 as part of the national development plan, NDP. While that is welcome for those communities, there were no objective criteria set out and no explanation as to why particular projects were selected for prioritisation over others. There was very significant geographic variation and some projects that were at a more advanced stage of planning were not listed for priority while less-advanced projects were. There was no indication as to what this means for those projects that were not listed. There is real concern in relation to that, as well as huge frustration in school communities across the State. Children are in school buildings that are wholly inadequate. I can list a number of such schools in my own constituency and there are

many more across the State. What does this mean for those other projects that are already years in planning? Does it mean that they are going to be delayed by a further two years?

The Tánaiste: That is a fair question and the short answer is "No". We have to start somewhere in terms of a list and a significant ramp-up of capital investment. What we saw yesterday was an effort to move forward a further 105 projects. That list consisted of 80 large-scale additional school accommodation projects and 25 further projects to be delivered under the modular accommodation programme. A total of 45 of the 80 projects were already at tender stage and 35 are projects that have planning permission or are at pre-tender stage. The criteria for identifying projects included projects that were ready to go to construction or to tender in 2026 or 2027; the condition of the school; projects in areas with capacity pressures; growing demographics; and projects in the pipeline for a long time. I take the Deputy's point that there are lots of schools but this is not the final word. This is an important tranche and we will look to build on this. As the Deputy knows, with capital projects there can be churn and there can be further opportunities. The Government and the Department will continue to engage with those schools, including the ones in Deputy O'Rourke's constituency.

Deputy Michael Collins: Will the Tánaiste outline how proposed planning guidelines will take full account of the vital role short-term lets play in the Irish economy, supporting tourism, regional employment and supplementary housing needs? In many parts of the country, especially rural and seasonal areas, short-term letting provides essential accommodation for tourists, contract workers, students and families. These lets sustain local pubs, restaurants, shops, transport providers and visitor attractions and often form a crucial income stream for small family-run business. Given that tourism is a cornerstone of our economy and a key employer, how will the Government ensure these guidelines do not unintentionally undermine local communities or force viable microbusinesses to close? What economic and employment impact assessments have been carried out at local and regional level? What engagement took place with stakeholders in the short-term letting sector during the drafting of these guidelines? How does the Government justify these measures on housing grounds, given the risk they may remove essential visitors' accommodation, damage regional development and deliver little or no additional long-term housing supply?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins for how he has raised the issue. It is important we tease through this carefully. I think we would all agree there is a need to make sure we get the best use out of the housing stock that exists in our country, particularly in a housing emergency. We all share that view. We do not want an unintended consequence. This is not about going into small rural communities where they are very reliant on this. The Government will have to consider this. Work is being done. The population of an area may be one indicator and we will engage with the sector. We will do this. We intend to regulate the short-term let sector. That is important but we need to do it with a degree of caution and informed evidence to make sure we continue to support the tourism sector while making sure, particularly in larger areas, that for Airbnb and the likes there is some regulation and structure. We are trying to get the balance right. I am happy to engage further with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Mark Wall: Yesterday, the cross-party interest group for family carers, of which I am co-chair along with Deputy McGreehan and Senator Tully, met in the audiovisual room.

We heard from family carers Angela Briggs and Matthew Murphy about the 24-7 care they provide for their loved ones. They outlined the stress some 34,000 carers went through recently and are still going through after receiving tax demand letters from Revenue. The Tánaiste knows carers save the State over €20 billion each year. Will the Tánaiste let us know what the Government is doing to remove carer's allowance and benefit payments from the tax net, similar to other payments like jobseeker's allowance? Will the Tánaiste commit to meeting the cross-party interest group to discuss this important matter?

The Tánaiste: I would be very happy to meet the group. I thank Deputy Wall, Deputy McGreehan and Senator Tully for the work they are doing. It is good to see a cross-party approach to this issue. I think in all our election manifestos we all promised a roughly similar direction of travel. I spoke to Family Carers Ireland this week. I am looking forward to meeting them and Care Alliance Ireland shortly too. It is a statement of fact that carer's benefit or allowance has always been a taxable benefit. It goes out in the letter that it is approved. It is a legitimate point of debate and policy discussion as to whether that should be the position in the future. There is also the issue of the means test. There are lots of issues we need to work our way through. I would like to get a shared sense of priority if that is possible as to how we move forward. We took a big move on the income disregard this year. That is the right thing to do. It will kick in in July. I am looking forward to engaging with the groups and I am very happy to meet the cross-party group.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: This week the Minister for education announced extra time will be granted to secondary school students with dyslexia and other and other visual and physical disabilities in their junior and leaving certificate exams but it comes with a catch - it is only ten minutes per exam. I accept ten minutes is better than nothing but it falls far short of what these students require and deserve. It is nowhere near what third level students get. The minimum dyslexic third level students get is an extra ten minutes per hour while second level students are offered just ten minutes per exam. This simply is not good enough. In Northern Ireland, dyslexic students get 25% extra time. The Government's proposal amounts to just 6%. In addition, the State Examinations Commission is just tagging extra time on to existing accommodations, meaning those who do not qualify for current supports such as reading assistance or a spelling and grammar waiver will be excluded. Why are young people who do not qualify for existing supports, in particular students with dyscalculia, excluded? Will the Government increase this half-hearted measure and offer additional extra time in 2026, putting it in line with third level supports? Will it make this extra time a stand-alone accommodation?

The Tánaiste: I find myself somewhat agreeing with the Deputy on this. I have not had an opportunity to probe the rationale behind the ten minutes but I will. I know the Minister and Department were eager to do something positive and providing additional time is that. As a former Minister for higher education, I am aware of how the higher education sector provides those accommodations. We need to ensure there is never a barrier to progression or access in the education system. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, about this to see the rationale for the Department and various expert inputs. I am happy to engage further with the Deputy, Dyslexia Ireland or others.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Like my colleague, Deputy Wall, I raise the issue of carers. They recently received correspondence from Revenue outlining tax liabilities on their carer's payments. For many families, that did not land as a clarification but as a complete shock. We know and all accept that it is not a new policy but for us it demands action. The Tánaiste knows carers are not casual contributors to our health and social care system. They are an integral part of it. They provide round-the-clock care, often at the expense of their own income, health and future security. They save the State billions of euro every year yet we continue to treat their support as a taxable income rather than what it truly should be - a recognition of essential unpaid labour. People with disabilities face higher living costs every single day due to medical needs, transport and basic accessibility. I want the Government to look at removing carer's allowance and benefit from taxable income. Then we would have a Government that listens, respects carers and values the work carers do.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGreehan for the work she does as co-chair of the family carers group. I look forward to meeting them. I rule nothing out but I want to have an informed conversation because - I do not mean this in any way flippantly - carers do such amazing work. We all want to commit to doing more but the commitment a couple of weeks ago was that we were all going to focus on the means test. We will have to have a joined-up conversation with carers and their representatives as to the best way to financially support our carers. The means test is one, tax policy is another. There is a variety of areas. Let us try to have a shared vision of where we want to get to. The reality around tax is the reality. Many carers will never reach the level where they will have any tax liability. They may even get a rebate. My understanding is this was about making sure people did not get landed with a large tax bill but, rather, that it was regularised. Having said that, let us have a proper informed discussion about how we prioritise carers over the next four budgets due in this Dail. I look forward to having that engagement.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question is about a persistent problem with driving test waiting times in Dublin Bay North. While it is welcome that they are coming down pretty consistently across the country, it is not happening everywhere. Raheny and Killester in Dublin Bay North remain well above the national average, at 19 weeks and 14 weeks, respectively. For young folks in particular, this is not necessarily just an inconvenience. It can mean the difference between taking up a new job, getting to college on time or just having that bit of independence they need. People are being left behind at a critical stage in their lives, potentially. It will get worse if it is not dealt with. What can be done in relation to driver test waiting times in areas like Dublin Bay North?

The Tánaiste: It is an important point. These delays are not consequence-free, as the Deputy rightly outlined, for somebody trying to go work, go about their lives or go to college. The national average wait time for driving tests has fallen. It is 10.3 weeks, slightly above where it is meant to be, which is ten weeks. It is down a lot from last April when it was 27 weeks at the peak. I take the point that the fall has not been consistent across all areas. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is working on this. He is closely monitoring the issue with the RSA. There are plans to open further test centres to assist the situation. I will ask him to take a look at Raheny and Killester and revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Réada Cronin: St. Patrick's national school in Celbridge is at crisis point. It has been promised a new school for 18 years. Parents and teachers have been in touch with me about leaks, rodents and even parts of the school being held together with duct tape. Despite the Minister, Deputy Naughton, visiting the school two weeks ago, it did not make the priority list published the other day. It is completely unfit for anyone to teach or learn in. The Celbridge three school campus has been at planning stage for the past ten years. It is at stage 2a now. St. Patrick's, St. Rachel's and Celbridge Community College are dependent on this campus.

The situation is also contributing to longer waiting lists for national schools, which is a new thing for people in Celbridge. When will the campus be delivered? Can appropriate temporary classrooms be provided to St. Patrick's school while it awaits the delivery of its new building?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As she stated, it is an issue of which the Minister is aware on foot of her recent visit to Celbridge. I will speak with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, about this in order to determine when St. Patrick's National School can expect progress on the campus and on what can be done in the interim. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The number of houses in Mayo represents 3% of the overall national housing stock. Despite this, according to a recent GeoDirectory report, the proportion of dereliction in Mayo represents 14% of the national rate. That is extraordinary. Dereliction is a scourge on our towns and blight on our communities. Many homes have been abandoned for decades and have essentially been left to rodents and bats. That is what is happening.

Mayo has had an average of two compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, over the past ten years. We need to resource local authorities in the context of dereliction levies and CPOs. We also need to set targets to ensure that action is happening. We are rudderless in respect of this matter, and communities are struggling. I know of communities in which people are worried because slates are falling off buildings. That is how bad things are in certain towns and villages. We need targets for local authorities and we need to resource local authorities. We must have metrics.

The Tánaiste: We also do not need to babysit the local authorities. They need to get on and do their job. We have given them all vacancy officers and we have funded them. Hard-pressed taxpayers in this country have funded posts for local authorities to tackle dereliction. It is utterly unacceptable that it would exist at the scale it does, particularly in the context of what the Deputy outlined with regard to his county of Mayo. We are so peeved with local authorities in terms of where they are at regarding the derelict sites levy that we are taking it off them and giving it to Revenue in order that it will be dealt with properly. That is why, as Minister for Finance, I intend to introduce a derelict levy tax. I will get Revenue to collect this because it will do it right. It astonishes me, at a time when dereliction could bring in, through the levy, more money for local authorities to deliver public services and act as a disincentive to dereliction, that so many of them have done so little in respect of this matter. They will write me letters and pass motions. They should get on with the job. I do not have any confidence that they are going to do it right, so we are going to legislate, take it off them and do it through Revenue.

Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 to abolish the 3 day waiting period for abortion on request.

This Bill relates to the three-day waiting clause in the abortion legislation. I was approached by young women last year who raised the need for reform on this specific aspect of the legislation. I gave them a commitment that I would put forward a Bill on the matter.

Termination of pregnancy is a health procedure that is extremely time sensitive. What was introduced is a mandatory 72-hour delay before a person can have a second appointment to access abortion. This clause does not apply to any other medical procedure that we have in law. One can buy Viagra over the counter – I would love to have a debate about that in the House. One can have a rhinoplasty procedure performed and there is no mandatory wait. The regret rate for rhinoplasty is 40%. We do not have any of these rules for other procedures.

This affects women and people who can become pregnant. There is an idea that women are rash, emotional, cannot make decisions for themselves and have not fully thought things through and that by putting in this place this barrier they will suddenly decide not to go ahead with a termination. This does not recognise the amount of thought somebody has generally put into a decision before they even pick up a phone to make an appointment. It does not recognise the impact it is having on GP services. This was, essentially, a political decision at the time. I was active around the process leading to the legislation and referendum. It is something I campaigned on.

This provision was introduced at the last minute. The legislation was very dependent on getting the vote of Simon Coveney, who, I understand, was Tánaiste at the time, and the votes of some others in the ranks of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In March 2018, Mr. Coveney was quoted as saying that people apparently came up to him in shops and stated that there had to be barriers before the legislation went through. He said:

Only after the protocol is certified ... I believe a pause period is appropriate at this juncture and expect Cabinet to consider between 48-72 hours, to ensure a fully considered decision.

What happened was very much political.

The country voted strongly on the matter. The people who went out to vote in numbers did not vote to put this barrier in place. I want to talk about some of the problems it is causing. It is forcing women to go much later, not by three days but often a lot more. In a survey, Too Many Barriers, carried out by Dr. Lorraine Grimes, the majority of people reported that it was very negative for them to have a mandatory delay. They spoke about having to get a person to give them a lift to a second appointment and having to get time off work. They spoke about the stress and anxiety of being forced to wait longer and of having this hanging over them. There are many other responses I do not have time to speak about. Often, people are waiting a week for an appointment with a doctor. Some one in four people waited more than three days for a second appointment. This can add ten days to the timeline.

I want to make something clear. Periods are not often talked about in the Dáil, but the date of pregnancy is measured by a doctor under our law from the first day of a last period. It is not measured from the date of conception. Therefore, people have even less time. People may think 12 weeks is a long time, but up to nine weeks are measured. It is a very short time, and we are potentially adding another week and forcing people to travel, including victims of domestic violence and so on.

The WHO, the Irish Family Planning Association, the O'Shea report and UN have all stated that the mandatory waiting periods should not have been introduced. They are not necessary. During the pandemic, we had telemedicine. There were no delays. Some 98% of people who went to a first appointment went ahead with termination at the second. The idea that they had to be forced to wait is highly insulting.

I want to mention the political aspect of this. The people who oppose the likes of this are from rural areas. It is actually rural women who suffer the most, particularly if they do not have access to GP services in their counties. Some are forced to travel to other counties. The right, the religious right and the far right are pushing back on rights we won in the 2000s and the 2010s. I ask that the Government consider this as being an absolutely necessary reform that we have not had in the seven years since we voted on the matter and to not be convinced by these individuals. The majority of people did not want barriers put in the way of women.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The most oppressed people, including the poorest and young people, will suffer the most as a result of this clause.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): Not on First Stage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Bill is not being opposed.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Not on First Stage.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is First Stage.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not being opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.20 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.20 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.

Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be read a second time."

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Gorman has 20 minutes.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will not be taking the full allocation for our group.

An Ceann Comhairle: No problem.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcome this legislation and acknowledge the hard work of officials in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. I know the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Foley, will recognise that work as well. Work on this Bill has been ongoing for some time. I was involved in some of the drafting work relating to the Bill when I was in the Department. I hope that it transits quickly through these Houses.

We have to consistently ask ourselves if our child protection laws and practices are effective. We must acknowledge that real progress has been made in this State on child protection since the referendum in 2012 and with the creation of the Department and of Tusla. Nevertheless, we are painfully aware that there are children who have been profoundly failed by those around them with a duty of care, including the State and its agencies.

This Bill will strengthen the child protection architecture and increase both responsiveness and accountability where necessary.

In terms of the Bill, a crucial element, and one I inserted, is section 10, which establishes the childcare implementation and inter-agency committee. This will put on a statutory basis, with very clear responsibilities, the committee I brought together on an administrative basis during my term as Minister. The committee involves Tusla, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, the Department of justice and others. Enhancing and strengthening inter-agency co-operation is probably the most crucial and the most consequential move we can make, especially as it had been clear to me that there is potential for lapses or failures in timely communication or timely engagement, particularly where it is essential that different parts of the State that deal directly with children should be talking to one another.

As regards the most persistent critiques of the child welfare system in this country, from the children's ombudsman, from the last special rapporteur on child protection, from the childcare law reporting committee, all of those focused on situations where State agencies disagreed or stuck very rigidly to their own remits and children were left exposed and fell through cracks. Absolutely, there are good examples of inter-agency co-operation already in place, but every agency will admit that it is not absolute. Making it a statutory obligation, as this Bill does, for organisations to engage frequently and to meet promptly is a very important function. This section sets out in detail the objectives and functions of this committee, who exactly will be part of it and, crucially, the means through which information will be shared and accessed in

pursuit of child protection. This is a good move, but one thing that cannot be placed in legislation, I am sure the Minister of State will agree, is the need for a strong chairperson. That role will be indispensable in making this committee work. I know the weight of obligations placed on those who will be its members - the Department, the assistant Garda commissioner, senior HSE executives - will be great. I know all will be absolutely committed to the matters at hand, but that co-ordinating role of a chair will be important. As regards the childcare implementation and inter-agency committee, which, as the Minister of State knows, has been meeting on an administrative basis for almost two years at this stage, putting that on a firm statutory basis, as this legislation will do, is really important.

I also acknowledge in this Bill the legal requirement for relevant bodies to co-operate. That is provided for in section 11, relating to the duty to co-operate, which mandates not only collaboration but also the sharing of hard data and information. That is another important point in ensuring that vital information about child protection issues is never held or guarded by one agency of the State on the basis of maybe some sort of quibble over the general data protection regulation, GDPR, or the like.

I also welcome the inclusion of the new section on guiding principles to the 1991 Act. This is an essential piece and brings the Act into proper alignment with the modern view and the foundational basis of our entire suite of child protection legislation. By rights, this probably should have been done after the 2012 referendum. It has taken us too long to get to this point, but it is important that these guiding principles now form part of the law. These are the fundamental principles that give effect to the duty to respect the rights of children and their best interests and to have the views and preferences of children known, understood and given consideration and due weight.

I also acknowledge the important improvement in section 6 where it comes to the operation of voluntary care, where the Bill seeks to give Tusla the ability to address more effectively short-term care needs of children requiring care. Voluntary care is an important part of our child welfare mechanism. It ensures that parents can, in agreement with Tusla, allow their child to go into care for a certain period. However, because it is done by agreement, there was maybe some lack of formality over elements of the voluntary care system. Even though it is voluntary, that formality needs to be in place because anytime a child leaves the care of their parents and goes into the care of the State, that is a significant moment.

I welcome the measures addressed towards foster carers. A safe and nurturing foster home is always a better option for a child than being in a residential placement, particularly at a time of such enormous demand for Tusla's services. Efforts have been made to make fostering more sustainable and to recognise the hugely important work foster carers do, but more is needed, so I am happy to see this measure adopted in the Bill.

It is not in the Bill yet, but the Minister referred to placing the national review panel on a statutory footing. Again, that is an important step that is needed. The national review panel plays an incredibly important role. It investigates those situations where a child has died or been involved in a serious incident while known to the State or in the care of the State. The learning from the work of the national review panel is incredibly important in making improvements to our child welfare architecture across the State and ensuring that similar situations do not occur again. Placing it on a statutory footing, I think, will further strengthen the key role that organisation plays.

The final point I will make is that I was always conscious of the criticisms about Tusla that we often hear in this House. Where there is an organisation looking after the most vulnerable of children, it is essential that it is open to criticism and open to the need to improve at all times the services it provides to children. It is also important to recognise the context in which Tusla operates. Between 2020 and 2024, there was a 39% increase in referrals to the Child and Family Agency. That is a dramatic increase in the scale of provision that it had to engage with. As well as the scale, there is also the complexity of the cases, including children who were facing very different needs as a result of Covid, children who were neurodivergent and children whose first language was not English. The scale of change that Tusla had to address in that period was huge.

As much as there are incidences where there is very legitimate criticism of the Child and Family Agency, I had the privilege to see the huge work that the agency itself and many of the organisations funded by it undertook and undertakes in communities all over the country. When we ask why it is so hard for the Child and Family Agency to recruit young social workers into those key front-line posts in Tusla, we have a responsibility in this Chamber as to how we speak about it and its agencies' work, always looking for improvement and highlighting where errors or mistakes have been made but also recognising its crucial job.

There is no more difficult job than that of a social worker who has to go into a family situation where a judgment has been made that children need to be removed. It happens only in the most crucial and the most difficult situations. It is important as well as looking to improve Tusla and its operations at all times. We have obligations in terms of supporting its work as well.

Deputy Emer Currie: This Bill amends the Child Care Act 1991, which is wide-ranging legislation that seeks to promote the welfare of children who may not receive adequate care and protection. Over the years the Act supported the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and an amendment to Article 42A of the Constitution to recognise the rights of the child. As per the programme for Government, the Act is being updated based on a review identifying what is working well to address gaps and operational improvements. It is absolutely necessary that we modernise this Act, and there has been consultation on this over several years. It should better protect children from harm and improve stability for them by allowing for the updating of care orders and care arrangements and supporting the establishment of an inter-agency committee for better co-operation.

It will introduce guiding principles for Tusla to follow in the performance of its duties, including that the best interests of the child are of paramount consideration, ultimately, to ensure children's rights guide decision-making and for a better alignment with the UNCRC. I welcome the rights-based progress and more joined-up thinking. I also welcome putting the national review panel on a statutory footing.

It has been raised already but I ask that the Minister engage directly with the guardians *ad litem*, GALs, particularly in relation to their concerns around independence. They are a very important stakeholder. From engagement with Tusla, it is clear the pressure it is under is immense. Since it was established in 2014, child protection and welfare referrals have more than doubled. For the first 11 months of 2025, the agency received 98,000 referrals, an increase of more than 10% over the previous year. Such is the importance of these services, any gaps

must be addressed strategically and proactively. Its presence on the ground in communities has never been more important. While I see areas like ours grow, and it is great we are seeing new communities, I want to see the Tusla network grow in those areas as well. They need to be connected into early intervention. We need the targeted and the specialist services and supports across the State.

Tusla advised the committee last week that it had moved from 17 areas to 13 networks, which it says means it has smaller geographical areas. Within each of those areas, it has local integrated teams. These are integrated front-door teams, where it has family support teams and child welfare and protection services integrated under one roof, so when requests come into the service, they can screen them and react quickly. I wonder whether that is enough, and if it is doing enough work to reach into communities. Through the likes of the local community safety partnerships, there should be the opportunity to strengthen the Tusla presence, working closely with youth workers, social workers, the JLOs and local communities. This Bill is the second half of amendments to the Child Care Act 1991. The first half passed in 2024 and was focused on early years services, including the removal of the exemption of regulations on self-employed childminders who work in childminders' homes. The Minister then followed that up with specific regulations.

I take the opportunity to briefly focus on childminding services. There has been very low registration during the three-year transition period to September 2027. Families using childminders are not necessarily able to avail of the national childcare scheme subsidies. Lots of parents out there are worried their childminders are not going to sign up to Tusla. The supply is not there to choose one that is. It is great to see so much focus on childminding in phase 1 of the early years action plan. I think we all agree the regulation of childminding services is critical to the safeguarding of children. Childminders are anxious about how inspections will be carried out on their homes, so I am asking the Minister of State to update us on when the review of the registration process will take place because time really is of the essence. We want to ensure we are not losing childminders from the sector, and we need to support our parents. That is the goal. We need to ensure we are doing both but the safeguarding of children is the most important priority of all.

I will also take the opportunity to ask about the 17 crèches that did not register properly and were in danger of not being able to open earlier this month and whether the new Garda vetting process was part of what happened there.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. I want to be very clear from the outset that this is an incredibly important and necessary Bill, and one I am proud to support. At its core, this Bill is about recognising that the world of child welfare and protection has changed significantly since the original Child Care Act was introduced in 1991. The challenges facing children and families today are different. Services are more complex and the need for agencies to work together effectively has never been greater.

This legislation acknowledges that reality and it responds to it. One of the strongest aspects of this Bill is the introduction of a statutory duty for agencies to co-operate with each other when it comes to supporting children and families. That may sound like common sense, and it is, but putting it into law is hugely significant. Too often in the past, families have felt like they were being passed from one service to another, repeating their story again and again. This

Bill moves us towards a model where services are expected and not just encouraged, to work together in the best interests of the child. This is exactly where the focus should always be.

The strengthening of interagency structures, including the establishment of a formal implementation and interagency committee, is another very positive step. It creates a space where Departments and State agencies can co-ordinate responses, identify gaps and improve how services are delivered in practice. For families dealing with crises, delay and fragmentation can have lifelong consequences. Better co-ordination means earlier intervention, better outcomes and, ultimately, safer childhoods.

I also strongly welcome the provisions that support stability for children in care, particularly the changes allowing foster carers to apply for enhanced parental rights after three years instead of five years. Anyone who has spent time speaking to foster carers knows the level of commitment and care they provide. Where there is a stable, loving, long-term placement, we should be supporting that stability and not putting unnecessary administrative barriers in the way of it. The Bill also strengthens review processes around care arrangements and improves oversight mechanisms, including strengthening the framework around serious incident and child death reviews. These are sensitive and difficult areas but they are absolutely essential if we are serious about learning from past failures and continuously improving our system.

I also acknowledge the work being done by the Department and the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, in progressing this legislation and committing to further strengthening measures, particularly around the national review panel. We also cannot discuss child protection legislation without recognising the front-line role played every day by Tusla staff, foster carers, social workers and support workers across the country. These are people doing difficult work in emotionally demanding situations and legislation like this gives them stronger tools and clearer structures to do that work effectively.

What I also like about this Bill is that it reflects a modern understanding of children's rights. It places guiding principles into legislation that align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensures decision-making across the system is grounded in the best interests of the child. That is exactly where our system needs to be. We must also, however, be honest. Legislation alone is not enough. Implementation matters. Resourcing matters. Workforce capacity matters. We must ensure that as we strengthen the legal framework, we continue to invest in the people and services that make it real on the ground because, ultimately, child protection is not just a responsibility of one agency or Department but a whole-of-State responsibility, a community responsibility and a societal responsibility.

This Bill is not about headlines. It is about building stronger systems quietly and steadily, systems that protect vulnerable children, support families and give professionals the tools they need to intervene early and effectively. For those reasons, I believe this Bill is very positive, necessary and a proper step forward and I am very happy to support it.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: At the outset, I would like to say I worked for the northern area health board, the HSE and Tusla. I worked in the same place but obviously changed over into different organisations over those 20 years when the responsibilities changed. I worked as a family support worker and later as a child and family support network co-ordinator. I commend so many people. I know it is really difficult work. I commend the social workers, the family

support workers and the care workers. The social care workers in Tusla do an absolutely phenomenal job and those in the organisations that are around it and are supported by it.

I want to talk specifically about guardians *ad litem*, GALs. I have only a limited amount of time, so I am going to try to get through this as quickly as I can. Just to read from their comments, the most concerning issues that arise from the response being provided is the ongoing insistence that the guardians independence will not be affected, alongside the sentence referring to ensuring legal representation for guardians *ad litem* where necessary. The decision as to whether it is necessary for a child to have legal representation through the GAL rests with the State. The State has so often had to make apologies to children for not hearing their voices. It was also stated this will be a massive step backwards.

Here is an example. To take a hypothetical situation, Tusla and the parents will automatically have access to all the reports about the child's legal representation, attend all court dates, challenge evidence, procure reports and assessments, bring contacts or applications to seek directions under the Child Care Act and to appeal any decision of the court that is of concern to them.

In the current independent system, guardians *ad litem* can do all of these things on behalf of the child and are fully legally represented in court. There is currently no waiting list for guardians *ad litem* and legal services are immediately engaged without any delay. In stark contrast, from the commencement of the new guardian *ad litem* service, guardians will only be able to ask the national service, which will come under the remit of the Minister, Deputy Foley, for permission to do any of these things. There will be a process, which has yet to be confirmed, that guardians will have to go through to get legal representation. Guardians *ad litem* are concerned about this logic. The State now sees them as only necessary in circumstances where the parents and Tusla are not engaged. The role of guardians *ad litem* is not to prop up the case for the State or the parents, but to be an independent representative voice in the best interests of the child. It is their opinion that their right to representation should never depend on the level of engagement of parents or their consent and that it should be possible to realise this right for all children.

Some 92 guardians *ad litem*, highly skilled and experienced professionals who have serious concerns about the proposed new guardian *ad litem* service for children in Ireland, are reluctant to enter this new service. These concerns have repeatedly been raised directly with the new service but there has been a lack of meaningful engagement. That lack of engagement with guardians *ad litem* is really concerning. Over the last couple of days, we have heard repeatedly that the Minister has refused, or has not been able, to meet these guardians.

Deputy Emer Higgins: A meeting is being arranged.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is really important that we sit down with the people who are directly involved and engaged in providing those supports. As I have said, I have met many guardians *ad litem* over the 20 years I worked with them. They are incredible people who work really hard.

Deputy Michael Collins: Since 2019, almost 1,000 early years childcare services have closed their doors. The Minister has said that 579 new services have opened but she failed to

say that most of these only cater for school-age children. There are currently 40,000 children on waiting lists for childcare across the country. The services that have closed could potentially have provided for 30,000 of those children. Childcare facilities are closing because of ever-rising costs and a lack of funding from Government. Many more small early childhood care and education, ECCE, services are going to close because the Department of children is making no funding available to cover these costs. New rates bills are now being foisted upon them. Although these small service providers have been rates-exempt since 2010, over the last six months, they have been receiving these rates bills, which they cannot afford to pay. It is the death knell for many of these providers.

The ECCE programme is a free two-year programme for children aged from two years and eight months to five years old. It runs five days a week and provides three hours a day of free pre-school. Service providers say that Government funding of between €69 and €82 per child per week is not enough to sustain these services. Costs have increased but Government funding has not. Their contracts do not allow them to charge parents. These increasing costs on crèches are not sustainable. According to Elaine Dunne, chairperson of the Federation of Early Childhood Providers, if Government funding is not increased, more closures will follow. As a starting point in resolving this urgent issue, the Government must increase the current rate per child per hour from €4.60 to the sponsorship rate of €5.30. The Department of children must take responsibility for the payment of the rates bills or, alternatively, rates must be abolished entirely.

I will address some issues that parents are having. One issue affecting families in Skibbereen and across the wider west Cork area is the serious lack of childcare facilities, which puts pressure on parents who are simply trying to balance work and family life. I recently heard from the parent of a 12-month-old girl who had been searching for childcare for most of the year. This parent applied to crèches not only in Skibbereen but also in Ballydehob and even as far away as Clonakilty. Despite placing their daughter on multiple waiting lists, they were eventually told there was simply no space for her anywhere. After months of uncertainty, they finally found childcare but only by piecing together two separate childminders, one covering Monday through Thursday and another who would take their daughter on Fridays. They consider themselves lucky because many parents in their community are still struggling and often relying heavily on family support, which not everyone has.

Even for those who do find childcare, the financial burden can be overwhelming. This family is paying nearly €1,300 every month for two childminders with no Government subsidy, no scheme and no relief available to them. They are not alone. Many parents in west Cork and all over Ireland are in similar situations, working full-time and doing everything right and yet finding themselves financially stretched because essential childcare infrastructure simply does not exist. This is more than an inconvenience. It is a failure of basic social infrastructure. Childcare is not a luxury. It is a necessity for working families and an essential pillar of a functioning equitable society. When families cannot access childcare, their economic security is threatened, their ability to work is compromised and the well-being of their children is affected. It is deeply concerning that such a vital service is missing from a town as large and vibrant as Skibbereen. We cannot expect families to thrive when they are forced into last-minute arrangements, long commutes or unaffordable private options. I call for the urgent prioritisation of new crèches, expanded childcare supports and meaningful investment in early

years services in areas like Skibbereen. Families deserve stability, affordability and access to the childcare services that every community should have as a basic right.

I will also raise an issue that many parents in my constituency have contacted me about, that is, the decision to end the ECCE split-place exemptions from the beginning of the 2026 programme year. Only last week, the Government announced a major investment in early years education, claiming that it would improve access and make childcare more affordable. However, almost straight away, families were being told that split-place exemptions will be removed. For many parents, this feels like giving with one hand and taking with the other. There are families who simply do not have the option to keep their child in one service for five days a week. Their local services are full. There are not enough places. To make childcare work and to stay in employment, they have no choice but to use two different services. This is not a lifestyle choice. It is the only arrangement that allows them to manage work and care availability. Removing these exemptions punishes families who are already dealing with a shortage of childcare places, especially in rural areas.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Government has created the perfect storm. Ireland has applied itself to making sure there are more jobs. That is a great thing. We should always encourage equality and ensure that people, whether men or women, can get jobs. A lot of people in Ireland are now working and that is a great thing. When my kids were growing up, they were able to go over the road to a local person who we would call the childminder. This person might have reared seven or eight children of their own. These people treated our children as if they were their mothers and their husbands would treat them as if they were their fathers. The kids could be dropped off in the morning and picked up in the evening. They were fed, kept and safe. Of course, that was banned under new regulations brought in under the then Minister, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, a few years ago and most of them have left the market. That is a fact. The statistics will tell you that they are not coming back. That is one part of it.

The second part is the incredible work done by crèches around the country. There is a big problem with babies. A certain ratio is required. That might be needed. I do not know. A lot of crèches do not want to take the really young babies. This ratio and the money you get out of taking in the really young babies are problems. If we do not address these problems, they will get worse and worse.

We must also ensure that the workers in crèches get a proper wage. We have a community crèche in Glinsk called Caisleán Óir. The Minister of State might search it on Google some time. We are abroad in the middle of the countryside. We have a pub, a shop, a church and a community centre and we built a crèche years ago. There were 48 kids in the local school. Because of the foresight of people in the service, there are now something like 85 or 90 children in the crèche. Enrolment in the school has gone up to 88 or 90. People are coming from the whole area. Does the Minister of State know what our biggest problem is now? Ironically enough, you can be a victim of your own success. With the planning that went into the crèche, the great staff, the management and the community behind it, we decided to provide after-school care. We got a minibus to pick up the kids.

They get a lunch and they do their homework, and they are nearly ready to go to bed when they go home or to look at television. More and more people have come from different areas

to use this service. It is out in the middle of the countryside. What has happened now is that we have a community centre and, because we have to make sure that we facilitate children, one third of this community centre is used to sort out the after-school service because more and more kids are using it. It is a great story to read and look at. Now, the service has to expand more. We are out in the sticks but people are coming from a huge area because parents vote with their feet. They look to where there is a service. This service caters for babies right up to children going to school. People come from a radius of five to ten miles around. It is a massive service. It is a community crèche and it is not for profit.

We need to make sure we make these services affordable. It was not in the time of the Minister of State, but I begged the former Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, with regard to the great people out there who mind a couple of kids in their house and who have to go through such a rigmarole. I feel sorry about this. It is like anything; it is like being in business. Do not ever worry about the person in business beside you because we need everyone to be doing a bit to cater for everything that is going on. I will not do all of the work in the world and nor will someone else. When the Ceann Comhairle was working at the lorries she did not do everything. There is always enough for everyone. I ask that child care be made as affordable as possible. With regard to the grants, I know there is pressure in cities and large towns. I understand that but look up the story of Caisleán Óir in Glinsk. Think of this small crèche in a rural area where people would say nothing is going on. Look at the number of children attending, how it is booked out miles ahead and how there is a wait for places. It wants to get bigger. When funding comes it should also cater for the likes of these services in the countryside.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. Vulnerable children have been treated terribly by the State and it is a dark mark against the Government and the previous Government. There are many good things in the Bill. There are bad things there also and I want to go into detail on them. When it comes to child protection and child welfare, there is no doubt we have to get better in terms of inter-agency communication and co-operation. There also needs to be transparency around data. We in Aontú have raised this issue in the Chamber over and over again. We have raised the individual reports produced by the national review panel on the deaths of children in State care. Some of the observations of the national review panel and Dr. Helen Buckley are harrowing.

There are serious gaps in the level of inter-agency communication and internally between different geographical Tusla units. Certain areas are not communicating with each other at all. These gaps are resulting in the deaths of children. I am thinking of instances where CAMHS has refused to accept children who are referred to it by Tusla simply because CAMHS does not have a policy on accepting children who use drugs or alcohol. Hugh was 16 when he died from a drug overdose after CAMHS told Tusla it would not take him. Niamh was another child under Tusla's care. She died at the age of 15 by suicide. She too was deemed ineligible by CAMHS. Another report about a girl called Ava under Tusla's care showed how she disclosed sexual abuse but nobody from Tusla spoke to her because in the Tusla area she was in, they assumed a social worker in the area where the alleged abuser lived was speaking to her. She was discharged from CAMHS after a mere two appointments and her body was found a few days later. She was 14 years old.

It is welcome that an inter-agency committee is to be set up under the legislation but it has an enormous amount to do. There is little joined-up work happening between various agencies

and officials are passing children from Billy to Jack. These children are falling through the cracks and they are being left with no supports, abandoned to the point where I am reading the details of the findings of the inquests of their deaths. This has been the result of Government action.

I have huge issues with the Bill and how it deals with separated children, migrant children, young people in aftercare and care leavers. The former Ombudsman for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, asked that specific provision be made in the legislation for unaccompanied children. Children who are placed into voluntary care require parental consent for this to happen. Provision must be made for those children who are orphans or who are in this country alone without their parents to ensure their rights are protected in the care system. We cannot continue to accommodate these children under section 5 of the Child Care Act. It is outdated and effectively creates a two-tier system for children's rights. When unaccompanied children do not get allocated a social worker and they do not get allocated a care plan, it is a major difficulty.

We also need to do better in legislation for birth mothers in this country. A number of women, and it is primarily women, ring my office to air grievances they have with Tusla. Birth mothers whose children have been taken into care feel aggrieved by the process. There does not seem to be a proper structure of support systems for such mothers. There is no fair means through which they can air their grievances. There are no psychological supports. There is an *in camera* rule that leaves them terrified to speak about their experiences. In some cases, they are afraid they are breaking the law just by talking to me or to the Garda. They are afraid Tusla will come after the remaining children if they criticise it.

The free legal aid system is not fit for purpose in how it treats birth mothers. Many of them have long and complex stories to tell. When one of these mothers rings my office I know it will take hours to go through all of the issues she has to discuss. The free legal aid provided is five minutes with a barrister before a court case. We also need to have a strengthening of parental rights, procedural fairness and independent oversight. This is what birth mothers are looking for.

I want to talk about the recent report of the Child Law Project. The details of the project are shocking. It is very alarming and very sad. We know we have a crisis in Tusla in terms of child protection. We have seen multiple cases in recent times where children have gone missing from care, where Tusla did not know where they are, where children were killed while under the care of Tusla, and where a child was raped under the care of Tusla. There are horrendous details in the report. One case involved a mother who was sold to a man who sexually abused her. She was found with her baby on the side of the road by a passer-by who called the Garda. We in Aontú have consistently raised these issues, particularly about the number of children not assigned a social worker. We have also been very outspoken on the scandal of human trafficking in this country. For a long time, I have been the only voice in the Dáil raising these issues. This has to change. We need a full debate about the crisis in Tusla.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In fairness, the Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025 is a substantial piece of work. It needs to be because it is the first real reform of our child protection laws in more than 30 years. It comes after a very long and well-documented history of systemic failures, inconsistent practice and persistent gaps in co-ordination between the agencies, especially within Tusla's work. For example, we have had situations where children have been

known to multiple agencies but the information was not shared. There have been cases of severe neglect where schools repeatedly raised concerns but there was no co-ordinated response. We have also had cases involving children with complex needs, disability, mental health issues and addiction issues in the family where there was a failure by agencies because no one took the lead. These types of issues have been highlighted repeatedly by HIQA, the Ombudsman for Children, the Children's Rights Alliance and numerous case reviews. In that context, the Bill's modernisation of the Child Care Act 1991 is welcome and necessary.

The Bill will introduce clear statutory principles to place the child's best interests at the centre, affirming the right to be heard and requiring proportionate rights-based interventions at all times. It has been broadly welcomed by many of the various oversight bodies and practitioners who have long argued that the absence of these principles in legislation and the lack of a statutory basis for them has contributed to inconsistencies around the country, depending on the area people are in.

The Bill's emphasis on this inter-agency co-operation is definitely a step forward. I have raised issues already regarding people falling between the cracks in the fragmented service. The creation of an *coiste forfheidhmithe agus idirghníomhaireachta um chúram leanaí* responds directly to these failures by establishing this formal structure.

Vetting provisions will be further strengthened to give full effect to Directive 2011/93/EU. This is also important because we have had delays in vetting foster carers or volunteers, regular poor communication with the National Vetting Bureau, and cases where relevant information about the adults in a child's life was not shared or was not shared in a prompt manner.

Other Deputies referred to child sexual exploitation as one situation where people have been allowed to fall through the cracks. The delays in vetting foster carers and inconsistent information sharing have caused major problems. In principle, embedding the stronger safeguards in law is a meaningful improvement. However, the Bill does have some notable gaps which the Ombudsman for Children has raised, for example, in terms of voluntary care. For years children have remained in voluntary care arrangements without adequate oversight, clear timelines or consistent review processes. While the Bill does improve that framework, it does not have the robust statutory protections that many advocates like the ombudsman believe are essential to prevent drift and may mean things will just go and that because we have this legislation, things are fine. We need to ensure accountability.

There are also unresolved issues in terms of children presenting as homeless. We have had documented cases where children were told to return to unsafe homes or where the responsibility for their welfare was disputed between housing authorities and Tusla. The Bill does strengthen the general duties of care and co-operation but it does not actually give any clear statutory responsibility for homeless children. Oversight bodies have documented delays also in assigning social workers, inconsistent guardianship arrangements, and the use of unsuitable accommodation.

There is a lot in the Bill but it does not tackle chronic resource pressures that tie in with all the systemic failures we have seen, such as the high caseloads, the staff turnover and, as I mentioned, the disparities in services around the country. The legislation on paper creates higher standards but I want to emphasise that without the tools to increase the capacity and to ensure staff are kept and more staff are retained, these standards risk remaining aspirational.

Deputy Paula Butterly: In broad strokes, I welcome this Bill and the debate in the Chamber on it, be it on childcare places or the Bill itself. Today I want to focus on two points, namely, the duty to co-operate and the establishment of the committee. For the past couple of months, I have had my eyes opened in Drogheda. I normally visit schools on a weekly basis. Most recently, before Christmas, I visited three schools where it was highlighted to me that children of seven years of age were coming in high on drugs - not high on life; high on drugs. Principals pointed out to me the immense pressure they are under trying to keep the children safe and away from their peers - teenagers who are grooming them and turning them into drug mules. Schools are supposed to be areas of safety, which protect the children, lift them up and give them the start of a good life. They should not be facing these pressures.

In a lot of cases these children are coming from homes where there is addiction, where the mother or the grandmother or the absent father is not there to facilitate and help them, to protect them and to give them the guidance and care that they need. We need to step in where this is failing. In Drogheda we have The Red Door Project, which is an excellent service. It helps people with addictions yet it has not got the funding for outreach programmes. We have the wonderful Connect Family Resource Centre in Drogheda and the Redeemer Family Resource Centre in Dundalk, both of which go out into the communities. The communities themselves offer great assistance to many families but they cannot do it alone. I have always said that it needs to go from top to bottom and bottom to top. It has to be a unified approach.

We talk about Tusla and An Garda Síochána. I have to say the gardaí in County Louth have been exceptional. They have had to face criminal organisations over the past number of years, and they have been excellent at bringing these people to justice and achieving convictions. However, we always know that when we lob off the head of a snake another head grows in its place. The pressure is continuous. The pressure on resources is continuous. The gardaí are there to bring these people to justice but they cannot be there 24 hours a day. When I am out and about at events, the gardaí are always there, they are always helping, and they are always listening. However, the biggest complaint I hear is that one hand does not speak to the other hand. That is why in this Bill I am really heartened to see there is going to be a duty to co-operate. I regret that has to be put on a statutory footing and that all of these bodies need to be pressurised and legally put on a statutory footing in order to talk to each other because common sense would say that to combat a problem everybody should be brought to the table. We had that in Drogheda. We had the Drogheda implementation board from 2021 until December 2024 where we saw that first hand. We should see it as a test model for other places.

I am a big fan of the Greentown Project in Limerick. It is not about one Department. It is not about one body. It is about bringing all the Departments and bodies together, including the communities, and getting to the heart of these communities to show these young children who are being used as drug mules or drug dealers.

I said it this morning, I said it yesterday and I said it to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, before Christmas that I was at a conference in Drogheda at which I told the average age of a drug mule is now between seven and ten years of age. The average age of a child to be used as a drug dealer is between ten and 12 years of age. I found that absolutely horrific. I was aware that teenagers were being groomed and used but the very idea that these teenagers are now so *au fait* with the procedures and processes of these criminal activities that they are in a position to get their claws into young children as young as seven years of age is absolutely

unacceptable for a society. Like a lot of people, I did not expect to hear that information when I went into those schools. I believe a lot of people would find that difficult to accept, never mind digest, this sort of information. The duty to co-operate will be fundamental to ensure we can make some effective progress in protecting our children. It is absolutely essential.

I really welcome the establishment of a committee. However, a committee is only as good as the people on it and the resources and powers given to it. This committee is very welcome but it cannot be a talking shop. It cannot be a committee that meets a couple of times a year, which goes out and visits a few communities, comes back, puts a report together and puts it on a shelf. This cannot be a data collecting activity which gathers dust. It has to be effective. When we have put agencies like Cúan in place, we have seen how effective they can be and how they reach out to the different organisations. Indeed, Women's Aid Dundalk recently received €6.5 million for new beds. That is hugely welcome. It shows that when there is a committee or an agency with proper oversight, proper powers and proper funding, we can achieve something. In the times we are living in, we are facing so many threats left, right and centre. Today it is AI, tomorrow it is Grok and who know what it will be next week. We genuinely do not know but we have to prepare, and we have to be there for our children right from the beginning. As I said before, we cannot let these people get their claws into our children.

Deputy Mark Ward: Any legislation that provides greater supports for children who need them is to be welcomed. However, we also have to make sure that children have, for example, appropriate school settings. There is a report out this week that shows a decrease in the number of young children attending school. If they are not attending school, they come to the attention of Tusla.

This week I visited a school in the Minister of State's and my constituency, namely, St. Kevin's Community College on the Fonthill Road. It is my former school. I walked around the school with the principal and there were 32 leaks in the school building. It has an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, class that is not fit for purpose. It is meant to moving towards 1,000 pupils but there are no plans for that. As far as I know, the school is not in the summer work programme either, so it will not get any supports during the summer. Schools like St. Kevin's in disadvantaged areas need to have the appropriate settings to encourage children to go to school, so they do not come to the attention of Tusla.

3 o'clock

In my previous profession, I supported people suffering with addiction issues. One of the most challenging issues I had was when, within the space of two weeks, three young women presented to our service. All three were products of the care system, all three had addiction issues and all three had a child while in the care of the State. All three had their children taken off them and put into the care of the State while they themselves were in the care of the State. That shows me all that is wrong with Tusla. It is a symptom of a broken care system. These are not isolated incidents. I could bring up more recent incidents in our constituency but I will not because I know there are investigations ongoing. These incidents are not few or far between and they need to be addressed. I hope this Bill goes some way to addressing the problems we are experiencing with Tusla.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the chance to speak on this Bill. I want to acknowledge the hard work social workers, link workers and family support workers, etc., do but the reality is the public has lost confidence in Tusla over the years. We need to see steps to rebuild trust.

I want to highlight concerns over the future independence of the guardians *ad litem*, GALs. Their job is to be the voice of the child in court proceedings. It is as simple as that. In some cases, GALs can be critical of the social work Department. They need to be independent and not be concerned about any repercussions from doing their job. There are cases where children in care see their social worker change regularly due to staff turnover but the GAL has been appointed to the child and knows the child inside-out. I know that from my experience as a foster parent. They know the children's concerns and asks. I have concerns about GALs and Tusla being under the same Department and Minister. I echo the calls from other speakers that the Minister meet with the association of GALs to discuss these matters.

In terms of foster parents, I welcome that the timeframe for the application for enhanced rights has decreased from five years to three. Children placed in care have formed very strong relationships and bonds with their foster parents so allowing a foster parent to make a day-to-day decision on a child makes sense. However, let us be clear: we need to do a lot more work to support foster carers.

I look forward to the Bill going through the House. My party will be very constructive and will work with Government Members to ensure its passage.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I thank social workers and all the people working in the industry. The amendments to the Bill build on calls from Members of this House over several years. I welcome the work put into it.

Also on a positive note, the changes to improve Tusla and childcare across the system are welcome. Foster parents who take children into their home have to be commended. To show someone love and give someone support is very honourable.

The parts of the Bill strengthening regulation and oversight are admirable as well. There have been calls for a very long time about the Government arrangement with Tusla. We see from recent incidents that there need to be improved enforcement powers. The tightening of quality and safety standards are welcome. I do not see how anyone would not support that.

It is good to see we are continuing towards treating early years education as part of our social infrastructure. It is not just a private service; it should be available to everyone in the State. I welcome that.

I thank the Minister of State for the time she gave to the Clontarf Bulls and the other teams and for speaking to the parents afterwards. For any parent of a child with additional needs going through the education system, it was great to see the engagement and I thank the Minister of State for her work on that. The parents we had in for the meeting were speaking of going through childcare, school and university, especially the CRC. Giving children with additional needs supports after they leave is important. The Clontarf Bulls reiterated that. I thank other Members of the House, as well, for their welcoming into it.

Childcare is not a luxury. I know everyone in this House heard that on the doors in the last election. It is very difficult at the moment. I heard Members talking about parents nearly

finding it more affordable for one of them to give up work. That is something we definitely should not be encouraging, especially after fighting so hard for a society that accepts that both parents work. We cannot be going backwards in that sense.

I acknowledge the progress and expansion of the national childcare scheme and the increased staff allocations and professional standards. It is brilliant to see that.

Those are the positive notes. Now I have to go to some amendments I would like to see. The extra public funding is real and I give credit where it is due. On the ground, however, many childcare providers are not talking about reform or progress. Having spoken and reached out to many of them before speaking today, they are talking about survival. Some are talking about closure, especially in Dublin Bay North. Many of these people are dedicated and have been in the industry for 25 or 30 years. They are struggling at the moment with the energy crisis and other difficulties, especially because they love it so much. When you are working in that industry with children, you have to love it and show your love.

I spoke to childcare providers, parents and staff across Dublin Bay North and further afield. I had people reaching out to me from across Ireland on this important topic. I would love to read out some of what they are saying because this debate should not be abstract. I spoke to Elaine Dunne, who has done fantastic work. I have her permission to read out this email:

I am writing to you on behalf of [I will not say the name] to express our deep concern about the increasingly unsustainable position that well-established childcare providers now find themselves in under the current Core Funding model.

[They are proudly serving] the... community for many years, consistently providing high-quality childcare and maintaining the highest standards of care, safety, and professionalism. However, despite our long-standing commitment and proven track record [in our community], we are now facing extreme difficulties in keeping our doors open. Childcare fees have been frozen since 2018, while Core Funding has increased by only five cents per child. This minimal increase falls far short of covering the rising costs of inflation, utilities, food, insurance, staffing, and compliance. As a direct result, we have been forced to make drastic and heartbreaking cuts, including the closure of our kitchen [and other services] - something that directly impacts children and families.

I will not name the provider but can pass the details over to the Minister of State's office. "What is particularly disheartening [for them is they] appear to be penalised under the current system". I know changes are coming and it has been spoken about in this House. We need to speed those up.

While we struggle to survive under fee freezes and insufficient funding, a new childcare service... directly across the road from us is free to charge fees of up to €300 per week, along with a non-refundable €800 deposit. This creates a deeply unfair and unbalanced playing field [for this long-established provider in the community]. Core Funding was presented as a promise of sustainability and fairness for all childcare providers. In reality, it has failed to deliver on that promise.

I know there is no silver bullet for the majority of issues we face in this Dáil but this should be examined again because:

If this continues, many respected and well-run services... will be forced to close, to the detriment of children, parents, staff, and the wider community [they have served for so long].

That is not ideological. That is not political point-scoring. Those are their words. This service has done everything asked of it and is now being squeezed out by a funding model that does not reflect reality.

Reaching out to another long-established childcare provider, I received this from Donnycarney in my constituency.

The following is the text I received this morning:

I don't know what I'm going to do and everything is up in the air.

The government think it's going to be a straightforward takeover and it's not. If they go down this route it is going to cost them a lot more investment than they currently pay out.

I removed some of the other text because I could not read it in this Chamber. It goes on to say:

This government, even with their investment over the past few years, still has ... the lowest GDP investments into the sector in Europe. We are being trampled into the ground and it feels like nobody is listening.

I see the Minister of State taking notes. I know she is listening. I am optimistic that she will take this on board and bring it to the Department.

Further on, the person who contacted me says that the fear, uncertainty and sense of being ignored is really affecting her business, her staff and her own mental health. The parents who go to her business are saying the same. One parent wrote to me, saying:

We pay €866 a month for the baby and ... [€200] for after school.

The broken promise of the €250 cap and the deafening silence on the matter. It was to be actioned within [the first] 150 days Now it's said it will happen in the lifetime of government .

They stated that they think this needs to be changed and asked me to help.

Another parent raised another incident, and states that the school has no school hall. This is to do with after-school care. I know it is not directly related to the Bill. Continuing, he says:

The children play outside in the rain ...

Working parents [already] pay huge amounts in tax and contribute to society.

My son is 8 now and I fear he'll be doing his Junior Cert before this is addressed.

It is not unreasonable for parents to be asking that. I have seen some mentions of it in recent announcements in the sense that if you have children in school, there are some schools that provide the service. However, I would love to see it nationwide. Other countries do it, as do some places in Ireland. If parents are dropping their children off to school and the children are already in the school, it would be great to have more established and funded models. I know

there is some mention of it in that. After-schools could be facilitated easier, particularly for staff in the schools who would like the extra few bob in their pocket.

Another parent stated, "Core funding doesn't exist in practice." This is another childcare provider from north Dublin. "You won't find a creche with it fully covering costs." The parent states that the only subsidy that really works is the €2.40 an hour under the national child care scheme and the Government should increase those payments across the board.

I welcome the Minister's engagement with my office on this. We had been inundating the previous Minister with parliamentary questions. I have a few of them here. I will not read them out; I will publish them later.

In regard to staffing requirements and insurance costs, the SMEs are really struggling, especially the long-established ones that I mentioned earlier. The Bill, especially when it talks about quality, should examine this. It needs to exist with viable services, using the existing ones that are already in place in communities. Without fair funding, the regulation simply drives out good providers. As I mentioned, people are being cut out.

Parents do not magically get cheaper childcare. The programme for Government states that this will be examined over the lifetime of the Government. I am aware things take longer. This should be prioritised as there are people who are being forced out of work. We know the current model needs to be changed and the long-established community providers cannot be frozen out or locked out.

The fact that the Bill rewards new builds and punishes experience is not fair. There are four things I will request. This is from consulting with the providers. These include reflecting the real costs in the core funding and the hourly subsidy under the national childcare scheme, as suggested to me. In only parts of the system, providers consistently say this works.

We must deliver on the €250 cap and I am cautiously optimistic that the Minister of State will do this. It is very important that when a promise is made to the electorate, it is delivered on. If we do not do that, they are broken promises. We are nothing without our word. Supporting after-school must be treated as infrastructure.

We should all work from across this House. An rud is fearr liom sa Teach seo ná nuair atá gach duine ag obair le chéile ar na fadhbanna seo. Ceapaim gur cuma leis na daoine taobh amuigh den Teach seo cé atá ag déanamh na rudaí. Tá siad ag iarraidh go bhfuil an obair déanta. Táim tar éis é sin a rá le cúpla fadhb a tháinig chun cinn sa Teach seo. Is bubble é an Teach seo. Nuair atá tú amuigh i do Dháilcheantar féin - tá a fhios ag an Aire Stáit faoi seo - tá daoine ag streachailt sa phobal faoi láthair. Tá praghas gach rud ag dul suas. We should work with a sense that if there is a suggestion that comes in, we should all accept things that need to be done for the betterment of Ireland, accept them quickly and put aside political differences. I really would welcome that.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

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

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

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack of special school places across Kildare South.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss the statutory instrument required to give effect to increases to the CIÉ pension schemes.

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

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

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss core funding for Ballyfermot Youth Service.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the illegal use of scrambler bikes on roads.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss wastewater infrastructure and capacity issues causing flooding in Dundalk.

The matters raised by Deputies Ruairí Ó Murchú, Mark Wall, Barry Ward, Jen Cummins and Albert Dolan have been selected for discussion.

Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I remind Members that the Minister, Deputy Foley, in her opening remarks, set out the objectives and principles underpinning this Bill. Its core function is to revise and update the Child Care Act 1991. This Bill is aimed at reflecting changes in child welfare and protection services in Ireland over the past 30 years. It will capture current legislative, policy and practice developments. Most importantly, it will provide for greater co-operation and co-ordination across State agencies and Departments, promoting a more agile response across the State in keeping children safe from harm. It is great to hear, in today's contributions and the contributions on Tuesday, that there is widespread support for the proposals to enhance inter-agency cooperation and collaboration, and that is something that the Minister, Deputy Foley, is determined to bring through to enactment.

As the Minister, Deputy Foley, mentioned in her opening remarks, she intends to place the national review panel on a statutory footing. These provisions will be introduced as Government amendments to the Bill as soon as possible. The national review panel is respected for the independence of its work. Placing the panel on a statutory basis will further strengthen its independence and enhance its powers and status. That is true in response to many of the cases that were raised here today, including those raised by Deputy Mark Ward.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, and I are delighted to hear Deputies welcome the Bill in principle. In particular, I appreciate the welcome given to the innovations regarding the duty to co-operate and the proposed implementation and inter-agency committee. Deputy Butterly spoke passionately about how outcomes can and indeed are being improved when Departments, bodies and communities work together. As Deputy O'Gorman said, the appointment of the chair of this committee will be really important. It was great to hear both Deputy Tóibín and Deputy Gogarty talk about those silos and how they need to be broken down because that is exactly what this aims to achieve.

I thank the Deputies for their positive contributions to the debate, which show their concern and interest in the health, well-being and protection of children. We have a shared objective here. We all want the best for all children and young people, as do all of the professionals who work in this area, as Deputies Donnelly and Mitchell said, and, indeed, the foster parents who provide such amazing support. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and I have listened carefully to every speaker in this debate and we will reflect on all that has been presented here. We have officials with us throughout these debates who have worked really hard on this and will continue to do so.

I recognise the role the former Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, played in drafting this Bill, in particular section 10, which, as he said, will strengthen the child protection architecture.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, is aware of the concerns raised in the House regarding the establishment of the guardian *ad litem* national service. That was raised here, even in the past hour, by Deputies Donnelly, Currie and Mitchell. The Minister has repeatedly said that she remains open to the possibility of a meeting with guardian *ad litem* stakeholders at an appropriate time in the future. To reassure the Deputies who raised this here today, that meeting is being arranged at present.

The legislation that underpins the launch of the national service was enacted in 2022 and is now being operationalised by the guardian *ad litem* executive office, under the auspices of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 preserves children's rights, strengthens their voice in proceedings and provides for legal advice and representation for guardians *ad litem* in certain circumstances to support them in carrying out their role effectively. The Act provides for the Minister to arrange legal advice for guardians *ad litem* in all circumstances and representation in certain circumstances to support them in carrying out their role effectively, including setting out factors the Minister must take into consideration in making such arrangements in the child's best interests.

This present Bill inserts an additional factor for the Minister to consider, namely, whether the legal representation has been appointed for the child. The independence of guardians *ad litem* in the performance of their functions is a legislative requirement and a core value of the role. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 clearly states that guardians *ad litem* must act

independently in their professional judgment and function. When this Act is fully commenced, it will be the first time that guardians *ad litem* are regulated and supported on a national basis to deliver a high-quality, child-centred service. The new service will deliver national standards, consistent practice and timely access to GALs wherever a court directs one. The executive office has had regular engagement with all stakeholders, including the Association of Guardians ad Litem Ireland, and will continue to engage meaningfully as we prepare for the commencement of the guardians *ad litem* national service.

In the drafting of this Bill, time was given to consider the issues raised at pre-legislative scrutiny by the previous Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Where matters raised can be addressed by legislation, we have tried to do so. It is important to indicate that some of what has been highlighted by Deputies today, which I accept was in good faith, is outside the remit of this Bill. I would like to highlight the ongoing policy work in the Department in relation to kinship care, special care, alternative care and aftercare. I note the cross-departmental work that is giving effect in Ireland to the EU migration and asylum pact, in particular, the immigration Bill. Deputy Tóibín raised a particular issue on this. I can assure him that in practice, the majority of unaccompanied minors are brought into care under the same legal provisions as any other child, with the same care and support.

As several Deputies noted, legislation is only a starting point. Operational matters and the provision and allocation of resources across the child welfare and protection system are important matters. To produce the intended outcomes, this needs to be planned, resourced and implemented, but also complemented by services in the community, such as the Red Door and the Redeemer centre in Dundalk, which Deputy Paula Butterly referenced.

The principles in this Bill will guide decision-making by Tusla. The Bill also provides that key bodies exercising their functions regarding children in need of care and protection, including all Government Departments, shall consider the best interests of the child as a primary consideration. As Deputy Albert Dolan put it, that needs to be the grounding factor in every decision.

As Deputy Fitzmaurice acknowledged, the economy is in a very positive space. Ireland has made huge inroads when it comes to gender equality in the workplace, and early learning and care and school-age childcare have helped to enable and sustain that. I note the contributions of Deputies, including Deputies Emer Currie, Michael Collins, Barry Heneghan and others with regard to the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector. The Government is committed to supporting the sector and providing high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare services. In December, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and I published two significant action plans. The first, *Shaping the Future*, is a detailed action plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early learning and care and school-age childcare system. The second, *Simplify to Support*, the action plan for simplification, sets out how we will reduce administration and simplify regulation in the sector. These are both programme for Government commitments that we are delivering on. The Minister, Deputy Foley, also last week announced a landmark commitment of funding for State-led services providing high-quality, accessible early learning and childcare. I hope that supports families like those who were mentioned during this debate.

From my perspective as Minister of State with responsibility for disability, I welcome the benefits the changes in this Bill will bring for children with disabilities and parents with disabilities. The Government is committed to fostering cross-government, inter-agency and inter-disciplinary working, and collaboration to improve the lives of people with disabilities and enable them to achieve their potential. I appreciate Deputy Heneghan's remarks and commend him for his dedication in this regard. I keenly anticipate that the statutory duty to co-operate will codify, strengthen and build upon the inter-agency working already in place. This includes initiatives, such as the protocols developed by Tusla with the HSE and others, to understand the needs of children and parents and deliver much-needed services. Where collaboration is not as robust or consistent as it needs to be, the implementation and inter-agency committee will ensure that barriers are identified, and co-operation established and maintained.

In conclusion, I believe this is very important legislation. I believe the Bill will make a key contribution to delivering on the Government's programme for Government commitments to strengthen Tusla and protect children in the care system. Taking all these measures together, I am conscious of the Bill's potential to have a very real and positive impact on children in need at particularly vulnerable points in their lives, and on their families. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and I look forward to engaging further with Deputies during the passage of this Bill, in particular, in relation to the provisions that we have outlined today.

Question put and agreed to.

Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I move:

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

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Flood Risk Management

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The recent Storm Chandra has caused chaos and disaster across the State. It shows the issues we are dealing with, and the need to make sure we have all the mitigations and flood protections in place that we possibly can have. I will deal with some specific issues in Dundalk and particular parts of Dundalk. I first want to commend the local authority staff, particularly those who were out dealing with these issues, and those in the fire service who were out for hours. I know that third parties were brought in with regard to the use of tankers, and they did vital work to ensure people were not flooded.

In saying that, a huge number of people were in a very precarious scenario. We have already been through a yellow storm warning, with the possibility that we could face the same again.

A yellow storm warning is in place, and I am told the storm is due sometime between Friday at 9 a.m. and midnight on Saturday. Because everything has been so waterlogged, and because the infrastructure is so backed up, my fear is that we could be in a similar circumstance, particularly in Dundalk.

I have dealt with a huge number of people who have had flooding around their properties, in some cases where the water has come directly into the house. I still say we have been very lucky. One brutal fall of rain during that period would have meant hundreds of houses were flooded in the general Dundalk area. There were problems right through mid-Louth and into north Louth, and even in the area where Ravensdale connects with Jonesborough. Councillor Antóin Watters has spoken to me about particular issues in Jenkinstown. I have dealt with people on the Ardee road who were flooded because the River Blackwater was over-full and spilled into their property, although some work has been done there. There is a need for mitigation to be introduced in that area.

I want to focus on my part of Dundalk, in particular, Bay Estate, Cluan Enda and Greenwood Drive, and I include areas like Greenacres, anywhere on the Red Barns Road and St. Alphonsus Road.

Those roads would have been the subject of a number of closures and severe flooding.

We are being impacted in the context of wastewater infrastructure. We are talking about an area that has infrastructure dating back 20 or 30 years and even longer. There has obviously been an increase in the number of houses - and we need to see more of that - some have been affected by the lack of wastewater capacity. We have the likes of WuXi and other companies operating in the area, and we do not have capacity. The pumping station at Coes Road cannot deal with the amount of water coming through. It will be 2029 before it is upgraded. The treatment plant on the Point Road has a design capacity for a population equivalent of 71,000. This is going to be upgraded to 120,000, but that could take until 2033. When the local authority handed the plant over to Uisce Éireann - it is operated by the EPS Group - it had capacity for 169,000 but under different rules. Water lies there in the Bay Estate, around Holly Park, Oak Vale and even in Cherryvale, but particularly in the part where it comes in from the Alphonsus Road. It is incredibly dangerous, and we need to deal with it.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta ós rud é gur chuir sé an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo ar an gclár inniu. Gabhann an tAire, an Teachta Browne, a leithscéal. Níl sé in ann a bheith linn um thráthnóna.

At the outset, I should point out that the operation of the public water supply and the wastewater supply are operational issues locally for Uisce Éireann, which has statutory responsibility for all aspects. The Minister, Deputy Browne, does not have operational function in the matters to which the Deputy refers. We have, however, enquired with Uisce Éireann and have been informed that the aftermath of Storm Chandra remains an active incident across the country as Uisce Éireann works side by side with the other responsible agencies and first responders to deal with the impacts. We are very grateful, as I am sure the Ceann Comhairle is, for everybody who been working hard all around the country where it has been badly affected.

An Ceann Comhairle: Indeed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Across Louth and other affected counties, Uisce Éireann teams are still actively responding to the impact of the storm to triage incidents, to prioritise safety-critical interventions and to ensure that essential services remain operational. The exact cause of specific flood incidents observed in parts of Dundalk remain unclear. Multiple factors, including ground saturation, river level fluctuations and tidal interactions relating to coastal positioning can influence flooding behaviour during storms. A full post-incident review will be undertaken once conditions stabilise. Findings and insights will be shared to the appropriate channels, including the national emergency co-ordination group, NECG, and other oversight bodies, to support continuous improvements of Uisce Éireann's national emergency preparedness and response frameworks.

Throughout this flood event in Dundalk and nationally, Uisce Éireann continues to issue public safety information where required, to support local authorities in mitigation efforts and to deploy crews to areas of greatest need. It will maintain full operational readiness, provide ongoing situational updates, and engage with Departments and all stakeholders. All efforts remain focused on public safety, minimising disruption and restoring normal conditions.

Under the revised national development plan, NDP, the Government has scaled up support for the water sector by means of a record allocation of €12.2 billion in funding out to 2030. Uisce Éireann will be allocated 95% of this. The funding will support the delivery of a wide range of projects in our cities and regions required for housing delivery, safeguarding public health and the environment and, crucially, the capacity required for new housing targets. The Government is committed to making sure that all aspects of water infrastructure are strengthened and that communities feel the benefit of the unprecedented development in water services announced in the NDP.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that the senior Minister cannot be here, but I do not think it is a good enough to say that Uisce Éireann has operational responsibility. We all accept that from a technical point of view. I have no problem with it, but there is an absolute need to have a review with regard to why this has happened. This has happened - it always happens - when we have heavy rain in a particular part of Dundalk. Talk to anyone from the local authority or to any of the engineers who are out doing great work and they will say that they are looking for over-pumping capacity for the Blackwater. That, at least, might mitigate some of this. Hopefully, it can be done over the weekend.

We need to look long term at some of the mitigation works that can be carried out. We need to see CFRAM work being done in relation to the Blackwater, but, first and foremost, it must be accepted that we do not have the necessary capacity in the wastewater treatment system in Dundalk, including in the estate where I live. Where I live is not the worst part. I spoke to a man earlier today who, as the water dissipated, is looking at sewage on his property. That is because it is a joint sewerage and storm-water system. Therein lies the problem. The water treatment plant cannot take it. The Coes Road pumping station is where the blockages occur. There is WuXi and a huge number of industrial operations and estates from where the water literally shoots down. It fills the pipes to absolute capacity. This causes a logjam in the system, which then cannot be pumped out. The water builds up and pools in estates such as ours as a result. It is not just water, however, because we are talking about a combined system. The

problem gets even worse at high tide. People living in Cluan Enda and the Bay Estate now check for when high tide will occur.

We really need to see long-term fixes, with upgrades through CFRAM. In the short term, there needs to be a solution. There was heavy rain in other parts of the country that caused devastation. Some of the problems can maybe be mitigated but a lot of them cannot. We could definitely mitigate the issues we have in Dundalk, particularly those that impact the people who live in the Bay Estate and Cluan Enda. We really need a solution.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have huge empathy with the Deputy and the residents. My suggestion would be to let Uisce Éireann and the council deal with the immediate aftermath of what is happening this week. Thereafter, it is fair to say, Uisce Éireann has responsibility for wastewater and the sewerage system in general. The local authority is responsible for drainage. It is probably a case of knocking heads together in the context of the combined systems and maybe trying to arrange a meeting between the local authority and Uisce Éireann. They should be given a bit of time to deal with the aftermath of the storms. However, the other matter is something both entities probably need to work on. I would definitely encourage them to come together on that, particularly Uisce Éireann with its big budget. It is still a local authority issue when there is a problem with drains.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask that the Minister of State would bring this back to the Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No Deputy, you went 20 seconds over in your previous intervention..

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will take it back to the Minister.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter, which is very important to the constituents in Kildare South. It is always good to start with some good news. I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Government for the announcement of three additional special classes in Kildare South in St. Evins National School, Monasterevin, St. Conleth's National School, Derrinturn, and Scoil Bhríde in Lackagh. They are most welcome indeed. A number of weeks ago, I raised the concerns of the community of Lackagh regarding the need for a special class. I welcome the fact that its calls have been listened to and that Lackagh will get the special class it deserves in September.

Unfortunately, that is where the good news stops for so many parents. My office has been inundated with calls and emails from worried parents who cannot find a special class or a special school place for this coming September. These are not isolated calls. It has now reached the stage where it is one of the biggest issues we deal with in the office on a daily basis. Parents in places like Kildare town, Suncroft, Newbridge, Calverstown, Crookstown and Athy, and at this stage almost in every other town and village in south Kildare, cannot find a school place and they are growing more and more desperate for their children.

There is a clear demand for additional classes across Kildare South for autism classes and classes for children with mixed or moderate learning disabilities. I have had a number of parents from one school in Newbridge who cannot find any school places. They even tried the surrounding schools but they are all full. The local feeder school for Newbridge had only one place available for which the parents of 15 or so children applied. Kildare town has one of the biggest number of primary school children in the country yet a number of local families cannot access a special class there. Parents in the Ballitore and Narraghmore area have contacted every local school in their area yet they recently found themselves numbered in the late twenties for one local school that had one place.

Kildare South was also promised a new special school, but this was eventually located in Craddockstown, which is in Kildare North.

While this is a wonderful school with great staff and great reports, it is already full as so many parents in Kildare South cannot find a special school place. The current situation in Kildare South is at crisis. Parents who are holding down two jobs just to pay the mortgage and their other bills are being told to apply to other counties. One asked me today if there were not children in these other counties who needed a special class or school. The answer is, yes, there are and these schools in other counties are full too. I am dealing with one lady in Newbridge who has already applied to over 50 schools looking for a place for her child. We now see Government operating a drip-feed approach in terms of announcing new classes. This is simply not good enough and is only adding to the stress parents have. They are relying on WhatsApp groups, local papers and local reports on local radio stations to try to find out if there is a new class opening near to where they live. I hope the Minister of State can bring us some good news on behalf of Government and not tell me and all the parents listening about a list of schools that already exist in Kildare South. On behalf of the many parents who have contacted me, I will tell him that they are already full.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank the Deputy for making this important case. The Government is committed to the provision of additional special school places for children with special educational needs. Budget 2026 secured funding for 3,000 new specialist places and the NCSE is currently looking at where these places should be best located for the school year 2026-2027. There is a lot of work going on at the moment in that regard. Over 2,700 new places were provided in 2025-2026, meaning there are now 3,741 special classes nationwide. That means there will be 300 more additional places. There will be 3,000 new specialist places next September. There were 2,700 new special places in this school year, so we are building on work we are doing. We need to build on it and put provision in the types of locations the Deputy is talking about, where it is best placed to meet existing and future demand.

In County Kildare, there are 148 special classes in operation providing capacity for 888 kids. This includes 17 new special classes in this school year, 2025-2026. In addition, 16 new special schools have been established in recent years. Six of these special schools are in County Kildare educating approximately 359 students with the most complex needs. These are supported by the Department and the National Council for Special Education. The NCSE will have a clear picture of local demand for special class places for the school year starting September after it reviews and assesses all the information it has got through the parents' notification process, which closed last October. As the Deputy is aware, an earlier deadline was introduced this year to support forward planning and to better equip the NCSE with local

information as to what students would be leaving school, transitioning to post-primary, or who is seeking specialist placement and maybe entering the education system for the first time. The information is critical to decide where to put provision. The Department and the NCSE continue to work closely with school patron bodies, management bodies and schools to confirm these new special classes for next September.

We have begun sanctioning new special classes this month. Some 236 have been sanctioned to date and many more will be confirmed in the coming weeks. Of these, 11 are in County Kildare. The earlier sanctioning of new classes happening this year provides clarity for parents and allows schools more time for the planning and establishment of new special classes. The vast majority of new special classes being announced are being provided in available school accommodation which is being reconfigured as a special class. Each special class is allocated one teacher and two SNAs, and at post-primary level schools should receive 1.5 teachers posts and two SNAs. Details of those special classes are on the NCSE website. Once special classes are sanctioned by the NCSE, it is envisaged that schools will open admission for them. The NCSE will continue to support all children made known to them after the dates but obviously it works better if the information can be provided. There is still a huge amount of work ongoing and that is just the way it is. It is still earlier than it has been before.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed reply on behalf of Minister of State with responsibility for special education. I put on the record that of the 11 classes he has announced for Kildare, eight of those are in Kildare North. I am asking for Kildare South, the area I represent. There is a huge and growing population in Kildare. On Monday we were told we have to add another 50,000 to that population. That is okay too but we do not have the special classes. Every time I ask a question in here, the reply I get is that there are X number of classes in Kildare. As I have said, all those classes are full.

I also want to talk about the process the Minister of State outlined, where parents apply. As we know, there was a new closing date and that was welcomed by so many parents because a lot of parents applied thinking that would improve their chances. Instead of getting a place they have now gotten a letter saying they are on a list. They have reached out to their local SENO but the SENO has only been able to produce a list of possible schools for the parents to ring themselves or tell them to look in another county. We are all told there is a pilot scheme for a central portal but this is between two and three years old at this stage and has not been rolled out to any other country.

I am dealing with the principals of some primary schools in Kildare South, such as Suncroft National School, which are willing to open another class and have the room to do so. Surely the Department would snap up an offer like this for the children of Kildare South.

I have stated in similar debates that I am aware of children in cars and buses passing each other each morning on crowded motorways, with one going from Kildare to Dublin and the others going from Dublin to Kildare. We have to ask why this madness is happening and where the plan is to solve it. All we want in Kildare South for the people and parents who are stressed is to have the classes and one special school located in Kildare South because there are so many parents crying out for that. That is all they ask of Government. We welcome the three we have got but we only have three of the 11 in Kildare South. The demand is increasing day in, day out and we need to hear some more good news from Government.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I assure people that this process is still under way. Quite frankly, the Department of education does not look at it in terms of Kildare South or Kildare North. It looks at the children who are there. Through the process that will balance out. There will be more in Kildare North, I assume because it is a bigger population. I also assume it will balance out as the process goes on. The idea that this is some sort of political decision is wrong. It is based on the needs of----

Deputy Mark Wall: I never said that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I do not know. The Deputy keeps talking about constituencies and why one constituency is getting more than another. The Department-----

Deputy Mark Wall: I never said that either.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Department has information about children and is going through that information. It has not come to any final decision and there will be quite a few more announcements to be made. It is about the children and their constitutional right to be educated, which we are proud to have in this country. It needs to be implemented and the Department and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, work every day of the week to execute and implement that right. The Department continues to engage with the NCSE. The vast majority of students with special educational needs get supported to attend school in mainstream classes with their peers. We have 15,000 special education teachers in Ireland and 12,500 special needs assistants. It is a huge number of people. For children with more complex needs, special classes or special school places are provided. This is in keeping with our policy on inclusive education, which promotes that children will be supported to receive an education in the most inclusive setting. The NCSE advises that a small number of places remain available in some other counties. That is simply a fact and the NCSE remains available to provide advice and support to all families seeking a placement and will continue to examine where provision is required for the 2026-2027 year so that this can be done right and the right decisions can be made as to where children are, and where those classes are needed. I have no doubt that every single offer from a school to provide a class is taken with the utmost seriousness in the Department. The Department will have to make sure the children are there in those areas. That process is still under way and is by no means concluded.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the next Deputy I welcome the visitors from Dundalk Grammar School, who are here at the behest of Deputy Butterly.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Barry Ward: Before I outline my Topical Issue, from speaking to Deputy Butterly, I am aware that Mr. Brady, one of her former teachers, is with the group from Dundalk Grammar School. He is particularly welcome. It is always a pleasure when our former teachers get a chance to come here. It is lovely to see that group here as well.

I wish to address issues relating to special education needs. I will begin by acknowledging the extraordinary investment made in this area. A total of 268 classes have been announced in recent times, including for Carysfort National School, Blackrock and St. Mary's Boys' National School, Booterstown. Those two schools will benefit on foot of those announcements. I pay tribute to the teachers in those schools because they are the ones who put in place the process that leads to these grants being awarded and that allows the classes to happen. The classes not only benefit the children in the schools, but, perhaps most importantly, they benefit everyone in Ireland in the long run.

One of the most important things about a special education needs, SEN, place is that it gives equal opportunity to children who have difficulties or disadvantages they need to overcome. It puts in place a system that allows them to compete on an equal footing with everyone else in their class. This is important because it is not that these children cannot achieve their educational potential; they can, but we need to do that bit extra to ensure they do.

I specifically acknowledge what has been done in St. Anne's National School, Shankill, to arrange a SEN place. Again, teachers are working hard to get grants to allow these things to happen. I pay particular tribute to Mr. John Fingleton, the principal of the school who is on secondment at the moment, and Ms Paula Kelly, who is acting in his stead while he is away, for the extraordinary and hugely important work they have done.

While acknowledging the work that has been done, I raise this issue is because I have been in touch with two families in the Shankill area whose respective daughter and son have been told, in no uncertain terms, that there will not be a SEN place available for them next September. While I do not in any way seek to denigrate the work to which I refer, I want to know what happens to the children who fall between the cracks. What happens when children are told there is no place for them and that when they go to school next September, they will not be able to avail of the accommodations and assistance they need to achieve their full potential? What are we doing for those children? What are we doing if we are allowing them to fall between the cracks? What is the long-term impact for them and for us?

I am sure this is repeated in other constituencies, districts, towns and villages throughout the country. There must be others. There cannot just be two children in Shankill who are being placed at a disadvantage. Think of all those children as they go up through the school system. I acknowledge that, in general, we have an exceptional educational system. In the context of metrics relating to literacy, numeracy or achievement, schoolchildren here do very well on global indexes. If we repeat this instance in towns all over the country, then it is obvious that there are children who are not getting the opportunity to achieve and compete on an equal footing. That damages us all in the long term because they fall behind over the process of a long school career up to the age of 18 and the leaving certificate. They do not have the same opportunities as their peers in the classroom, and that is simply not fair or reasonable. We need to redouble our efforts to ensure that no children fall between the cracks. We need to ensure there are SEN places for all those who need them.

These families have done everything asked of them. They have obtained the assessments and made the applications, not just to the schools they are in but to other schools in their areas to find out whether places are available. The answer they are getting is that places are not available.

I heard what the Minister said in replies to parliamentary questions to the effect that this is an ongoing process. I welcome and accept that. In these two cases, as I understand it, they have been told definitively that they will not have places in September. Not only is that hugely upsetting for the parents involved, it is also hugely disadvantageous for their children as well. What can we say to them about the SEN places they need for September?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On the individual case, I strongly urge the Deputy to give the details to me or directly to the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan.

The Government is committed to the provision of additional special places for children with special educational needs. There is funding, as I said previously, for 3,000 new specialist places and the NCSE today is currently examining where those are best located for the 2026-27 school year. We now have 3,741 special classes around the country, and we will build on this figure. The determination from the Minister and the NCSE is to place them where kids need them. That work is still ongoing. In County Dublin, we have 705 special classes providing capacity for 4,230 kids. This includes 103 new special classes opened in Dublin in this current school year, of which 81 are at primary level. In addition, 16 new special schools have been established in recent years. There are 40 special schools in Dublin and two of the five special schools opened this year are in Dublin. These schools are supported by the Department and the NCSE. In budget 2026, funding for 3,000 new special educational places has been provided. The NCSE is currently examining where they are needed in order that children can avail of their constitutional right to free primary education.

In order to ensure new special classes can open as quickly as possible, the NCSE prioritises working with medium and larger primary schools that do not already have special classes and that have accommodation available to facilitate new special classes. This approach maximises the use of existing space which can be reconfigured efficiently while also ensuring that new provision continues to be established. It also increases the number of schools with special classes, providing parents with greater choice and reducing the distances that some students are forced to travel to get a school place. However, as in other years, where schools have no accommodation available, particularly at second level, and where there is known demand in an area, the Department will continue to provide additional classroom accommodation to provide necessary places.

The Department and the NCSE continue to work closely with school patron bodies, school management bodies and schools to confirm new special classes for the 2026-27 school year. The NCSE began sanctioning new special classes this month, which is several months ahead of last year. A total of 263 have been sanctioned to date. Many more new special classes will be confirmed in the coming weeks. The earlier sanctioning of new classes is good because it provides better – not perfect but better – clarity than parents previously had. The vast majority of new special classes announced are being provided in available school accommodation that is being reconfigured for a special class.

New special classes are being established in every county, with 58 new special classes confirmed for Dublin so far. Further information on additional new special classes will be confirmed in the coming weeks. It is envisaged that schools will open admissions for those new special classes after the sanctioning.

I stress the NCSE will continue to support all children made known to it. Of course, it is critical that the NCSE has timely access to local knowledge to plan future provision.

Deputy Barry Ward: I endorse everything the Minister of State said regarding the figures and the numbers. I acknowledged at the outset that the recent tranches have delivered 268 classes. All of that is extremely welcome. Ms Paula Kelly of St. Anne's National School in Shankill and Mr. John Fingleton, the permanent principal, have done the forecasting for the school in terms of what is needed. That is why the school has made its applications. Ms Kelly and Mr. Fingleton deserve credit for that. Similarly, Naomi Russo in Rathmhichael Parish National School or the teachers in Scoil Mhuire, Shankill, have a view of what they need in the future. Notwithstanding all of that, we still have a situation where we have children with no SEN class available to them for next September. Honestly, it is not good enough.

What measures is the Department taking to take stock of what is going to be required in the future? How is it going to guarantee that it will meet the demand? How is it going to say to the two families I mentioned earlier that this will not happen and that it will supply a class or a space for them in September? As I said, they have bent over backwards doing what is expected of them. They have got the assessments for their son and daughter, respectively, and made applications to multiple schools, but they are still getting a point-blank “No” from the Department. The Department is not saying that out of malice or anything of that nature. Rather, the reality is that places are not available.

As a political body, we must ensure that the Department does not have to send out such responses. We must ensure that the answer is “Yes” when people provide documentary evidence that their child needs additional support. What forecasting is the Department carrying out, whether it is in respect of Shankill or anywhere else, in order to determine the number of places needed in the next two, three or ten years? What is it doing to ensure that the capacity is there to put in place those classes in the context of both the physical infrastructure and the human resources needed? How can we guarantee other families in Shankill that they will not be in this situation next year or the year after?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We have to guarantee those places for children. The Government is acutely conscious of that. Work is ongoing to ensure that this guarantee, which, in my view, derives from the Constitution, is fulfilled for every child who needs a school place. The Department continues to engage intensively with the NCSE to forward plan for new special provision to get a place for every single child in the setting that best suits their needs. The NCSE is continuing to engage with a large number of schools across Dublin in the context of sanctioning further new special classes for the coming school year. While there was an announcement some weeks ago, there is still a lot of work going on.

4 o'clock

That was the first batch of them and there will be further batches. The Department and the NCSE have been working on this earlier in the year and I welcome what the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, has done in this regard because it gives more certainty. It is not perfect but there is more information available and at an earlier stage than was the case previously. Again, I have no doubt that the Department and the NCSE will be out with further announcements in the next few weeks. In the meantime, if Deputies Wall and Ward wish to

engage directly with the Minister of State in relation to those particular individuals, I am sure he would very much welcome that.

Youth Services

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am raising this issue on behalf of Ballyfermot Youth Service, which I visited recently. It has a fantastic facility in Ballyfermot. I am not sure if the Minister of State has ever been to Ballyfermot. It is an area of Dublin which has faced a lot of difficulties over many decades but there is a great sense of community in it, and that can really be seen in the skate park facility that has been built there. It is absolutely fantastic. Youth service staff lock it up every night and open it up every morning. There are staff members and youth workers there to make sure that young people who are doing what they do best in a skate park, living their best lives, are supported in whatever way they can be. The challenge faced by the youth service is that it is so successful that more and more young people are coming to the service every year. The service has been able to expand into many different areas, including having a fantastic outdoor pursuits programme under which it brings young people down to Wicklow. For anybody who grows up in the city centre, going somewhere outside where they can see the stars all night, where they can see cattle, trees and hedgerows, is very different. To have that facility in the youth service is absolutely amazing.

Ballyfermot Youth Service has received funding from the community safety innovation fund but that funding is coming to an end. The challenge is that it has not been mainstreamed, so it is not being taken into consideration along with the other sources of funding from the Department of Education and Youth. What is at risk now is the employment of two youth workers who were employed under that funding stream, as well as a psychotherapist who supports young people. When people grow up in an area of disadvantage, psychotherapists are like gold dust but they are really needed. There is intergenerational trauma and poverty and young people in areas like Ballyfermot really need to have mental health supports that are often not available. There are queues for everything in this country, particularly when it comes to youth mental health, so to have that service on site is absolutely vital. This is a basic service and one that every youth service should have. A long time ago, I worked as a youth worker and I have to say that youth work changes lives and saves lives. Tonight, I will be attending the community safety forum in Ballyfermot, which will be attended by representatives of Dublin City Council, An Garda Síochána, youth workers and people who live in the community. They are the pillars of our community, the people who hold it all together.

What can be done here? I have written to the Minister about this and the reply I got just told me about all of the funding that the service gets already. The service is delighted with that funding - do not get me wrong - but it is going to lose three workers in this project because the long-term impact of having them now is not being considered. This is the problem when youth services and other services around the country rely on one-off funding. They become reliant on it to provide services. The need is there, so we need to be able to move the service in with the other mainstream funding services. The sum involved is €150,000, which is not a lot of money in the grander scheme of youth work provision. We need to make sure the investment in youth work in Ballyfermot is not lost as a result of losing those youth workers. We need a prevention model that takes the long-term view of what can be done for families in the area. We need to mainstream this and make sure that the service is available all of the time. That

means that the allocation for 2026 needs to be adjusted for this youth service so that it is able to bring this into the mainstream part of the service to become part of the furniture. It is not the icing on the cake but is now part of the bread and butter services provided by Ballyfermot Youth Service.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this matter. The Minister for Education and Youth has asked me to set out the position with regard to youth work provision and the funding supports available. Supporting youth services and youth work is an absolute priority for the Department of Education and Youth. The Department is committed to ensuring that young people in Ballyfermot and everywhere else in the country have access to valuable resources and opportunities that enable them to thrive.

The UBU, Your Place Your Space, scheme is the Department's largest funded youth scheme targeting young people aged between ten and 24 years who are identified as marginalised, vulnerable and at risk of not flourishing. It delivers evidence-informed interventions that promote soft skills, confidence, and progression into education, training or employment, and provides the foundation for local youth organisations to deliver tailored supports that meet the needs of their communities.

A budget of €50.7 million was allocated under the UBU scheme in 2025, representing a 4.5% increase on budget 2024. Over €17 million of that budget was allocated to City of Dublin Education and Training Board, CDETB, in its capacity as a grant administering body of the UBU scheme. In 2025, the Department allocated over €623,000 to Ballyfermot Youth Service under the UBU scheme to sustain core youth services, ensuring consistent support for young people. This represents a 4.5% increase on the previous year. Ballyfermot Youth Service caters to a wide range of young people and provides a diverse set of programmes, including non-formal education programmes, drop-in information sessions, music and arts programmes and access to the Erasmus+ programme. As the Deputy outlined, the work of Ballyfermot Youth Service empowers young people to make positive decisions around their life choices and to meet their needs by providing appropriate social, personal and development programmes.

In addition, the Department allocated approximately €40,000 to Ballyfermot Youth Service in resilience and effectiveness funding. The service also received over €28,000 in 2025 as part of the summer holiday meals pilot programme, which supported the provision of meals to young people during the summer period. Further funding was allocated to Ballyfermot Youth Service under the local youth club grant scheme. Although the 2025 local youth club grant scheme annual reports have not yet been received by the Department, in 2024 Ballyfermot Youth Service received €4,000 in funding under this particular heading.

Under the Estimates for the Department of Education and Youth, the youth affairs unit has been allocated an increase of €8 million in current and capital expenditure. While the high-level allocations are confirmed, a specific timeline for the release of the final detailed breakdown of the youth affairs schemes and programmes is not yet available. Work is continuing within the Department to finalise these allocations and they will be issued as soon as possible. There may well be funding from other Government Departments that Ballyfermot Youth Service could avail of. The Deputy can be assured that the Government values the work that is done by the service. We are eager to continue to fund it as best we can because we know that the work being done there is highly valuable.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am delighted to hear that the Government values the work being done in Ballyfermot. If the Minister of State or the Minister ever gets an opportunity to visit, they should take it because the model there is fantastic. I spoke to the community garda in Ballyfermot who said that Ballyfermot Youth Service safeguards vulnerable young people. The role it plays in diverting young people from crime and anti-social behaviour cannot be overstated. We have heard a lot in the Dáil in the last week about the scourge of scramblers in this city and throughout the country. Places like youth services, where young people can be, can learn pro-social skills and can be involved in things they like, are absolutely transformational, not only for the young people themselves but also for their communities. Receiving a grant of €4,000 under the youth club grant scheme is fantastic, as is receiving €28,000 for the summer hot meals programme. In order to run the summer meals programme, the service needs all of the staff it currently has to deal with the 1,700 children who come through its doors. Losing three staff will mean fewer children will be fed in the summer months. As we know from the last few weeks, the hot school meals have been fantastic for young people. The delivery could be improved, and that is what we all want, but youth services being given that job during the summer is exactly what should happen. However, if the Ballyfermot service is down three staff, fewer young people will be able to engage in that programme.

I feel like I am at an auction. Can we go higher? Can the Department give more money? What can we do to make sure that this €150,000 goes back into this community?

The reality is youth services were cut drastically in austerity - really badly. They are inching their way back up but they are not back to the level they were before those cuts. Funding has certainly not been adjusted for inflation. On that basis, with this youth service asking for this pittance in comparison with the size of the budget we have, I ask the Minister to reconsider it and please visit so he can see how brilliant the work is.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputy Cummins can be assured that the Department, Minister and officials will continue to actively engage with City of Dublin ETB, youth services and young people to ensure that there is appropriate provision for young people in Ballyfermot. The Department's commitment builds on the significant work already undertaken through targeted funding and collaborative initiatives, which have strengthened youth services and expanded opportunities for inclusion and development. The Department is committed in its support for inclusive, needs-based youth work that empowers young people to thrive and contribute positively to their communities. The Department will maintain a proactive approach to ensure services in Ballyfermot and across the country remain responsive, accessible and impactful for all young people. I have no doubt the Minister and Department officials will take very much into account what the Deputy said and the case she has made in making funding allocations.

Electricity Grid

Deputy Albert Dolan: What we have seen in north County Galway in the year since Storm Éowyn has been nothing short of disaster. There have been over 20 power outages in the past year in Dunmore in north County Galway. It is not just Dunmore but surrounding areas like Ballygar, Glenamaddy, Kilkerrin and Clonberne are all affected by regular outages. Outages

are one thing but extended outages are another. I thank the ESB for its engagement on the issue. I had a meeting with ESB representatives on this specific matter earlier and it was a positive and constructive engagement. I got to the bottom of the reasons for a lot of these outages. There were swan strikes, issues with the line and issues with automation on the line, which led to power outages in larger areas, probably unnecessarily. This comes back to our readiness for weather events. Are we storm-ready along the north Galway lines?

Investment is the other issue. Has this line been invested in in the past few years and, if so, what level of investment has gone into it? I received correspondence from the GP practice in Dunmore. For it to be without power for an extended period has a significant negative impact on patients. How can families, mothers with newborn children, the butcher shop and other shops - everywhere in the community - function as a society in the 21st century if they cannot have consistent power? The real issue is reliability and consistency. While the rest of the county drives on and has power, this area is often without power. Many constituents in north Galway have made contact with me. People can deal with a handful of power outages but when it is a recurring issue, it really frustrates people. I would be grateful for any insights the Minister can share as to how this situation will be resolved and what is causing it.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am aware the Deputy met ESB Networks representatives today. I am glad he found that meeting informative and constructive. I will work with him on this specific issue. He articulated very well the impact it has on the communities he mentioned in Dunmore, Glenamaddy and elsewhere in Gaillimh. I will outline a couple of initiatives for the electricity grid and then get to the specifics in my second response.

It is important that we look at this at a national level, although there are local area issues too. The Deputy knows the delivery of infrastructure on the ground is down to our network teams. We support that and the capital investment programmes being rolled out by EirGrid and ESB Networks. We have a role in assisting to fund that and in ensuring the right environment exists to enable the delivery of critical infrastructure. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, the independent regulator, is accountable to the Oireachtas committee. It is responsible for the economic regulation of the electricity system and its system operators. The operators are tasked with building safely, operating and maintaining a fit-for-purpose electricity system.

Our grid is made up of two interlinked networks, namely, the transmission network operated by EirGrid, which allows us to transport electricity around the country, and the distribution network operated by ESB Networks, which brings power to communities, businesses and homes. In December, the CRU published its final determination of what is called price review 6. That is the capital investment programme for our grid in this five-year period. It is badly needed. It follows on from price review 5 which concluded at the end of last year. It is up to €18.9 billion of investment in our grid and 520 capital projects across the country to do the very thing the Deputy sought on behalf of his constituents, namely, improve grid resilience, upgrade lines, replace poles and ensure electricity corridors are fit for purpose so we can bring more power onto our grid, distribute it, bring more renewables onto the grid and ensure there is a safe and secure supply line of electricity. To facilitate that, and with the Deputy's support, we are investing €3.5 billion in equity in EirGrid and in ESB Networks. This is the first time this has been done. We passed the legislation before Christmas for the first €1.5 billion. It has

now gone to ESB Networks and €2 billion will go to EirGrid. That allows them to borrow and leverage from that equity investment to invest in our grid. Those plans are for the next five years. It is about three and a half times the level of investment in the previous five years.

If we needed to be taught anything, Storm Éowyn, even if it was an exceptional weather event, although, let us be honest, exceptional weather events are becoming much more frequent, showed that it is incumbent on us to improve the resilience of the distribution network in our grid. We have already embarked on that programme. I am directly involved with EirGrid and ESB Networks in relation to specific projects. I will come back on what we can do in Galway, the reasons for that and what we can do for the Deputy's constituents.

Deputy Albert Dolan: At my meeting with ESB Networks today, it became very clear that the company has both immediate and medium-term plans. It is important to highlight that vegetation and trees are one of the biggest causes of recurring outages in north Galway, where is a significant amount of forestry. When people planted those trees 30 years ago, there was no legislation suggesting they had to be 30 m distant from either side of the wire. We have to be honest about that. One issue the ESB faces, which it raised with me and was quite surprised about, is that a lot of forestry is owned by pension funds and investments funds, which are, ultimately, faceless organisations. It can be difficult for the ESB to make contact with them to gain access to the lands to maintain the tree line. I know legislation is being worked on but the ESB needs to have the power to go in and maintain the lines. It is the State's infrastructure and the ESB's infrastructure. The ESB has to have the right go in and maintain it. That is vital.

In terms of immediate plans to protect areas like Dunmore, Glenamaddy and Mountbellew, I have heard stories of people who were two, three or four days without power. Every time that happens to a low-income family, they cannot afford to put food on the table because they are a few days without power. They have to go out for three or four meals a day and they have three kids. That is a really tough situation. When we get this right and when price review 6 investment comes through into areas like this, the people we will be helping are elderly people and people on lower incomes by giving them energy security.

I welcome the grant announcements earlier this week and the work the Minister is doing because it is important in terms of giving people control of their own energy in their homes.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As I said, the meeting was important and gives the Deputy a clear view of what is happening. Work is under way in Tuam. Recent outages in the wider Tuam area and surrounding areas have primarily been caused by lightning events, timber vegetation, as the Deputy mentioned, wildlife and equipment failure on the network. There is a major programme of pole replacement. We have work to do on forestry corridors and timber cutting. Storm Éowyn brought down years of timber that would have been harvested.

We are bringing forward legislation to clarify the rights the ESB already has because they go back to the 1929 electricity Act in terms of access to land. That will be done this year. My Department is working with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is incumbent on those who own forests, be they privately owned, State forests or owned by institutions, that they are managed properly. That is why the licensing arrangements for new forestry need to reflect that. It cannot always be down to the State to manage forestry on private land. We have to put the responsibility on landowners.

The Deputy mentioned the upgrading of the existing Ballygar 38 kV substation. That will have a very positive effect on the area. In my constituency, in north county Dublin, in particular in Donabate, there have been regular outages which has been rectified by the installation of a new substation. Many more of these will be delivered in the coming period. The winter resilience plan is under way. After Storm Éowyn, it was the first time that the grid had been fully surveyed nationwide across the 26 Counties and, indeed, across the 32 Counties because we operate a single electricity market. That was done mainly through drones, which I will discuss shortly.

I assure the Deputy that I will work directly with him on the specific issues in his constituency. He has articulated very well the impact they have had on residents. Things are now starting to improve. A major investment programme over the next five-year term will make a difference.

Regulation of Drones Bill 2025: Second Stage

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I appreciate the Minister coming to the House to discuss the Bill. I am pleased to speak to my first Private Members' Bill. I note the Government has opted to delay the Bill using a timed amendment for 12 months. I am disappointed in that approach. I believe it would be better to allow the Bill to be debated in more in depth on Committee Stage. I will be the first to say that improvements can be made to the Bill, but Committee Stage would have been a good time to hear input from the Government, academics, experts and communities, including residents who have strong views on the use of technology. Nevertheless, I appreciate the Minister being here and look forward to hearing his contribution.

I want to be clear that in respect of drones and unmanned aircraft in general, there is clear potential for this use of technology to serve us well. This is an evolution in how we transport certain goods and it is something for which we should be ready. I am bringing forward the Bill because, to date, the State has approached the issue of drones from the wrong angle. The regulation has been based on an air traffic control consideration. The public interest, including, for example, the interests of people in Dublin 15 whose air spaces now host frequent drone deliveries, has not come into the regulatory structure to date.

The air traffic control approach might have worked ten years ago, but we are dealing with an entirely different set of circumstances today. That is simply what my Bill is trying to do. It recognises that every new technology and evolution must be regulated in the public interest. Regulation to guarantee safety is critical, but that is the basic minimum we should expect. We have to ensure that the operation of drones works for everyone in our communities.

The potential of drones and unmanned aerial systems is significant. They are an innovation that Ireland can and should harness. A major change is happening in our society right now. Hundreds of journeys that up to this point took place on our roads are now being transferred into the skies over our homes and gardens. Many members of the public are asking how many drones flying over their house or gardens is too many. Up to this point, the State has refused to engage in a meaningful way in that particular conversation.

It is hard to see a direct historical comparison for the evolution we are seeing. The advent of the car is probably the closest thing in terms of autonomously operated vehicles that have the potential to proliferate in an environment. Today, nobody would question the very strict and extensive regulation that we have around car use when it comes to safety, noise, the environment, air quality and ensuring adequate space for walkers, cyclists and public transport. No one has a problem with the extensive regulation around cars and they are still able to fulfil their potential to move us and our stuff around. In the same way, regulation around drones will allow the use of drones to continue.

What I propose today should not be seen as some sort of hindrance to innovation, as some might argue. Balanced with the public good, the right of people to the reasonable quiet enjoyment of their homes, gardens and air space immediately above them, we can get the regulation of this new technology right.

What are people telling me about the impact of drones? Right now, it is clear that Dublin 15 and Dublin west are being viewed as a kind of test case and large-scale experiment. It is the first urban area in Ireland to experience large-scale drone delivery. People living in Dublin 15 have raised with me and other Deputies and councillors a wide range of issues relating to airborne delivery drones, including concerns about the noise from the machines, their safety, the planning status of drone bases, privacy issues - as we know drones are fitted with cameras - and their impact on wildlife. Many people have told me that the frequency with which drones are seen and heard above their homes has increased as the service becomes more popular.

It cannot simply be the case that people are told, "That is it, they are here now, so get over it". Local communities have a right to democratically shape and influence how their environment is used, how that changes and how those changes impact on them. That is the cornerstone of our democratic planning process. However, there are questions about the extent to which the operation of drones is even covered by the planning process in the first place. That is one of the central issues I am trying to address in the Bill. For example, if a private company, such as a business that operates some sort of noisy manufacturing process to make goods, proposed to open new facility, there would be tight regulation in terms of the level of noise and when noise would be allowed. The community would be able to involve itself in that decision through our normal planning process. It is unclear as to whether such opportunities exist in respect of drones. Again, that is central to why I am bringing forward the Bill.

I also want to address the environmental concerns that have been raised with me. For example, BirdWatch Ireland has said that drones can have detrimental effects on nesting birds. We are now seeing drones operate at scale in Dublin 15. There are hundreds of journeys every week. I will be very honest. It needs to be proved to me and others that this level of traffic in our skies is not having a negative impact on wildlife. Again, that is why we need have a discussion and a policy on this on a national level where the wider environmental impacts can be teased out.

It is not just me raising this. Earlier this week, the attorney general of the state of California joined with 17 other attorneys general from other US states to take a case against the Trump administration because it has significantly increased the volume of delivery drones operating in various states in the United States and reduced the level of regulation.

In that case, they are citing environmental concerns as central to the issues they are raising.

I do not know the answer to this but I need it to be looked at, and it is not being looked at right now. If we are going to see this happen in my home area and in other areas across Dublin and across the country, I believe these questions need to be answered.

There are other views on drones. I have been contacted by residents in my area who are supportive and find the service useful, and I absolutely recognise that. That is why getting a balance here is important, but a balance is not achieved by allowing one company or a couple of companies to do what they want and everyone else just has to react to that. That is why the State needs to step in in a legislative manner.

I will briefly set out some of the key provisions of my Bill for the record of the House. The Bill provides for the further regulation of private and commercial use of unmanned aircraft systems, commonly referred to as drones. The Bill creates new and mandatory planning regulatory considerations under the Planning and Development Act 2024 with respect to the private and commercial operation of drones, creating an additional consideration for the issuance of the national planning statement and by requiring local authorities to prepare objectives for the management of drone operations.

Section 1 just sets out the key interpretation provisions.

Section 2 amends section 2 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 to insert a definition of the term "unmanned aircraft systems" into that Act.

Section 3 amends section 26 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 to create a new consideration upon the Minister in the issuance of a national planning statement. That is the consistent regulation of the private and commercial operation of drone systems in the public interest. The term "consistent" is important to ensure that we have a uniform national application of the same considerations where multiple planning authorities are dealing with this. We should not have a different rule for drones in Dublin City Council from that in Cork County Council. That sort of situation will not work. This section is important because it sets out in national law a requirement for a national policy that will be established by the Government and that will be put into the national planning statement. In doing so, it allows that national debate to take place about what the public interest we want is in terms of drone usage. That has to happen. It has not happened yet. This has been done on an *ad hoc* basis, and that is causing real frustration and confusion. Requiring in national law that a policy on a national basis is taken is really important.

Section 4 creates a new obligation upon a planning authority to prepare objectives, as part of the making of a development plan, for the effective management of the private and commercial operation of unmanned aircraft systems in the planning authority area. The new section provides that objectives must ensure that the private and commercial use of drones is prioritised in favour of operations in the public interest and provides a list of such operations. Again, this is probably at the heart of the Bill. If we understand that the use of the airspace immediately above our neighbourhoods and our residential areas is limited, we have to create a hierarchy in terms of prioritising uses that are in the public interest: medical, emergency, architectural, wildlife, conservation and industrial safety uses. Drones can have very important health and safety uses. Those uses should be prioritised. A prioritisation can also ensure that private commercial operations can take place as long as that is happening in a controlled manner. The new section also provides that a planning authority may designate a use not listed

as being in the public interest and the new section requires a planning authority to ensure that the objectives created for the above purposes must be consistent with that national policy statement.

Section 5 is a part that I believe addresses a very significant gap in our law at the moment, that is, that members of the public have no legal recourse right now when it comes to the noise impacts of the operation of drones. That is something that is raised with me time and time again. Section 5 amends section 108 of the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 to allow any person, a local authority or the EPA to make a complaint to the District Court with respect to the emission of noise from certain private or commercially operated drones. This again recognises that the presence of drones in airspace above and around residential areas can have an impact on environmental noise and it provides the public with a remedy about that noise in the same way they have remedies at present about noises coming from other areas.

Section 6 gives the Short Title of the Bill.

It is pretty much Dublin West represented here today. It is somewhat unique in that this is an issue for Dublin West right now. Sometimes when I talk about drones, people are like, "What are you talking about?", but this is a real issue. I said it before, but a massive change has taken place in Dublin West. Our skies are now buzzing with drones and we need to have a national conversation about this. It cannot be just the TDs and the councillors in Dublin 15 going on about it. I have not mentioned the one company involved because for me this is not just about one company but, rather, about national policy. It is one company now; it could well be two, four or many companies very soon delivering different things. This will happen in more of Dublin and in more of our country, and we need to have a regulatory structure. I was critical of the framework policy that came out in August, mainly because I felt it set out a few nice things but did not put in place timelines to address this, and timelines are crucial. That is why I moved forward with this legislation, because we need to start a concrete debate on how we regulate this technology in the public interest. Residents in Dublin 15, irrespective of their views, whether they find the delivery drones useful or not, want to see that clarity and regulation in the public interest.

I look forward to the Minister's response and the contributions from colleagues.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

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

Dáil Éireann resolves that the Regulation of Drones Bill 2025 be read a second time on this day 12 months, to allow for the actions set out in the National Policy Framework for Unmanned Aircraft Systems and agreed by Government to be progressed and to allow for a full examination of the legal and policy implications of the Bill's provisions to be undertaken.

I thank Deputy O'Gorman for tabling this Bill. It is a very useful part of the debate. It is pretty much Fingal representatives in this room, with the exception of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, but it is an issue. We are one of the first countries to have brought forward a policy framework on this. I will use the opportunity here to inform the House of the progress we are making there and where I see this going further. I acknowledge Deputy O'Gorman's work on this Bill and on this issue and, particularly, his engagement on this issue. This is not the first

time he has raised it, and other colleagues who are here in the House, including Deputy Currie, have raised this issue on a number of occasions directly with me as well. In particular, it is very important that the concerns and views of local residents and communities impacted by the increase of drone usage are represented here, and it is right and proper that they are articulated here in the Dáil.

The Bill deals with planning and noise considerations arising from commercial operators. It seeks to provide for the regulation of commercial and private drones in the public interest. It proposes a series of amendments to the Planning and Development Act 2024 and the EPA Act 1992. To summarise, it creates new obligations on the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and on planning authorities to have regard to the objective of the regulation of drones in the public interest of private and commercial drones in a national planning statement, as Deputy O'Gorman has outlined, and in development plans, respectively. It also would see noise from a drone addressed as a nuisance, allowing complaints to the District Court by any individual or local authority or the EPA.

The Government understands the background to these proposals, and I fully recognise the Deputy's intentions in the preparation of this Bill. The use of drones for commercial and other purposes has grown substantially over the past decade. The growth has been facilitated by the publication of a suite of EU aviation safety regulations that promote the safe and secure development of the drone sector throughout Europe. Drones are now accessible to a broad range of users and their use is becoming commonplace. As the technology has evolved, drone use has presented significant opportunities in both commercial and public domains. Drones present exciting opportunities for businesses and the public sector to boost productivity, improve service provision and improve safety.

In the Topical Issue I answered just prior to this, I addressed the mapping of our electricity network across the island, which was undertaken predominantly by drones.

Already in Ireland, drones are being rolled out across services, including in emergency response, inspections of dangerous buildings and sites by local authorities, in environmental monitoring and in goods delivery. However, the rapid pace of drone innovation and commercialisation has also created significant challenges and generated real and genuine concerns among communities, particularly around issues of noise, intrusion and privacy. While there is a comprehensive regulatory framework in place for drone operations, from an aviation safety perspective, the rapid expansion of drone operations has resulted in gaps and uncertainty in certain areas.

While the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, which is the civil aviation regulator, oversees the implementation of the EU drone safety regulations and standards to ensure safe drone operations, there is a recognised demand for clarity and guidance on the roles and responsibilities of public bodies more generally in relation to, in particular, high-frequency drone operations. Recognising that the impact of a growing drone sector needed further consideration, the Government included this in the programme for Government and a commitment to finalising and publishing a policy framework to guide high-level strategic planning and development of the drone sector in Ireland. The framework aims to support growth and innovation, while ensuring safe and secure operations and managing environmental and other concerns.

In 2025, we saw significant progress made in delivering this commitment and the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems was agreed by the Government and published by me in August 2025. The foundation of the policy framework is cross-government engagement. As has been outlined by the proposer of the Bill, a lot of this sits within the planning authorities but in planning legislation as well. It is important to say our strategy was also informed by public and industry consultation. The policy framework sets out a number of cross-government actions that aim to address the concerns in relation to increasing drone usage and operations in balance with the realisation of the economic and societal benefits from the emerging drone sector. This will include ensuring that appropriate authorities have the required regulatory powers and that they have mechanisms in place to ensure the views of all stakeholders, very importantly, including residents, are taken into account. It also seeks to identify and address any policy, regulatory or legislative gaps that may have arisen due to the increased expansion of drone operations. This will be done in a holistic and balanced way. The policy framework contains actions to assist the planning community and local authorities to manage the integration of UAS technology into communities and how to take local concerns on board, and they must be taken on board. One such action is the IAA supporting local authorities and planners to acquire the necessary aviation knowledge about UAS technology, regulation and oversight. The IAA has already begun to provide this support.

In dealing with noise from drones, there are a number of mitigating measures, technological and operational, that can be undertaken to minimise the noise nuisance from drones. I have experienced this myself in the Dublin West area and I certainly take the point. The point Deputy O'Gorman has made in relation to noise is a very valid one. Mitigating measures also include spatial planning through airspace management by the designation of UAS geographical zones and through input into the planning system where planning permissions may be required. The policy framework provides for the development of transparent processes and procedures for the designation of UAS geographical zones, including for the purpose of protecting privacy and, very importantly, dealing with environmental concerns. The structures and actions set out in the policy framework should be allowed to be established and implemented, so that any regulatory gaps can be identified and addressed. I see the Deputy's legislation as forming part of that. The implementation of the policy framework, while being led by my Department, will very much rely on those cross-government structures and the continuation of engagement and support from sister Departments, agencies, the drone sector and, very importantly, the public.

Implementation is under way. The national UAS policy framework monitoring group, which will support and monitor the progress of the implementation of the policy framework and the delivery of actions, has been established. The first meeting of the monitoring group is scheduled to happen on 18 February 2026, just next month. As Minister for Transport, it is my responsibility to lead the overall response and ensure co-ordination across Government. As the Deputy's Bill illustrates, many of the issues that require consideration in respect of drone operations are within the responsibility of other Government Departments, and that is why that co-ordination within the framework is critical.

The provisions of the Bill do affect legislation that is under the remit of the Department of housing, as well as my other Department, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment. Following engagement at official level with both those Departments, initial examination indicates that proposed legislative amendments would present implementation difficulties. The Department of housing, for example, is of the opinion that the proposed

additional consideration for the issuance of national planning statements and the requirement for local authorities to prepare objectives for the management of UAS operations in their development plans may be overly prescriptive. The purpose of development plans is to provide an integrated overall planning approach. It is a priority for Government to ensure the implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 and, indeed, the revised national planning framework. This work is central to tackling issues such as housing supply and infrastructure development. Any changes to plan-making requirements at this point, before implementation of the UAS policy framework is further progressed, could serve to undermine the clarity sought by local authorities and could delay this important work. I know that is not the Deputy's intention. The House can be reassured drone bases do constitute "development" and existing planning legislation already applies to them. We have seen a specific example of that working through in Fingal County Council. We need to allow some time for further policy development and implementation.

The proposed amendment of the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 to treat noise from a drone as a nuisance may be problematic. I do not want to be overly negative about it. There is complexity within the process but I think that needs to be looked at within the framework itself. In many jurisdictions, including Ireland, existing environmental protection legislation specifically exempts aircraft noise from local authority regulation. A drone at the moment comes within the definition of "aircraft". Nuisance law often relies on individual complaints and legal action, which is an inefficient and impractical way to manage the potentially high frequency of transient drone flyovers expected from widespread commercial operations. I think people would agree with that, so we need a more holistic approach. A proactive system is needed instead of a reactive, individual complaints-based system. Complaints and feedback are important. I am not saying they are not but when we look to implementing the framework itself, we have to have a better way to be able to manage it. The District Court could obviously see a significant increase in noise complaints about drones, and I do not think the courts should necessarily be the place to be clogged up with these complaints. We do have a distance to go in respect of fully addressing drone noise before a role for the courts can be considered.

Deputy O'Gorman's Bill is very important and the engagement from Members in government and across the House is helpful. I am committed to moving forward and working with the monitoring group and the national UAS policy framework. I believe this will be the key driver for bringing forward regulations, and further regulations, which will be needed. Like the Deputy, I do not intend to try to restrict the technological growth in this sector, and there are great technological advancements. There are certainly advantages to drone usage as well, with reduced traffic where we have some deliveries and other things that would otherwise be carried by vehicles, such as cars, vans and trucks, but, and I do say "but", there are genuine concerns from communities that have been impacted who never believed their homes would be overflown by this type of aircraft. There is, in my view, a noise nuisance. We do want to support the growth and development of the sector in an appropriate, sustainable and balanced way.

In my response to the Deputy, I already outlined, as he did, to be fair to him, when he introduced his Bill, some of the benefits of drones being introduced. We can see this when we look at survey work and work in relation to wildlife protection, derelict buildings and the mapping, assessment and monitoring of our grid across the country. What we were able to do

in a matter of weeks would have previously taken months and years. There is also a particular issue here as well, though. I have met professional drone operators but I have not met the company that has been referenced here although not mentioned.

We also need to look at a framework for the licensing of professional drone operators because there are many unlicensed drone operators operating on a commercial basis. That means there is not a level playing pitch for those who are properly registered with the regulator and pay the fees associated with that. The transport committee and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage are going to have significant input into this. I firmly believe the framework is the way forward.

I have proposed a timed amendment because, while the Deputy can hold the Government's feet to the fire on this, we need time to further the implementation and to establish the framework committee. We have done that. The committee is in place and will meet on 18 February. We can work through these measures together. Within that 12-month period, the Deputy will be able to assess the progress being made. That is why I did not want to reject this Bill outright. It is a very useful contribution to the debate and to bringing about a balanced approach to the drone sector along with our communities. I thank the Deputy for proposing this Bill. I also thank colleagues for raising matters in this area prior to the debate. It is an important matter. That is why I ensured I was here myself to take the debate on the Bill. I hope that demonstrates the importance the Government and I put on this issue.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank Deputy O'Gorman for publishing this Bill and for the work that has gone into it. I have consistently argued for a balanced approach on this matter. I want to see innovation and the deployment of drone technology but I also want to see effective regulation and enforcement of that regulation. There are politicians in the area who just want an end to the drones. That is fine but I am not in that camp. I recognise the benefits and potential benefits of drone technology but I believe there must be practical and implementable safeguards for communities. I still believe that can be achieved.

Communities, planning authorities and businesses should be engaged with to build an effective and workable regulatory framework. Enterprises, especially those with ambitious plans for global expansion, should be up for that. I welcome the publication of the national policy framework and want to see it prioritised and progressed. Making regulations and enforcing them is a matter for the Government. We have seen what happens when innovations, for example, e-scooters, come in without a robust regulatory framework and enforcement measures. The Government must do more. Innovating and operating responsibly in compliance with the law is a matter for business. I welcome the fact that a business operating in the community is continuing to innovate by investing in new propeller systems to address noise impacts. However, at the same time, it must also ensure it is fully compliant with all aspects of regulation and the law, which includes the local planning code.

I support innovation and the development of a new regulatory framework. All businesses must comply with those rules in their operations. I note the Bill requires local authorities to prepare objectives for the management of drones. We all know that national policy and local policy need to be more joined up. I am not sure how this Bill addresses that gap. With regard to noise, I agree there needs to be a complaints mechanism but in order for that to happen, there needs to be agreement on appropriate noise levels for residential areas.

Fingal County Council granted a temporary three-year trial at Blanchardstown shopping centre for a drone delivery service. The planning officer noted that the applicant stated that this was a trial period to examine whether the proposal would be acceptable. In reference to noise, the chief executive's order states that the temporary nature of the proposal will enable potential impacts to be monitored more fully. The fact that the trial is coming to an end should focus the minds of those who want to show that noise can be addressed with mechanisms to measure it. It should also focus the minds of those who want to ensure a balance can be found.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the Bill from Deputy O'Gorman and the opportunity to again speak on this issue. It is a really important issue for Dublin West but it will also have an impact right across the country. It is interesting that it comes this week in light of the scrambler issue. I have raised the issue of Garda use of drones. Gardaí have been trained in the use of drones. I have been asking about this since 2021. An Garda Síochána has drones and gardaí have been trained in their use since 2023. However, they are not being used because regulations from An Garda Síochána are still awaited. There were legislative issues but these were cleared up by the Minister, who said there were none. It has gone back to An Garda Síochána and now it seems regulations are needed. There is just confusion about this across the board.

Businesses do not seem to be confused about what they think they can do, however. This is a real example of the Government not getting its act together with regard to new technologies. We are going to see this on a monthly basis with the development of AI technology. We are going to be scrambling to try to deal with things literally every week. I live just down the road from Millennium Park, where the drone take-off zone is located. To be honest, when some of this was developed three years ago, I was intrigued. I walked the dog there pretty much every day - I still walk in that park - to see what was going in there. We saw how it was being developed and we saw drones. I was genuinely interested to see how this would work and the impact it would have on the community. I knew it was a trial period and wanted to see how it would develop. It would be untrue to say there is either unanimous opposition to this or unanimous support for it. There are very mixed feelings in Dublin 15 about its operation and impact. We were waiting to see what the impact would be in a couple of years.

It was clear that noise was going to be the big impact. I simply do not accept the drone operators' views on the impact of noise as drones hover over your house. Anybody who has seen or experienced it will tell you that the noise of the drone as it drops off the package is unacceptable. To be fair, when you are walking your dog and the drone is at its peak height, you can hear it but it is not massively significant. It can be a little bit annoying but the impact is not as big as it is when a delivery is being made to your door or the door of someone else nearby.

What most people are really concerned about and cannot get their heads around is the scaling of this. What is it going to look like? At the moment, there are five drones operating from Millenium Park. They can do a delivery every couple of minutes so, in an hour, five drones could make a couple of hundred deliveries. What will it look like when there are hundreds or thousands of drones in the sky? There is no doubt that other companies will look at this and say it is a very cheap and effective way to deliver products. It will not just be coffee and food. It will be small packages and deliveries. We see the development of these technologies in the war in Ukraine. We see the size of some of the drones and what they are used for. Some of these packages will probably be huge.

There are hundreds of van drivers, delivery drivers and Deliveroo workers. All of those companies that currently deliver are going to see this as an opportunity to get rid of human beings delivering packages. They will see it as a way to operate much more effectively. I would invite anyone who does not know what we are talking about to come see.

5 o'clock

I was out canvassing a couple of months ago and we had comrades down from Belfast. They were looking at the drones above them asking what was going on. We told them it was coffee being delivered or someone getting their lunch or breakfast delivered. They were absolutely flabbergasted and could not believe it. Not everybody is aware of this but it is coming into every community and it is something that will be a huge issue for people.

Another issue is privacy. For people who do not understand, when the drone goes over a person's property to make a delivery, a camera switches on. It looks down at where the square is and when it sees that nobody is there, it drops the package. I understand the company states this is not recorded but we know from previous history, and from our own WhatsApp groups and social media, that people take screenshots and videos from various computers. I have a real worry. People should have the right to be in their own garden and expect the privacy of their own garden. This should be expected. At the moment, I do not think people really trust that this is happening with the drone deliveries. Certainly, as it goes into the future, it will be a deep concern for people.

I welcome the debate and the moves to regulate this. I have read the framework and looked at the framework. Unfortunately, there are no timelines on it. We do not know. The people living with it in the here and now, the people who are experiencing this in Dublin 15, cannot wait for another year, year and a half or two years. We know the company tried to open another two zones and ran into planning issues. We know it is pressing forward. I do not think we can wait, and certainly given the advancement of the technology, we certainly cannot wait for the Government.

It is really disappointing to see this happen to another Bill brought by the Opposition. The Government constantly asks us to bring forward our solutions. Every time something happens in here, we are told to bring forward our solutions and that the Government will listen to us. Deputy O'Gorman has brought forward a solution and what has the Government done? It has kicked it down the road for another 12 months. It is really disappointing.

The impact will not be in the Minister of State's constituency. It was previously but then it moved to our constituency. It will be in every constituency. We need to move fast to ensure people's right to their gardens and their privacy, their right not to have the noise these drones cause and their right not to have the nuisance they cause. I am not opposed to drone technology. It is another piece of technology that is here. It would be foolish to say we can ban this type of technology or get rid of it but we have to be able to regulate it. We have to make sure the concerns of our communities are not undermined by the desire to ensure businesses such as these drone delivery companies take precedence over our communities.

It is disappointing that the Bill is being kicked down the road. We are going to be coming back to this time and again. As time goes on, the Chamber will get fuller of people who have concerns about drone deliveries in our communities. I ask that the Government act soon.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have been the experimental lab in Dublin 15 for this technology. I thank the TDs from outside Dublin West and I will be absolutely frank. It was only when it was spoken about that this technology would be going into other areas that immediately people kicked up about it. We have been suffering this for a year and a half. It was introduced with no opposition. It was welcomed in by the Minister, Deputy Chambers, who is a TD for the area. Some people raised it at local council level, trying to get media attention on it. They put it on the council agenda. Deputy Gannon raised it in here as a Topical Issue one day and I raised it. Then Dundrum happened and 200 people showed up to a meeting there. Fair play to Dundrum; the people said to hang on a second and that they were not having it. The company had to have some level of consultation there. This was a turning point last summer.

I will give my position on where we should go with this. The Bill is quite minimal. I support the provisions in it but it is far from dealing with the issue. We have had no debate on the impact of this very intrusive technology, which is completely and utterly wrong. It was allowed to happen by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in particular. There was no consent sought from the communities that had to endure it. A couple of comments have been made about the noise. It has been said that it is like the death of peace and quiet but this is not the case for everyone. I do not hear the noise as much as other residents would but it is not about taking a poll to see what the temperature is and going with that. If it impacts on a minority of people, that is enough and it should not be allowed to do this.

There is one company, Manna, that has upped the ante and taken on Deliveroo. What about when other companies, such as Amazon or Google, start to use this? We will have an M50 in the sky. The only other country where this has happened and there has been a community response is Australia. The community in Bonython protested and saw off the drones. To make it clear, because it is a bit jaded to say some TDs do not like technology and we are Luddites, we do not just welcome technology for the sake of technology. It is about how technology impacts on people. A number of people in academia are very opposed to this.

There was a public meeting that was attended by other TDs here. Everyone knows how hard it is to get people to a meeting and there were 250 people in the Crowne Plaza hotel, on a cold enough night, who were very concerned about the impact this was having. We all agree that drones can be used amazingly for medical issues, topography, geography and emergency situations such as delivering defibrillators. This is what they should primarily be used for. I am in favour of regulation where we outline the uses of drones. I do not think they should be used for commercial or fast-food delivery in highly built-up residential areas. I do not see that as being essential, not compared to the scale of the impact it is having on people.

It is not about just opposing technology. The effect of persistent noise on people is very damaging to their health. We know this from all the studies. Dr. Ciara Bracken-Roche from Maynooth University spoke at the meeting. I also had a very good meeting with Professor Julia Powles, who is a professor of law and technology in Australia. She has written a lot about this and the impact that Google drones had there. There is a lot of questioning of this technology. Primarily, it is communities getting organised for themselves that has made the difference.

I do not have time to go into it but Manna has been operating disgracefully in Dublin West. It has three bases and two of them did not have any planning permission. The rules do not

seem to apply. In fact, it is quoted in the newspapers as saying the planning regulations had not caught up with it. The rules do not apply to it. Due to community opposition, this has been pushed back on two of the sites and the other will come up for renewal shortly. I imagine there will be opposition to it. The reason is that we all agree it is great having technology, but not when it means constant noise.

There is a privacy issue also and this has been proved. A French company came over and did excellent work whereby it got one and showed how it worked. A photograph is taken of the site where the package will be dropped - the package is a burger or, mainly, a coffee - but the drone is taking pictures of other back gardens as well. This was shown in the work. Someone out in their back garden should not have a company with a drone taking a photograph of them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): We would prefer if Deputy Coppinger did not mention any company that is not here and cannot defend itself.

Others have not done it, so it would be great if Deputy Coppinger could also not mention company names because they are not here to defend themselves.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Does the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach mean companies like Manna Drones? That is the company that is operating this system.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): I know, but other Deputies have refrained from doing that so it would be very helpful. It is because the company is not here to defend itself. I ask that the Deputy refrain from doing that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In fairness, the company has testified at Oireachtas committees. It is perfectly out there. A representative of that company is quoted in today's paper so it is a bit silly to say we cannot talk about the company.

In any case, it is important to show people how the company has operated without permission. I am assuming the Minister of State does not think it is okay to just breach planning permission and that people should go through the planning process. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, said there were gaps. There are not gaps; it is just a Wild West situation where these people can do what they want to do.

We all agree with drone technology for certain uses, but the impact it is having is clear in the example from a resident who wrote to me.

Beyond the serious privacy and safety concerns, persistent drone noise is disruptive and it undermines the quiet, residential character of their neighbourhood. It adds yet another layer of stress to daily life and reflects a broader problem - the growing incursion of tech companies into our communities and lives without any democratic oversight or meaningful accountability. It is about profit. Drone delivery of fast food and consumer goods is not a public necessity.

That sums it up.

Feedback was sought by a resident in Castleknock through a Whatsapp group. The replies were as follows:

I worry about the environmental impact ... The frequency of flights has noticeably increased ... There was a close encounter with a bird last week ... The presence of drones makes outdoor meals and dining uncomfortable ... Why weren't we properly consulted? ... The noise echoes in our cul-de-sac ... My autistic child finds the noise overwhelming ... My elderly parents find it overwhelming ... The drones passed directly over a family picnic ... This is not what I signed up for. There are so many messages about the feeling of being under surveillance and of having absolutely no say.

Drone Action in Dublin 15 is a group of residents who got together and produced a newsletter. As TDs, we are always giving out newsletters and the feedback we get is generally very minimal. Drone Action sent out 5,000 newsletters and got back 300 responses. They asked for people who are interested in a no-fly zone over their house because representatives of the company operating this currently told the transport committee it would respect that. So 300 replied to this, which that is a huge rate of feedback. These are not just moaning Minnies, as this company tries to portray them as. It is very disparaging towards local residents and it is saying this is politically orchestrated, when the person running it is also very political themselves and regularly shares posts about Trump, military stuff and so on.

The key point is that the communities themselves must be the final arbiters of this. Community assent has to be sought for this technology. We need a law whereby commercial drone delivery is not allowed in very built-up residential areas or for commercial fast food. There are occasions where food might need to be delivered, which is no problem in outlying or isolated areas, but it is too disruptive. Given there are one or two companies doing it now, what it will be like when there are more companies doing it?

There are also employment issues. They are putting people like delivery drivers and riders out of jobs. The economic impact is always talked about from the drone base. They have to be gotten to the drone base. The products are often driven to the drone base. It is not environmentally clean either.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank Deputy O'Gorman for bringing forward this really important Bill. In relation to naming companies in this Chamber, I was given out to about that recently. These companies are not individuals. They are not private individuals. They are big enough and bold enough to defend themselves, so I do not know whether we need to look at our rules on that. We should, in this House, be able to call out companies who are already-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They appeared in committee as well.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: As Deputy Coppinger said, they are before the committees, they are in the papers, and they are big and bold enough to defend themselves.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): I am giving Deputies the knowledge that we are not supposed to name people in the Chamber. It is for the protection of the Deputies under Dáil privilege.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I was not having a go at the Chair.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): I know. I am the messenger today.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am the first speaker this evening from outside of Dublin 15 and it has been noted that there are a couple of us here from outside the area. This is coming for us all. That is why I am here, and I am sure it is why Deputy Gibney is here. We have seen plans for Dundrum and elsewhere around Dublin. There should be a certain urgency to getting this right so that we nip the issues in the bud that we have seen arise in Dublin 15 and west Dublin and that we get it right quickly.

As Deputy Gorman and others have set out earlier, we do need a balanced approach to drones. We have to be open to new technology and new developments and all of that, but we cannot be blind to the potential harms they bring including, as Deputy Coppinger noted, the potential for displacement of jobs.

I will focus on the communities that have had their real concerns around drone usage just ignored for years. We urgently need to see proper regulation and this Bill would be a vital step forward. The last two years have seen parts of Blanchardstown and the surrounding areas become the Wild West of Dublin with planning permission sidestepped as a drone company claimed it was running a trial period. It is just not right that residents in Dublin 15 have been treated as guinea pigs while drone bases were established without planning permission and the Government essentially turning a blind eye. Just yesterday it was reported that the number of drone deliveries had surpassed 250,000 with more than 60,000 flights in Dublin 15 since commencing operations there two years ago. The measures in the Bill are basic, common-sense regulations that should have been in place before these machines ever took flight. Amending the Planning and Development Act 2024 through this legislation will hopefully force the Government to finally layout a national drone policy with similar statements in each council's local development plans. It would also allow for noise pollution complaints to be taken to the District Court on drones just as is the case for other sources of noise pollution.

This is not about stifling innovation or limiting people's choice or convenience; it is about taking the sensible steps we need to make sure guardrails and safeguards are put in place to make sure that new technology like this is serving the best interests of our local communities. Of course, there may be benefits to the use of drones like this, but it needs to be accompanied by strong and effective regulation at both local and national levels.

I pay tribute to the work of my Labour Party colleagues, Councillors John Walsh and Mary McCamley, who have recognised the great public concern this issue is causing in their communities as have the Deputies speaking here today. Over 1,500 people signed a community petition they launched calling for regulation of drones in Dublin 15. There is huge concern out there in the community. There are genuine concerns around noise, the unlimited frequency of flights, privacy and the impact on the environment, and this all has to be addressed.

Ministers seem to have so far ignored public concerns while quietly facilitating the expansion of drone delivery services. Local councils need stronger support based on legislation to require and enforce rules on noise, privacy and environmental impact. There is no national

or local regulation around the establishment of drone bases, frequency of flights or flight paths and that is just not acceptable. It effectively means that regulation of noise cannot hope to succeed and there is not regulation of the number or route of flights during the day. What is more, is that three of the four drone bases set up in Dublin 15 were established without any planning permission. The drone company effectively treated planning as an optional extra. Local communities were denied any input in the establishment of drone operations in their area.

We have also seen serious concerns among local communities over the Government's national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems, which was finally launched in August 2025 after a number of years of stalling. The framework is strongly focused on promoting commercial opportunity for drones and pays only lip service to genuine public concerns. The Government's strategy, which envisages a series of working groups to look at key issues further has barely left the drawing board and is lagging woefully behind the rapid expansion of drone companies. It includes hardly any specifics at all on how to address excessive noise from drones, how to manage unrestricted frequency of flights by drone companies and how to monitor the environmental impact of drones, especially in relation to wildlife.

Deputy Donnelly referred to colleagues of his coming to Dublin and hearing the noise of the drones. I have been with friends in Castleknock. You do not appreciate until you are there how intrusive and noisy these machines are, how disruptive they will be to family life if you have kids in the garden and how exposed you feel when they fly over you. It is a serious disruption so we cannot go on treating residents across a swathe of our capital city as subjects of an experiment.

No further expansion of drone delivery services should be permitted before a safe, sustainable drone traffic management system is fully established and independent research is conducted to assess the impacts of drones in terms of noise, privacy and the environment. Meaningful action to prevent noise, address concerns about privacy and ensure independent monitoring of environmental impacts must come before the development of the drone delivery sector, rather than haphazard mitigation after the horse has bolted.

The Government has ignored concerns in Dublin 15 for far too long. Soon, expansion of services across other areas, towns and cities will mean it can no longer be ignored. We desperately need effective regulation and rules about drones at both national and local level. This Bill is a welcome first step. I share the disappointment of colleagues that the Bill is being kicked down the road for a year. I hope the Government will, in the intervening period, come up with its own proposals. We would look forward to engaging constructively with the Minister of State on them, if they could be brought through urgently.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome this incredibly timely Bill from Deputy O'Gorman on the regulation of drones because it is long overdue. I share others' concerns that the Government does not agree that it is timely, given that it is kicking it down the road.

I want to address the kind of message I get back when I push for greater regulation across the tech space more broadly. I am thinking of online safety and the online platforms, which need to experience greater regulation, similarly in AI, particularly at EU level. Here we have a specific technology being operated within a regulatory vacuum. We in the Social Democrats support business. We support small business, innovation and enterprise. What we do not

support is this vacuum of regulation. We want to see evidence-based decision-making and not a business-focused mindset from the Government when it comes to regulation. We have to make regulation work for business, but we do not take into consideration in a balanced way the concerns of the community.

So many issues are brought into focus when we talk about drones. They affect our privacy, noise, environment, the economic picture, labour, health and so much more. We also have to see it well sequenced. We are in a vacuum now because of the lack of action from the Government. That results in a community that is essentially a Petri dish, being tested and trialled without the safety of regulation.

I will take one example from the list I have provided: environment. We were kicking this about in the office when we were researching my contribution. The immediate thought might be that, from an environmental point of view, fewer cars on the road doing deliveries can be a benefit of the drone. Then you start to dig into it and find 70% of deliveries are done by bike, which are active transport, do not have carbon emissions and are carbon-neutral; therefore, you are not getting much gain from it.

We do not know what the effect is on biodiversity. We just heard examples from Deputy Coppinger's constituents, including a near-collision with a bird. More than that, noise and air pollution come from this and what that will mean for nature and our planet is something we cannot play around with. We certainly cannot leave it as a guinea pig to be tested on.

Ba chóir go mbeadh muid in ann guth a bheith againn maidir leis an méid atá ag tarlú díreach os ár gcionn. Tá muid ag iarraidh a bheith níos fearr ó thaobh pleanála de inár bpobail agus tá fadhb ollmhór nuair nach féidir é sin a dhéanamh mar gheall ar easpa reachtaíochta.

The lack of regulation has left communities powerless to oppose the use of commercial drone delivery. In my constituency, local residents have contacted me in huge numbers. Other contributors have spoken of balance and said people are expressing different views but in my office the response to drones is overwhelmingly negative. Local residents are absolutely opposed to the development of a commercial drone delivery depot in Dundrum. What has deeply frustrated them in their efforts is that there is a vacuum of regulation and no avenues for them to raise their valid concerns and objections to drones flying over their homes and communities. Everyone should be able to raise issues they experience with noise and privacy concerns in a clear and effective way, and there needs to be a mechanism which allows those issues to be heard and taken seriously by the appropriate authorities. It is clear from the experiences of people who live in other parts of Dublin - specifically Dublin 15, where these drones have already been in operation for a number of years - that they do not have a voice within this regulatory process.

The national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems posits the implementation of drones as something economically beneficial but fails to recognise the slippery slope that this technology represents and the issues that are already affecting communities and which will continue to do so unless we see real regulation. I agree with Deputies who have said this will simply grow. As Deputy Donnelly said, for as long as regulation does not exist, this Chamber will get more and more full every month as Members discuss this issue.

I want to include in my contribution some of the messages I received from my constituents. These are the people and community groups who will deal directly with the impact of

unregulated drone delivery every day of their lives. They are left powerless by the current gaps in legislation, which this Bill seeks to address. A message from the Roebuck Residents' Association states:

We wish to make the point that the Irish Aviation Authority, the IAA, does not sufficiently take the impact of this type of activity on residential amenity into account when awarding such licences and certificates. This certification was set up to accommodate more time-limited commercial drone activity such as drone use for mapping and surveying. There are many more parameters that need to be taken into account when considering drone activity for frequent deliveries over dense residential areas. The parameters that need to be taken into account include:

- noise nuisance
- safety issues
- privacy concerns

We are firmly of the belief that part of the oversight of such activity should fall under the remit of the local authority. The IAA is wholly unsuited to determine the effect of such activity on the residential amenity of affected homes in a particular location. We are aware that there is no reference to drones in the DLR County Development Plan, the Dundrum LAP, or indeed in any of the National or Regional Planning Frameworks and Strategies.

Then I have correspondence from three individual local residents. The first states:

While the technology may seem innovative, it raises serious concerns for our community. Drones could negatively impact noise levels, privacy, and safety, particularly in residential areas. They also risk disrupting wildlife and the character of our village. I believe there are better ways to support local businesses and improve services without compromising the quality of life in Dundrum.

The second states:

Drone activity threatens the peaceful environment needed by local families, children, and those seeking quiet.

The final one states:

Repeated, noisy drones operating in residential areas to deliver a cup of coffee is absolutely NOT a good idea. Trivial uses of drones by a few creates an unacceptable environment for the many.

I am not sure why the Minister of State finds that funny.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Sorry, I was agreeing with the Deputy. It was the idea of ordering a coffee on a drone.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I appreciate the confirmation. As we have heard, that is genuinely what people are using them for. That is my point.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is what most of it is.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Yes, I agree with Deputy Coppinger. If this can save lives by delivering medical equipment-----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is unimaginable where I live, so-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Can I continue, please? If this can save lives, make a meaningful contribution to the public interest or help in the delivery of health services or essential public services, I am all for it. I am all for creating a regulatory framework that will facilitate that but what we do not have is exactly that. A regulatory framework is absent; therefore, trivial and mass-scale commercial drone usage is what we will experience. This Bill is a positive step - again, I commend Deputy O'Gorman on bringing it forward at this time - towards protecting our communities and plugging the gaps in regulation which have been left unaddressed for far too long. I welcome this Bill and the debate today.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I had no idea people ordered coffee. I am in a lot of sympathy with the Deputies but that only shows there are many people out there very happy to order coffee by drone. That is part of the public view as well.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Just so the Minister of State know, most of it is coffee.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Genuinely.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is because of the quickness.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: They are people who want coffee. They are voting with their orders as well.

The Minister sends his apologies that he could not attend the latter half of the debate. I am happy to be here and respond to this important debate on behalf of the Government. The Deputies have made good contributions. Deputy O'Gorman has done incredible work bringing this to the House. We acknowledge the work that he has done.

From a safety point of view, there is an effective EU-wide regulatory framework that is being implemented and overseen in the State by the Irish Aviation Authority, the civil aviation regulator, to ensure safe drone operations but the Government acknowledges, as the Minister already said, that the rapid expansion of drone use and drone operation has given rise to concerns and there is a need for clarity in areas outside of safety and in respect of the roles and responsibility of public bodies in drone operation. The concerns of communities impacted by increased drone operations are being heard. The Department of Transport will continue to engage with local representatives and communities on the issues raised.

As previously outlined, the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems sets out the Government's policy in relation to the UAS sector to provide a balance between supporting growth and innovation in the drone sector, which, I have to say, I support because we have to be moving forward with technology where there are appropriate uses, but also to

ensure safe and secure operations which are planned to minimise environmental and privacy impacts. The policy framework proposes a number of structures and actions that aim to address the concerns that have been raised in relation to the increasing usage of drones and operations in balance with the realisation of the economic and societal benefits that can happen from emerging and new technologies. The best approach to achieving this balance in as comprehensive and cohesive a manner as possible is through the implementation of the policy framework. As the drone innovation evolves new challenges may arise. The policy framework is a living document that will continue to evolve to keep pace with the evolution of the sector internationally and be responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities.

The Government's position is that the issues raised are best addressed in a holistic approach through the implementation of the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems. This, we believe, is best facilitated through our proposed timed amendment. This will provide the space to examine any gaps in regulation and guidance and provide a more informed perspective on this Bill and any related regulatory issues. This debate and the contributions from Deputies today have been very valuable. The Government has heard the message from all contributors and will take this into the policy implementation process.

We thank Deputy O’Gorman for the work he has done in this area that and, indeed, Deputies on all sides for their work to give voice and representation rightly to their communities on this issue.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Minister of State has been thrown into the deep end here on drones but I thank him for his contribution. I appreciate the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, being here earlier on and making his own contribution, and hearing mine and those of some of the Deputies. I am grateful to Deputies, from Dublin West and other areas, for addressing this matter.

I am not happy with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien's response and I will outline my concerns about it. The first of these is, just like with the framework policy on drones, the lack of timelines, bar one. It is still not clear to me, when I read Deputy O'Brien's speech, when any of this is going to happen. Delivery drones started at scale in March-April 2024. We are 18 months down the line and I still do not see when we will see substantive measures taken. There is one date in the speech provided, that is, in February 2026 the national UAS policy framework monitoring group will meet for the first time. The framework policy was published in August of last year and, six months later, the group overseeing the national framework policy is going to have its first meeting. There is no sense of urgency. There is no sense of even momentum with a six-month delay between when a national framework is created and work starts. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, describes it as "a living document" in his speech. It does not strike me there is much life in it right now. People need to get a move on.

The Minister's speech is clear about what he and his Department is not going to do, but I am unclear about what is going to happen. The Minister's speech speaks about the Government being unable to put this into the planning legislation even though there is a planning Bill coming through the House soon that at least part of my proposal could be slotted into. We are told that it might delay the delivery of housing and infrastructure. The written speech says that; in fairness, the Minister took that back. However, it is very frustrating for it to say there is the

appropriate legislative vehicle to deal with the planning issue here coming through the House and the Department has taken the call not to put that in it.

On the issue of noise pollution, there is a long session here about why we should not be going to the District Court. I agree that the District Court is not the right place to be dealing with any noise pollution issue but that is the law as it is right now. I see no reason drone noise cannot be treated in the same way as any other sort of nuisance noise. As for the Minister's line, "We do have a distance to go in respect of fully addressing drone noise before a role for the courts can be considered", "a distance to go" has to be, for me, the euphemism of the day.

In terms of what is happening and has happened in the last six months since the framework strategy was published, one such action is the Irish Aviation Authority supporting local authorities and planners to acquire the necessary aviation knowledge about UAS technology, regulation and oversight. The IAA, has already begun to provide this support. Therefore, the IAA is providing some advice to local authorities. That is great, but setting the bar low. It is giving a little bit of advice. I would not be boasting about that.

On noise, the focus here is on mitigation. The focus seems to be on us making the devices or drones quieter. New propellers have been put on some of the drones in my area. That is great, but that is not about empowering people who have real concerns and are experiencing noise pollution in their areas with a route or mechanism to address this.

Deputy Donnelly and others spoke about the issue of scaling. Right now, there is one company using delivery drones in one part of the city but, in my view, the trend or direction of travel here is that other companies, maybe not food delivery, maybe for entirely different reasons and maybe for valid reasons, will start to look at and invest in drone technology and the State is stepping back and saying it will let this happen and see what happens. I know no other area of new technology where we are so blasé about rolling back the State and letting things happen. I say this because action 16 of the national policy framework states, "The Irish Aviation Authority will promote processes that allow for the allocation of airspace for experimental and developing UAS operations to be established." This idea of the experiment, this idea of suck it and see, is built into the Government's national policy and I do not know of other areas where new technology is let loose like that. What has happened in Dublin 15 is not something that occurred in a regulatory vacuum. The Government has chosen regulatory vacuum. The Government has chosen to allow experimentation take place.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, spoke about us having 12 months for the timed amendment and how the Opposition can hold the Government's feet to the fire. The Minister can bet that I will be doing that because I do not see anything in the response from him that gives me clarity about how we are to address the fundamental issue here. The fundamental issue here is we have not had a proper debate about how much of what happens on the roads should happen in the sky. The Minister of State made a point about people ordering and getting coffee. I agree that happens, but let us have a discussion about to the extent to which we want that as a society.

Do we want to give a delivery drone dropping a coffee cup the same level of priority in our air as a delivery drone delivering medicine or delivering something to an elderly person, or doing a survey for a piece of infrastructure? That is a conversation, a debate and a discussion we need to have. We need to make decisions on that, and they are not being made at the moment.

There is not even a clear pathway in the framework policy about how that big-picture discussion takes place. There are a lot of little bits; for example, the IAA will advise local authorities, which is fantastic. However, that big question of what we want in our skies, and how much of it we want in our skies, is being entirely avoided here. That is a real problem. We will be back here because there will be drones in other communities, and that divided opinion - I recognise it is a divided opinion - will be taking place in other communities around Dublin and around the country.

I had a few really poor-quality drone puns that I was going to throw into the speech, but I will not subject the House to that at this stage. I appreciate the Deputies' contributions. This is a matter we will be coming back to. It is serious. It is just touching one community now, but it will become a bigger issue. I recommend that the Government takes a more proactive approach to how it addresses this.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): The division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.42 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 4 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.42 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 4 February 2026.