



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 4 Feabhra 2026

Wednesday, 4 February 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last Friday, the community in Finglas came together for Grace Lynch's funeral, to mourn her, to remember her, to stand by her devastated family, and to say clearly that the days of their neighbourhood being terrorised are over. It is hard to describe the convulsion of grief in Finglas that day - a family utterly bereft and the sobs of young people.

Finglas is just one of the communities that have been terrified, harassed and intimidated for years now by those using scramblers for antisocial behaviour and criminal activity. Finglas is just one of the neighbourhoods that have, literally, been terrorised by people on scramblers threatening residents and feeling they could do what they want when they want. Stories of gardaí being taunted by hoods on scramblers are all too common. It happens because they know that the gardaí have their hands tied behind their backs, powerless to stop and apprehend scramblers even as they pose such a threat and danger to people.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government have failed to act, failed to get a grip on what was a very evident and worsening problem for our communities across Dublin and beyond. It is unforgivable that it took the death of Grace Lynch for the Government to sign the regulation to give the Garda the power to get scramblers off our streets and out of our communities. In fact, it sat there gathering dust for more than two years, even as communities continued to endure the scourge of scramblers. The Tánaiste himself has admitted that he cannot give a satisfactory explanation as to why this happened. I wonder whether the Taoiseach can.

I really hope the new regulation brought to Cabinet today will be some small comfort to Grace's heartbroken parents and to her community. I sincerely hope that today genuinely marks the start of the change that is so desperately required. I hope this is the start of the Government getting its act together and really taking the fight to those who are using scramblers to make life a misery for so many. However, law and regulations on their own will mean nothing if they are not backed up by enforcement. It is all well and good having laws and regulations and

making promises, but if gardaí on the ground do not have the tools they need to get the job, then we are at nothing. Speaking this morning, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, was very unclear as to how all of this would be enforced. He was unable to answer or clarify even the most basic of matters. He was unable to articulate what difference these laws and regulations will make.

We need this clarity now from the Taoiseach today on the floor of the Dáil.

Will he specifically outline what additional resources, equipment and specialist training the Garda will be given to enforce the law and get these scramblers off our streets? Will he specifically answer what new powers the Garda will be given to successfully pursue and apprehend scramblers? What new power will the Garda have to seize and destroy scramblers? When will the urgently needed code of practice be in place to allow the Garda to use drones in the fight against scramblers? The public and communities need answers. A law without enforcement and resources will not work. We know the real test of these laws will not be found in announcements and promises but in the difference they make on our streets, in our communities and in the lives of those who have been plagued by scramblers.

The Taoiseach: Without question, the criminal and antisocial behaviour of many in certain communities in our capital city and certain other locations is absolutely unacceptable. Every single resource will be made available to An Garda Síochána to deal with those who are breaking the law on an ongoing basis. Gardaí have the powers and do not have their hands tied behind their backs, actually. They have significant powers. The Garda Commissioner has confirmed with the Minister for justice his intention to take intensive action in specific locations where there have been repeated breaches of the law and dangerous use of scramblers.

There is already a body of legislation in respect of scramblers and other vehicles. The majority of scramblers are illegal in terms of their use on public roads, particularly those that are not taxed and do not have a licence. The Garda has powers to dispose of a seized vehicle six weeks after the date of detention. However, the 2023 Act was introduced because a number of Deputies, particularly Deputies McAuliffe and Lahart on the Government side, asked us to bring in further measures. As a result of the 2023 Act, and the sections that were commenced in that Act, it became an offence to drive dangerously in any location, not just in public places, which had been the case prior to the 2023 Act. The Garda has the power as a result of the 2023 Act to seize vehicles being driven dangerously. The third aspect is that the Minister for Transport can make regulations to restrict certain vehicles or classes of vehicles in particular locations. The Minister has today brought a memorandum to Government and received sanction to bring in regulations that would give effect to that measure, irrespective of whether the vehicles are licensed or not, or whatever status they have. They will simply be banned. That will significantly enhance the Garda capacity to take these out of operation both in public parks and on public roads.

Fundamentally, these off-the-road scramblers are no longer just illegal for use in public places. It is illegal to drive them anywhere dangerously, even on private land. The Garda has full powers to seize a scrambler being driven dangerously. The Minister is going to give additional powers to not just seize and confiscate but also to destroy seized scramblers, to reduce the number of seized vehicles that could potentially end up back on our roads. This is a singular, focused approach to the commencement of these regulations. It is important that

we give every power possible to the Garda to deal with this scourge that is particularly manifest in certain locations and communities by certain individuals. The Government will spare no effort in that. In addition, the Government will bring in regulations in respect of e-scooters, e-bicycles and so on to ensure there is greater protection. These will be preliminary measures in respect of e-scooters, potentially looking at further regulations thereafter.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Deputy Ellis first raised this in 2011 or 2012.

It was a problem then and, in the years that have followed, it has gotten worse and worse. I do not know whether the Taoiseach has any exposure to scramblers and this happening in his community and neighbourhood, but I do. It happens in Cabra and in the inner city, too. It is terrifying.

It is now too late for Grace Lynch, aged 16. Her life is gone. Unless there is enforcement - aggressive, rigorous enforcement - we run the serious risk of losing more lives, and that simply cannot happen. I asked the Taoiseach to specify what additional resources and capacity to pursue these offenders, such as any training or the use of drones, will be put in place. These are some of the essential elements. I ask the Taoiseach to please reassure people that he understands that enforcement has not been adequate and that he needs to fix that.

The Taoiseach: It is too late for Grace Lynch. It is absolutely shocking and extremely traumatic for the family and friends of Grace that what happened last week happened in the manner that it happened. What is essential is that every possible dimension of law is brought into being to prevent this insofar as we can in terms of human behaviour. The reckless use of scramblers by people in public parks and on public roads is something we simply have to stamp out.

The significant additional power is not the power to seize, which already exists, but to destroy scramblers that are seized.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: How are they going to-----

The Taoiseach: There is also a very clear message, irrespective of whether a person has a licence. We must remember that the bulk of scramblers that are driven in this particular manner are illegal because they do not have any regulatory governance or licences. The drivers do not bother taking out tax. Those scramblers are illegal.

With regard to hot pursuit, that is a Garda policy issue but the Commissioner is clear that there will be very intensive action on that front.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is not good enough.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On 4 October 2023, more than two years ago, I stood here and raised the disgraceful revelations that the HSE was sitting on a massive portfolio of vacant properties. Over 200 HSE-owned buildings and sites lay idle while the housing crisis tightened its grip on families. Back then, nearly 4,000 children were homeless and average rents for new tenancies stood at €1,590. Today, two years on, more than 5,000 children are without a home and rents

for new tenancies have shot up to more than €1,700, and that is before the Government's so-called rent reforms come in. In the two years since the HSE was caught sitting on sites that could be turned into homes, Ireland's housing crisis has become ever more dire.

What did we learn just two days ago? In Monday's edition of the *Irish Independent*, it was reported the HSE still owns nearly 200 vacant properties, more than half of which are officially marked as surplus to requirement. These buildings were supposed to be converted into homes for people and families under the Government's last failed housing plan. Why has so little happened? The housing crisis is at emergency levels. Thousands of children are doing their homework in emergency accommodation. Our streets today are peppered with drenched sleeping bags, abandoned by people sleeping rough who have had to flee from the rain. People on good wages, like the man my office has been helping recently, are giving up hope of ever buying a home. He tells me he saw the one-bedroom apartment he viewed for sale reappear months later on *daft.ie* for rent, having been snapped up by institutional investors. That is a pattern we are seeing.

Yet, the HSE continues to give a bureaucratic shrug in the face of this national crisis. This cavalier approach, and it is not just the HSE, reflects something deeper, a Government dodging delivery. I looked back at the Taoiseach's response to me in 2023 on this question. In his reply, he told me to "get on to Dublin City Council". What a dismissive attitude to the issue of State-owned properties gathering dust while people are sleeping in doorways.

In my constituency, Dublin Bay South, just a few hundred metres from here, the Baggot Street hospital still lies empty, an eyesore reminding us of the continued vacancy and dereliction crisis ravaging Irish towns and cities. Over the past four years, I have called for it to be used as accommodation for refugees or healthcare workers or, indeed, for it to be converted into homes by the Land Development Agency, LDA.

However, the LDA tells me it has not even been offered the site by the HSE and now the HSE is putting a portion of it on the private market, with apparently no consideration of the public good.

It is not just the HSE, as I say. Across the State, public bodies are sitting on properties that could be transformed into safe and secure accommodation and homes. There is a human cost to vacancy. When will the Taoiseach confront the epidemic of vacancy and dereliction, particularly in State-owned properties? When will he lead a co-ordinated national effort to deliver the homes people need?

The Taoiseach: This is an important issue. I would just make the point that significant progress is being made on the housing front. There were 36,000 completions in 2025. That is a significant figure when we compare it with 2019 and 2020, when we were building just about 20,000 per annum. Then Covid-19 intervened for a good two years after that. The measures we have taken in the last 12 months are having an impact, and the feedback on the market side, in terms of potentially increased private sector investment, is positive.

On the rent reform measures, and the Housing Commission-recommended reform of rent pressure zones, RPZs, it is interesting that the Labour Party shares the opposition of some large developers and so on who do not want this legislation to come through. I read *The Irish Times* last week. Certain leading developers and landlords felt that this measure was encroaching on

their property. It shows the level of polemic, spin and shallow commentary in the absence of any substantive and decent debate on these issues.

Deputy Ged Nash: We disagree.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is it the Opposition's fault that the Government cannot build houses?

The Taoiseach: On one level, developers are saying that the RPZ reform is an encroachment on their constitutional rights, while the Labour Party is saying that reform is trampling on rights.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is.

The Taoiseach: It is not.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: That is not what we have said.

The Taoiseach: It is, and the Labour Party has been saying it consistently.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is going to put rents up.

The Taoiseach: Let us come to the HSE. It has about 190 vacant properties. We have been effective with the LDA in getting a lot of State property for significant housing developments already, and that work continues. The HSE has about 4,300 buildings at the moment in about 2,500 locations across the country. It is one of the largest property owners in the State and it has a very large portfolio. Of course, the properties range from small health centres in rural locations to very large acute hospitals. Some of them are pre-18th century buildings and others are modern, purpose-built facilities. That said, we have made it clear to the HSE that any properties that are surplus to requirement must be sold and the LDA has first call in respect of those.

About 168 of the properties are in disposal. They are surplus to the HSE's requirements and are in various stages of disposal. If a property is to be disposed of, a disposal strategy for the property is determined by the HSE on a case-by-case basis. Properties are disposed of on the open market and most have been disposed of via public auction. Twenty-two of the properties are vacant and under review. Those currently under review are being considered for retention and reuse by healthcare services.

The Deputy is complaining about the building on Baggot Street. It is being sold.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is being sold on the private market. That is the point.

The Taoiseach: What is wrong with that?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I know they say attack is the best form of defence, so it is no surprise the Taoiseach chose to go on the attack and to mount an attack on the Labour Party, because he knows that Government policy on vacancy and dereliction is indefensible. He simply has no defence. It has patently failed. It is not just about publicly owned buildings. The Taoiseach and the Government have effectively conceded that the current system, including the derelict sites levy and the derelict sites register, is ineffective. I am looking at the Government's own up-to-date website, which promises to introduce a new derelict property tax. That is an initiative we supported. What are we seeing on the Government's own website? "A preliminary national register of derelict properties will be published in 2027, with the tax starting soon after." That is all the Government can commit to on its own website. The Government has flagged this many times as the key measure it is introducing to tackle vacancy and dereliction.

I think the Taoiseach agrees this is a scourge across the community. It is particularly a scourge where the buildings and sites are publicly owned - that is indefensible - but on the Government's own measures, there is no sense of urgency to bringing them in.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When will we see new derelict property tax? Will the Taoiseach tell us that?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The most effective thing we did in terms of dereliction was the grants for restoring properties and houses that are derelict or vacant. Thousands of young families have benefited from those very generous grants we introduced and there was no great enthusiasm from the Deputy's side in respect of those grants. It does not even reference them.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We supported them.

The Taoiseach: That is positive. It is a proactive way of dealing with dereliction in rural and urban Ireland. The Derelict Sites Act is still in place. Limerick has been the best example. It demonstrated what can be done in terms of the derelict sites levy. Other local authorities were not as good as Limerick. The Government is saying we are putting Revenue in charge-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When?

The Taoiseach: -----but Revenue has to do a proper detailed mapping exercise with local authorities to get all of the properties properly identified and documented so that the levy can be applied correctly in an appropriate regulatory way.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There is no timeline.

The Taoiseach: Already, people are conscious of this.

An Ceann Comhairle: A Thaoiseach, time is up. I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

The Taoiseach: People are very conscious that Revenue is coming onto the scene. We are getting action already in advance of it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: In November 2012, Elon Musk wrote to Jeffrey Epstein: "What day/night will be the wildest party on your island?" Epstein was already at that point a convicted child abuser and Musk was looking for an invitation to the island where horrific child abuse by ultra-rich paedophiles took place. Musk has turned Twitter into a machine for the mass production of child sexual abuse imagery and image-based sexual abuse of women. We know the horrific, traumatising impact this abuse has on victims. It is why image-based sexual abuse, including through the use of deepfakes, was made criminal offence six years ago but the Government's approach to big tech appears to be see no evil, hear no evil.

When Deputy Boyd Barrett asked the Taoiseach if those in X responsible for enabling Grok to produce sexual abuse imagery would be arrested, he scoffed at the idea. He suggested that to do so would be like *1984*. Yesterday, French prosecutors raided the offices of X in Paris as part of their investigation into its creation of child sexual abuse images and image-based sexual abuse of women. They have also summoned Elon Musk personally for questioning. Is it *1984* in Paris?

Last week, I questioned the Minister of State with responsibility for artificial intelligence about her engagement with X since this scandal broke. After she met X representatives, she put out a press release repeating X's claim that "Grok, as integrated on the X platform, has been disabled from removing or reducing clothing on individuals worldwide." I asked the Minister of State whether she had checked whether that was true. It turned out she had not checked and it was not true. X lied to the Minister of State and to the Government. Now, they are giving two fingers to this Parliament by refusing to attend a committee meeting today.

Right now, anyone in Ireland can still create sexual abuse imagery through X using a VPN. The Minister of State also told me that the Garda is criminally investigating private individuals who use Grok to create sexual abuse imagery but she said she did not know if any criminal investigations were under way into X itself. Is there a criminal investigation into X or is the State simply kicking the can to the European Commission instead of launching criminal investigations against the app it could under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 and the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2000? Both of those laws are crystal clear about the criminal liability of directors and officers of corporate bodies that distribute sexual abuse imagery. The Government is also failing to act to protect people from the torrent of toxic content coming at them from social media algorithms, including the promotion of misogyny, self-harm and eating disorders.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The only thing they care about is maximising profits by selling more ads online. That is why they have these toxic algorithms. Opinion polls show 68% of people want these toxic algorithms turned off.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Taoiseach support People Before Profit's Bill to do so?

The Taoiseach: I take offence at the Deputy's very dishonest portrayal of the Government's position in respect of this and his deliberate conflation of a different series of events to give the impression that the Government somehow condones the behaviour of X, Grok or Elon Musk. That is reprehensible political behaviour by him but it is par for the course all the time to distort the actual truth.

The French prosecutors are prosecuting. Our prosecutors are pursuing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: X?

The Taoiseach: That is the point. The Garda has indicated there are up to 200 complaints and lines of inquiry. We do not interfere with prosecutors in this jurisdiction. We do not interfere with the Garda.

The Deputy has used another phrase, "kicking the can to" Europe. It is another dishonest betrayal of the reality. He knows the legislative framework as well as anybody else. The European Commission is responsible for the very large platforms, including X. It has opened an investigation in collaboration with, and working with, national regulators, in this context Coimisiún na Meán. When we met last week, Coimisiún na Meán gave us a comprehensive presentation on the work it has been doing on this and the degree to which it was co-operating and working with the European Commission, which I believe is essential. This is not about kicking the can.

We all have an obligation in here to lay out for the public the legal frameworks by which we can go after large platforms. There is no toleration of child abuse materials on any platform. There is no attempt by any Government to protect such proliferation of abuse material. After all, it was this House and the then Government in 1998 that brought in very far-seeing legislation in respect of the issue of the generation and dissemination of child abuse material. The 2020 Act is also very comprehensive in its coverage. The Attorney General is quite positive in terms of the depth and breadth of the 2020 Act regarding what it can deal with and what the prosecuting authorities can pursue in respect of that Act pursuant to the sharing of adult material generated on any platform, particularly and specifically the X platform here.

The Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport is meeting his French counterparts today in respect of this issue and will also introduce an age verification tool. Significant work is being done on that, initially on a pilot basis, to inform how we would do that on a nationwide basis. All potential measures are under review in terms of how we deal with social media-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Taoiseach. I call Deputy Murphy.

The Taoiseach: -----because we understand fully the very negative impact social media can have, and is having, on many children the length and breadth of the country.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Let me be clear: I am not saying the Government condones the production of sexual abuse material. I am saying it does not want to do anything about it because it does not want to annoy or harm its relationship with big tech and big tech investment here is more important to the Government than standing up to these people. That is what I am saying.

I want to ask a precise question. The State can, under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 and the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, take criminal action against X. We do not have to wait for the European Commission; we can take criminal action, as is happening in France.

Are the Garda investigations into X as opposed to people who may have used Grok to produce those images? Those people may well be liable for prosecution and should be prosecuted, which is fine. Is the investigation into X itself, which is the machinery that is being used to produce these images? We should return to a point where we turn off the toxic algorithms. Spain is taking action on the toxic algorithms. Will the Government agree with our Bill to turn them off by default for everybody and turn them off for all children?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy just made a reprehensible assertion at the commencement of his last comment. The idea that we would give priority to not standing up to big tech over the generation and sharing of child abuse material is an absolutely shocking and reprehensible assertion. How dare you?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Who the hell do you think you are? Do you have some moral superiority over everybody else? You do not have moral superiority over anybody else in this House. Everybody in this House is at one in terms of going after anybody who would generate and disseminate child abuse material, and the legislation is there to do that. The State does not get involved in a Garda investigation.

Politicians do not bring in the Garda and ask, "What are you doing in that investigation?" The Garda, under the law, is pursuing all aspects of the 1998 legislation where it is breached and the 2020 legislation, but particularly the 1998 legislation, to make sure there is absolutely full accountability before the law and before our courts in respect of this issue. I am thinking both domestically, in terms of our national laws, and-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about the algorithms?

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of the European Commission. It is important that the European Commission, on behalf of everybody within Europe, pursues X and the platform in respect of this.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Last week I spoke in this House about Jessica Sheedy, who died in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, and the case of Dr. Lal, who admitted to 13 counts of misconduct. That has been dealt with on its own. I see the Minister for justice is here as well. I also need his help on this. Today I want to talk to the Taoiseach and the Minister about

the hospital management, who used non-disclosure agreements, NDAs, to silence people and to avoid accountability. I am aware of people in UHL who came forward with concerns well prior to Jessica Sheedy's operation. Those people were victimised, their careers would not excel and they might have to look for references. They were used to sign non-disclosure agreements. This is wrong.

Under the Maternity Protection, Employment Equality and Preservation of Certain Records Act 2024, NDAs are void when victimisation occurs, including harassment, sexual harassment or discrimination in relation to employment. Are those people who came forward in whatever hospital around this country protected under the 2024 Act where patients and the public were put at risk and NDAs were used to withhold information from inquiries and investigations? Why were the public and patients put at risk under people who were not competent to do their job? I have full respect for people in all parts of the medical profession who are competent at doing their job. Sometimes a mistake happens, but you learn from the mistake; you do not cover it up. Eight years it took to get the information out, for somebody to admit guilt - eight years. How many more non-disclosure agreements have been signed to prevent the course of justice? That is what I want to know. Will these people be fully protected under this Act if they come forward now? I do not want to hear, like others say, "You are 100% protected". We have heard that before where whistleblowers were involved. This time I need to know from the Government and I need an official response.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Without question, there should be no cover-up in respect of any medical misadventure, any error or any wrongdoing. Hospitals and the medical community should own up immediately. That is good practice. It is unacceptable that for decades many families have had to go long periods endeavouring to find out the full truth in respect of what happened to their loved ones.

The Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023, landmark patient safety legislation, was commenced in September 2024. It provides a legislative framework for a number of important patient safety issues, including the mandatory open disclosure of a list of specified serious patient safety incidents that must be disclosed to the patient and to their family. It was passed by both Houses and signed by the President in May 2023. It is to ensure that families and patients have access to comprehensive and timely information.

It is achieved by an open disclosure mechanism in the Act. It contributes to embedding a culture whereby clinicians in the health service as a whole engage openly, transparently and compassionately with patients and their families. The requirements apply to all healthcare bodies, including the HSE, all section 38 and section 39 organisations, private hospitals and private health and social care providers, such as GPs, dentists and pharmacists. The Act contains a provision by which the Minister can add to this list via regulation. Patients and their families must have access, as I have said, to comprehensive and timely information, including an apology where appropriate.

We have seen good examples recently from the chief executive officer, Bernard Gloster, who in a number of cases has changed the culture, it would appear to me, come forward, identified clear faults, and apologised himself publicly on behalf of the HSE in respect of significant wrongdoing and errors that have been made. The HSE has updated its national open disclosure policy. The Department and the HSE, in consultation with stakeholders, are

currently finalising a revised HSE incident management framework that sets out how serious incidents are reviewed and learned from.

I am told that the Act was commenced, other than section 68. I do not have the specifics around that section with me, but that is what I have been told and the information I have here. The implementation of the Clarke report into the tragic death of Aoife Johnston at University Hospital Limerick also brought forward a number of significant improvements, supporting the implementation of key initiatives, such as the framework for safe nurse staffing and skill mix, the emergency medicine early warning system, updated sepsis guidelines and a new national quality improvement framework for emergency department triage and local escalation plans.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. He can come back in. I call Deputy O'Donoghue.

The Taoiseach: Disciplinary action was also initiated in respect of that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Management actions caused serious bodily harm and, in some cases, caused death. If there has been eight years of withholding information here, how many other cases like this have there been? The Taoiseach mentioned Aoife Johnston, God rest her soul. We have Jessica Sheedy as well. Management withheld information, had non-disclosure agreements signed and spent eight years with one case alone. That is obstructing the course of justice. This is my problem. They obstructed the course of justice. People and patients were put in harm's way, and some people died.

If this was outside the remit of the health service, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, would have me up the steps and have me in prison now for obstruction of justice and serious bodily harm. You would be put in prison if you had done this. We have management that are still in place in this hospital-----

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

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: -----who have covered up information that could have helped the learning in the hospital and saved lives, rather than covering it up. That is what I need to try to make sure of.

The Taoiseach: Historically, it is fair to say the cultural norm in medicine was not to disclose openly. Over time, that has changed, to be honest to all involved, but we still have a distance to go. We learn through error and medicine is not failure-proof, although the more you create a systemic approach to medicine, the less error you have. The cult of the miracle worker or of the brilliant person was always a challenge and a cultural challenge within health. It is a system-wide approach that reduces adverse incidents, bad practice and poor practice. We must have a systemic approach and the culture has to be all about that. In most of the training colleges now, it is all about that, with multidisciplinary teams working together and every person on that team being an important cog in the wheel to make sure the surgery or treatment of a condition goes properly. Open disclosure is the key to that. Non-disclosure agreements have no part in that.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy William Aird: I welcome the Taoiseach's upcoming engagements in Washington and Philadelphia for St. Patrick's Day. These meetings come at a critical moment for Ireland as global trading conditions become uncertain. Our trading relationship with the United States is central to our economy. In 2024, Irish goods exported to the US reached a value of €72.6 billion, around 32% of all goods we sell overseas.

Pharmaceuticals accounted for 61% of these exports, which shows how dominant that sector has become. This sector brings jobs, investment and tax revenue but it also leaves us exposed. Ireland is more dependent on US markets than almost any other EU country. Unfortunately, there are signs of instability. Figures released early in 2025 showed that nearly half of all Irish goods exports in January went to the US, with medical and pharmaceutical products accounting for 61% of these exports. Recent US tariff actions and the threat of wider measures have already shown how volatile the situation is. In April 2025, exports to the US fell by 62% in a single month due to tariff uncertainty. Economists warn that broad US tariffs on EU products could cost Ireland more than €18 billion in lost trade. It would have a real impact on GDP, domestic demand and employment if a full trade war were to develop.

These figures underline two realities. Irish exporters are vulnerable to shifts in US trade policy, and jobs and investment are affected in every county. In my own constituency of Laois, only two IDA-hosted investment visits took place in 2025. This in no way reflects the county's potential. The decision by Leprino Foods to leave its Laois plant, putting 132 jobs at risk, shows the need for stronger supports and more diverse and robust investment. Ireland's economic model must be flexible enough to withstand external shocks. European unity on trade policy is important but we cannot rely solely on Brussels. We must go further. Ahead of his trip, will the Taoiseach clarify what risks to Irish economic interests arising from US trade and tariff policy have been identified by the Government? Will he set out the commitments and guarantees he intends to seek from US counterparts to safeguard Irish trade and investment?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Aird for raising this important issue and the critical economic relationship between Ireland and the United States. Not too many Deputies in the House seem to want to mention that. "Economic relationships" seems to be a dirty word. It is enormous. The European Union-US economic relationship is the biggest in the world. It cannot be dismissed. The implications of any implosion of US-European relations would be very significant for our economy, for Europe's economy and for America's economy.

The Deputy is correct; bar Germany, Ireland probably has the strongest economic relationship with the US. That is quite an extraordinary statistic. US companies directly employ about 210,000 people in Ireland and indirectly support about 167,000 jobs. Those are the figures as of last March, which come from the IDA's US investment brief. US companies spent over €40 billion on goods and services, payroll and capital expenditure in Ireland in 2023. That figure was identified by AmCham, the American Chamber of Commerce Ireland. On the other side, more than 200,000 people are directly employed by 780-odd Irish companies across all 50 states in America. Irish companies are global companies. Our food companies are global companies. They have long gone past this small market. They manufacture, produce and

procure food to sell all over the world. We are the fifth largest source of foreign direct investment into the United States, with investment by Irish companies valued at about \$390 billion. That is a very significant economic relationship that puts bread on the tables of Irish workers the length and breadth of the country. Dáil Éireann needs to acknowledge that while also dealing with other issues. It cannot just be dismissed and put to one side. As Taoiseach, I have an obligation to protect livelihoods, workers and farmers in this country. A lot of food produced in Ireland is exported to the US.

The Deputy is correct; tariffs did create uncertainty. The European Union managed to negotiate a landing zone that Ireland, Europe and the world can live with in respect of the trading relationship, particularly in the areas of pharmaceuticals, which is a hugely significant area, medtech, technology and financial services.

The engagement is also in terms of the geopolitical turbulence that is going on at the moment. We have articulated our position on the Middle East and our position on Ukraine, for example, which is particularly important.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Taoiseach for his response. Ahead of the Taoiseach's US trip, it is essential that the Government identifies the risks posed by the US tariff policy and industrial strategy; sets out the commitments required to safeguard key export sectors, including pharmaceuticals and agrifood; and actively promotes market diversification and bilateral safeguards rather than relying on EU-level responses. I urge the Taoiseach to use every engagement in Washington and Philadelphia to secure protection for Irish producers, workers and communities, especially those in rural counties such as Laois where high-quality jobs are hard won and extremely valued.

The Taoiseach: I will alert IDA Ireland to Deputy's comments on Laois. I know Deputy Fleming also has an interest there, as do other Deputies. Deputy Stanley has his hand up as well. I hope he keeps his hand up in respect of the economic relationship between the US and Ireland. Notwithstanding everything that has happened, there have been significant investments even since all of the turbulence. I will not name all of the companies but the bottom line is that Dublin, Cork, Galway, Clare, Kilkenny, Monaghan and Meath, just to mention a number of counties, all benefited in 2024 from investments from US companies. The research and development tax credit of an additional 5% has had a significant impact in terms of investment in research and development in existing multinational companies in Ireland and, of course, in our indigenous companies. Research is the future in terms of our capacity to export to the US and our capacity to attract foreign direct investment into the country.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Motion re Ninth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Bord Bia, selected by Sinn Féin.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Road Safety (to conclude within 2 hours and 25 minutes)
- Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Second Stage, resumed) (to conclude within 1 hour and 52 minutes, with any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 11th February 2026)

Thursday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Cost of Living Crisis, selected by Independent and Parties Technical Group.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

- (a) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business;
- (b) private members' business shall be taken following the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026;
- (c) Parliamentary Questions to a Minister other than the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken; and
- (d) topical issues shall be taken on the conclusion of private members' business

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

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

4. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes, or where no further member is offering, and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) members may share time.

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

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) no motion for a Committee report pursuant to Standing Order 111 or private member's Bill pursuant to Standing Order 169 shall be taken;

(b) private members' business pursuant to Standing Order 168(1) shall be taken for 2 hours on the conclusion of proceedings of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026; and

(c) topical issues shall be taken on the conclusion of private members' business, and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of topical issues;

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

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

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

(c) members may share time; and

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

3. the resumed proceedings on the Second Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour and 52 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on the conclusion of the second speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 1 hour and 42 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a

Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion;

(c) any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 11th February, 2026; and

(d) members may share time.

Mins	10	10	10	6	2
Mins	10	6	2	10	6
Mins	2	10	6	2	10

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the arrangements agreed to? No.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They are not agreed. Why does the Taoiseach continue to bury his head in the sand? Farmers are in an ongoing sit-down protest in the offices of Bord Bia. How on earth can the Taoiseach stand over a Bord Bia chairperson remaining in place when every single farming organisation, representing the primary producers of food in this country, says he has to go? They have no confidence in him because he brought in Brazilian beef with none of the standards he insists the farmers must meet to sell their beef around the world. When will the Taoiseach wake up and remove the chairperson of Bord Bia?

Deputy Duncan Smith: Given the past week and the forecast for the next few days, we need a debate on flooding and the State's response to it as soon as possible, preferably today but no later than next week.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to move an amendment to the Order of Business under Standing Order 35(3).

An Ceann Comhairle: The amendment under Standing Order 35(3) will be done next.

Deputy Michael Collins: Like Deputy Smith, I believe we need a debate on flooding and the flood preventative works that should have been done in many towns and villages that are flooded, and certainly with regard to the rivers. I heard on the radio the other day with regard to Enniscorthy that the river has not been cleaned. We need to have a debate on this.

The Taoiseach: I was very surprised it was not raised on Leaders' Questions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Last Friday we had the monthly homeless figures. The numbers of those in emergency accommodation are still at absolutely shocking levels. I have been asking for a commitment to a debate to deal with homelessness figures and those in emergency accommodation. The Government is bringing in a residential tenancies Bill that will make rental accommodation even more unaffordable. This will drive more homelessness. We have been faced with a deadline for amendments to this very complex legislation of tomorrow at 11 a.m., before Second Stage of the Bill has even concluded. It is not acceptable to ram the legislation through in this way.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am proposing an amendment to have a debate on the flooding issues. Over the past eight days-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: -----we have seen nothing but deflection from the Government, pointing fingers at the weathermen and-----

An Ceann Comhairle: -----if you are stating an amendment-----

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: -----pointing fingers at the local authorities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore, state your amendment, please.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Government is not accepting responsibility for decades of inaction when it comes to flood adaptation and management.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore, you are supposed to state the amendment, for the future. Thank you. The Chief Whip to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I have noted the requests for a debate on flooding and on housing. There will be five hours of housing debate on Second Stage of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 this week: 204 minutes today and a further 102 minutes tomorrow. It is a two-day sitting. This legislation is really important. We will facilitate discussion on Thursday around further debates. At the moment I am not in position to accept an amendment under Standing Order 35(3). The Order of Business stands, a Cheann Comhairle.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Is it agreed that the proposed arrangements for the week's business be agreed to and that the proposed amendment be negatived?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Connolly, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Cooney, Joe.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Cummins, John.	Healy, Seamus.	
Currie, Emer.	Hearne, Rory.	
Daly, Martin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Martin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dillon, Alan.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Nash, Ged.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Reilly, Louise.	

Martin, Micheál.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Quaide, Liam.	
McGuinness, John.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Stanley, Brian.	
Murphy, Michael.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghail, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

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

Question declared carried.

Tributes to Deputy Head Usher of the Houses of the Oireachtas

An Ceann Comhairle: To take a moment of your time, I want to say a very special "thank you" today to Mick O'Brien. Mick O'Brien has worked here in the Oireachtas for 32 years and today he retires. Mick began his time here as a service officer. He became an usher in 1997 and was promoted to usher team leader and then deputy head usher and office keeper in 2005. In 2016, he became the project facilitator who oversaw the restoration of the historical Leinster House from the Oireachtas side, a task he undertook with great pride.

Mick retires today to spend time with his lovely wife, Lorraine, his daughters, Michelle and Jennifer, and his son, Karl. He also has five grandchildren, who no doubt will keep him very active and busy. Mick is an avid fan of Liverpool Football Club-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: -----and he is a keen golfer, so there will be lots to do. During his time here, Mick has seen off eight taoisigh, eight Cinn Comhairle and four Presidents who have gone before him.

On behalf of the Members and the staff, I wish Mick a very long and happy retirement but, also, it is actually his birthday today.

Deputies: Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you.

An Ceann Comhairle: Very good. They are not known for their singing ability, Mick.

Before we move to Questions on Policy or Legislation, the Taoiseach would like to say a few words, as would Deputy McDonald and Deputy Carrigy, who requested this on behalf of the committee he represents. We will then move on.

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas le Mick O'Brien as an méid oibre atá déanta aige ar son Thithe an Oireachtais i rith na mblianta. Gan amhras, is duine den scoth é agus tá muid go léir fíorbhuíoch de. I want to congratulate you on everything you have achieved, particularly your work on the historical restoration. You have been a phenomenal officeholder here, in many ways reflecting the outstanding tradition of the usher community, which has made life so meaningful, hospitable and welcoming for all who are elected to Leinster House. I speak as a Taoiseach who you have not seen off.

An Ceann Comhairle: Number nine.

The Taoiseach: I say that with a sense of humour. It is the first time, I think, that I have ever witnessed "Happy birthday" being sung in Dáil Éireann, so you have broken new ground. It appears you were a soccer referee. You would have made a great Ceann Comhairle in another life, clearly. Thank you for everything, and also to Lorraine, Michelle, Jennifer, Karl and the family. Enjoy your retirement. It is well earned and well deserved.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: So, Mick, free at last. Thirty-two years; that is a really good number for you to finish on. We would say that, would we not? I wish you well. You will have lots of time now but I am sure it will be very usefully deployed. Lorraine will have you at home a lot maybe - we will see how that goes - as will your daughters Michelle and Jennifer, your son Karl and your grandchildren. We all collectively, as you can hear, wish you nothing but the very best. We hold nothing for you in our hearts other than immense gratitude for your hard work, your courtesy, your sense of fun, but above all, your service to this institution and to all of us who have been elected here. Good luck and enjoy.

An Ceann Comhairle: In the interests of fairness, please, Deputy Bacik, very briefly.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Very briefly, and I appreciate that a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Labour Party, I want to express our sincere thanks to you, Mick, for all of the immense work and all the great service you have given. We wish you the very best of luck for the future and wish your family all the very best of luck too. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I will be brief. On behalf of the Social Democrats, I want to thank you for all of your work and wish you a really happy retirement.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Mick on behalf of People Before Profit and the Independents and Parties Technical Group for an amazing 32 years. This place would not be able to function without the hard work that you have done, and all of the ushers here, who are the unsung heroes of this place. Thanks for everything and enjoy your retirement. Enjoy the football, the golf or whatever it is you are going to be at.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: On behalf of the members of the all-party committee on autism, I sincerely thank Mick for all his work over the last number of years in making Leinster House an autism-friendly Parliament and a Parliament that welcomes people of all disabilities and none. He did a huge amount of work with Roisin Deery over the years to make this Parliament what it is, a Parliament with the highest standards in the world. The person always came first in anything Mick did. It is a pleasure to have got to know you over the last number of years. I thank you for all your good work. Enjoy your retirement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Again, thank you so much on behalf of all the Members and staff, and happy retirement. Thank you very much. Take care.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: Elvis has left the building. We will proceed to Questions on Policy or Legislation for the week. I call on Deputy Mary Lou McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I am all shook up.

Communities devastated by flooding are angry about the failure of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to deliver desperately needed flood defences. The Taoiseach might remember that in the wake of Storm Frank in 2015, when he was the leader of the Opposition, he described that flooding as a national emergency. He criticised the then Government for being far too slow. That was 11 years ago, and now he talks about waving magic wands and points the finger of blame at all and sundry. There are now 94 ongoing flood relief schemes, 68 of which have not even gone to planning. That is shocking given the increased frequency of extreme weather events. Where is this national emergency-style action from the Taoiseach's Government to get these flood defences in place?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate Deputy McDonald raising this issue. I was surprised that nobody raised it on Leaders' Questions given the urgency of it and the importance of it. Fifty-

six schemes have been completed and a further 100 schemes are at different stages of development. I am blaming nobody and have not blamed anybody other than the fact that we are experiencing severe weather events more frequently. Weather is changing and patterns are changing, resulting in very high and elevated levels of water across the land. Climate change, in my view, is responsible for the rapidly changing weather patterns we are experiencing. Every event we evaluate, as we did after Storm Éowyn. A very significant action took place after Storm Éowyn, but that was a different kind of storm. In my touring around the country on Monday, travelling to various spots, it was interesting that the Aughrim event was different from the Enniscorthy one. Each had their different local manifestations. It is important, yes, that we get better at bringing the national frameworks closer to the local manifestations of the various weather events.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to pay tribute to the family of Martin Lynn, the young man killed in an unprovoked one-punch attack outside his Dublin home in 2023. His sister Sharon Lynn expressed her disappointment at the weekend after the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, chose not to appeal his killer's sentence for manslaughter. I have met with Sharon, along with my colleagues Deputies George Lawlor and Robert O'Donoghue. We met with Sharon and her partner Anthony, and we want to reissue our sincere condolences to them on their loss. Commendably, Sharon has said she wants to go on now to advocate for sentencing reform to help others. Victims and survivors of violent crime deserve transparency in sentencing. It is now 18 months since the Labour Party brought forward a Dáil motion raising the need for consistency in sentencing for violent offences, inspired by the bravery of Natasha O'Brien, now reinspired by Sharon and her family. I would ask the Taoiseach to look again at the calls in our motion to improve sentencing practice, in particular to ensure clearer sentencing guidelines for judges and a comprehensive database. We owe it to victims and survivors of crime.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is a very important one. I also wish to convey my condolences to the family of Martin and Sharon and those the Deputy has met. We have to prioritise victims and survivors of criminal violence and we are doing that. Deputy Bacik is a person with a significant legal background. Perhaps she and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, could engage on the substance of her party's legislation. I will talk to the Minister in the context of her raising this and perhaps he can engage with her on it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The use of counselling notes in trials for sexual offences is outrageous and grotesque. This morning, the Cabinet approved new legislation on this but it sounds a lot like the *status quo* - a court deciding if counselling notes should be released. This is a gross invasion of privacy. It stops victims coming forward and slows or prevents their recovery because victims are afraid to seek help. They feel they have no safe space where they can deal with their pain and trauma because their inner thoughts and feelings can be weaponised against them by their abuser in a courtroom. Why are we tolerating this instead of outright banning it? The law is supposed to be about balancing competing rights. Can the Taoiseach explain to victims why their rights are always pushed to the bottom? The cornerstone of therapy is confidentiality. In 2026, there is no excuse for this complete disregard of the crucial role of therapy in recovery. The Government can introduce an outright ban. Why has it not done it?

The Taoiseach: It is unfair of the Deputy to use the language that she has used in identifying the Government's response. The Minister, Jim O'Callaghan, has seized on this issue and the legislation is anything but the *status quo*. The Minister is going as far as he possibly can within constitutional limits. A complete ban or a blanket ban on the disclosure of counselling records is simply unconstitutional. That is the very strong advice from the Attorney General, and indeed other legal advice has confirmed that. The Minister is going as far as he possibly can. From now on, if counselling records are sought by the defence, a judge will scrutinise the material and make an impartial and objective decision on whether disclosure is necessary in the interest of justice.

Deputy Holly Cairns: People still want a ban.

The Taoiseach: It is a significant change and there are other elements of that legislation also that represent significant change from the *status quo*. At least that should be acknowledged. There are constitutional constraints.

Deputy Charles Ward: I want to address the decision announced last week to exclude St. Eunan's College, Letterkenny, from the latest school capital funding allocation. We need to be clear about this. This school was doing everything it could do, getting everything ready and engaging with the Department. Planning permission has been in place since 2022 and an agreed pathway for progression has been made. I visited the college last week. It is overcrowded and temporary buildings are now becoming permanent. The children in the community have the right to dignity and safety at home and at school but they have been failed twice now. Going from unsafe homes to unsafe learning environments is not ideal. Only one Donegal project was approved for funding, which is welcome, but other counties received multiples. I ask that the Taoiseach look at this decision and revisit it as a matter of urgency so we can work with St. Eunan's. Will the Government commit to immediately engaging with St. Eunan's College to fix this injustice? It needs all the help it can get.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister for education with respect to the college the Deputy has raised. There is a broader issue. We have dramatically increased spending for second level and primary schools in terms of investment. The national development plan represents a further expansion and increase in projects. We will continue to keep all of this under review and do everything we can to progress as many schools as possible that need extensions or completely new builds in some cases.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Mayo University Hospital is under immense difficulty at the moment, particularly the emergency department. A couple of weeks ago electives were cancelled in the hospital. Research I have done found that a safe staffing framework for which an audit was carried out in 2021 was only recently sanctioned, and those posts still have to be filled. Mayo has a unique patient cohort, and I ask the Taoiseach to come to Mayo to visit the hospital. We have a significant issue with step-down facilities and home care packages that are having a knock-on effect on the hospital. Will the Taoiseach come to Mayo to visit the hospital and the step-down facilities we have in Mayo?

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Health is seized of the situation across the country, including Mayo. We have allocated significant additional resources to the Health Service Executive this year, compared with last year. Population is growing and there are lots of pressures on acute hospitals. I will talk to the Minister in the first instance with respect to the issues the Deputy has raised. Obviously, during the Christmas and flu period certain electives were postponed. We know that. That is normal. It happens when there is a particularly bad flu season as there was in November, December and January. The Minister is working with the hospital's management and clinicians to make sure we continue to reform as we allocate additional spending.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am sure the Taoiseach will join me in thanking and praising the work of the local authorities and many voluntary groups in the response to Storm Chandra last week. When he came to Aughrim on bank holiday Monday he met with Aughrim Tidy Towns, which has done incredible work in the community providing support to the victims of the floods. The big issue we are now dealing with, which is a particular problem for north Wexford and south Wicklow, apart from the impact on homes and businesses, is the state of the roads. Many roads, which were in poor condition, are now impassable as a result of the heavy rainfall. Will the Taoiseach commit to talking to the Minister for Transport about additional funding, particularly for Wicklow and Wexford County Councils to address the problems of the roads, as a result of the storm?

The Taoiseach: I met with the Deputy, the local authorities and the tidy towns group in Aughrim. I pay tribute to them and the local authority for the exceptional response. It again underlined the importance of community-based facilities and community centres. These are two communities under enormous pressure from weather events. In this case it was not a particular river breaking its bank, rather it was all of the water coming off the mountains and hills taking roads with it. It caused danger and huge trauma and distress to a number of households and the village. I saw it first hand and spoke to the engineers about the need for funding for roads in the Aughrim. I spoke to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about it yesterday and alerted him to the fact. I also spoke to the officials in that Department and with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, about the need. They are doing an assessment with the local authorities now.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: It is more than just Aughrim.

The Taoiseach: It is across the country. It is Wicklow and Wexford as well. It is a consequence of what is happening.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I express my sympathies to the family and friends of Grace Lynch. I welcome the news today that new legislation to implement a total ban on scrambler use in public spaces will be called Grace's law in her memory. In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny over the past year and a half or two years, we have seen an increasing number of scrambler bikes in and on the forest trails around the foothills of Mount Leinster. I know loads of people who have had frightening experiences with scramblers while out walking these trails with young children and dogs. My concern is that the welcome new law and necessary strengthening of enforcement powers for An Garda Síochána will have the unintended

consequence of making Coillte's 3,000 km of marked walking trails more appealing to scrambler users and therefore more dangerous for the thousands of walkers who utilise these trails regularly. How does the Government propose to tackle off-road scrambler use on Coillte's land?

The Taoiseach: It will be banned in public parks, on public lands and on public roads. Coillte has a responsibility to ensure its trails, walkways and so on are not used by illegal scramblers using scrambler bikes. There will have to be a zero-tolerance approach to the use of scramblers where the public are engaged. They should be used in proper sporting facilities where they were originally meant to be used. Where I was reared we had a scrambler track nearby in Vernonmount. We never had any problems with them being used on our roads or around our neighbourhood. It was always understood that they were there for a sporting purpose. I accept that has changed and the world has changed. Appalling behaviour is evident on our roads and in public parks. We have to make sure that all public authorities and the gardaí make sure it does not happen.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Entire shifts of ambulances are operating in Monaghan without an advanced paramedic car. There are delays in handover and staff suffering from burnout. In 2023 and 2024 my party and constituency colleague, Matt Carthy, raised the cases of young boys seriously injured at football matches left waiting upwards of three hours for ambulances. In the latter case, the Taoiseach clapped himself on the back before acknowledging that the wait was too long. People know he does not have a magic wand but neither can he magic it away because he has had a hand in Government for the past decade. There is no magic wand but there are no excuses either. What year will he stop failing the people of Monaghan with regard to ambulance services and reinstate the 24-7 advanced paramedic car?

The Taoiseach: We are rolling out advanced paramedic cars across the country. I was involved in establishing the pre-ambulance-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Is there one in Monaghan?

The Taoiseach: I was responsible for establishing the pre-ambulance emergency council, which ushered in the new era of professional first responders that transformed the whole ambulance situation. There is a broader issue with how ambulances are deployed. The council and the national authorities responsible have a clear view as to what is the best and optimal deployment. Not everybody in this House agrees with that. We need to try to work through how it works with the ambulance authorities and the HSE and ongoing development in respect of it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: He never answered my question as to whether there will be one for Monaghan.

Deputy James Geoghegan: The Taoiseach will be aware that during the Davos summit remarks were noted by the co-chair of the World Economic Forum that Dublin could be a potential future location for a World Economic Forum event. I raised this as a Topical Issue

and the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, gave the reply of behalf of the Government and made clear that if the World Economic Forum contacted the Government that some kind of event could perhaps be hosted in the context of the EU Presidency. There was reporting in *The Irish Times* that contact had been already made with the Government and there is the prospect of an event taking place in Dublin. Has the Taoiseach or anyone in his Department had contact with the World Economic Forum? Is there a prospect that Dublin could host a World Economic Forum event perhaps during the EU Presidency?

The Taoiseach: I have not had any specific contact although I am aware of the comments by Mr. Larry Fink that Dublin could be one of a number of potential locations for Davos, or an alternative to Davos. I notice some of the officials connected to the event were less strong about it. Be that as it may, this year is a huge event for the country with the European Presidency. The European Political Community of leaders will be meeting towards the end of the year. We will have a significant series of large meetings with Heads of State, Prime Ministers and so on. We will keep an eye on that and engage to see if an event pertaining to the World Economic Forum could be held in Ireland.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I join others in sympathising with the family of Grace Lynch. It is an unbelievable tragedy.

It is right that the Taoiseach has moved quickly to close out some of the legislation. Well done. I will be glad to read about what that will entail today. Those same legal principles need to be extended to urban ponies and horses. We must be one of the only countries in the world that has strict laws when it comes to horse control but implementation and enforcement are not that high. A lot of children have been injured in the past year by being kicked by horses on green areas. For those who wish to own a horse, they should own or lease land or pay for a livery. The idea of having horses tethered to metal poles outside shops and, in some cases, living inside houses is absolutely absurd. We need to get a lot tougher on this. The same principles are probably interchangeable in this regard. If people want to own a horse, they must be responsible. No one has a God-given right to own an animal, tie it up wherever they want and let it do whatever damage it wants. We need to get equally tough with urban ponies and horses as we are now getting with scramblers.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy makes a good point. There has been a lot of different strategies used to get horses off roads. There is an animal welfare issue very much involved here, in addition to the danger and health and safety issues for children, young people and humans more generally. There are laws governing this but they require review and a stronger approach.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Last week, the much anticipated first tranche of the national development plan's funding for school building projects was announced. To the devastation of their communities, both Coláiste Pobail Osraí and Kilkenny City Vocational School discovered they had been dropped from the priority list for building projects. Coláiste Pobail Osraí is the only Irish-medium secondary school in Kilkenny and Kilkenny City Vocational School is the only DEIS school in the city. The demand and need for both of these schools are immense. Will the Taoiseach provide some insight as to why these vital schools

were removed from the priority list and received no notice? How long will they now have to wait for this essential funding?

The Taoiseach: These schools have not been removed from a priority list. Indeed, the Deputy's colleagues, Deputies John McGuinness and Peter 'Chap' Cleere, have raised these two schools with me. I will engage with the Minister. We are expending more money than ever on school buildings and we want to continue to prioritise school buildings. I fully understand the pressure that both these schools are under and the need for additional accommodation at these particular schools. I will continue to work on their behalf to get them over the line.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Laois is one of nine counties that still does not have a domestic abuse refuge. Over the past 15 years I have been highlighting the fact that victims and their families are sent miles to other counties to a refuge away from services, such as their local GP, schools and family support. They are already traumatised by the abuse and this can further traumatisise them. Unfortunately, there is an upsurge in domestic abuse, including violence, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. It can be carried out by men and women but mainly by men.

A site was purchased on the Mountrath Road in Portlaoise by Laois County Council over two years ago to provide eight apartment units and a service centre. The Department halted it and it has reached a deadlock because the approved housing body that was to partner with Laois Domestic Abuse Service was deemed not to meet the criteria by the Department. That is fair enough but I ask the Taoiseach to assess Sophia Housing. It is either able to meet the criteria or not. If it cannot, will another partner, in the form of another approved housing body or Laois County Council, be sought to get the facility in place?

The Taoiseach: I will alert the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to this issue because it is a specific one in terms of the approved housing bodies, Sophia Housing and the Department. It is frustrating when a site has been identified and there is the prospect of getting it off. There is a need for a refuge centre in Laois, and I acknowledge that. I will talk to the Minister. Perhaps I will ask him to contact the Deputy.

Deputy Liam Quaid: I met today with a group of healthcare workers who have been living with long Covid since the early stages of the pandemic. They are utterly distraught with how they have been treated by the Government after having their special Covid leave with pay cut on New Year's Eve. The Department of Social Protection will not recognise long Covid as an occupational injury for these workers because it says that it is not possible to establish with confidence that the disease has been contracted through a person's occupation and not through community transmission. Yet, these healthcare staff were receiving special Covid leave with pay for five to six years on the basis that they contracted the virus at work. Also, the State rightly paid €1.7 million in compensation to families of healthcare workers who died after contracting Covid in the workplace.

The Taoiseach told my colleague, Deputy Rice, in December that, "At some stage, some resolution of this has to happen on a sustainable basis." Yet, all he has done after meeting a group of these workers in June last year is pass on the same detached bureaucratic responses from the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Will the Taoiseach intervene on behalf of these

workers? Why is this cohort of healthcare workers with long Covid not having the reality of workplace transmission of their condition recognised?

The Taoiseach: I did more than that. When I met people in June, I advocated and intervened to get it extended to December.

Deputy Liam Quaide: That was already decided.

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

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy knows, it had not actually been decided.

Deputy Liam Quaide: It had.

The Taoiseach: No, it had not. I understand it is a genuine case but I do not-----

Deputy Liam Quaide: Their condition is-----

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

The Taoiseach: The Deputy always has an attitude of trying to put a sting and have a go at people all the time. The more important point is that the Labour Court recommended a final extension in June and we extended it to December. Like others, I met people, survivors and those with long Covid. This does not mean supports end. Rather, staff who remain unfit to return to work will move into the public service sick leave scheme, ensuring continuity of care and financial protection. That scheme provides for payment of 92 calendar days on full pay in a rolling one-year period, followed by 91 calendar days on half pay subject to an overall maximum of 183 calendar days of paid sick leave on a rolling four-year period.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I raise concerns about the accountability and oversight of the school building programme, specifically with regard to one project management company contracted by the Department of education. KSNPM has been paid over €27 million by the State over the past six years. I am dealing with three schools that KSNPM is supposed to be looking after. In one school, it left behind a botched, half-done job. In another school, it left without ensuring the works were complete. In the third school, it left a school building site half done and empty since last June. Some examples include: unsafe exposure of electrical systems, water ingress from leaking roofs onto a brand new bathroom and broken asbestos tiles and classroom floors that children are walking around every day. In one instance, it argued for weeks with a school principal who was seeking to ensure there would be running water from a tap in a toilet for a new AS classroom. The attitude from KSNPM towards these schools has been despicable and the response from the Department has been disgracefully slow. What will the Taoiseach do to ensure accountability for the school management building programme in the Department?

The Taoiseach: Frankly, the Department has responsibility to ensure the fulfilment-----

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I have raised this with the Department.

The Taoiseach: -----of its contracts. I cannot get involved in every single contract in the country, nor would the Deputy expect me to, but I will talk to the Minister for education, Deputy Naughton, in this regard. If there is contractual non-fulfilment - what the Deputy is saying clearly points in that direction – then the Department should rigorously pursue the company. It should also ensure the basics in the schools are put right pending any engagement with the company, be it legal or whatever, to ensure the contract is fulfilled and that children are protected and looked after in those schools with the provision of basic infrastructure, facilities and so forth.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The death of Grace Lynch as a result of a scrambler was a shocking loss of life. It was shocking to her family, friends and community. We welcome the legislation that was brought before Cabinet today. However, there is an issue in relation to enforcement. Incredibly, gardaí are currently not trained to pursue a person on a scrambler or electric scooter. At the moment, there is no legal protection for them if they pursue. They could be stood down from their job or subject to a civil court case or Fiosrú investigation. Will the gardaí be given the training to be able to pursue individuals on scramblers? I see in the press statements today that there is an ability to pursue but this is not agreed with the gardaí. I have spoken to gardaí today and there is no agreement in that regard. How is it that one of the most inherently dangerous things a garda can do, that is, pursue in the case of someone fleeing in a vehicle, was too dangerous without training before but it is not too dangerous now?

The Taoiseach: In my city, I recall when joyriding, as it was termed, was all the rage in the 1980s and different strategies had to be pursued. There was always a challenge with pursuit because it involves pursuing young people driving very-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no training.

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

The Taoiseach: -----speedily on vehicles. Very often, some pursuits could result in unintended consequences and some other innocent person being injured or killed because vehicles are out of control, particularly vehicles that are being chased or pursued. There is always a balance here.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Training helps.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. You are out of time.

The Taoiseach: Other mechanisms then were deployed in those communities, which did not involve pursuit but traffic calming and other measures that rendered those bikes and so on unusable. That worked over time. There were also a lot of other measures, including community policing and getting that-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Training.

The Taoiseach: ----into the communities.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Time is up.

The Taoiseach: There is a wide range of training.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no training.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach and the Deputy can talk further. I ask the Deputy to respect the Chair.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy knows the answer, why did he ask the question? I will ask the Minister for justice to talk to the Deputy about this issue.

Work Life Balance (Right to Remote Work) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy George Lawlor: I move:

That leave be given to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for an entitlement of an employee to remote working arrangements where reasonably practicable, for this purpose to amend the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023, and to provide for related matters.

Colleagues may recall that a couple of weeks ago, my colleague Deputy Mark Wall proposed a motion in this House regarding flexibility and flexible work. The irony was that the Deputy left Athy, County Kildare, at 6.30 a.m. and was late to propose the motion in this House when he arrived at 10.05 a.m, such was the level of gridlock and traffic congestion on the M7. This is a campaign that he has carried on for many months.

As it stands, workers only have the right to request remote working, but an employer can very easily refuse. Many hours are stolen from workers who sit in traffic, in many instances for hours on end. It is only getting worse. Workers rely on public transport that is reducing in availability and quality on a regular basis. I was told today that the Department of enterprise is asking its workforce to return to work. Some are moving from three days to four days in-office. Others are moving from four days to five days. Those workers are based in East Wall, Dublin. It is horrendous trying to get to work in East Wall, such is the level of traffic and congestion. Those workers are expected to give up hours that they could be spending with their families or giving to their communities. They give up hours. They start work by sitting in cars for many hours of the year, week in and week out.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed the benefits of remote working. When it was forced on us all, we saw the benefits in productivity. We saw the benefits to families. We saw the benefits for people who may otherwise not be able to enter the workforce because of

restrictions. They were able to join the workforce. Those included people with disabilities and lone parents.

This Bill contains clauses to facilitate employers where it is not deemed suitable to make remote working a possibility. It states:

An employer may refuse a request under subsection (1) if the arrangement requested is not reasonably practicable [such as in cases where]:

- (a) the nature of employee's work does not permit that it be done at a remote location;
- (b) it is not reasonably practicable for the employer to reorganise the work done by his or her employees amongst them, so as to facilitate the proposed arrangement;
- (c) the proposed arrangement is reasonably likely ... adversely to affect—
 - (i) the quality of the employer's product or service, or
 - (ii) the quality of the work of the employee;
- (d) the workspace at the proposed work location ... is not a suitable workspace for the employee to work in.

This Bill has many safeguards for the employee and the employer. It is not just about blindly facilitating an employee who wishes to work remotely. It is about creating a better work-life balance and a better atmosphere for employees to become more productive, not to sit in traffic and not to depend on public service transport that has reduced in quality and efficiency in many areas across the country. The Bill also facilitates people who simply cannot afford to live, reside or rent in areas such as Dublin. Many people from my own county of Wexford travel to Dublin on a daily basis and have to deal with the gridlock.

Last week, a relatively small flood in Kilmacanogue meant that it took me 4.5 hours to get from Wexford town to Leinster House, a journey that usually takes approximately one hour and 45 minutes. Remote working and the ability to work remotely would have a tremendously positive impact on that. Facilitating it, and making remote working an ordinary thing to do, is something we must enshrine in legislation.

In bringing this Bill before the House, I am conscious that many employees around the country will benefit from it. I believe that many employers will benefit from having workers who are content to work and who improve their productivity from their homes, hot desks or office spaces in the locations where they reside.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Alan Kelly: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce Bill entitled an Act to amend the law relating to the recording, distribution or publication of intimate images so as to extend its provisions to images that are generated or modified by computer-graphics; for that purpose to amend the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020; and to provide for related matters.

This Bill is critically important. I have just come from chairing an Oireachtas media committee meeting that heard from representatives of TikTok, Google and Meta. X refused to come in, which says its own thing. That was a disgraceful decision. After that meeting, I can assure everybody in this House that this Bill is needed more than ever.

The Bill is a huge enhancement of Coco's Law, which was inspired by the Labour Party and our former colleague, Brendan Howlin. This Bill follows on from Coco's Law. It deals with what we believe are loopholes in the law when it comes to the sharing of sexual and intimate images, whether they are AI-generated or real. It ensures that the definition of "image" includes images that are generated by AI or computer-generated images. Most importantly, the Bill sets a criminal act for the generation and sharing of such images by those who facilitate it, that is, the e-commerce companies. Those companies are publishers and not just platforms. They hide behind the word "platform". They are e-commerce companies that are worth billions or zillions of dollars. They are trading on people's vulnerability. They are getting away with an incredible amount of harassment and abuse that is affecting the lives of millions of people.

I have heard, and always believe, that we can look towards Europe when everybody there is aligned in respect of bringing in legislation to deal with such issues. Unfortunately, we cannot wait for Europe in this case because it will take too long. Many of the children, and indeed adults, across this country will be affected if we wait.

The Bill clarifies what is an abuse image to include AI-generated images, but also ensures that the companies involved are prosecutable for the facilitation of such abuse and for the sharing of such abuse. No one should lie in fear that their image or identity can be abused or weaponised. The primary responsibility of those of us in the Chamber and in the Oireachtas is to protect our citizens. This Bill protects everyone's digital safety on this issue.

I hope the Government will - I do not mind - take it on, change it or do whatever but keep the ethos of it and by doing so act speedily to deal with this issue. We have the European Presidency coming up and the Taoiseach has spoken about changes he would like to see in that time. We cannot even wait until then. We have to deal with this issue now. There is a loophole that needs to be addressed. At the Oireachtas committee meeting earlier, both Meta and TikTok refused to tell us how many accounts they had for children under 16. Let that sink in. They needed to get permission from on high to find out if they could share that information in a

jurisdiction. This is the type of company we are dealing with. If we believe we can trust them within the regulatory framework that currently exists, we are so bloody naive; we cannot. This is all about money and power. Some jurisdiction in this world has to stand up and shout "Stop". This country, where many of these companies are based, should be the jurisdiction to do so. The initiation of that will be if we collectively as a legislature implement this Bill. I hope the Government will support it in the coming weeks. We do not have time to wait.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer, following those set down to the Minister for Defence, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Social Protection.

Question put and agreed to.

Ninth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 5th February, 2026, approves the Ninth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 30th January, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021: Referral to Select Committee

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 187.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Programme for Government

1. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [67574/25]

2. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [71592/25]

3. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [71593/25]

4. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [74525/25]

5. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [3638/26]

6. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [3639/26]

7. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [3646/26]

8. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [3648/26]

9. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach p=for an update on the programme for Government. [3830/26]

10. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [4024/26]

11. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [4088/26]

12. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [5973/26]

13. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [5990/26]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress on implementation of the programme for Government. [6013/26]

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on progress on the implementation of the programme for Government. [6016/26]

16. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [6067/26]

17. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [6093/26]

18. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [6125/26]

19. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [7328/26]

20. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach for an update on the programme for Government. [7692/26]

21. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [8090/26]

22. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach for an update regarding the programme for Government. [8196/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 22, inclusive, together.

The programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, sets out a series of ambitious commitments across social, economic and environmental policy. The Department of the Taoiseach's Statement of Strategy 2025-2028 puts the implementation of the programme for Government central to the mission of the Department and the Cabinet committee structure plays a central role in overseeing the whole-of-government approach to implementing the programme.

Just one year into its five-year life cycle, tangible and substantive progress is being made in implementing commitments across all areas in the programme. For example, housing is a key priority of the Government. We have agreed regulatory reform, tax reductions and an investment of €275 billion over ten years, the largest infrastructure investment in the history of the State. We are targeting the construction of 300,000 homes including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable housing supports. We have agreed reforms to rent pressure zones, strengthening the rights of tenants and stimulating increased investment and development activity. We have reduced VAT on the sale of completed apartments from 13.5% to 9%. There were 36,284 new dwelling completions in 2025, an increase of 20.4% on 2024 and the highest number of completions since the series began in 2018. The number of apartments completed in 2025 was 12,000, up 38.7% from the previous year. There were 18,308 scheme dwelling completions in 2025, an increase of 13.1% from 2024. Close to 6,000 single dwellings were completed in 2025, up 12.5% from the previous year.

In the area of infrastructure, the Government has provided a total public capital investment of €275.4 billion over the period to 2035 under the new national development plan, NDP. The accelerating infrastructure task force and a new infrastructure division are driving wide-ranging reforms that will remove barriers to the delivery of strategic infrastructure. Government has published Ireland's sixth nitrates action programme underscoring Ireland's success in retaining the nitrates derogation.

The Government's pro-enterprise decisions in budget 2026 invest in Ireland's enterprise base and support job creation, regional development, innovation, tourism and long-term competitiveness. We reduced the VAT rate for food, catering and hairdressers from 13.5% to 9% with effect from 1 July 2026. We increased the research and development tax credit from 30% to 35% which is having a significant impact in inward investment. We revised capital gains tax, increasing the entrepreneur relief lifetime limit threshold from €1 million to €1.5 million. We increased the national minimum wage by 65 cent per hour, a 4.8% increase that directly benefits over 200,000 workers. We extended the special assignee relief programme, SARP, providing income tax relief for persons assigned to work in Ireland from abroad. We also extended relief on foreign earnings to the end of 2030 and increased the limit on the deduction to €50,000 to assist indigenous exporting companies and their employees overseas. We are also committed to implementing action plans on competitiveness and productivity, insurance reform, market diversification and collective bargaining.

In the area of disability, I established the disability unit in the Department of the Taoiseach to bring renewed focus and urgency to disability issues across government. The new national disability strategy was published in the second half of last year. In budget 2026, we approved record investment of €3.8 billion in specialist disability services, an increase of 20%. This funding will support enhanced therapy services and other specialised supports for approximately 45,000 children and the recruitment of additional staff for children's disability network teams. Funding of €20 million is also being provided for the assessment of need targeted waitlist initiative, delivering approximately 6,000 clinical assessments. We established the new education therapy service and launched a recruitment campaign to put 90 occupational and speech and language therapists into 45 special schools in the 2025-26 school year. We also allocated €3 billion to special education, benefiting approximately 250,000 children in the school system who present with a special educational need.

In terms of child poverty and well-being, in the budget we made significant provisions including a €320 million package for children featuring the largest increase ever in the child support payment, increased income thresholds for the working family payment and the extension of fuel allowance to those on the working family payment, €3.2 million of additional funding to expand the national network of family resource centres and an additional €5 million for Equal Start, a 30% increase. There is an additional €16.5 million to implement a new DEIS strategy and the new DEIS plus scheme.

4 o'clock

There is a 22% increase totalling €7.3 million for youth justice supports. The expansion of the income thresholds for the national childcare scheme will reduce the cost of childcare for lower income families.

On migration, we have published a new International Protection Bill to allow for a firm, fair and effective international protection system that aligns with the European Union's migration and asylum pact. We have established a new United Kingdom-Ireland 2030 programme of strategic co-operation to support and strengthen the interaction between Ireland and the UK. We have doubled the resources available to the shared island fund, with a further €1 billion available out to 2035 to foster reconciliation, mutual respect and growth.

On justice, defence and national security, we have established a new ministerial council on national security, which I chair. We have allocated €1.49 billion in defence funding in budget 2026, an increase of 11%. Likewise, justice has a significant allocation of more than €6 billion, €11.5 million of which is for domestic and gender-based violence initiatives. There are many more allocations, but due to time pressure I will not go into them.

Deputy John Connolly: The Taoiseach mentioned housing at the outset. One of the commitments in the programme for Government regarding housing was to repurpose the local authority affordable housing purchase scheme to become part of the starter home programme in order to enhance uptake. I am not sure we will have any difficulty with uptake; the difficulty is with supply. We are conscious that we are trying to generate supply across the entire sector. Last year, Galway City Council managed to complete nine affordable houses and Galway County Council completed 17. The local authority advised me it is finding it challenging to fund affordable housing programmes. In 2023, I voted to develop 30 affordable houses in Galway city, but they are yet to break ground. The local authority has advised me it is a funding issue. We need to examine and enact that commitment. We need to make sure the affordable scheme is something that local authorities can develop because they play an important role in increasing supply.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I want to raise a number of urgent school issues affecting school principals, teachers, children and parents across County Kerry. In an urban primary school in Killarney, Presentation Monastery National School, more than 85% of pupils do not speak English at home, with 44 nationalities among the 170 pupils. Despite this, there is no DEIS primary school in the Killarney area. Over the past two years, the school has lost two English-language teaching posts and a full SNA, which severely impacts its ability to support the children of parents working for minimum wage and in the hospitality sector. I ask that the school's case for DEIS status be urgently reviewed, along with other schools in Killarney. I

would also like to raise Loughfouder National School in Knocknagoshel, where the roof of a SET and sensory room has collapsed due to severe weather. The school has no alternative space and children with special educational needs are now without a safe environment. Emergency funding is urgently required. I also want to raise Aghatubrid National School, Filemore National School, Coláiste na Sceilge and Scoil Saidhbhín in Caherciveen, each of which requires urgent attention. I would also like to mention-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I hope the Deputy does not have a long list.

Deputy Michael Cahill: -----St. Brendan's College in Killarney, which the Taoiseach has seen for himself. It requires tens of millions in funding for redevelopment.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: The programme for Government commits that the Government will work to facilitate an easier return to Ireland for emigrants, including reciprocal driving licence arrangements with the USA, Australia and Canada and the creation of a one-stop shop to support and assist with obtaining PPS numbers and other administrative issues. As the Taoiseach knows, we need some of our Irish citizens to come back and contribute to the labour force in critical areas such as construction and housing, the healthcare sector, pharmaceuticals, IT and so on. We need to make it easier for Irish emigrants to come home and contribute to the labour force. We all have examples of people who have found it difficult to engage with services here when they come home, whether that is obtaining a driver's license or PPS number or dealing with social welfare. A one-stop shop is critical. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that gets up and running as soon as possible.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Taoiseach is aware, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to protect and renew the regional, local and non-national road network. There has been a welcome increase since 2020 in funding to local authorities on an annual basis. We need a more significant increase. As the Taoiseach is well aware, very heavy rainfall is causing awful damage to our local and regional roads. Counties like Cavan and Monaghan have particular problems because of our topography and our drumlin soils. We do not have free draining soils and, therefore, face additional problems in the road network. The Taoiseach will recall meeting Fianna Fáil councillors from Cavan and Monaghan, along with me, when they put forward a strong case for a substantial increase in funding for a roadworks programme for 2026, taking into account the fact that 92% of the road network in Cavan does not comprise national roads. There is significant demand for additional funding to bring roads up to the proper standards to which people are fully entitled.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Critical to the delivery of housing, the Government's top priority, is the need to unlock infrastructure that will allow that housing to be provided. I would be grateful for an update on the housing activation fund. In particular, the provision of the northern inner relief road for Gorey will unlock 73 acres of land in St. Waleran's for housing development. Now that the wastewater treatment plant in Arklow has been opened by the Taoiseach, there is provision for the town to grow, but a second bridge over the river is needed in order to allow for expansion. I ask the Taoiseach to treat both of those projects as priorities.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need to deal with the planning and delivery of infrastructure. I have received a letter from the parent of a child attending junior infants in St. Mochta's National School in Louth village. The parent writes that two classes are currently being taught in the school hall and special education teachers are teaching in a cupboard, in the staff room and in a corridor due to lack of space. I have previously raised Monksland National School on the Cooley Peninsula, where teachers are taking their lunch in their cars or in a shipping unit. I do not think any of that is up to scratch. There is a lack of SEN offices, a GP room and all of the rest.

I dealt with Louth County Council's design team for Ardee Educate Together. A proposal has now gone through to address the parking problem for the new school and two proposals have gone to the Department. I would like to think there will be support from a governmental point of view for delivery on that. That is before we start talking about the issues that need to be delivered in Dundalk as regards flooding, which may involve catchment flood risk assessment management, CFRAM. On the overpumping capacity Louth County Council has for the River Blackwater, we now need to make sure there is constant capacity. Beyond that, we need to make sure wastewater capacity exists in my part of Dundalk, where it does not exist at this point in time. We need the coast road updated and a treatment plant because 2033 is far too late.

Deputy Mark Ward: I listened to the Taoiseach's response on Leaders' Questions to my party leader, Deputy McDonald. He said the Government will introduce regulations for e-scooters. That is also in the programme for Government. Since 2024, e-scooters have been legal on Irish roads, but people do not need a licence to drive one. They do not have to be registered, taxed or insured. As we speak, e-scooters are being driven recklessly and with impunity across Dublin. They are so quiet that pedestrians do not hear them until they are right on top of them. They are being driven on footpaths and at night time with no lights or reflective clothing. The drivers are often dressed in black. They are being used to transport money and drugs for criminal gangs. They are driven without helmets. There has been an increase in the number of people presenting to accident and emergency departments with acquired brain injuries due to accidents involving e-scooters. I ask for an update on the measures the Government will introduce, when that will happen and how the law will be enforced.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In the programme for Government there is a commitment to increase the number of special schools and special classes across the State to ensure children can go to school in their local communities. At this point in time, hundreds of children across the State are not being considered for a special class or special school place, despite the fact that they have all of the paperwork in order, because they missed the 1 October deadline for the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. I am dealing with three principals in a special school and two in mainstream who have identified children for school places. They have the perfect places for these children, but they have been told by the SENO that under no circumstances are they to offer children those places because they do not have a letter of eligibility from the NCSE. It is a major issue. What does the Taoiseach have to say to those children?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Today is World Cancer Day. I am a cancer survivor. I am lucky. I am in good health. I have seen the improvements in science and medicine which save lives every day.

However, I have also seen first hand the fact that the State's health system discriminates against some people who have cancer. I will give the Taoiseach a number of examples. There were a quarter of a million fewer people who had cervical, bowel or breast screening in 2020 than in 2019, and we have still not caught up with the number of people who missed out on screening at that time. A quarter of all cancer patients at the moment are left waiting for longer than three weeks, even though that is a timescale in which they should achieve radiation therapy if that is what they need in relation to good health. A woman from Limerick has a 15% lower chance of survival than a person from Cavan in relation to breast cancer because of the differentials geographically on survival rates. If you go to a public hospital, you have a 12% less chance of survival than if you go to a private hospital. In Britain, for example, you are 5% more likely to survive breast cancer. This is not good enough. We need to make sure every single patient is treated fairly across the geographic and demographic spaces in this country.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: While we welcome that the basic income for artists pilot scheme is extended until February, we are now in February and just a week away from the scheme coming to an end and we are still none the wiser as to when the promised follow-up scheme will be up and running, who will be able to apply and how they will be selected. Forty-seven out of the 174 artists in my county of Mayo who applied were successful and benefited hugely from this scheme but when will the new scheme be opened for applicants and when will it start providing funding? How many artists will the follow-on scheme fund? Are the 2,000 artists who took part in the pilot scheme able to reapply? Will the new scheme yet again be a random selection or does the Government intend to introduce criteria based on merit or on need?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Are gardaí accountable or are they a law unto themselves? Who should police the Garda? I refer to a constituent of mine, George Nkencho, who was shot six times on his doorstep. We are meant to believe that that is okay and there is "nothing to see here". His family have never been allowed a public inquiry or a trial. The minimal thing they got was an inquest, which ended on Friday. That is a very limited process. It does not allow for cross-examination, examination of forensics, all those kinds of things. We are actually meant to believe that 13 gardaí wearing stab vests could not disarm a young fella with a kitchen knife - a young fella who happened to be black, by the way - and that the only solution was to get out an NP7 within one minute of arriving on the doorstep and shoot him - not once, not twice, not three times, not four times, not five times but six times, including twice in the back. It is an absolute travesty of justice that this family have been denied by the DPP, who was handed a two-year investigation and said, "Nothing to see here". The DPP also denied Nikita Hand and denies rape victims regularly. We need to talk about the DPP in this country and their inordinate power to prevent very important cases getting to court. George Nkencho should be alive today, and this State has covered this up for over five years.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The number of people in emergency accommodation in this country is shocking but I want to highlight in particular the issue of family and child

homelessness. The number of families in emergency accommodation has gone up by 100% since 2016, which is absolutely shocking. Many if not the majority of cases coming into me now of people stuck in emergency accommodation involve families with children, often with special needs, in there for long periods because of the lack of three- and four-bedroom houses. There is a problem with one- and two-bedroom houses but there is an even bigger problem with three- and four-bedroom houses because we are relying so much on private developers, who tend to build one- or two-bedroom units because they can make more profit from them. There is not the delivery we need of three- and four-bedroom units, and that is contributing directly to child and family homelessness being disproportionately bad in terms of keeping people in emergency accommodation. What is the Government going to do about it?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the unacceptable delay in paying agreed pension increases to retired workers of An Post and CIÉ. A 7% increase for An Post pensioners was agreed back in September. The Minister was asked to approve this increase from 23 October, yet pensioners are still waiting while the Minister stalls and delays. It has been almost 18 years since CIÉ pensioners have received any sort of increase in their pension. An agreement was finally reached last May between the unions and CIÉ. However, the Government is sitting on this and stalling any progress. The stalling is causing huge financial hardship for pensioners already struggling in a cost-of-living crisis. Will the Taoiseach explain what is causing the delays and when these pension increases will finally be paid?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Despite public transport and the improving of public transport being a key commitment of this Government, many areas have actually seen a poorer service than was there previously. I am speaking in particular in this instance to the Gorey-Dublin rail line. Previously, there were four carriages on it and it sat 262 commuters. For some inexplicable reason, Iarnród Éireann changed those four carriages in October of last year. It put on a different carriage system, which seats only 185 people. I hear of consistent overcrowding and people fainting on that line, and there are health and safety issues with it. I have raised it with Iarnród Éireann and the NTA. I have been told they would get back to me in a matter of weeks. Unfortunately, I am still hearing from constituents in Wicklow town and all along that line who face incredible overcrowding. Will the Taoiseach please look into that? It is unacceptable.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The housing crisis is an absolute social catastrophe. I was contacted yesterday by a woman who is a civil servant, who is in her 50s and who has been evicted from her home into homelessness. What is the Government going to do about homelessness? In particular, what is it going to do about the delivery of social and affordable housing? Today the Social Democrats launched a detailed proposal for a State construction company. It is costed. We need a game changer. We need the public sector to deliver affordable housing, just like we do in health and education. Will the Government take this up and implement and create a State construction company that could guarantee the delivery of housing? We have young people who are tradespeople emigrating from this country because they do not see a future. We could be employing them in a public construction company, alongside the market, while guaranteeing the core delivery of social and affordable homes by the State, like this country did in the past.

Deputy Liam Quaide: We are all conscious that parts of the country have been gripped with anxiety this week and last week in relation to heavy rainfall and risk of flooding. So far, east Cork has been spared this time around but what we are left with is an eerie calm because we know we may not be so fortunate next week, next month or next year. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to streamlining and delivering flood relief schemes. The large-scale project for Middleton is extremely overdue at this point but it is at least edging towards a planning application. Meanwhile, the villages that were struck by Storm Babet in October 2023 remain entirely in limbo. There is no clarity on when works will begin to protect Mogeely, Killeagh, Castlemartyr, Rathcormack, Lady's Bridge or Whitegate. Some €107,000 was recently allocated to Whitegate but that was only to appoint a specialist to survey possible works. It will not fund any actual works, over two years on from Storm Babet. The residents of these villages are sick and tired of waiting and fighting for flood protection. When will we see a timeline for these works in Mogeely, Rathcormack, Killeagh, Castlemartyr, Lady's Bridge and Whitegate?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Management, staff, students and parents and the whole school community are extremely disappointed and dismayed at the decision last week by the Minister, Deputy Naughton, not to release long-promised funding for the Kilkenny school campus. Both Kilkenny City Vocational School and Coláiste Pobail Osraí are now at capacity. Kilkenny City Vocational School is the only DEIS post-primary school in Kilkenny city and it has an exemplary record. Both schools are non-denominational and co-educational. Coláiste Pobail Osraí is the last remaining Gaeilge post-primary school in Kilkenny city and county. The reality for both schools currently is that their classrooms are not fit for purpose, there are no outdoor recreation facilities, there are no outdoor sport facilities and no PE facilities. Any help the Taoiseach can give to reverse this decision would be hugely appreciated by the whole school community. Will he meet with the school community, with Kilkenny and Carlow ETB and the principals as a matter of urgency to discuss this specific project and to try to get it to construction stage as soon as possible? If the project is not advanced by July 2027, the planning permission will run out, and €3 million has already been spent to get to this stage. I implore the Taoiseach, if he could, to meet with me and the relevant school authorities. That would be fantastic.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: De réir anailíse ó thionscadal One Million Homes, atá foilsithe inné, tá easnamh de 12,635 teach sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Tá pobail Ghaeltachta gan a dhóthain páistí chun scoileanna áitiúla a choinneáil oscailte, gan trácht ar chumainn spóirt a choimeád beo. Ó 2015 i leith, níor tógadh ach 1,250 teach ar fud na Gaeltachta. Ag an ráta sin, léiríonn an anailís chéanna go mbeidh easnamh de thart ar 32,000 teach sa Ghaeltacht faoi 2036. Le deich mbliana anuas, tógadh díreach 36 teach i nGaeltacht na nDéise i bPort Láirge. Tá sin idir trí agus ceithre theach sa bhliain, cé go bhfuil timpeall 550 páiste faoi bhun 18 mbliana d'aois sa cheantar. Mar thoradh air sin, tá clanna óga á mbrú amach as a bpobal féin agus tá an Ghaeilge á cailliúint dá bharr. Is géarchéim pobail agus teangeolaíochta í seo. Tá géarghá le tithe inacmhainne agus sóisialta sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Mar sin, i bhfianaise na bhfíricí seo, cad go díreach atá an Rialtas chun a dhéanamh anois? An dtarraingeoidh an Taoiseach le chéile go práinneach na hAirí cuí maidir le tithíocht, pleanáil agus an Ghaeltacht

chun treoirínte pleanála Gaeltachta a fhoilsiú gan a thuilleadh moille, agus freagra comhordaithe a chur i bhfeidhm sula mbeidh sé ródhéanach do na pobail thábhachtacha seo?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies who spoke in relation to this question. Deputy Connolly raised the issue of affordable housing and the local authority affordable scheme in Galway. I will certainly engage with the county manager and the city manager there on the low progress in respect of the application of that scheme in the Galway context. Certainly, as part of the housing action plan, we want to do more on the affordable housing front as well as the social housing front. There have been certain local variations in terms of the application of the schemes. Some of them have been better than others in terms of scale and the number of schemes completed. I will engage with the county councils, the managers and the Deputy to try to progress it. I will talk to the Minister for housing in respect of the Galway situation too.

Deputy Cahill raised quite a number of issues, including Presentation Monastery National School. He mentioned a significant number. I think the Deputy said that the first language of 85% of pupils is not English, which is huge. This means there are particular needs. Progress is being made in terms of an examination of DEIS plus. If a school is not even in DEIS, the prospects of being in DEIS plus are more limited. There was an extensive review of DEIS about three years ago. I will talk to the Minister about whether there are specific supports we can give that school, particularly in terms of the language issues, that might help it to deal with what is clearly a different set of challenges being faced. The Deputy also referred to Knocknagoshel, where the roof of the sensory room has collapsed. Emergency works grant funding should be available for that. I will alert the Minister to it. I think he also mentioned Filemore National School, Aghatubrid National School and Coláiste na Sceilge. What is the problem with Coláiste na Sceilge again?

Deputy Michael Cahill: There are a number of issues there.

The Taoiseach: Yes. That is a school I helped enormously when it was starting. The only challenge is that it produced an awful lot of high-quality Kerry footballers afterwards who won All-Irelands against us, which was pointed out to me with glee by some of the Deputy's colleagues. I have visited St. Brendan's College. A lot of people raise school issues. We are spending a lot more money on schools. A lot more schools need extensions or full buildings. St. Brendan's College is a fantastic school but it is in an old building. I fully appreciate the needs. I will be engaging with the Minister for education to see what we can do in terms of the school programme because quite a number of Deputies across the board have raised school issues today.

Deputy Séamus McGrath raised the issue of a one-stop shop for bringing people back into the country and trying to clear up a lot of issues from driving licences to a whole range of other issues. I will progress that with the relevant Ministers. I commend him on his precise scrutiny of the programme for Government and every single aspect of it to keep us on our toes. I will follow up on that one.

On Deputy Brendan Smith's contribution, there is a big issue with regional and non-national roads. The flooding of recent times has done a lot of damage in specific locations, but the rainfall generally has had an effect. I spoke yesterday to the Minister responsible - the Minister

for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien - on the impact of the floods on the roads, the need to review how we allocate funding to non-national roads and the need to get a serious allocation there. The inclement, wetter weather of recent years is playing havoc with non-national roads across the country.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne raised the housing activation fund. Some €1 billion has been allocated. I hope some of that could be allocated to the northern inner relief road in Gorey - I will follow that up - and to the second bridge for Arklow. As the Deputy knows, when we were in Aughrim yesterday we discussed with a number of people, including the county manager and some of the engineers, how Arklow is now primed for housing development. We have put in a massive wastewater treatment plant there. It is a very modern one. If we need to lift any limits that are on Arklow in terms of house construction and so forth, we will continue to follow up on that in the context of the housing activation fund.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised a number of classroom issues in County Louth. I think he said that a school hall is being used.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes. It is about departmental engagement with the three schools: Ardee Educate Together, St. Mochta's National School and Monksland National School.

The Taoiseach: Again, I will talk to the Department of education in respect of that matter. I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, about the CFRAM issue in Dundalk. Others have raised flood relief as well, including Deputy Quaide. Flood relief programmes are complex. They take time. That is just the reality. In the interim, we should be providing interim works that can be of assistance.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I have seen some of the works in Midleton, either embankments or gates. We can be doing more and we should work with the local authorities. The OPW wants to work with the local authorities on interim measures while the schemes themselves are being developed. I think that is the direction of travel we intend to work on.

Deputy Mark Ward raised the regulation of e-scooters. The Minister got sanction from the Cabinet today for preliminary regulations covering the wearing of helmets and hi-vis vests for the users of e-scooters, e-bikes and so forth. That is important. We also understand that there will be a need for more regulation in respect of how e-scooters are being applied on our streets.

Deputy O'Rourke raised special schools and classes. There has been a lot of increases in special schools since 2020. I think the number is well over 11, and perhaps up to 15. I will check the latter figure for the Deputy. There has been a huge number of increases in special classes. In fact, the big phenomenon in education at the moment is the phenomenal growth in the number of children needing special education provision. The October deadline brought on a huge increase in numbers compared to last year. This is notwithstanding those who missed the deadline. This is a very significant issue that we need to analyse and evaluate in terms of the nature of supports and whether we are providing the optimal supports. A significant number of people have come forward since the early deadline was put in place. The Minister of State with special responsibility for special education, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and the Minister

for education, Deputy Naughton, have alerted the Government to the significant increase in numbers who have applied, particularly those who would have been in mainstream classes but, because of the early date, principals and others are saying should be in special classes. This is increasing the demand and the need. We will come back to the Deputy on the date. I know the Minister and the Minister of State are working on it, and I will come back to him on it.

Deputy Tóibín spoke about World Cancer Day. I accept that there are geographical variations. That is not a situation that is acceptable. Overall, cancer survival rates have improved enormously. I appreciate that the Deputy, being a cancer survivor, is in a good place to articulate and advocate on behalf of this issue. Covid did intervene in some of the screening programmes, and, yes, the catch-up is not there fully in respect of some of them. There is consideration on the way, even to expanding the age cohort that would benefit from various screening programmes. Overall, it is important to say that survival rates have improved significantly over the last two decades for various cancers in this country and that is a positive we have to acknowledge.

Deputy Conway-Walsh asked about the pilot basic income for artists scheme. The Minister has proposals in that regard. I will ask him to come back to the Deputy.

To respond to Deputy Coppinger, gardaí are accountable. We saw an example of that in the courts yesterday. The Deputy again raised the issue of the DPP. I am not clear what she is saying should be the case but an independent Director of Public Prosecutions is essential in a democracy. It is good practice. If the Dáil was to become involved in deciding who gets prosecuted and who does not, we would be on a very dangerous slippery slope.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am not saying that.

The Taoiseach: I know but we would then need an alternative to having an independent Director of Public Prosecutions. That is the core issue here.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am saying the office should not have the power it does.

The Taoiseach: I fully accept that families and people in specific situations may be very angry and annoyed at the absence of a prosecution. I fully understand the concerns of the Nkencho family in respect of what happened but, whatever way you look at this, I see having an independent Director of Public Prosecutions as a strength in our system. I see other systems. The Deputy talked about the United States. Prosecutorial services in the US are very embroiled in politics. In certain states, becoming an attorney general can depend on your politics. I am not too sure that is ideal either.

Deputy Boyd Barrett spoke about emergency accommodation numbers. There are big issues involved. There is a wider issue there. Emergency accommodation is a complex issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I asked about three- and four-bedroom houses.

The Taoiseach: The Minister has received about €100 million in additional money specifically to deal with the issues affecting families in emergency accommodation who require housing that the Deputy has referenced. The Minister is working on that.

To respond to Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, yes, there is a delay. I am pursuing that with the Minister of State responsible for post offices, the Minister for Transport and the Minister for public expenditure. There is an issue that needs to be sorted fairly quickly. Both Ministers tell me there is not an issue but there clearly is. My understanding is that the increase is not an issue but there might be something else relating to the Labour Court. That should be progressed.

Deputy Whitmore asked about public transport. I will raise what is happening there with the NTA. Deputy Malcolm Byrne has also been raising the matter of transport between Dublin and Wicklow with me. There are issues here for CIÉ and the NTA. A lot of people travel that route. Commuter travel is one of the biggest issues facing the Deputy's constituents. We need to review our plans to make sure we can accommodate additional numbers on public transport.

Deputy Rory Hearne raised the issue of the housing crisis. We have the LDA. We are committed to providing 72,000 social houses. We are building more social houses now than at any time since the 1970s. We are doing this through local authorities and approved housing bodies. Last year may end up having been a record year for social housing. I am not sure we should stop doing what we are doing. Perhaps that is not what the Deputy is suggesting but he is saying we should establish a State construction company. That would take a while. It could slow down the construction of social housing. It is not a panacea. I am not clear whether we are in the realm of direct labour any more. Would that work? It did not work in the past. We are now delivering about 12,000. Last year, about 8,500 were directly built by approved housing bodies and local authorities. We need to get up to 10,000. If we can get higher than that on a progressive basis, we will. I am not sure we need a State construction company, on top of what we already have, to deliver social housing. I will look at the Deputy's document but it seems to me that we now need to get on with the agencies we have and get the thing done.

I think I dealt with Deputy Quaide's point on flooding schemes. It is a cause of worry and anxiety. We need more interim measures. I will talk to the Minister of State, Kevin Moran, in respect of Mogeely, Killeagh, Whitegate, Rathcormac and the other villages Deputy Quaide mentioned. The interim measures are key. The wider scheme is complex given the nature of what is happening in that area and all of the issues the scheme needs to address. I will talk to the Minister of State in respect of that.

Deputy Cleere asked about Gaelscoil Osraí and the vocational college in Kilkenny. I will meet with the community there. Deputy Cleere, Deputy John McGuinness and others have raised this matter before. I will be meeting with the Minister for education on this. I am familiar with the colleges. I have visited the community college and the Gaelscoil. I am anxious to deal with these issues for the school communities involved. I do not have an issue with meeting with the school community if the Deputy wants to arrange that.

Deputy McGuinness raised the issue of pobail Ghaeltachta agus an méid tithíochta atá á thógáil againn sna ceantair sin. Chuireamar articles éagsúla san Acht pleanála ionas go mbeimid in ann déileáil go speisialta leis na Gaeltachtaí ó thaobh cúrsaí tithíochta de. Tá an infheistíocht ann anois. Tá muidne sa Rialtas sásta gach aon rud is féidir linn a dhéanamh chun

níos mó tithe a thógáil sna Gaeltachtaí. Má tá scéimeanna faoi leith i gceist ag an Teachta, ba chóir dó iad a chur in iúl dúinn. Bheinn sásta iad siúd a chur os comhair an Aire agus cinneadh dearfach a dhéanamh faoin gceist sin. Is ceist thábhachtach í.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is now 4.35 p.m. so we will not have time to go into Questions Nos. 23 to 39, inclusive. That therefore concludes Taoiseach's Questions.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Could we take just one question now?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have dealt with Questions Nos. 1 to 22, inclusive. We are due to finish at 4.38 p.m. It is now 4.35 p.m. We will not conclude Questions Nos. 23 to 39. We will suspend while we are waiting for the Minister.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.37 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.41 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.37 p.m. and resumed at 4.41 p.m.

Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

On 27 January 2026, the Government approved the publication of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026. This Bill will amend the current system of rent controls significantly and provide new measures to protect tenants, including a no-fault eviction ban for larger landlords, reduced grounds for smaller landlords and stronger security of tenure. It will come into effect for new tenancies from 1 March 2026. We want to provide certainty, clarity and stability for the rental sector. Cabinet approved the introduction of amendments to rental controls to come into effect on 1 March 2026, immediately following the expiration of rent pressure zones.

These decisions have been informed by the findings of the Housing Agency review of rent pressure zones. These showed the existing rules were restricting supply and potential policy options. There is also the agency's preferred recommendation to modify the existing operation of the current rent controls. This followed comprehensive examination by the Housing Agency and stakeholder engagement. The approved policy measures aim to boost investment in the supply of homes available for rent and to keep existing landlords in the market. The changes agreed will also provide significantly stronger tenancy protections and are finely balanced between the interests of tenants and the need for further private investment in the rental market across the country, taking account of stakeholder engagement.

A new national rent control will ensure that annual rent increases across the country will be capped at 2% or the rate of inflation. Unless a no-fault eviction occurs, we will allow rents for new tenancies created on or after 1 March 2026 to be set at market value but in return for far greater security of tenure through tenancies of minimum duration of six years for most tenants. We will continue to restrict the annual rent increases in line with inflation but linked to the consumer price index, CPI, and retain the 2% cap.

The Government recognises that rents are already too high. We simply need more rental accommodation, however, and in particular apartments, to tackle the high rents in this country by increasing supply. This is why we are allowing the rents for new apartments to be linked to the CPI, even when inflation exceeds 2%. Landlords will be allowed to reset rent for new tenancies and between future tenancies. The resetting of rents to market rent will only be allowed in respect of a new tenancy created on or after 1 March 2026 but not after a no-fault eviction. Where such a new tenancy lasts for over six years, the landlord will be allowed to reset rent to market rent at the end of each six-year period. We do not want rents for long-term tenancies to fall behind market rents. The current rent pressure zone rent controls are out of kilter with international practice in this regard.

Along with the ability to reset rents, the Bill will introduce enhanced tenancy protections for all new tenancies that begin on or after 1 March 2026. These changes will have a significant impact for our rental sector. There is a very fine balance to be struck. We aim to attract investment, but we know that both tenants and landlords deserve and need fair treatment. We aim for tenancy protections that at their core are meaningful and fair. We know that introducing stronger tenancy protections will need more and better enforcement. Therefore, the programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*, commits to continuing its support for renters. This includes measures to protect renters and landlords from abusive practices by enhancing the enforcement powers of the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB.

It is important for both landlords and tenants that disputes are resolved as early as possible and that parties to the dispute consider the process transparent and reflective of our rental law. The RTB is working to ensure that process improvements continue to be implemented to ensure that disputes raised by landlords and tenants are dealt with promptly and efficiently and, more broadly, to ensure the effective regulation of the rental market. Exchequer funding allocation of €22.8 million for the RTB's operational services has been secured for 2026. This is a 70% increase on its initial 2025 allocation. This will enable the RTB to effectively manage increases in its demand-led services and additional remit as a result of the changes proposed in the Bill.

The Bill should be viewed as having an important role in driving supply and as part of the Government's broad commitments and efforts to meet our housing demand. The Government is fully committed to working with all stakeholders to deliver social, affordable and cost-rental homes at scale and to continue accelerating housing supply across all tenures, including rental. Increasing the supply of new homes is critical to alleviating pressures in the housing market, helping to moderate price growth and easing affordability challenges across the country. In this regard, supply has increased significantly over the last five years, with more than 161,300 new homes delivered since July 2020.

The Central Statistics Office, CSO, *New Dwelling Completions* report for quarter 4 of 2025 shows that a total of 36,284 new dwellings were completed in 2025, representing a 20.4% increase on the same period in the previous year. This marks the highest number of completions recorded in any given year since the CSO began recording this data series in 2011. Over the last five years, 148,995 new homes have been delivered. This compares with 83,267 in the previous five-year period from 2016 to 2020, and just 29,217 in the five years before that from 2011 to 2015. One key indicator of progress is the delivery of new apartments. Encouragingly, after a very significant drop-off in apartment delivery in 2024, the CSO figures show a 38.7% increase in the delivery of apartments in 2025 compared with 2024, with more than 12,000

apartments completed. This is the highest completions figure for apartments since the CSO began collating this dataset in 2011.

The Government's new plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030: An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness*, was launched on 14 November 2025. Building on the foundations of *Housing for All* and informed by the work of the Housing Commission, this plan will empower the State, partners and the private sector to continue to play a critical part in delivery. This plan is being enabled by the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State, €275 billion over ten years, to significantly upgrade our infrastructure and make the environment for building homes much better. Direct funding for housing will also be at record levels. In 2026 alone, over €9 billion in capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer, the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the Housing Finance Agency, HFA.

The fundamental difference from *Housing for All* is the greater emphasis in this plan on creating the environment for delivering more homes. This plan enables others, particularly the private sector, to play their part. A significantly greater supply of housing can be achieved through a balanced approach, focused on both directly supporting people to have a home of their own but also creating the best conditions possible for the industry to build more homes for people. Where necessary, the Government is also removing barriers in the legal and planning systems, regulation and procurement. We will free up the private sector to provide homes at much greater scale by providing more zoned and serviced land for housing right across the country.

The Government has delivered a revised national planning framework, enabling the zoning of significantly more land. Apartment standards have been revised and the VAT rate on the sale of new completed apartments reduced. All of these measures make apartment building more viable and rental accommodation will come on stream.

The Government will lead with record investment and strong direction, but the necessary housing can only be delivered at scale in partnership with local authorities, the LDA, approved housing bodies and the private sector. We will measure delivery and publish data, recording delivery by each of our partners. The housing crisis affects all of our society and the economy and we will continue to work with others to benefit everybody.

Increasing the supply of new homes is key to addressing many of the challenges in the housing market and rental sector. The Government is committed to delivering more homes, to doing it quickly and for more people. The programme for Government aims to ramp up the delivery of homes right across this country, to increase supply further and deliver another 300,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030. The rental sector will grow and this is an important part of that supply. We are determined to deliver the homes people need, whether that is one-off rural homes, whether it is in our villages, our towns or our cities and whether it is social, affordable, rental for purchase or private. We are determined to get those homes delivered right across the country. Our plan is already starting to show. It is showing momentum with a significant increase in housing delivery. We have seen an increase in planning permissions in the third quarter and an increase in commencements in December of last year as well. We will deliver the homes people need in this country.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): The Minister has outlined the broad thrust of the Bill and I am now going to focus specifically on its provisions.

The Bill contains 31 sections. Sections 1, 3, 4 and 25 contain standard provisions dealing with the definitions, Short Title, commencement, collective citations and construction of the Bill.

Sections 2, 9 and 23 provide for the repeal of the RPZ provisions and make consequential technical amendments.

Section 5 clarifies that notices and other documents may be served or given by electronic means under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, the principal Act.

Section 6 requires a landlord to serve a notice on a tenant and copy the RTB, explaining how the rent was set upon the commencement of a new tenancy created on or after 1 March 2026.

Section 7 obliges a tenant to allow viewings of a dwelling where the landlord intends to sell.

Section 8 provides for a new national rent control in respect of new tenancies, that is, first-time tenancies between parties, created on or after 1 March, 2026. Provision is made for an annual rent increase restriction in line with the consumer price index or, if lower, 2% per annum *pro rata* for both new and existing tenancies. However, a restriction linked to the CPI only will apply for new apartments and student-specific accommodation that both commenced and completed development in compliance with the building control regulations on or after 10 June 2025. From 1 March 2026, a new exemption from the annual rent increase restriction is provided for the first rent setting for a new tenancy in an existing rented dwelling after a tenant ends their tenancy where the tenant breaches the tenancy obligations or where the accommodation is no longer suitable to the accommodation needs of the tenant household. In respect of a new tenancy created on or after 1 March 2026, after six years, or three years in respect of student-specific accommodation during which the rent increase restriction applied to that tenancy, a landlord may reset the rent to market rent.

Section 10 requires a landlord when notifying their tenant of new rent to copy the notice to the RTB. Landlords must in setting the rent have regard to a newly published register by the RTB and the most recent comparable rents for similar dwellings with regard to floor area, dwelling type, number of bedrooms and bed spaces and the BER. Contravention by a landlord of the amended section 22(2) will be an offence and improper conduct and the RTB may prosecute or sanction such contravention.

Section 11 updates the definition of market rent by requiring, in setting a rent for a dwelling, regard to be given to the rent information contained in the public register.

Section 12 requires a smaller landlord, that is, a landlord that is not a company and is a landlord under not more than three tenancies of dwellings, when terminating a new tenancy created on or after 1 March 2026, that is, a tenancy of minimum duration during or after its six-year term, to make certain statutory declarations. A technical amendment allows engineers to certify for the purposes of grounding a tenancy termination on substantial refurbishment or renovation that vacant possession is required for at least three weeks for the health and safety of the tenant.

Section 13 provides that where a smaller landlord wishes to terminate a tenancy of minimum duration during its six-year term on the ground that the dwelling is needed for occupation by a family member, the termination can only be grounded in respect of the intended occupation of the landlord's spouse, civil partner, child, stepchild, foster child, adopted child, parent, step-parent or parent in-law. The smaller landlord must make a statutory declaration that the landlord is not a company and is a landlord under not more than three tenancies of a dwelling. Where a smaller landlord wishes to terminate a tenancy of minimum duration during its six-year term on the ground that the landlord intends to sell the dwelling, the landlord must make a statutory declaration that on the date the notice of termination is served, the landlord is not a company and is a landlord under not more than three tenancies of dwellings and that the landlord requires the sale proceeds to avoid undue financial or other hardship. Where the smaller landlord wishes to terminate a tenancy of minimum duration on ground 5, that is, substantial refurbishment or renovation, or ground 6, which is change of use, at the end of a six-year tenancy of minimum duration, a statutory declaration will be required to be made by a smaller landlord that on the date the notice of termination is served, the landlord is not a company and that the landlord is under not more than three tenancies of dwellings. A declaration and statement will also be required to be made by a smaller landlord that the notice period in the related notice of termination served during the tenancy of minimum duration expires on a specified termination date that falls on or after the expiry of a six-year tenancy of minimum duration.

Section 14 restricts the termination of certain tenancies by certain landlords. During a six-year tenancy of minimum duration, a smaller landlord will be permitted to terminate a tenancy where a dwelling is needed for the occupation by the landlord of a family member restricted, as I have said, to immediate family. It will also be permitted to avoid undue financial or other hardship, that is, where the sale and proceeds are required by the landlord to provide a principal private residence for the landlord or a spouse or civil partner of the landlord where the landlord or civil partner or spouse of the landlord is legally required to discharge a debt or to make payment of more than 15% of the asking price within nine months of the termination date, including a payment to the Revenue Commissioners, for example to discharge a debt under the fair deal scheme or to make a payment in respect of a tax liability; where a personal insolvency practitioner has been appointed to the landlord, spouse or civil partner of the landlord; or where at least one of those parties is bankrupt or subject to proceedings of the declaration of bankruptcy or is arranging a debtor or has made a composition of arrangement with creditors. At the end of the six-year tenancy of minimum duration, a smaller landlord may terminate a tenancy on any of the limited grounds for termination under the principal Act, subject to making any necessary statutory declaration and statement. A larger landlord will no longer be able to use the grounds for termination under paragraphs 3, 4, 5 or 6 of the table in section 34 of the principal Act and can only gain vacant possession where the tenant voluntarily leaves or breaches their obligations or where the dwelling is no longer suitable to the accommodation needs of the tenant household.

Section 15 requires the landlord when terminating a non-Part 4 tenancy to state the reason for its termination. Resetting to market rent is only allowed following a termination by a tenant or by a landlord grounded on breach of tenant obligations or where the dwelling no longer suits the accommodation needs of the tenant household. Technical amendments are made, including an update to 90 days from 28 days for the period of dispute to be referred to the RTB in relation

to the validity of a notice of termination where it was served for reasons other than a breach of tenancy obligations by the landlord.

Sections 16 to 18, inclusive, update the requirement for the RTB to maintain the residential tenancies register and require the RTB to confirm for a tenant whether their landlord was a smaller landlord on the date of the notice being served.

5 o'clock

The published register will now be required to include the rent, the tenancy registration number, the tenancy commencement date, the number of bed spaces, the local electoral area in which the dwelling is situated, the floor area where applicable, and the BER, in addition to the number of bedrooms and the dwelling type for individual rented dwellings across the country.

Section 19 requires the following particulars in the application to register a tenancy with the RTB: number of bed spaces, floor area and, where applicable, the BER.

Sections 20 to 22, inclusive, provide for data sharing between the RTB and the Minister for Social Protection, the Revenue Commissioner, and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.

Section 24 provides a contravention to section 22(2) of the principal Act relating to rent review requirement as improper conduct by a landlord which may be investigated and sanctioned by the RTB.

Part 3 provides for amendments to the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2022 to provide that a dwelling that is or was required to be registered as a tenancy under the Residential Tenancies Act since 4 March 2022 is not eligible for the accommodation recognition payment, ARP. Also, only owners of the dwellings may apply for the ARP.

I will deal with the last piece, with your indulgence, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Part 4 provides for technical amendments to maintain the pre-existing planning provisions for short-term letting following the repeal under this Bill of the RPZ legislation.

This Bill provides a finely balanced provision between protecting tenants and encouraging existing landlords and also encouraging new private investment into the rental market. I commend it to the House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The rip-off rent hike Bill before us today is without doubt the most profound change to the regulation of the private rental sector in over a decade. Much more significant than that, at the core of this Bill, is nothing short of a vicious financial assault on private renters who are already living in the most expensive and insecure form of housing in the State. The consequence of this legislation over a relatively short period of time will be significantly increased financial hardship for renters; more and more people locked out of an overpriced private rental sector, forced to move back in with their parents, or indeed emigrate; and, crucially, significant increases in homelessness, plus family homelessness, including children. That is what is actually being proposed here today.

At the very heart of this legislation is a profound transformation in how rents are set - the market reset. As the Minister knows, the current rule is when one tenant moves out and another tenant moves in, the new rent is based on inflation or 2%, whichever is the lower. What is being proposed here from the beginning of March is that when one tenant moves out and

another tenant moves in, at the start of the tenancy, in the overwhelming majority of cases, a landlord will be able to reset the rent to market rent. While RPZs will continue over the next six years, at the end of that six-year tenancy if the tenant remains, market reset will happen again. What this means is that from 1 March, thousands upon thousands of renters are going to be hit by the market reset.

What is the average length of a tenancy currently in the private rental sector? It is three and a half years according to the Residential Tenancies Board. A quarter of all tenancies registered annually are new first-time tenancies. What that means is that if those two trends continue, within a matter of months up to 60,000 tenancies could be affected each and every single year. Within four to six years the overwhelming majority of private renters in this State will be captured by the market reset rule. That is what the Minister is proposing. He will not explain it properly to people. He will not be straight with renters but that is what he is proposing.

The big question this Government wants to hide from is how much extra this is going to cost those renters? If you make a very simple calculation using the data from the Residential Tenancies Board of new and existing rents, the average additional rent to be charged by a renter captured by the market reset in a year would be €3,000. That is €3,000 extra in rent that the Minister is imposing on those renters.

In fact, because the RPZs have had a bigger effect outside Dublin, the impact in the first year alone will be an extra €3,500 in rent. In Galway city, where the gap is the largest, the Minister is proposing to allow landlords to charge up to an additional €4,500 in rent a year for a new first-time tenancy commencing in March onwards. I do not understand how the Minister and the Minister of State can describe that as fair or balanced. I will say it again: what that means is that within the course of 12 months, up to 60,000 tenancies - many more renters in those tenancies - will be paying thousands upon thousands of extra euro in rent each year. Many of them will be first-time renters in September. The majority of students live in the mainstream private rental sector and not student-specific accommodation. They are going to be hit very hard. If that is not a vicious assault on renters in the private rental sector, I do not know what is. It is the death knell of the most modest and ill-conceived rent pressure zone regulation that I can imagine but one for which renters are going to pay dearly.

The Minister will of course say that tenants who remain in their existing tenancies will not be impacted but what that ignores is the level of churn in the private rental sector. It also ignores the very difficult decisions that renters are now going to face because of this change. Will they put off having children? Will they put off taking up a job or educational opportunity? Will they have to continue to live in inadequate, overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation for fear of paying those extra rents? That is the real choice the Minister, Deputy Browne, and his Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and Independent colleagues in government are forcing on renters.

To make matters even worse, the Minister is proposing a level of complexity both in rent setting and tenure rules that is just perplexing. There are going to be five different sets of rent-setting rules. How anybody thinks that is a credible form of rent regulation is beyond me. There will be four different sets of tenure rules. I accept that tenants in properties owned by larger landlords will have increased security of tenure but security of tenure is no damn good if you cannot afford the rent. The Minister is giving with one hand while he is taking away - with a gut punch - with the other.

This is really hard to explain to people. Even the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, struggled to generate any level of understanding while reading his script. It is going to be much harder to understand and virtually impossible to enforce. The Residential Tenancies Board is already struggling with the significant caseload that it has, and the level of complexity and confusion being proposed here is going to make the board's job much more difficult.

For the percentage of landlords out there who will break the rules or play fast and loose with the rules, this will make their job much easier. Of course, none of this should surprise us. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have an incredibly bad track record when it comes to regulating the private rental sector. They blocked rent certainty in 2015. They made a mess of rent caps in 2016. Over the past decade they have introduced a dizzying array of changes to the Residential Tenancies Act. They ended the ban on no-fault evictions in 2023. That is the reason our private rental sector is so damn dysfunctional. It is because of those parties and their bad policies.

The Bill before us today is no different. Their rent-setting proposals have been sharply criticised by tenants' advocates. The tenure rules are being opposed by small and medium sized landlords. It appears that even some builders are unhappy with the proposals. That begs the question: why has the Minister done this? Why is this even in front of us today? The answer is very simple - it is because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, along with their Independent supporters, have been captured by the big institutional investors. The funds lobbied aggressively for the market reset and when the funds tell Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to jump, their parties ask "How high?" That is exactly what has happened in this instance. The tragedy of this is that they have been sold a pup. Contrary to what the Minister claims, this legislation is not going to see a significant increase in investment or in the delivery of private rental sector homes. I accept we will get some increase in high-end, high-density, high-rental accommodation in parts of Dublin and maybe the docklands of Cork but it is not going to increase the supply of social, affordable or privately owned homes and it is certainly not going to reduce rents in the short, medium or long term.

The only guarantee from this legislation is rip-off rents are going to be hiked ever higher for an ever greater number of renters, many of whom cannot afford them.

Of course, there is an alternative. The Minister should be here in front of us today introducing legislation to cut and freeze rents, introducing budgets to dramatically increase and accelerate the delivery of social and genuinely affordable homes and supporting proposals from Sinn Féin and others to activate the small and medium-sized private residential development sector to deliver more good quality homes for working people to buy but, instead, he is shafting renters and lining the pockets of big institutional investors and large corporate landlords.

For the Minister not even to acknowledge the dramatic impact that the market reset is going to have on tens of thousands of renters is, quite frankly, not only dishonest but shameful. On those grounds, the fact that, because institutional investors have demanded it of him, he is going to allow 60,000 renters pay thousands of euro extra in rent every year is the reason we will oppose this Bill, today, tomorrow and every other day in the short time he is giving us to deal with it here in the Oireachtas.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: While most people are handing over more and more of their wages in rent and mortgage payments, other people are making an absolute fortune out of the misery of the housing crisis. For those people, this is not a crisis; this is a cash cow. For the banks,

corporate landlords, investment funds and large developers, the housing crisis is not something to fix; it is something to feed off. It is something to keep alive at all costs. Those powerful interests want to squeeze every drop out of ordinary workers and this legislation is proof positive of that fact. The Government are the middle men for the vested interests. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's rent hike Bill will allow vulture funds and big landlords to hike up rents to over 60,000 people every year. This will mean people paying thousands of euro more in rent from 1 March.

This Bill is about increasing rents - plain and simply. Everything else is window dressing and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and their band of Independents know this. They are making sure that the gravy train stays on the tracks and that the money keeps flowing upwards.

This is the second time in the past few months that the Government has reached into the pockets of ordinary people to give more money to those profiting from the crisis. It handed out massive tax cuts to developers for apartments that were being built. We are talking about hundreds of millions of euro that should have been given back to workers. Instead, the Government shoved it into the pockets of developers. The largest developers are currently boasting gross profit margins of over 20%. Even after all their executive salaries and all their bonuses, they still absolutely smashed their profit targets and the Government gave them more tax cuts. When workers look at their payslips and wonder how they are going to make it stretch and how they are going to afford the rent, they should know that tax cuts that should have been theirs ended up in the pockets of developers and landlords.

The Government does not stop there. It is not just about jacking up rents or handing out millions of euro of tax breaks; it is also making renters live in smaller and darker apartments. The Government wants corporate landlords to be able to charge thousands of euro a month for apartments that are just bigger than two car parking spaces.

It is glaringly obvious whose side the Government is on. We do not have to look too hard to find out that it is on the side of the big landlords, the developers who were handed the tax breaks, the landlords that are getting bigger tax breaks, the investors that pay no tax at all on their rental income and the banks that do not pay a penny tax, but renters, by God, are the ones that are going to have to pay under the legislation because the Government thinks that they need to pay more. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are never going to solve the housing crisis because they are on the side of those people getting rich off the backs of hard-pressed people - plain and simple. The only way to fix this housing crisis is to take on the vested interests, to invest in public housing and not to keep on bowing down to those same vested interests.

We need to end this rip-off for once and for all. We need to ban rent increases. That is the legislation that the Minister should be bringing before this House - legislation that Deputy Ó Broin has drafted. The Minister should be making sure that rents are affordable. That is the legislation that he should be bringing before the House, not this shameful legislation that will jack up rents on tens of thousands of households right across this State every single year from 1 March onwards. This rent hike Bill needs to be stopped in its tracks.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This is another example of legislation being rushed through so the Minister appears to be taking action instead of simply taking action.

Just two weeks ago, I sat on the housing committee where we dealt with dozens of typos in the planning Bill. This is legislation that has been enacted but that was also rushed through. We in the Opposition warned about the problems with rushing through legislation with mistakes and the Government still has not learned.

This Bill is not about renters. It is actually about the opposite of renters. This Bill should be called the "Investor Speculator Bill", because that is what it really is. It does not set out to protect tenants. The Minister made a point about the security of tenure. That is no good if people cannot afford the rent.

I will set out some facts to explain to him what is going on. In Cork, renters are facing an increase of €278 per month. In County Cork, it is €308 per month. That is over €3,000 a year. People are hanging on by their fingertips, we are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, rents have skyrocketed and the Minister is going to add on €3,000 a year. Who can afford that? We TDs can afford it, but the ordinary man and woman in the street trying to keep a roof over their head cannot.

If the Government were serious about tackling the crisis in the rental sector, it would take real action.

In Cork city, there are 2,197 people and families getting housing assistance payment, HAP, or rental accommodation scheme, RAS. Those families are entitled to social housing but, because the Government did not build and is not building enough social housing, they are in private rented accommodation. That is 10% of the rented accommodation in Cork. These people, if the Government would build social housing, could move into it, releasing those 2,200 properties to other people to rent. That would help drive rents but instead, the Government is driving them up. It is about delivering supply.

Instead of focusing on tax breaks and increasing rents for speculators, developers, investors and vulture funds, the Government needs to work for ordinary renters. A ban on evictions, a three-year ban on rent increases and increasing the supply of social and affordable housing are solutions that will help renters. They will support families, help workers and help prevent more families and, in particular, children, going into emergency accommodation and becoming homeless.

There is a famous line from the movie, "Wall Street": "Greed is good." Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the Healy-Rae and the Lowry Independents stand for that. Greed is good for the speculators, the investors and the vulture funds, and we 100% oppose that.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister's rip-off rent Bill changes how renting is regulated. It is a shift that will make an already broken system even worse, if people could credit that. It will shaft renters. At a time those renters are facing record rents and intense cost-of-living pressures, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the Healy-Rae group and the Lowry group have chosen to gut controls when they should be strengthening them.

The central change in the Minister's legislation is the introduction of these market rent resets. Under his model, rents can be reset to prevailing market levels at the start of new tenancies and again after fixed periods. That is a clear move away from rent restraint and towards a system that ensures sharp increases become routine for renters.

Rents are already far beyond what many households can afford. Supply is constrained because of decisions of the Minister and his predecessors in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over many years. Instead of acting to stabilise the market and building homes, the Government is embedding a mechanism that will ensure that rents rise again and again.

The Bill will not reduce rents. It will not deliver stability. It will not prevent homelessness. It locks in higher rents into the future and leaves renters carrying all of the risk and all of the pain. It means a rental system designed to push rents higher, not lower. It means workers and families facing sudden rent hikes that they cannot plan for or absorb. It means insecurity built into the system as a feature, not treated as a failure. It means the Government choosing to side, as always, with large investors seeking higher returns, rather than renters trying to keep a roof over their heads.

The impact of this approach will be widespread. The private rental sector has high turnover and relatively short tenancies. As a result, these resets will not be confined to a small group, as the Minister tells the media and anybody who will listen, but will over time become the default experience for most renters. If this shadowy legislation is forced through - it looks like it will be, despite there being none of the Government backbenchers present to hear the debate - from next year, new tenancies will increasingly be exposed to immediate resets. Students entering the private rental sector will be caught by the same approach. Over time, even tenants who have already endured no-fault evictions will face market resets after fixed periods.

The direction of travel is very clear. It behoves the Minister to be open and honest about that, something that he and his colleagues in government, including the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, have failed to be thus far. Concerns about this legislation are not confined to Sinn Féin and the Opposition parties. Organisations working on the front line of homelessness, including the Simon Communities of Ireland, have warned that unaffordable rents are a direct driver of homelessness, and that the Minister's upward rent resets risk undermining security of tenure in practice. The Bill rips off renters, with higher rents, weaker security and more people pushed to the edge. Sinn Féin will oppose it because renters cannot absorb any more pressure. The people I represent, the people we represent, cannot take any more. Government policy should be focused on reducing rents, not driving them up even further in the interests of those who tell the Minister what to do, and who designed this approach and this legislation.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: This legislation seeks to rewrite the rental rules for the seventh time in a decade. In his speech, the Minister spoke about moderating price growth. Bar the tacit acknowledgement in his speech that rents are too high, there is nothing in the Bill that will bring rents down. I looked on *daft.ie* recently and I found that within a kilometre of Leinster House, it is €695 a week for a studio apartment on Hatch Street, €4,500 a month on Tara Street, and for a two-bedroom apartment on Grand Canal Place, it is €3,600 a month. In what world is that affordable? Under the Bill, people who are already being forced to pay that level of rent will find their rent going up by 15% or 20%.

I have no doubt that we will be back here, if not next year or the year after, then in three years' time, debating this again. This Bill is going to put a rocket booster under rents in the private rental sector. Either the Minister or some other Minister for housing is going to come under undue political pressure and will have to come back to try to address this again. The

rental market in this country is critically dysfunctional, and it is always renters who are forced to deal with the consequences of this dysfunction. The Government talks about certainty and stability but the only certainty with this is that rents are going to continue to rise, and they are going to rise faster than they have risen in the last decade.

The Bill is confusing, incoherent and fundamentally unenforceable. The Minister claims that the legislation is about balance but we know that the Bill is going to put fuel on the fire of spiralling rents and evictions. It is renters who will continue to suffer. I do not understand how the Government thinks, in a cost-of-living crisis, that rents should be allowed to rise further. In my view, the Bill essentially amounts to the Government folding the tent and giving in to large landlords and Irish institutional property. They are the ones who wanted the rent pressure zones gone, and the ones who are ultimately going to celebrate the passage of this Bill. The Minister has figured out a way to almost remove RPZs by stealth because they will effectively be useless with the market reset mechanism.

The biggest landlords will claim that rent pressure zones have all but killed institutional investment. They will point to the fall-off in apartment completions and claim it is down to RPZs. We know that is not completely accurate, and that rising interest rates and input costs have significantly impacted apartment construction. The empirical evidence of the impact of the RPZs on the supply of housing is limited. In fact, in their original 4% version, the RPZs did not have a negative impact on supply. I do not understand why the Government did not even consider reverting to the pre-2021, 4% rate instead of this convoluted, confusing mess. The only reason I can think of, to be honest, is to go back to what the Taoiseach said a year ago this week, when he went on the "This Week" programme and floated ripping up rent pressure zones. He said he was open to a "pivot". It is very clear from the Bill that when the Taoiseach went on the radio that time, he said the quiet bit out loud, and the pivot he referred to was *ipso facto* the removal of rent controls.

As others have said, we know the sheer amount of churn in the private rental sector is going to mean that this legislation will effectively be the same as having no rent controls. The six-year rule will mean that while a tenant is protected at the beginning, they will be exposed to market rents at the end of the six-year period, if they even get that far, because we know the average tenancy is from three years to three and a half years. This Bill will lock renters into an inflationary spiral that is even worse than what we have already seen. The average length of a tenancy in a build-to-rent development is one year, which means the rent for renters in these developments is going to be reset to the market rate. It is going to go up and up every single year.

The Bill makes a mockery of extending RPZs nationally. It effectively guts rent controls. This is the seventh time we have done this in a decade. The chopping and changing is leaving renters in what I can only describe as a shark tank. If we are honest, we are all seeing it in our constituency offices in recent weeks and months: the rising evictions, the notices to quit, and the landlords hoping to get ahead of the six-year tenancies and the restrictions that are coming down the track. The Government has nothing to offer these people except higher rents.

RPZ legislation is meant to protect students. It is not meant to create a backdoor for further price hikes targeted at students. Students will be some of the people hardest hit by this. We know that students in this country, by and large, live in private rental accommodation and move

accommodation every single year, as they are required to. Their rent is going to rise every single year. They are being repeatedly screwed.

I look at my own city of Limerick, where the average rent is now €1,800. Rents in Dublin have gone up by 94% in the past decade. This Bill is going to put a rocket under that. If we look at the RTB data from quarter 4 of 2025, the average annual rent increase in a non-RPZ area was 11.6%. By allowing landlords to reset the rent in between tenancies, the Government is condemning renters in this country to at least an 11.6% rent increase. Given that the average rent for a new tenancy in this country is €731, the 11.6% increase means the average renter will have to pay at least €200 more per month.

I have appealed to the Government on the floor of this House and to the Minister in writing to remove the market rent reset mechanism from this legislation. There are laudable elements to this proposed legislation but the rip-off rent mechanism renders every increased protection absolutely bloody useless.

The evidence from the RTB's assessment of property price rental growth in Ireland shows that in 75% of cases when the tenancy turns over landlords increase the rent. This is why I have appealed to the Government and I have appealed to the Minister that if they are not going to remove the market reset mechanism, at the very least they should include a rent break. We need to give renters some modicum of protection against extreme rent increases. The one thing I know for sure is that when these rent increases come on board they are going to become politically unsustainable for this Government. I ask the Minister to bring forward amendments to put a rent break into this Bill, or at the very least to support an amendment I will bring forward. There is so much in this legislation that does not make sense. For example, the distinction between small and large landlords is something that nobody asked for. We will have a situation where we are going to have multiple different sets of rules for different tenants. There will be new tenants of larger landlords, new tenants of smaller landlords, and existing tenants of both. The level of complexity is going to make this virtually impossible for tenants to actually understand, never mind their landlords, and also for the RTB which will have to enforce this. This is a recipe for confusion and chaos. It means that renters, as they always do and as they always have done under this Government, will pay the price. The changes around security of tenure and the restrictions on eviction for sale should be applied universally to all landlords irrespective of the number of properties they own. That is the norm in other jurisdictions.

The creation of the rent register is something in this legislation that I and the Labour Party have called for for some time. We proposed this as far back as 2016 and it is fundamentally necessary. Many of the issues with rent setting in this country are caused by a lack of data. We need to start this data collection process because we need to move to a long-term and sustainable data-driven model for rent setting. It is vital for tenants to know the history of the rent charged on their home so they can be confident that they are being charged the lawfully permitted rent. There might be some issues in relation to the Data Protection Commission but my concern is that the Minister and the Government should have used the Pobal HP deprivation index to more accurately pinpoint areas of material deprivation which in some cases, such as my own city of Limerick, are right next to affluent areas.

The fundamental issue with this Bill remains. Despite all its intricacies, it leaves renters exposed to potentially huge rent increases with little in the way of emergency protections, given

the average duration of a tenancy and the churn that is there in the rental market in this country. I am really concerned that we are going to see a return to economic evictions where people are literally going to have to leave their homes because they cannot pay the rent. This is why I have called for the rent break mechanism as a simple safeguard. What the Minister, Deputy Browne, has come in with here today is confusing, fragmented and will be impossible to enforce in the real world.

In response to concerns I raised through Oral Questions a couple of weeks ago, the Minister said that all proposals would be examined and given a fair assessment. If that commitment means anything, I ask the Government to accept an amendment for a rent break. Renters cannot afford any more half measures, any more complexity or any more ideology designed to benefit institutional investors and property developers dressed up as protections and reform. This Bill as it is currently presented here is going to fail. It is not going to stop rents rising. It is not going to necessarily guarantee any supply. If it guarantees any supply, it will be expensive build-to-rent apartments in high-end developments like the Dublin docklands, and maybe some in Cork. It is not going to bring down rents. There is no vision here. There is no long-term vision for renting in this country beyond giving landlords and institutional investors whatever they want. Yes, Government policy must be focused on increasing supply but if the Government is serious about increasing supply, it could ensure it meets its targets for the first time. It has never met its targets for social and affordable housing. It has abandoned the annual targets for the private sector under this housing plan because it knows it does not have a hope of reaching them. We are not going to get the supply, and certainly not the supply of social and affordable housing we need, by offering up renters on a silver platter for developers and institutional landlords to devour.

There has been little or no modelling done on this legislation. It does not make any sense. When the RPZ regime was introduced by the Department in 2016, extensive modelling work was done at the time. We need to see a commitment for a review within two years. I guarantee everyone in this House tonight that this is not the end when it comes to rent setting and renting here in Ireland. Rents are going to go up by an unsustainable level and the Minister, or whoever his successor is, will be back here again trying to fix it because this is absolutely botched. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Since the announcement was made last June of the proposed changes to take effect, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Government have unleashed havoc upon thousands of renters out there who are now facing notices to quit. In the third quarter of last year, 5,400 tenants received a notice to quit. That is up from about 3,000 in the previous year. For the people who are coming through my clinics in Dublin Central, it is really distressing because they have nowhere to go. We have spoken at length about the extortionate high rents in Dublin. There is a lot of talk about the market rate but we know the market rate is set by a small number of institutional investors who set the price for everyone else in the rental market, particularly in the main urban centres. This is driving the eye-watering rents of €2,500 that we are seeing in many parts of this city.

This evening I want to raise specifically the two new classes of landlords, and by extension tenants, that will be created in this legislation. These are landlords with four or more units, and those with four or less units. What I am seeing at the moment is three examples of landlords strategically evicting tenants to avoid the so-called "Tyrrelstown amendment". They are

evicting groups of tenants in fewer than ten units. This is to avail of the magic number of below ten. They are doing this over a staggered period of months. I do not know how widespread this practice is. I suppose the key issue is what the RTB is seeing in this. We would have been critical in the past about data collection within the RTB, and we believe there needs to be an awful lot more reporting, but the critical issue here is that we now have different thresholds being set out in the rental legislation. The Tyrrelstown amendment refers to landlords with ten or more holdings wishing to sell.

Of course, we now have this new provision for landlords with four. We need to level the playing field. We need hugely to tighten up on the Tyrrelstown amendment and we need to make sure we do not see what I am calling strategic evictions. One is a unit along the north quays, a building which was in NAMA and was in receivership for 13 years. The minute that debt was discharged the company has gone into liquidation and the sale is happening. The other is for renovation purposes. When I look at the notice of termination, I have to question whether all of the tenants have to be evicted for the renovations that are being proposed. I think there is a lot of gaming of the system happening at the moment.

The appeals have been made to the Minister not to introduce this rent reset and to row back on the profound changes being introduced, which are already wreaking havoc on the system. In particular, we need to look closely at the mass eviction of fewer than ten units. What trends are happening in the RTB at this point? We need to move speedily to ensure there is a level playing field between the four and the ten. I know my colleague, Deputy Sheehan, will be bringing forward amendments on this.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I support the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026. This legislation is about two things that renters and would-be renters need more than anything else, which are security and certainty. It strengthens tenants' protection in a way we have not seen before while creating clearer and more stable conditions for investment so we can grow our rental supply. Put bluntly, a rental system is nothing without the supply. It is not a system. It is a queue. We all know the reality. Too many people are paying too much for too little, with too little confidence about what happens next. The current framework, especially the uneven RPZ map, has not delivered the stability tenants deserve and has not provided the confidence needed to expand the pool of rental homes.

The Housing Agency review made clear that the change is needed and that the Bill is that change. I will start with the tenant protections because they are substantial. From 1 March this year we will move to a national system of rent regulation. That means renter increases will be linked to the Irish consumer price index with a cap of 2% per annum *pro rata* for existing tenancies applied nationally and not just in certain zones. In plain English, every renter gets the protection, not just the lucky ones who happen to live on the right side of those RPZ boundaries. Second, this Bill introduces rolling tenancies of minimum duration of six years for new tenancies. This is a major step forward in security of tenure. It also significantly restricts so-called no-fault evictions, particularly for larger landlords. Tenants will have greater ability to put down roots, keep children in the same school and plan their lives without the constant fear a notice will land on their doormat within 12 months.

At the same time, the Bill recognises the reality of the sector. It differentiates between smaller and larger landlords in a sensible way. Smaller landlords will have limited flexibility

in defined circumstances, such as genuine hardship requiring sale or where a close family member needs to live in the property. Crucially, larger landlords will not be able to terminate for sale, refurbishment, own use or change of use. In other words, we are closing the door on arbitrary terminations while keeping the reasonable grounds where a tenant is not meeting obligations or where the home is no longer suitable for a household's needs.

Let us now address the question that also comes up and that is supply. We all know that the long-term solution to high rents is more housing. Rent controls help but they cannot conjure more homes into existence. This Bill does something important. It pairs stronger protections with a framework that can retain and attract supply, including by allowing rents to be reset to market rent between different tenancies but only in tightly controlled circumstances and never following a no-fault termination. This is a critical safeguard against economic evictions.

The Bill also sends a clear signal on apartment delivery. For new apartments, rent increases will be linked to the CPI without the 2% cap. The policy intent is straightforward. It is to provide predictable inflation linkage to support viability and investment in the kind of housing we need most in our cities and large towns. It is also a pro-supply measure, and it is essential.

I want to illustrate this Bill in the wider reality of delivery. Nationally, 36,284 new homes were completed last year, up from 30,330 in 2024. That is a 20% increase. Apartment completions reached 12,047 units, up almost 39% and single dwelling completions rose to 5,929, up 12.5%. That is momentum and we need to build on it, not talk it down. The Government needs to pull every lever at its disposal because the answer to housing is supply, supply and more supply.

We can see what it looks like on the ground in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown. The council's own reporting shows the scale of ambition and delivery under way, including the Housing Delivery Action Plan targets of 1,994 social homes and 1,057 affordable homes, with the council now expecting to exceed the social housing target, rising to 2,142 social homes over the period. They are progressing affordable delivery in Woodbrook and unlocking major land and infrastructure opportunities in Lehaunstown with potential for hundreds of homes and local area plan areas with potential for over 1,000 more units.

This is where I must make the political point because it needs to be said plainly. Once again, Deputies on the other side of the House oppose to efforts to build more homes and resolve the housing crisis but that is not surprising. They opposed the establishment of the LDA, which has developed 597 units in my constituency, and they are occupied. They were also opposed to supports for first-time buyers that have seen thousands of people buy their first homes. They were opposed to the rent pressure zones when they initially came in which gave renters the break. They were opposed to every effort to encourage private investment in housing, thus increasing supply. You cannot oppose every measure and then complain the system is not working.

I also want to acknowledge the implementation because legislation is only as good as enforcement. The Bill is backed by increased resources for the RTB and the establishment of a rent price register to provide transparency, reduce disputes and strengthen compliance.

I welcome the leadership of the Minister, Deputy Browne, on this. He is acting decisively to protect tenants while also creating the policy conditions to grow supply. The Bill is balanced, serious and necessary and it deserves the support of everyone in the House.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This Bill must be called out for what it is. It is a Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael rip-off rent hike Bill and it must be stopped. I will tell the Minister the reasons why. The Government should be cutting rents, not facilitating them to rise even further. Rents are already out of control and renters are drowning in a cost-of-living crisis. Yet, the Government's response is to tear up what little protection remains and hand a gift to big institutional investors.

At the centre of this Bill is the so-called market reset allowing landlords to hike rents to full market levels between tenancies, not 2% and not inflation, but whatever the market can squeeze out of people. Students will be the worst hit. I have talked to so many students about this. From September, students entering the private rental sector will face immediate market resets on what they are paying already. For families in Mayo, this is absolutely devastating and nothing short of daylight robbery and extortion. Commuting is simply not an option for most students and for students in rural Ireland. Parents have no choice but to pay whatever rent is demanded, no matter how extortionate. How are parents expected to absorb this on top of the food, fuel, fees and childcare for younger children? How many students will be priced out of education altogether?

I move on to the figures for tenancies in County Mayo, which speak for themselves. New tenancies average €1,181, compared with €949 for existing ones. That is €232 extra every single month, or nearly €2,800 over a year - a 24% increase. That the Government is happy to stand over that is unbelievable. The Bill bids farewell to the modest protections of the rent pressure zones with tenancies lasting an average of just three and a half years. Within a short few years, most renters will be caught out by this reset. Renters and families need a break. Sinn Féin is calling for the rents to be cut, and for an emergency three-year ban on rent increases. The Bill does exactly the opposite and that is why we will oppose it.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Under this Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, students will be among the hardest hit. At a time when students are already being pushed to the pin of their collar and students' unions are having to set up food banks, the Government is choosing to turn its back on them once again with this Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael, rip-off rent hike Bill. Under these proposals, student-specific accommodation rents can be reset every three years, opening the door to higher rents and greater insecurity for students and their families.

This student accommodation crisis did not appear overnight. Rather, it is the direct result of the Government's failure to meet student accommodation targets and deliver publicly owned, genuinely affordable student accommodation. As a result, the majority of students are now forced into the private rental market and unsecure digs where they have little protection and even less certainty.

The figures in reports speak for themselves. The number of student beds delivered is down 54% from 2004, with just 422 beds expected to be delivered this year. That is the lowest in over 20 years. That is a policy failure.

The proposed changes will mean that students in private accommodation may now face year-on-year rent hikes with no real safeguards. At a time of spiralling costs, the Government is adding pressure instead of relief. The National Youth Council of Ireland has found that

accommodation is now the single biggest cost-of-living issue for students and young people and, alarmingly, two thirds of those aged between 18 and 24 believe they would be better off living in another country. That is shameful and it is down to this Government. What protections will students in private accommodation be given? Where is the certainty of fairness? The Government needs to cut rents and introduce an emergency three-year ban on rent increases. Students and families need affordable rents, real protections and public investment rather than broken promises.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am not quite sure whether the Minister genuinely believes what he is setting out and has been saying in public. Let us explain honestly what the Minister is doing. With regard to the claim that renters will get certainty from this Bill, the truth, no matter what way he tries to spin it, is that the only certainty it gives existing renters, the 250,000 households renting right now, is that their current tenancies will continue into the future with the same threat of eviction as exists today. They get no new security of tenure. Yes, rents will remain capped at 2% per year but they will get no new existing security of tenure. There is this spinning that this is a Bill that will give renters greater security, but all existing tenants will get no greater security. The Minister is being dishonest and misleading in claiming and stating publicly that this Bill gives renters greater security of tenure. To existing renters, all of those who are in their homes, they get no extra security of tenure. The certainty they get is the continued threat of eviction. They get no new protection.

What will new renters - those who take up new tenancies - get? They get the certainty of permanently higher rents. First, when they take up a new place, the previous 2% inter-tenancy rent cap from the previous tenant is being removed and landlords will be able to increase the rent where there has not been a no-fault eviction, which is in the overwhelming majority of cases. They will be able to put the rent at market rent, meaning all new renters taking up new tenancies will face higher rents. They will face market rents. Will the Minister at least have the decency and honesty to admit that? What renters are going to face is market rents. On top of that, when they take up the new tenancy, within six years they will face an increase in rent to market rents. Currently, for existing tenants, it is 2% per year. There is no point at which their rent can be reset to market rent. Under the new proposals in this legislation, however, for new tenancies that renters take up, landlords will be able to reset their rent to market rent every six years. We know what market rent is; it is absolutely unaffordable, extortionate rent. What will it be in six years' time?

I say to the people of Ireland and the public today that if the Social Democrats are in government in four or five years' time after the next election, we will make sure to change it so that they will not face that market reset of rents. What is set out here is a recipe for the disaster and catastrophe in housing to become even worse. It is a recipe for rising homelessness. That is what this Bill is. It will cause increased homelessness in two ways. First, it does nothing to prevent the ongoing tsunami of homelessness and the thousands of evictions of existing renters. It does nothing to increase security of tenure for them. Second, when renters are evicted and they try to find somewhere else, there will be nowhere to go because everything will have been brought up to market rents.

The Minister set it out very clearly. He says that, on the one hand, the Government recognises that rents are very high. It is great that it does, but it will allow them to go even higher. What is it going to do? When a new tenancy lasts for over six years, the landlord will

be allowed to reset the rent to market rent at the end of each six-year period. The Minister said that he does not want rents for long-term tenancies to fall behind market rents. He wants all renters to be paying the market rent. Currently, there are hundreds of thousands of renters who are paying below the market rent. In some cases, it is an affordable rent and, in other cases, it is a higher rent, but it is not the market rent. This Bill – the Minister said it very straight and plainly – is a Bill to bring all rents up to market rent, which is absolutely unaffordable.

It is wrong and it will be deeply damaging for many people in this country. The Minister wants renters to be paying market rents. Of course, the assumption and market theory justifying the Bill, one which the Housing Agency set out as well and with which I disagree, is that we allow rents to increase and then we will see an increase in institutional investment and more funds will come in. That will then lead to a supply that will, at some point in the future, lead to lower rents. Dr. Lorcan Sirr set out before the housing committee clearly that this assumption and theory has no foundation. As he set out, the theory is that the increased supply we are looking for is going to bring down rents, but no one can ever say when. The Minister will not say when rents will come down as a result of these rent increases. Dr. Sirr said:

In my history, and from looking at my trends, charts and data, it has never happened yet because the quantity that we would need to bring down rents is so great that it is never going to happen.

What institutional investor is going to build apartments that are going to bring down rents? It is a flawed assumption. It is a flawed theory. It is based on free market economic theory that does not work in the context of housing. We know it does not. What developer or investor is going to build the unit that will lead to lower prices and rents? It is not true.

We know very clearly why this Bill has been introduced. This is a Bill that was pushed for by institutional investors, particularly by Irish Institutional Property. Mr. Pat Farrell, former Fianna Fáil chairperson and Senator, leads Irish Institutional Property and he has had multiple meetings with the Minister and his predecessor. Meeting after meeting with Department officials and the Minister are set out in the lobbying register.

6 o'clock

The relevant matter is that Pat Farrell of Irish Institutional Property, formerly a designated public official, DPO, and Member of the Seanad, met David Kelly, an assistant secretary in the Department of housing. What was the intended result? The intended result, which was set out on the lobbying register, was to "inform public policy review on rent regulation having regard to published [institutional investment policy] priorities". What does that mean? It means what he said in May last year, as was reported in the *Business Post*. Pat Farrell of Irish Institutional Property said that rent caps had stalled equity into Ireland, as the rate of return on investment was not lucrative enough for the build-to-rent sector. He said the rental cap policy has been "disastrous" and needs to be lifted.

The Minister can dress it up any way he wants. The reality is that he is lifting these rent caps for the institutional investors so that they will increase supply, which will, at some mythical point in the future, lead to lower rents. It is not going to lead to lower rents, and the Minister knows that. He should at least have the honesty to admit that. They are, as the Minister set out in his statement, going to lead to all rents being brought up to market rent level. For what? Is it so that we can have more box units at €3,000 or €3,500 per month? What are

those rents going to be in two or three years' time? Will they be €4,000 per month? Who can afford these rents? It is not economically sustainable.

Fianna Fáil is bringing us back to another property crash and another financial crash through unsustainable rents, just as there were unsustainable house prices in the past. Who is it for? Who is going to pay for it? That is a question the Taoiseach and the Minister do not address. Who are going to pay the rents? Young people at the moment are stuck in box rooms. Are they going to move out and pay €3,500 or €4,000 per month? They are not going to do it. They will still be stuck in the box room. People will be in overcrowded situations. People will be spending all their income on rent. What nurse, garda or teacher will be able to afford these rents? They cannot afford the rents as they are. How are they going to afford higher rents?

What has happened is that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been captured by institutional investors into thinking that this is the solution. I believe they are making a political calculation that is about units and not homes. The Government is lauding this increase in the number of units built last year. The Minister set this out himself. Where was the majority of unit increases? It was in apartments. Who is buying apartments? What household or young person is buying apartments? None of them are doing so. None of those units are for sale. They are all build-to-rent and with rents that no one can afford.

What does the Government want? Is it more apartment blocks for which no one can afford the rent? That is not sustainable. They are not homes for people.

The Social Democrats have set out alternative policies, even though the Minister denies it. The Taoiseach says that there are no solutions, that nobody else is putting forward solutions and that we need to rely on the private market and institutional investors. We do not. That is one of the most frustrating things. The Government does not believe in the Irish people's capacity to solve our own crisis. Councils in the past, when this country had nothing, built public housing for people across this country. What the Government is now doing is sacrificing future generations and to making them pay rents that they will be locked into. It is going to create a permanent class of renters. It is like returning us to serfdom. It is happening not just in Ireland but in other countries. Institutional and global wealth funds want to turn younger generations into a permanent class of renters who pay an income into their pension funds and wealth funds. What the Government is doing is facilitating that.

It is ironic that Fianna Fáil, supposedly the party of home ownership, is standing over the reduction in home ownership and the reduced possibility of home ownership. How are young people supposed to be able to save for a deposit when they have to pay €3,000 or €3,500 per month in rent? The Government is taking the future possibility of home ownership away from them in order to get some units on a spreadsheet so that it can say it has reached its targets or is heading close to them. It is not thinking about what is being built. Affordable housing is not being built. The Government has been captured. With this legislation, the Minister is taking a deeply disappointing measure. I do not believe it will work. We have seen that we cannot rely on global finance to deliver affordable housing, or housing full stop. At what point do those global financiers say they have enough profit or sufficient returns? It is never enough. The funds are based on every year increasing the rate of return. That is the way these funds work. Surely the Minister knows that. There is no point at which they will turn around and reduce the rents. The Minister is locking our housing system into an unaffordable supply of housing. That is fundamentally flawed.

There is an alternative. We have €166 billion lying in bank accounts in this country. We could be using that to build affordable homes. We have set out a proposal today - I look forward to the Minister's response to it - for a State construction company that would build affordable and social housing at scale. We could do that.

I seriously ask the Minister to reconsider at this last moment. I ask him to pull back and not introduce the aspects of this Bill that will lead to the reset to market rents. The Government is going to unleash housing misery on hundreds of thousands of people and on future renters in this country. I do not get it. The Minister knows. How are people going to be able to afford even higher rents than they are paying now? Rents will be reset year after year and tenancy after tenancy. Properties will be churned back to higher market rents. This is a completely flawed Bill in its rent increases. There are alternatives. The Social Democrats will be opposing the legislation.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I echo my party colleague's baffled and confounded response to this legislation. It fails to acknowledge the absolutely dire situation that so many renters are in, the crisis and emergency that this Government has created and the failure of the Government to provide any solutions. The system is pricing people out of renting and this Bill is only going to make matters worse.

In my constituency, grown-up people are stuck in their family home, unable to grow any further in their own lives. This Bill represents a false solution to the problems faced by renters. It is a reality we have heard at committee and from all the experts that if this Bill passes, the sky-high rents in this country will continue to rise. Setting rent anew with new leases means properties that have had their already very high rents capped at a 2% increase per year will see rents sky-rocket. Already in my constituency, if you search for Dundrum on *daft.ie*, the lowest cost two-bedroom property is priced at €2,500 per month. The lowest priced one-bedroom property is €1,700. I cannot imagine how a young family or working professional, or anyone but the wealthiest in society, can survive and plan for their future while paying €30,000 a year in rent.

People have contacted my office desperate for help, unable to dream of getting to the top of the housing list. Spiralling rents are leaving them trapped in homelessness. Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin, ach tá na daoine seo fágtha gan tinteán ar bith.

Grown-up children are stuck in their family homes and unable to grow. People are putting off having children because they do not have room in the family home. They cannot imagine raising a family when they could be pushed out by rent increases or evictions at any time. The sense of hopelessness felt by those stuck in this situation is palpable. People tell me about all the things they cannot do and all the ways that their lives are impacted. It is leaving people in unsafe living conditions with damp and mould. There are cases where people cannot escape a bad family situation because they have nowhere to go and no resources to pay nearly €2,000 per month for the most basic option available in the private market. It is leaving people in jobs they want to escape and limiting their educational opportunities, all because those who have somewhere are so desperate to keep a roof over their heads and trying to find somewhere to rent at an affordable rent is nigh on impossible.

This Bill represents a false solution. That is crystal clear in the simple fact that part of the goal of this Bill is to allow rents to continue to rise. We are faced with market-driven solution

after market-driven solution. I know we are given the message back that we do not see any place for market-driven solutions, but that is not the case.

We do see a place for market-driven solutions but the Government seems to be blinded by them alone. It is time for us to finally view housing in this country as a public good and a human right, not as an asset to be leveraged in every which way to the detriment of real people. There are no safeguards against constructive evictions so that landlords can reset to a market rent. We know we need a radical reset in housing. I do not see how a plan based around allowing rents to be hiked with every new lease delivers on that much-needed reset.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Speaking as the mother of two teenagers and one young adult who is renting, I am acutely aware of the pressures within Ireland's rental market currently. To make their way in the world, develop independent living skills and build the relationships that will last throughout their lifetimes, young people need a space they can call their own. Unfortunately, these spaces are becoming increasingly rare. In the most recent *daft.ie* report on the state of the Irish rental sector, a 20% reduction in the number of rental properties available was recorded. It does not take a degree in economics to know that where supply is diminished, prices will naturally rise. It is these price hikes that are barring young people and increasingly people in their 20s and 30s from entering the market. As things stand in Ireland's rental market, an entire generation is faced with an unenviable choice - return to your childhood bedroom or pack your bags and emigrate, as many generations before have done. In Carlow and Kilkenny, the picture is no different. A quick scan online yesterday showed that in the whole of County Carlow, only 23 properties were available to rent. In Kilkenny, there were 13 in the entire county yesterday.

If we are to provide for renters and protect their dignity, we must get to grips with providing rental accommodation. The Government has identified the problem as one of supply. While the Opposition would prefer inaction, this Government is prepared to do something about that. The key to this approach as envisaged in this proposed Bill is to dismantle the existing vicious cycle of dwindling rental supply. Landlords with existing long-term tenants under previous conditions found they could not reset rents to reflect market rates legally. Even with new tenants, a landlord's ability to set a new rent was linked to the rate of the previous tenancy, effectively ensuring that small rural landlords were permanently kept below water. Facing rising costs in maintenance, insurance and mortgage interest, these landlords found they were simply not allowed to keep pace with the world around them. Making the only rational choice, small rural landlords decided to leave the market, decreasing rental supply even further and raising the market rates yet higher. An ESRI report on the supply-side effects of excessive regulation found that rent controls, specifically after they were tightened, brought about market exits, with the RPZ status associated with significantly fewer rent listings and registrations.

If we are to boost supply, we must encourage those who provide it to enter the market. This is not about siding with landlords or renters or *vice versa*. It is about designing a system that works for everyone by working with everyone. Allowing landlords to reset to market rents for new tenancies will encourage these small landlords, who provide the backbone of rural Ireland's rental market, to open up their properties to rent. A six-year tenancy of minimum duration will provide the security that renters need to live their lives in comfort. Neither party should be at a disadvantage. There should be no reason we cannot simultaneously protect renters' rights while bringing landlords into the market. Presenting Ireland's rental market as a

conflict between landlords and renters is a false binary peddled by those who prefer struggles to solutions.

In the medium term, the policies outlined in this proposed Bill will bring supply on board, stabilise the market and put roofs over our young people's futures. I acknowledge change will not be instant, nor will it be without worry for some landlords and tenants, as change always brings about fear of the unknown. These measures will undoubtedly take time to become effective and may lead to a temporary rise in rents. I am buoyed, however, by the progress being made across government in the housing market. As we now know, housing delivery is ramping up at an unprecedented scale and solutions put in place by this Government are bearing fruit. This proposed Bill is one such solution. I am confident that in time it too will benefit us all.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Each time I have the opportunity to speak on housing, I say this. I have to start by reiterating that for the common good, I want every Government housing and homelessness policy to be effective. For every person on the housing list, the hidden homeless, every family in a homeless hub and all of those in emergency accommodation, I want the Government's policies to work. The fact is, however, they are not working. Rent controls have not worked. Now we have this Bill, the latest Government intervention in the rental market that will make things worse for renters and allow rents to rise, and ultimately, there will be people who are no longer able to afford their rental accommodation and will also end up in their local authority housing office trying to source emergency accommodation. This is at a time when we are at a record level of homelessness, with almost 17,000 people homeless, including 5,000 children. People had a little bit of protection in rent pressure zones but with the Bill, the Government is taking that protection away. Nobody wants this Bill, except for the big institutional investors to increase their profits. The Government's entire housing and rental policy seems to be in service to those big businesses, not the men, women and children who need affordable rental accommodation throughout this State.

Towards the end of last year, in Louth, market rents were on average 6.4% higher in 2025 than in the previous year. The average listed rent is now €1,907 a month, up 52% from the time of the Covid pandemic, but that is averaged across the county. It is much higher in my home town of Drogheda and in the south of the county, as people there bought in the ever-expanding commuter belt. Only last week, a modest three-bedroom terraced home was advertised for an eye-watering €3,250 per month. This Bill will continue to drive those rents up for an average apartment or house in the wee county. We can be damn sure the rise in rent will be not so wee. This is nothing more than a rip-off rental Bill the Government needs to bin now.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Is é bun agus barr an scéil leis an mBille seo ná go gcuirfidh sé drochbhail ar chíosaithe trí chostas tithíochta a ardú, costas atá cheana féin i bhfad ró-ard.

The bottom line with this Bill is that rents can be reset to market rate between tenancies, which means we will see already sky-high rents go up and up from March. We are already seeing the effects. Eviction notices have already gone up in anticipation of the new rules. In my constituency, I have been working with an 81-year-old man in Athy who has been renting in the same building for over 20 years at a rate that is now well below market rent. Now, all of

a sudden, the landlord is moving in a family member. Under the new legislation, rents can be hiked up to market price every six years or if a tenant leaves voluntarily. Rents are going to be out of control within a matter of months.

This basically amounts to deregulating the rental sector and offers perverse incentives for landlords to create shorter tenancies. It is estimated that under the new regime, yearly rent will cost over €3,500 more in Kildare by the end of the decade. While the Government talks about creating sustainable and secure conditions for renters with this Bill, it will do exactly the opposite. One would have to wonder who the Government had in mind coming up with these new rules. It was not nurses, teachers, people in their 20s and 30s who have never moved out of the family home, families who would like to support their children moving away for college, the elderly receiving the State pension or low-income families receiving HAP, who will no longer be able to afford their top-up payments. These changes come at the behest of big institutional investors and vulture funds to increase their profits. What renters need now is hope, not hikes. Sinn Féin stands with renters and for affordability.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Minister may not have noticed, and maybe Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have not noticed, that tenants in private rental accommodation are already under huge stress. In case things were not bad enough, the Government is now going to throw them to the mercy of rack-renting landlords from 1 March. Whatever limits and calming effect rent pressure zones had in slowing down rent increases will all be gone. New rents will be pitched to the highest in the area. The sky will be the limit. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael surely know this. They know what is going on out there the same as I do. They know what is going to happen. Tenants going into new apartments or houses, or existing ones that become vacant, face extortionate increases. Tenancies do not just change every six years. The Government knows there is regular turnover. The average tenancy lasts about three and a half years.

Laois renters will be particularly hard hit, given the evidence of what is already going on in that sector in the county. Many tenants are under huge pressure and regularly tell me about this. They have to go short of meals, clothes and a whole range of things to try to keep the roof over their heads. They have to turn off heating. The RTB figures for last year show that rents in Laois for new tenancies had jumped 16.7%, higher than existing tenancies. The latest figures for new rents in Laois show that there has been another increase of 15.3% on existing tenancies. That is the current situation, before 1 March.

A crummy one-bedroom apartment now costs €1,750 per month. A three-bedroom house in Kilminchy costs €2,100 per month. A four-bedroom house in Foxburrow costs €2,500 per month. We have had the highest eight quarterly increases we have ever seen in the county, despite the fact that we have RPZs. The race is on for landlords to get to the top of the market and market rent. On top of all that, there can be annual increases of up to 2%. Who in the name of God can afford that? This will cause a catastrophe for people.

Existing tenants in homes and apartments will be put under huge pressure with higher rents. The Government is introducing measures it has said will provide tenants with security, but the Minister of State and I know how it works. We know how landlords will apply pressure. There will be strategic evictions and notices to quit because people will not be able to pay the rent.

I appeal to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael not to push through the Bill. It will hurt tens of thousands of households that are already trying to keep their heads above the waterline in the

middle of a cost-of-living crisis. It is a real difficulty for younger people who are over the income threshold for social housing and do not have a hope of being able to save a deposit. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael spoke about home ownership. People can forget about it because they will not be able to save for a deposit. They are trapped in private rented accommodation.

I am sure the Minister and Minister of State know an increasing number of people who are going past middle age, as well as elderly people who are paying massive rents; such people come to me. Where will they go when they hit pension age? The Government's contention is that the increase in the supply of housing will reduce rents. The evidence does not support that. The evidence at a committee did not show that. Between 2003 and 2007, the construction of new homes hit record levels, including over 90,000 in one year. Did rents go down? Not a hope. They did not. They increased dramatically. That is what happened.

The only beneficiaries of the Bill will be large rack renting landlords. I appeal to the Minister of State. Section 8 is absolutely shocking and will put huge pressure on people. I ask the Government not to try to force through the Bill, in particular section 8, and instead introduce effective rent controls for counties like Laois where rents are rocketing. I ask the Government to increase the support for Laois County Council and other councils around the country to build more cost-rental homes and improve housing affordability. I want more home ownership, rental housing and people in secure accommodation, but this Bill will not do that. It will pile pressure on people. I am not just coming in here to have a go. I am saying this because of what I see happening on the ground

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The pretence that the Government cares about the rental crisis and the unaffordable and obscene rents that are contributing to the housing crisis and misery that many people are suffering this country is being dropped completely. We have a naked admission with this Bill that the Government is representing property speculators, investors and landlords. It is trying to justify it with the most perverse logic ever, namely that it is going to raise rents that are already unaffordable in order to make rents drop. It is like the American military commander in Vietnam who said they had to bomb the villages to save them. It is the same perverse and Orwellian logic. I spotted it, as did Deputy Hearn, in the explanatory memorandum and in the Minister's speech where he admits this. The explanatory memorandum, regarding the purpose of the resetting upwards of already unaffordable rents to market rents, states: "The aim is to encourage investment in the rental sector by ensuring that rents in respect of long standing tenancies do not fall behind market rent". For the very few people out there who might have half affordable rent, the Government is to make sure they cannot even have that. We have to make sure, in the interests of the investors, that everybody is paying the highest possible rent because that is what the investors need.

The Minister admitted the same logic is behind the Government's thinking when he said earlier this year that housing is about international markets. It is actually a spreadsheet in Zurich, New York or Antwerp more so than a builder looking at a site in counties Longford or Roscommon and deciding what is happening here. That is it. The Government is dancing to the tune of speculators and investors in Antwerp, New York and Zurich, and of course we have our own home grown greedy landlords as well.

The Government will put up what are already the most unaffordable rents in Europe to even more unaffordable levels. Our rents are 30% higher than the EU average and the Government

wants them to go higher. In Dublin, the average rent is now 50% of the after tax income of the average worker. That average is brought down by the fact that there is still a small number of slightly lower rents. When everything is reset to the highest level of market rent, that average will jump.

Rents have gone up by 41% in the past six years. If rent is reset every six years, 60,000 to 70,000 new tenancies will potentially go up by 40% every year. That is shocking, on top of the already obscene rental levels that are completely unaffordable for ordinary people. That makes a mockery of the so-called protections, including the security of tenure measures, because if rent is unaffordable and there is a churn of tenancies about every three and a half years, anybody looking for a new tenancy will be faced with completely unaffordable rents that could be up to 40% higher than the already unaffordable levels. They will have absolutely no chance of being able to afford those rents. All the while, the guys in Zurich, New York and Antwerp, and our own homegrown landlords, will be raking it in from these unaffordable rents.

It is also not entirely clear that the protections the Government claims are in place are working. Accommodation not being suitable to needs can still be grounds for eviction. People can be evicted for being in overcrowded accommodation. There will be new reasons for eviction, even under the so-called protections, such as cases where there are too many people living in a property. People may have had a kid or have a new partner who has kids and is in an overcrowded situation, and that now grounds for people to be evicted under the Bill. Of course that will happen. As landlords find other reasons for evictions, then will then have an incentive to drive up rents. The Government has given them an incentive. Even in the case of those who are marginally protected, the landlord now has an incentive to kick them out and get the rent up to the highest level. What the Government is doing is unbelievable. It is disgusting and shameful and will make the housing misery a lot worse for a lot of people.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The only guarantee in the Bill is that the already unaffordable rip-off rents will be increased to extortionate proportions, and I mean all rents, not just those affecting tenancies, from 1 March. Over a very short period, all rents will increase to extortionate proportions. It is an outright attack on renters. Some 60,000 renters will have their rents increased every year by anything up to €3,000 to €3,500. It will lock renters out of the market and increase homelessness.

This Bill is written for, on behalf of and by big corporate landlords and institutional investors. There is a housing emergency in this State. A total of 16,734 persons were homeless on 31 December of this year, an increase of 1,870 on 2024. A total of 5,188 of those were children, up 678 on 2024. That is a scandal, and this Bill will make matters worse. The Government has consistently failed to meet its housing targets. This year it had a target of 41,000 units; it missed it by over 5,000 units. The fact of the matter is that the housing emergency we have in this country continues to undermine the very fabric of Irish society.

There is an alternative, and I continue to say we need the declaration in law of a housing emergency. That is the basis for any successful alternative to the current failed policies of this and previous Governments. Housing is a human right and is enshrined in Article 25 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Housing Commission deals with this housing emergency and says, "It is critical that this housing deficit is addressed through emergency action." Successive governments have failed to do that and failed to solve this

housing crisis. The Government's current plan and this Bill fail. They are rebaked policies of previous Governments and previous plans. This one is no different. There is precedent for the declaration in law of a housing emergency. We had the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Acts between 2011 and 2016. A declaration of a housing emergency in law would ensure that the State and all its agencies, Departments of State, local authorities, approved housing bodies and utilities like Irish Water and the ESB would be required to take emergency action to solve the housing crisis. This approach is consistent with and faithful to both the spirit and the terms of Bunreacht na hÉireann, and I believe it should be implemented urgently because it is the only way this housing crisis can be dealt with and reasonable housing can be provided for Irish citizens. We need large-scale building of social and affordable houses on public land, we need to stop all evictions and we need to freeze rents, not to increase them to what are being called market rents, which are absolutely extortionate. We need a massive plan for local authorities to purchase vacant houses, to refurbish them and to let them to housing applicants. These are the first steps in a successful housing plan, and the very first step in that is the declaration of a housing emergency.

One final item I want to refer to is the current income limits for local authority housing applicants. They are completely out of date, totally inadequate and a huge pressure on ordinary families, working families and families on social welfare.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have heard some contributions in here in my time but the contribution from the Fianna Fáil TD, the lament for landlords we just heard, was quite incredible. Her whole contribution was about the difficulties of the landlords in this era, in 2026. This is at a time when teachers, therapists and building workers cannot find anywhere to rent, when the average rent, as we know, is now €2,500 in Dublin. The Deputy's contribution showed very bizarre level of detachment. She certainly was not thinking about the likes of a tenant in my area who is reported in the newspapers today as having been charged extra for the use of a fridge, charged extra for the use of a dining table to study on and then asked to do work on the adjacent Airbnb the landlord was renting out, where 12 building workers were residing. This is going on in Clonsilla, in Dublin 15. Fair play to that tenant for fighting that and for winning the case with the RTB but €7,000 in compensation is not very good, to be frank, for the level of suffering they faced. It is not much of a deterrent either, if you think about it that way, and that needs to be looked at.

These are the conditions people are being forced into, and it is not just young people either, as we have all heard. A lot of older people are coming to our attention. In my area there is an eviction tsunami. A couple of months ago, in Dublin 15 alone, 115 families had registered with the local council that they had notices of termination. They are just the ones who told the council. We have been trying to assist people. I have the sheriff on speed dial on my phone. I never thought I would reach that level. It is a matter of trying just to get things put back until we can find there is no emergency accommodation in Dublin. I do not know if there is any discussion on that in the Dáil. People are just expected to go onto the streets. A lot of these people tend to have nobody else to support them, no near family members. We had one eviction in the Clonee area where the woman, who did nothing wrong in her entire life, was paying her rent, the landlord wanted to sell and the council would not acquire the property because the budget was used up. She ended up with the sheriff coming and being pulled out of the house in her dressing gown, onto the street. She actually spoke the same language as the bailiffs

doing the evicting so she could hear everything they were saying and was appealing to them. She was treated brutally and manhandled. Those are the goings-on now all over the suburbs of Dublin and I am sure in many other counties as well. It is not even being brought to light in the media, so we have to bring it out to light in the Dáil. That is the level of what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have created.

I will back this up with facts and show that it is not just anecdotes. According to a survey from *myhome.ie*, just 7% saw any difference in housing policy from this Government. They had no hope whatsoever. The eviction rate had gone up in quarter 3 of last year by 35% in preparation for these new laws, and rents are now one third higher than they were at pre-Covid levels and two thirds higher than the Celtic tiger peak. The Government is benefiting landlords at every single turn.

Then we have a social crisis where we cannot get essential workers whom we need to bring down the CDNT waiting lists, to work in the schools, etc. We had one case in Dublin 15 where four teachers were evicted from the one campus. There were two schools together on the campus. Four teachers got evicted at the one time. That is what is facing people. I absolutely despair for young people now. I was talking to an American who has lived here for a year and they cannot believe the housing crisis in this country. They are just gobsmacked by the lack of action and the lack of care or thought about it. They have not seen anything like it in the US, which is the belly of the beast of capitalism, as we know. They just could not believe that it is continuing the way it is. Our nieces, our nephews and our children are ending up in Australia. This Bill will only make it worse. It has all been said here tonight. If you allow a landlord to introduce new rules for new tenants, they will create new tenants. That is just a reality. It is an iron law of economics that that will happen. The Government is giving that power because it wants more vulture funds and more investment funds and that is its prime consideration.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I rise to support the residential tenancies Bill 2026. I will begin by acknowledging the work of the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, in bringing forward this legislation, which tries to do something Ireland has struggled to do for far too long, that is, strike a fair balance between tenant protection and rental supply. I will say this clearly: we need that balance because the truth is that the system we currently have is not serving anybody properly. It is not serving the renters, who want security and certainty, and it is not serving landlords, who want clarity, fairness and a rental sector that is not constantly changing rules midstream.

The Bill gets a number of things right.

First, it introduces for the first time a national approach to rent regulation. Instead of the patchwork of rent pressure zones, we move to a more consistent, national framework where rent increases are linked to inflation using the consumer price index, CPI, and, critically, there remains a cap of 2% per annum to protect tenants during high inflation. Second, it strengthens tenant security through the introduction of rolling six-year tenancies of minimum duration for new tenancies, and that is being created from 1 March 2026. That is a major step in giving renters the stability that so many families are crying out for. Third, the Bill provides a pathway for new investment in supply, particularly in apartments, by linking rent increases for new apartments to inflation only, which is designed to support new building and attract investment into the sector.

There is, therefore, a lot in the Bill to support. I support it because it is rooted in the reality we cannot ignore. If we do not grow supply, rents will remain high and pressure will remain unbearable. I also commend the Minister on recognising something many in this House have been slow to acknowledge, namely that a rental market where rents cannot be reset between tenancies becomes one that people exit. That is why the Bill provides for rent to reset to market rates in specific circumstances, particularly where tenancies have ended or between tenancies at the end of a six-year period while also putting safeguards in place to prevent economic evictions. That is the correct direction of travel.

I also want to raise concerns that have been brought to my attention and that I am hearing repeatedly in my clinics in Galway East. I want to raise them honestly and frankly because these concerns are real. In my clinics, I meet people who are not corporate landlords, not vulture landlords or not large investors but ordinary people, such as a farmer who bought a small house years ago for retirement income, a couple with one rental property to support a mortgage or a widow who rents out a property to top up her pension. These are people who did what the State told them to do for decades.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is a bad reflection if they need to do that in Ireland.

Deputy Albert Dolan: They invested, provided rental homes and helped supply. They are coming to me with one fear above all others. They are afraid they will lose control of their own property. Vacant possession matters. I want to put this plainly. It is absolutely right that tenants have security. It is absolutely right that we restrict no-fault evictions. It is also vital, however, that property owners can have vacant possession of their asset if they choose to sell, especially small landlords. For many small landlords, that property is not a business. It is their pension, their safety net, their retirement plan and their family's long-term security. While the Bill recognises that a property can be sold at any time with a tenant *in situ*, we have to be honest about what that means in practice.

I want to raise a very practical point being raised with me again and again, which is that if small landlords are forced, in effect, to sell with tenants *in situ*, the valuation of their property will be crippled. This will be for two reasons. First, the buyer pool collapses, so if a property is sold with tenants *in situ*, it is no longer a home for a young couple to buy but only an investment asset. That means the only buyers are investors, which is a far smaller pool. Second, the properties become valued on yield. Here is the reality. For a small landlord with one property, after tax, maintenance, insurance and compliance costs, and after the risk that comes with the system, the yield is low. For large investment funds, however, the yield calculation is completely different. They can buy and sell portfolios at scale. They can spread costs. They have professional management, better financing and better tax structuring. We are creating, and I say this respectfully, a situation where the State risks pushing small landlords out while strengthening the position of large-scale corporate ownership. I think that would be the worst outcome.

The Bill does recognise a distinction between small landlords and large landlords and that is welcome but I urge the Minister to be extremely careful that, in practice, we do not end up with a system where large landlords have disproportionate ownership of the rental market and small landlords face the same practical consequences but without the scale, resources or tax

efficiency to survive it. If we lose the small landlord sector, we lose supply and flexibility in rural Ireland.

From a rural Ireland perspective, if we lose the small landlords, they will not be coming back. We sometimes think institutional investment will step in and take their place but in these small towns, there is no institutional investment. No institutional investment is coming to east Galway. We are not going to see large apartment blocks. As a result, when a small landlord sells and gets out of the market, that rolling rental supply we depend on in our towns is going to be gone. These properties might be for somebody who needs one for a year, somebody who moves into an area to settle or a worker looking to relocate. These are all examples of people who need to rent in our areas and there will not be a rental supply if it is sold and gone.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Ó Muirí.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the legislation before the House and I commend the Minister and the Minister of State on their work in progressing it. The need for reform in the sector itself is clear. The legislation, as my colleagues said, seeks to strike a balance between strengthening protections for tenants while also ensuring landlords stay in the rental market. However, there are a few issues I believe must be addressed before this legislation is enacted.

I welcome the report laid before the Dáil by my colleague, Deputy Micheál Carrigy, Cathaoirleach of the housing committee. I believe the recommendations in this report need to be thoroughly considered by the Department. Recommendation number seven is particularly important. This proposes that the distinction between large and small landlords should be reconsidered to account for the number of properties owned rather than the number of tenancies held. According to that data most recently published by the RTB, over half of landlords are currently associated with five or fewer tenancies. They are not large corporate entities. In many cases, they are self-employed workers or PAYE employees who have invested their own money in a property as an alternative to a pension, using rental income for deposits and committing to mortgages spanning 20 to 30 years.

I would go further than the committee's recommendation. It does not make sense that a small- or medium-sized landlord with four or five tenancies should be treated the same way as a corporate landlord. Small landlords are a core component of our housing system, whether some like it or not. There are over 240,000 private tenancies on the housing register, with almost half of those associated with small landlords. Five as a level is probably a good place at which to set that distinction. I understand it has to be set somewhere but it has to be set very carefully. We have to be careful in terms of striking that balance.

Another concern raised with me relates to families where a relative has entered long-term care. In particular, there does not seem to be an exception under the legislation that would allow a tenancy to be terminated following the death of a landlord whose family home had been rented out, effectively, to provide for the cost of care. While I understand the Department is going to look at issues around the fair deal scheme in this regard, we need to ensure that families with similar, effectively private, arrangements outside that scheme will also be protected in this way.

I ask that the Minister urgently examine these issues over the coming days and weeks, recognising that these changes are intended to come into effect urgently from next month and that many families are understandably concerned. We have to get this right, not just for tenants, but for the long-term stability and viability of the rental sector as a whole.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I stand in firm opposition to this destructive legislation. It is the most profound change to the regulation of the private rental sector in a decade and will have a severe impact on renters across the State. At a time when families are already crushed by a cost-of-living crisis, this Bill is not a reset; it is a surrender. The rent-hike Bill of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will allow vulture funds and big landlords to hike up the rents of 60,000 people every year. It surrenders their security to the profit motives of vulture funds and institutional investors. That is the fact and the reality.

The core of this Bill, the so-called market reset, allows landlords to exploit the gap between tenancies, hiking rents to exorbitant, so-called market rates. This is not policy; it is profiteering. Analysis shows this will claw extra thousands of euro from renters annually, pushing more people into poverty and insecurity. In Meath East already, two-bedroom apartments go for in the region of €2,000 to €2,600. What we are faced with here are rents far in excess of that, rents that will be simply unaffordable. The Government's duty is to protect citizens and not portfolios. Instead of cutting and freezing unaffordable rents, this Bill deliberately fuels the crisis. We must reject it entirely. We must defend existing protections and fight for a system where housing is a home and not just a commodity for corporate profit. We need to end the rip-off, ban increases and make rents affordable.

Seasaimid le chéile. Stop Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's rent hike Bill.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Two things occur to me in relation to this Bill, which I strongly oppose. It is a very dangerous Bill that will cause huge hardship for an awful lot of people. Listening to some of the contributions over the course of this afternoon, I have felt like I am in a parallel universe. The first thing to say is that there must be prioritisation here. There must be a recognition of what is fundamental here. I believe in rules that are fair and I believe that adequate resources should be provided to ensure that decisions are enforced where landlords have legitimate grievances. However, we are treating the two considerations as equal when these are people's homes. They are where people live. When they are evicted, they cannot find accommodation and potentially end up homeless for extended periods of time. Treating the two considerations as if they are roughly equivalent makes no sense to me. The rules should absolutely be fair, enforceable and applied. Resources are needed for that but to treat these considerations as one and the same is wrong.

This legislation is based on an assumption that is completely untrue, which is that there is a functional market. There is no functional market. The rental market is completely dysfunctional. It is broken and has been for a really long time. The Minister of State is talking about the new tenancies that are going to be established. With the complications involved in these five new different types of tenancies, it will be impossible for landlords and tenants to work out what to do. These new tenancies are going to be matched to market rents, as if market rents are not completely out of reach for a huge number of people. There are tenants out there who are paying €1,600, €1,700 and up to €2,000 in rent, depending on where they are. Some of them are paying childcare fees on top of that, along with a million other things. How are

those people supposed to make ends meet? This creates an incentive for people to be moved out of properties and new tenancies established. In that case, in Cork, you are talking about a difference of €308 in the county as a whole and €278 in the city. Over the course of a year, that is thousands of euro. It is a huge blow to people. It makes no sense whatsoever.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are again being told that these are only technical amendments and that nothing is changing. However, in places like west Cork and in Killarney, County Kerry, next door to us, that reassurance rings hollow. These sections lock in a planning regime that was never designed with coastal rural communities in mind. They copper-fasten restrictions on short-term letting that hit family homes, small operators and tourism-dependent villages while doing nothing to address the real causes of the housing crisis.

In west Cork, short-term letting is not about speculation or corporate landlords; it is about ordinary households renting a room or a home for part of the year to keep local tourism alive and to make ends meet in areas with limited employment options. This Bill preserves a one-size-fits-all approach that treats rural communities in the same way as inner-city Dublin. It does not deliver housing supply, tackle vacancy and dereliction or distinguish between large-scale operators and local families. We will be proposing amendments. I hope they will be accepted. We could then sit around the table to work on delivery. The Bill will remove accommodation from the tourism market, damage local economies and undermine livelihoods across west Cork, all without producing a single affordable home. Until the Government recognises that rural Ireland needs a different and balanced approach, I cannot support measures that punish rural communities while failing to solve the housing issue.

Part of this Bill relates to short-term lets. The situation in that regard is very serious. I have seen it myself. This legislation is going to come before the people next May. People the length and breadth of west Cork have been asking me about it because we depend on short-term lets. I am genuinely not sure where the Minister of State's constituency is.

Deputy John Cummins: It is Waterford, which is very dependent on tourism.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is Waterford. Waterford depends on tourism so the Minister of State will know all about it. It is a lovely place. Many people depend on the little bit of income from Airbnb, operating bed and breakfast accommodation or letting out a second home or whatever for the short term. They have very serious concerns. They will now have to fill out a form and be registered. They have no problem with registering. They are not afraid to be registered. However, there are very serious concerns about having to seek planning permission. According to this Bill, they will not be allowed to operate without it. That is on the form as of now. Perhaps the Government is going to change it. That is where my amendments will come into play. If that is not changed, these places will end up being shut down. That is an astonishing attack on tourism. We cannot let that happen here. It looks like it is happening. We have been pleading about this for the last year and a half here in the Dáil, in the audiovisual room and in other places. Meeting after meeting has been held on this issue across the road in Buswells Hotel. The Government is treating Courtmacsherry in the very same way as Dublin 4. That does not work and the Minister of State should not even dream that it does.

A woman in west Cork told me last week that she has packed up because of the terror of this legislation going through. She said that she and her friend had packed up. They said to hell with it; they are sick of it. Will the Minister of State listen to me for two minutes for God's sake? If he does not, no one else will. This woman told me that this meant ten bedrooms gone in her corner of the community. She is not going into the business again. She has packed up because of this legislation. She talked about the number of people who had booked rooms with her who went into Clonakilty or Bandon to have a bit of food or a pint. They used local taxis and the local transport bus to come and go. The Government is going to block all of that with this legislation. Will the Minister of State wake up? This is not going to work.

If it does go through, the Government parties will be run out of west Cork in the next election. The Minister of State keeps nodding over there but I will send this on to him. I am having a public meeting at 7 p.m. next Friday in O'Donovan's Hotel on this issue alone. I will stand by the tourism sector in west Cork. I will stand by the people of west Cork. I will not turn my back on them. The Minister of State keeps nodding over there but I will send it on to him.

Deputy John Cummins: I am not nodding.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will send it on to him so that he can have a look. If I am wrong, I will stand up and thank the Minister of State very much.

Deputy John Cummins: I am sorry but, just because the Deputy is saying I am nodding, it does not mean I am. I know he is saying that for the camera but I am not nodding.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am not saying it for the camera. I am saying it for the people of west Cork. How dare you insult the people of west Cork? You should not dare open your mouth like that. If you do not know what you are doing, you should not be there at all. How dare you say that? The people of west Cork are going to lose their income. They are crying in my offices. They are crying without a house because the Government cannot supply them with one. God almighty, what is wrong with you? I had a lovely girl in front of me yesterday. After many years, she had got an eviction notice the day before. I said that she had not slept since she got it and she said that she had not and that she could not sleep with the worry. Another woman told me she cannot get social housing because she and her partner both work. She was crying in my office on Saturday because they cannot get a home. We have a serious crisis and instead of dealing with it the Government is attacking the tourism sector.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I have very serious concerns in relation to the legislation. If I could have the Minister of State's attention very briefly, I would greatly appreciate it because there are significant concerns. This legislation will not bring about stability or the balance the Minister of State has outlined. It is actually causing the flight of landlords. That is what is happening. It has accelerated the exodus of landlords from the market, which is causing immense difficulty for constituents and renters right across this country, including in my own constituency of Mayo. Small landlords are leaving the rental market and it is not because they want to but because of this Government legislation and its six-year tenancies. The evidence is overwhelming. That is why I am asking the Minister of State to reconsider. The legislation

must be reconsidered. It is designed for large institutional investors. It is not designed for accidental landlords or people who are entering retirement and who may seek to sell down the line. For many such landlords, it actually incentivises vacancy.

The number of eviction notices issued has increased by 35%. In quarter 3 of 2025, over 5,500 termination notices were issued. In the same quarter of the previous year, the figure was 4,000. Most of the landlords who are issuing these notices are intending to sell and they are not being replaced. The RTB has concerns in that regard as well. Some 56% of homes that are sold are sold by landlords who are leaving the market. Just 9% are being bought by investors. There has been a significant reduction in the number of rental properties available.

7 o'clock

I believe this legislation is going to create more difficulty for renters because it is designed for pension funds and investment funds. I have spoken to landlords who are very concerned. The restrictions on small landlords are very concerning. Financial hardship has been mentioned. I looked at the legislation, which states small landlords may only sell where they are servicing a debt in excess of 15% of the asking price. This is causing concern. I have spoken to landlords who have attended my clinic and who are raising this as a concern. I spoke to another landlord, who is a grandfather. His grandchild is in Australia but he will be coming home. This man said he is going to leave the property vacant.

This is the reality on the ground and the unintended consequences of the Bill will be great. It will be known as the legislation that caused the flight of small landlords, which has already been happening but it will cause an acceleration of it. I ask that this aspect about small landlords be reconsidered. It is primarily designed for large institutional investors. There are a number of cases where we will see homes being left vacant as a result of this. I ask that it be reconsidered and that amendments to the legislation be considered to reduce the number of properties that will remain vacant as a result of this.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: There is an old saying, "fail to prepare, prepare to fail". This legislation, with all its intentions of what the Government wants it to do, has not taken everything into account. Part of the legislation mentions short-term lets. What constitutes a short-term let? Is it a week, a month, two months or three months? The likes of Airbnb have been on about this to me and my colleague in Independent Ireland, Deputy Collins, asking us what it is. Last year we spoke about the planning permission rules for Airbnb and buildings that for the past number of years had been used as short-term lets for holidaymakers who contributed to local towns and communities. This goes partly to short-term lets but what is a short-term let?

We have people who want to build their own houses. If we go to Wexford, we have people who will be looking for lettings while their houses are being retrofitted after flooding. What happens there? A problem has been caused by the Government failing to dredge the rivers, which has meant it flooded people's houses to protect different species. It could have put a plan in place to dredge the rivers in different sequences, protecting the wildlife and protecting people's homes. These same people's homes will no longer be able to get insurance because they have been flooded. The Government is coming up with a task force for this. This brings us back to the tenancy Bill and how long a property is let. How long will the houses of these people which have been flooded be out of action? If they rent a property, will they be caught

in a situation whereby they might want to rent for a year but the landlord will say they cannot do this because it has to be based on the tenancy Bill?

Rents will skyrocket as will the price of student accommodation. I have a family member in college. The hardest thing we had to do this year was get him accommodation. Four of us with family members who are students in Galway came together to rent a property. We had to pay for it from three months prior to the start of the college year to make sure they had a place when they were going to college because of the rental market. All I can say is that come March every auctioneer in the country will be weighed down with rental properties going up for sale. There will be rental properties going up for sale because people will say enough is enough. Every year something changes.

We have some fantastic landlords but we also have some bad ones. We have fantastic people looking after people in their communities, keeping the rent low to make sure people can afford it because they are looking after the property. Now we have this Bill, which will equalise it to market value. Somebody could be charging one and a half times the price of someone else. Now they will say that as they are getting one and a half times the price of what someone else is getting, that person will have to bring their rent up to meet it. This means the person in the rental property will be paying more. It will put more pressure on the landlords because they will say their property needs to make more.

The Bill states that people who have four properties or more will be locked into six-year tenancies and anybody with three properties or fewer will not. This is one thing the Bill is bringing in. What needs to be brought in here is 100% security for people. Anyone who had problem tenants had a massive problem with the RTB as people were left in the property for up to two years. This was not only private landlords as local authorities have had the same issue. A lot of people have a second home because it might have been left to them. A parent might have passed away and left them property. They might have decided they wanted to house somebody local in the area to help them and they are all being branded as landlords.

From the point of view of good landlords and good tenants, we need to put in place a reward system. This system being put in place will only make rents higher. It will put the landlords who are profiteering on a massive scale at an advantage and small landlords will want to get out. All the tariffs are being put in place in a one-Bill-fits-all. Reward good people, reward good tenants and reward good landlords and then deal with the people who are doing badly.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I support the Bill and I must acknowledge that many of the proposals are welcome in principle. Tenants across the country, and particularly in my constituency of Dublin Mid-West, have had a torrid time over the past 20 years with many people facing termination of tenancy with few viable options for alternative accommodation. We do need more protection and a simpler and more transparent system. While the Bill has some positive elements, I do not think it will go far enough. It will not lead to more homes being built or more homes in the right areas with transport, education, community and other facilities alongside them.

The core problem in Dublin is the shortage of supply. In my constituency, more than any other part of Dublin, we have seen huge tracts of land already zoned. We are carrying the load, with tens of thousands of housing units zoned but insufficient building taking place. Alongside this, thanks to almost every political party in this Chamber, appalling decisions were made to

benefit developers but not the people living in the areas who need the facilities. These areas will be ghettoised without proper transport, education and community infrastructure. We had a chance with Clonburris strategic development zone but a hames was made of it but this is another day's debate.

In terms of assisting with supply, nothing in the Bill addresses barriers to construction such as costs, slow delivery, planning and other aspects. We have the gradual disappearance of smaller landlords, the type of people who are more likely to charge affordable rents in return for a reliable and, in one sense of the phrase, low-maintenance tenant. Instead, we are pushing the boat out for investor landlords, making it easier for them to hike up their rents.

I get the logic, and I support the 2% rent freeze, but there is still a real risk that some of the measures could push up rents even higher. By exempting new units from certain caps, the Bill could end up creating a two-tier market, as others have said, whereby new developments can charge a lot more, even allowing for the consumer price index. This is something that will continue as long as demand massively outstrips supply and we could do more.

There is also a credible concern that the Bill may paradoxically undermine security of tenure despite its stated aim of enhancing it. Restrictions on terminations are very welcome but they sit alongside provisions that may encourage landlords to reset tenancies more frequently than before in order to access the higher market rents.

If the financial incentive tends to become stronger than the so-called regulatory disincentive, then tenants may find themselves less secure. We could see certain types of landlords and institutional landlords being more active in looking at ways at getting around the regulations or being flexible in terms of the definitions, such as for "refurbishment". For example, one of the grounds is termination for sale. The Bill does not require proof of actual timelines for listing the sale or specify the penalties for failure to complete a sale. That means a landlord can credibly issue a notice to sell even if it is not ultimately completed. We need to get tighter on that.

Regarding the termination for substantial refurbishment, the Bill does not go too much into the definition of "substantial", so a landlord could plan works, provide contractor quotes, carry out limited works and then relet at a higher market rate. Where are the enforcement and inspection to make sure that a loophole is not going to be made? Then there are the own-use or family-use grounds, which are difficult to disprove. If the Bill does not require proof of occupation after the tenant leaves, minimum occupation periods and RTB follow-up checks, then there are going to be a lot of cracks to be falling through.

The RTB is already not sufficiently funded. I know of one very dodgy landlord operating in my constituency who has multiple units that I have reported for not being registered with the RTB and for other planning issues. I am not naming names, but I am pointing out that two years later nothing has happened. That is an unfortunate situation. We will see the boundaries of the law being stretched unless we have rigorous enforcement. That is something we need to look at. Can the Minister of State give any guarantees that between Committee and Report Stages we are going to have actual guarantees for the enforcement of these rules? He might also respond to the point about the resourcing of the various bodies that will have to follow through on this. I have to acknowledge there is a lot of good stuff in the Bill but we need to

make sure it is actually going to work rather than creating loopholes and leading to people paying higher rents down the line.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for being here and facilitating the discussion this evening. I commend him and the Minister, Deputy Browne, on having the courage to undertake a fundamental reform of the rental sector, which was long overdue. It is critically important that reform has taken place in accordance with what is proposed here.

As we know, there is a chronic shortage of properties in the rental sector. Demand far exceeds supply and in a situation like that, there will of course be rising rents. They will continue to rise unless an intervention is made and the Government is seeking to do that. The Minister and the Minister of State have had the conviction of their beliefs to try to set about that reform. I am not saying it is perfect or absolutely rock solid in terms of what is on the table, but it is a good effort. We certainly need to listen to the proposals that are coming forward here this evening and tomorrow from the floor of the Dáil in relation to this legislation and take on board good measures. Before we pass this, we have to ensure it is done correctly because we have to strike the right balance and this is all about striking a balance. That phrase is overused, but it is critical we strike the balance between the rights of tenants and the needs of landlords because that is the only thing that will deliver a functional rental sector.

There is a lot in the legislation to protect tenants. If we take the case of a tenant under a small landlord, for example, they will have far greater certainty now with a tenancy of six-year duration. They will, of course, have the protection of the rent pressure zone, which is critical, and that security of tenure is very important. Indeed, there will be additional resources for the Residential Tenancies Board so that disputes can be resolved in a much timelier manner, which is critically important. Equally, tenants under large landlords, according to the legislation, will also have the protections of the rent pressure zone and effectively ultimate security of tenure because no-fault evictions are effectively banned under the large landlord proposal. That is very significant for those tenants.

There is the category of new apartments after 1 March. That is designed to stimulate investment and activity around the delivery of additional apartments. It must be remembered that these are new tenancies for new apartments. They do not exist at present and it is all about adding to the supply, which is very important so that we can increase the supply overall because, ultimately, that is the only thing that will help moderate rent prices.

The set of proposals before us offer a lot to landlords as well insofar as they give policy certainty. The resourcing of the Residential Tenancies Board is also very important to landlords and in certain circumstances the Bill gives the right to reset rents, which is something that landlords have called for. Again, it is about striking that balance. If we do not have both sides to this equation, if we do not have tenants and landlords as part of the rental sector that are reasonably satisfied with the sector, it will not function correctly and I believe that is what the Government is setting out to do.

Overall, there are ongoing issues. I sit on the housing committee and I have listened to those who are advocating for property owners, such as the Irish Property Owners Association, and those who are advocating for tenants, such as Threshold. We have to listen to the points they are making and that they have made at committee. I know they have been making submissions in recent days as well. It is important we get this right before the Bill passes

through the Houses because it is one opportunity we have to get this right. Valid points are being made on both sides of the debate. We have to listen to them and try to get it right.

One point I want to highlight tonight, which I have made previously, relates to the definition of a small landlord as having three properties or fewer. We need to look at that because it has the potential to drive many of our Irish, domestic landlords out of the market and that would be regrettable. We need a mix in the rental sector. We need landlords that are domestic and Irish in our towns and villages across the country as well as those institutional investors that may come in with international finance. Defining a landlord who may own four or five houses in the same category as an institutional investor that has hundreds of apartments, for example, is not appropriate and should be something we are prepared to look at. It is important we have a mix of landlords across the sector. While many institutional investors will invest in places like Dublin and some of our other cities, they will not do so across the country in all towns and villages and we need landlords in all our towns and villages because there are tenants there who have needs and demands for rental accommodation. That is something we need to look at.

It is important to point out we are talking about new tenancies. Existing tenancies are not impacted by the proposals before us and that is a fundamental point. There has been a lot of confusion regarding the proposals in recent weeks and months, and I believe notices to quit have issued on the basis of misinformation. It is very important that at this point we continue to set the record straight in that we are talking about new tenancies after 1 March and new relationships between landlords and tenants. Whatever side of the argument one may be on, nothing is dramatically going to change after 1 March. It will take time for this to flush its way through the system because existing tenancies are not impacted and that is a fundamental point that has to be made. It is important that we communicate that message and that we try to take on board the proposals that are coming.

The overall fundamental issue at present with the rental sector, as all public representatives in the House know, is the inability of tenants to find accommodation. That is the overall issue. Any set of proposals that aims to increase the supply and tries to rebalance the supply of properties against the present demand is ultimately what is needed, and that is what the legislation before us seeks to do. It is not perfect, and there is time to bring about certain changes to it before it passes, but overall it is a good effort and I commend the Minister of State, the Minister and the Department on bringing it forward. I urge them to listen to the submissions that are being made on both sides of the argument, from those representing tenants and from property owners. Let us get this set of proposals as right as possible before we sign the Bill into law.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is hard to call this anything other than the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael rent-hike Bill. This is going to allow vulture funds and big landlords to hike up the rents of 60,000 people every year. That means thousands of euro extra will be paid in rent from 1 March. It is hard to believe. In fairness, Deputy Ó Laoghaire said it earlier. Whatever about the setting of the rules, there is a huge level of confusion on the part of landlords and we are going to have confusion from tenants right through to landlords.

The Minister is starting as if we are dealing with a fully functional market, whereas I thought we all accepted that it is utterly dysfunctional, broken, and not working for anybody out there

in any way, shape or form. Whatever small protections were provided by the rent pressure zones, they are gone. We are talking about a complete reset to market rents. I would have thought we all accepted - certainly I would accept, as well as a considerable number Members present and people outside on the street would accept - that rents are absolutely through the roof. They are utterly unaffordable. Now we are talking about resetting rents with no protections whatsoever.

We talk about improved protections into the future, but how do we deal with the fact that rents are utterly unaffordable at the minute, yet we are allowing for new tenancies that are going to be at market rent? A long time ago we all thought there would have been some control on the market, but I cannot see it.

The average price of a three-bedroom house in Louth in the third quarter of 2025 was €1,966, which was an 8.7% increase on the year before. Obviously the protections we did have were insufficient. I can only imagine what we will be looking at next year. I dread to think. We see the usual stuff when we check *daft.ie*. In Dundalk, the cost of a three-bedroom house is €2,100 per month. It is €1,150 per month for a studio apartment. It is €1,850 per month for a three-bedroom house. A two-bedroom house is €1,550 per month. It goes on, but not that far because the other thing we realise is that nobody can get a rental.

Another issue is that all of us are inundated with people who have received notices to quit in the past while. We know the issues that arise for Louth County Council and other local authorities in trying to find a solution. We are talking with a lot of young people - but they are not all young - who are in severe circumstances, where they are about to be put out of their home. In some cases, the landlord is leaving and does allow an element of overholding. If it were not for that, we would have had a complete disaster.

Did we ever imagine we would be looking at the current homeless figures? We used to be shocked when we were talking about 5,000, then it was 10,000, and now we are talking about 15,000. That is before we talk about the disgrace in relation to the percentage of children.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not see any solutions here for affordable and social housing. I do not see anything to stop the increases, or any move towards what we are calling for, which is a ban on rent increases for at least three years.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We accept that the market is dysfunctional and that these rules are not going to work. The Minister needs to do better. This is far too late.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There are very serious and valid concerns regarding the amendment to the residential tenancies legislation and the impact, particularly on private property rights and small-scale property owners or landlords. I have met many of these small-scale property owners in my offices in Birr and Tullamore and they are telling me quite clearly that are leaving the rental market. I have also met tenants who have received a notice-to-quit letter. I know

this is as a result of the legislation coming before us, which is flawed and unfairly punishes small property owners.

What are we, as TDs, to do? How are we to advise tenants who cannot get access to social housing because their income is too high? There are no affordable housing schemes and now there are fewer properties to rent. I know for a fact that many properties are up for sale in towns like Birr, Banagher, Tullamore and Edenderry. That would not have happened were it not for this flawed legislation, which goes about unfairly punishing small-scale property owners. It is totally unfair.

I have seen good people who have been in the rental market for a long time. They have been very fair with their tenants and everything has worked very well. Now we have an absolute disaster unfolding. Unless the Minister can get to grips with this, change course quickly and amend this legislation, we are going to have an absolute catastrophe in terms of a greater shortage of rental properties, which I can see first hand. I am still getting a huge volume of emails from property owners, many of whom are in the process of selling their homes. They are gone out of the market now thanks to this flawed legislation.

I hope the Government will see sense. The way it is going about this is wrong. There should have been fairness and balance. I am all for having rental properties and fairness for tenants, but we have to be fair with the small-scale property owner as well. The proposed framework represents a disproportionate appropriation of rights from private citizens who have always paid their taxes and who have invested their savings, in some cases their life savings, in the rental market. The move towards rolling six-year tenancies and the virtual elimination of no-fault evictions for many providers effectively strips owners of their right to manage their own assets, which in many cases they worked hard to purchase. I am talking about the small-scale property owner with three or fewer properties. It is unfair and it needs to be changed.

We have a situation whereby we have asset seizure by regulation. By preventing owners from reclaiming their property for sale or personal use until a six-year mark is reached, the Government is essentially freezing private capital. This legislation forces small-scale property owners to carry the social burden of housing provision at the expense of their own financial security and liquid assets to their investments and disincentivises the sector. The measures we have here in this flawed legislation do not just target vulture funds, they punish private citizens or individuals who have worked hard to provide quality housing, who have obeyed the laws, worked within the parameters of the RTB, and have been fair and good to their tenants. The message being sent here is that private property rights are secondary to political expediency. It is because there is a crisis that the Minister is being too rash with decisions here. The legislation is not properly thought out. I am asking for an urgent review of the Bill before we have an absolute disaster.

Property owners deserve a fair return and the fundamental right to control their own assets without undue State interference. The control is overbearing and it is pushing people out. It is forcing small-scale property owners out of the market. Many small-scale property owners have also told me that the security of tenure for some cannot come at the cost of other citizens, in terms of security of ownership. There has to be a balance. No balance is struck here. From what I can see, the Minister has made rash and ill-thought out decisions. I ask him to again meet with small property owners and the organisation that represents them because the Bill is just not going to be a success. We are going to have chaos.

Will the Minister of State tell me what I should tell tenants who are coming in to me very upset because they cannot qualify for social housing? There are no affordable housing schemes in County Offaly. What do I tell the people who got on well with the property owner or landlord and everything went well and who lived happily in their house for many years? Now we have this mess. We need solutions. We need affordable housing but we do not need to tackle this with the force being applied by the Minister. It is unfair. We should always ensure the rights of all are respected and upheld. This legislation will most certainly deepen the housing crisis. I am already seeing it with the volume of notice-to-quit letters, and the increase in properties for sale in many towns throughout Offaly. People have had enough. They are not going to be dictated to by the Government when they have worked hard, paid taxes all their lives and worked in jobs like teaching or nursing or as a garda. They are not going to be dictated to. It is unfair. The Bill needs to be reversed immediately. Thanks to this legislation, we are going to see an increase in homelessness due to the greater absence of rental properties in the market.

This legislation has to be urgently amended because it is not a solution. It is a disaster for tenants who do not qualify for social housing and it is an absolute disaster for the small-scale property owners, many of whom are disillusioned and have decided to leave the rental market and sell their properties. It is a disaster.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: First, I want to make it crystal clear that I myself only own one house and I am not in the rental business or never have been. I want to make that absolutely clear. I only own one house.

I am very concerned about the six-year rule. I believe we are attempting to interfere with people's constitutional and democratic rights. People work very hard, early in the morning and late at night, to build or buy these homes and they have a constitutional right to determine how long they want to rent their house out for to tenants.

Tenants and landlords need each other - one as much as the other. For the most part, 70% or 80% of landlords and tenants are getting on damn fine without any interference from us and that is a fact. It is wrong to be forcing out honest good people with maybe one house, two houses or, at the very most, three houses. It is mostly one or two around Kerry. Since this story was being mooted in the second half of last year, an amount of people have come into my clinics or are on the phone day after day shivering. They are all get notices now because these landlords - I do not like calling them landlords but that is what they are talked about as - or house owners are getting out. That is a fact. In a way, I do not blame them because they are being forced into this where they will have to rent their houses for six full years. No one knows what way the situation will change. Six years is a very long time.

I will give the Minister of State two examples. There was a young fella who came home from Australia and he bought a house. He was going back to Australia and he made it clear he would be back home in Ireland in 12 months. Even though he made it clear at the outset, he did not get his house back for another year and a half. There was another person who rented out his house and found that he could not pay the bank for the house so he entered into a transaction. He sold his house. He had notice given to the tenant, who, by the way, was a consultant earning good money. The young fella needed to get his house back to pay the bank and to get out, but it took him three years to get that consultant out. He even went to the bother of locating another house for the consultant and the consultant came back and told him that his

wife did not like that house so the poor fella who had his house sold was still paying the bank loan because he could not get the money from the fella that bought it since he could not give him vacant possession. That is what happened. I worry for people who meet clients like those after six years trying to get someone like that out of their houses.

There were several other things that we could do. Instead, we should be dealing with the vacant houses. They are all around us. We see them every day. I have asked the Government several times to do something like it is doing for the Ukrainians, that is, pay €600 tax free to the landlords that are renting those houses to them. They are getting them and our Irish people are not getting them in Kerry. That is what I am talking about - not up the country, around the country or elsewhere. I am talking about Killarney, Tralee, Dingle, Kenmare and all those places. What is happening there is that the Ukrainians will get the house before the Irish person because there is €600 tax free being put upfront by the State for them and we are not offering that - I asked the Government to do that - for Irish people. They are our own and they are in trouble. The Government could do that. That would tempt a lot of people not to leave their houses vacant. There are so many of them there.

The other problem that I have stated is the landlords are paying 50% tax, which is not fair. Other countries only allow for 30% tax, or maybe 27% or 28% tax. Regardless of what their income is or what other income they have besides the houses, that is what they would pay in income tax against whatever rent they are getting. We should be doing something like that. We have too many vacant houses around the country. We should be doing something with them.

It is unbelievable to see young girls coming in to my clinic who are after getting notice to quit and it is all because of this six-year rule. I saw a girl, while I was dealing with the few that were before her last week. I looked down the hall and she was absolutely shaking - every bit of her like an ivy leaf. I am hurt by that. We could be doing better some other way. The Minister and Minister of State may have a lot of work put into this but I would like to see them doing something about equalising the story of Irish people with the Ukrainians and I would like to see them doing a lot more about the vacant houses that are all around us. There are 54 houses from the top of Kenmare town, when you go out a small bit, all the way out to Kilgarvan, through Kilgarvan village, down Glenflesk until you finish up at the Kerry Way. On the side of the road, 54 houses are vacant and no one in them. They are grand houses. People need only step onto the road where the 270 bus is passing from Killarney to Kenmare, through Kilgarvan and through Glenflesk and they could go where they like on the rural transport.

The Government's plan to lock people who are renting houses into six-year tenancies is not going to work in Kerry. I say that because people are getting on to me every day. Trying to force people into six-year tenancies is not going to work.

The Government also has short-term lettings in its sight. I will say to the Minister and Ministers of State that this is another wrong direction before they go any farther with it. People have been at this for 20 years and they will not rent their houses long term for all the different reasons. The Government has not been clear or been honest with these people. They are telling them to go for planning permission, that they will get planning permission and to register with Bord Fáilte, and I say to the Minister and the Ministers of State that is false. They do not need to go for planning permission when they are more than seven years at it. They have planning acquired by being in the game for seven years. I ask the Minister of State to take stock of that.

I want him to know also what is happening about the tenant in situ scheme in Kerry. I have a number of times taken out officials from Kerry County Council to look at a house where the tenant has been asked to leave and their time is up. Invariably, they have told me that there is something wrong with the house and at the end of it, after a number of times doing this, they tell me they will buy no second-hand house, only a new house. It is not fair to be telling people that there is a tenant in situ scheme when it is not working in Kerry. Maybe it is working somewhere else.

It is good to see three Ministers listening to us because we only have a few minutes when we come in here. This six-year rule will not work. The Department will lose more houses than it will gain.

I asked the Minister and the Ministers of State about doing something for people who want to build their own house. We have this urban generated pressure clause in our planning system in Kerry that rules against people. It was supposed to prevent people from coming out the country from an urban setting but three, four or seven miles out, the people from that area cannot get permission on that.

Surely to God, we should be trying to do something for people who are asking for nothing but planning permission. They will borrow the money. If they have the money, they will build the house because they want to stay near their people, and be near them at the end of their days. We are being blocked from that; it is still a blockage.

I have been asking for this to be sorted out for three or four years. I asked the new Taoiseach and the new Ministers, but still, here we are, with nothing done about it. It is like the planning regulator can do what he likes, and he does not listen to the elected members of Kerry County Council. That is what has happened in Kerry. He insisted on extinguishing this area, way out from Killorglin, from Killarney, from Kenmare and from Dingle, so people could not get permission out in the countryside. That is what is happening.

Those people would not be looking to build a house. They have their own houses built long ago. They were just asking for planning permission on equal terms so their septic tanks would be right, or they would have access to the national road or whatever road they are coming out onto - the local road - so they would not cause accidents. They are not looking for anything exceptional. Even where there is an existing entrance, they are disallowed. Imagine that. In fairness to Leo Varadkar, when he was Taoiseach, he said a blanket ban could not be right, even though he signed the document that means people are being stopped from coming out on national primary or national secondary roads. In 2012, it was he who signed it into law. However, he said afterwards, when he became Taoiseach, that a blanket ban was wrong. Many of those people are trying to get onto those types of roads, but they are not allowed.

These are only small things. They could and should be sorted out between the Minister for housing, the planning regulator and the Taoiseach, if necessary, and all the other Ministers. They are simple things that could be sorted out.

I am worried that this will not work. Trying to stop short-term letting is not fair and will not work. Those people will not go into long-term letting. *Saecula saeculorum* - it will not happen. They have been with Airbnb for 20, 22 and 23 years, and they can prove they have been with it for more than seven years. Again, it is wrong to tell these people, or have housing departments in different places tell them, that they have to get planning permission or retention.

That is not the truth. They can get registered, and they should be allowed to get registered, without doing this. This is the crucial point. If they go for planning and they are denied, they do not have the benefit of the 21 or 22 years they have been with Airbnb after that point. They have lost it because they went for planning. If they had planning, they would not have gone for it at that stage. They have to be very careful about that.

I am against these things and against this Bill as it is constituted. I will tell the truth and no back doors about it: if it is not changed, I will have to vote against this.

Debate adjourned.

Bord Bia: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

- that Bord Bia's mission statement is to bring Ireland's outstanding food, drink and horticulture to the world, thus enabling growth and sustainability of producers;
- the importance of Irish food and drink exports to the Irish economy;
- the importance of Ireland's reputation around the world as a food producer;
- that the Irish food and drinks industry is dependent on Irish farmers as the primary producer; and
- the animal health and welfare standards that Irish farmers must adhere to, and in particular the standards and conditions that are part of Bord Bia's Sustainable Quality Assurance Scheme;

further notes that:

- Irish farmers and their representative organisations have lost confidence in the Chairperson of Bord Bia, as a result of his company's role in importing Brazilian beef into Ireland; and
- continuing as Chairperson undermines public confidence in Bord Bia, and damages Ireland's reputation as a world leader producing food that adheres to the highest standards; and

calls on the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to use his powers under section 18 (1) of the An Bord Bia Act, 1994 to remove from office a member of the Board, with immediate effect.

I wish to share my time with colleagues.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are back here again, unfortunately. I first want to welcome all the farmers in the Visitors Gallery, who represent thousands of farmers around the country, and who are not "emotional", but are extremely angry about this situation.

Bord Bia has done amazing work promoting Irish food, Irish drink and Irish horticulture around the world, and it has played an important role in increasing Irish exports to record volumes. The value of Irish food, drink and horticulture is estimated to hit €21 billion for 2025. We recognise the role of Bord Bia, its important work and the importance of the trade missions it is engaged in. The problem we have is that the Government and the chairperson of Bord Bia, Larry Murrin, are failing to recognise the importance of Irish farmers and the value of the work they are doing to bring this world-class product to market. Without Irish farmers, the primary producers, there would be no Bord Bia and no world-class produce to go to market.

Bord Bia operates the quality assurance scheme, with thousands of farmers participating in it and complying with the very demanding standards. I want to go through some of those standards. As I said to somebody today, a child being raised in this country does not need to have the same level of records as a calf needs to have in the Bord Bia records. That is astonishing, but it is the reality. Everything they eat has to be recorded. Every vaccine medication they get has to be recorded, and those records have to be kept for inspection. There are records of all animal movements. Does the animal have a health plan? Does it have a health safety statement? Does the farmyard have a layout plan? Has it had Bord Bia inspections every 18 months, as well as complete surveys and audits? The level of record-keeping and paperwork is enormous.

Irish farmers comply with these rules and conditions in order to maintain Ireland's reputation as a world-leading food producer. It is no wonder, then, that farmers are angry when they hear that the chairperson of Bord Bia, Larry Murrin, is importing possibly contaminated Brazilian beef into the supply of his own company in this country. He claims that it is only 1% of the beef he uses, and that may be so, but we all know that Brazilian beef is produced at about 1% of the standards that Irish farmers must comply with. It is blatantly double standards from Larry Murrin, and shows arrogance towards Irish farmers.

I wrote to Dawn Farm Foods in the last couple of weeks to ask if it was one of the three companies that imported Brazilian beef last September that was recalled because it contained banned hormones. I also asked the Minister this on a number of occasions. It replied to the question, but it did not answer the question. We do not know what the three companies are. We do not know if Dawn Farm Foods is one of them. I believe the longer that Larry Murrin remains in his position as chairperson of Bord Bia, the more damage that will be done to the organisation and, unfortunately, to Ireland's reputation.

The Government amendment to our motion states that the majority of the board agreed to support the chairman to continue in his office. I believe this is not an accurate reflection of the board meeting where the IFA and the ICMSA proposed removing Larry Murrin as chairperson. There was no vote. It was stated that it was up to the Minister for agriculture to remove the chairperson of Bord Bia. Comments by the Minister for agriculture and other members of the Government that farm organisations are to blame for this controversy, and the description of farmers as getting "emotional" over the issue, are far from helpful. It is condescending, to say the least.

The IFA is not to blame for this, nor is any other farm organisation. They are not the ones importing Brazilian beef. Their job is to represent Irish farmers, and that is what they are doing. Irish farmers have a right to protest when they feel they are being let down. Irish farmers have been let down by the Minister for agriculture, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste, and not for the first time. They put up no opposition to the Mercosur trade agreement, and had to be dragged kicking and screaming to vote “No” at the last minute. Then, only half of the Government MEPs voted to send the Mercosur trade agreement to the European Court of Justice. Now, the Government and the Minister for agriculture are deciding to take the side of big business, protecting the well-connected rather than standing up for Irish farmers.

The message from Irish farmers is clear: we do not have confidence in Larry Murrin, and we want to restore confidence in Bord Bia. It is the Minister's job to remove him. Larry Murrin must go, and the Minister must do his job.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: If the Minister wants to understand the crisis, he does not need to go far. He can go upstairs and talk to them up there. He can go and meet the farmers who have protested every day outside Bord Bia's office, and listen to them. They will tell the Minister in clear terms that their confidence in Bord Bia and the Government is shattered.

The controversy surrounding Larry Murrin and Bord Bia is not an isolated incident. It is the latest. The issue should never have reached this point. It is clear that when it comes to standing up for farmers and rural communities, the Government has to be dragged to do the right thing, just as it was finally dragged to oppose the Mercosur trade deal. It is an utter disgrace.

The Government has attempted to lump the blame for all of this onto the IFA and the farmers across Ireland - “emotional nonsense”, as Larry Murrin called it. It is a disgrace. Many of these farmers gave decades of support to the Minister and his colleagues, but that support is clearly not returned. Instead of accountability, the Minister has dug in his heels to defend Larry Murrin as chair of Bord Bia.

The Minister's failure to see the blatant conflict of interest is staggering. Perhaps the Minister does see it and he is simply standing by one of his own through thick and thin. The hypocrisy is not lost on our farmers. Irish beef is the world's gold standard. Over 77,000 farmers work relentlessly to pass the rigorous Bord Bia inspections. I would love to see those inspectors visit Brazilian farms or even the mega slaughterhouses in Brazil that are co-owned by Dawn Meats. Would they pass or is that just another case of “Do as I say not as I do” for Irish family farms?

There is clear cross-party support for this action. Even members of the coalition in Fianna Fáil have called for Mr. Murrin to step down. Fianna Fáil's spokesperson on agriculture has stated that Mr. Murrin's position is untenable. He has lost the trust and confidence of the Irish farming community and as a result he must go. I welcome this cross-party support. Now I urge those Fianna Fáil TDs to follow through on their words, stand with the farmers they represent, and support our motion for the Minister to finally use his powers and remove Larry Murrin from Bord Bia. It is time to restore trust. It is time to stand with Irish farmers.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister and the Ministers of State know what has to be done here. Bord Bia is the body tasked with marketing our beef across the world and with overseeing the standards in that regard of all the farmers across the State. My colleague Deputy Martin Kenny referred to the quality assurance scheme. I think there are 66 questions on the survey. Basically, farmers are driven mad with paperwork. That is why we have a world-class standard in beef. In what the Minister has attempted to do in recent days he has not listened to the primary producers. All of the farming organisations are clear that Larry Murrin has to go. They have no confidence in him. Rather than listen to them the Government has picked fights with them. They are the primary producers. They produce the food. The Government is giving credit to Larry Murrin for that quality of beef and that world-class standard around the world but they produced it. The Government has just ignored them and dismissed them to the point now that they have to have a sit-in protest and occupy the Bord Bia office. How much reputational damage has the Government done to Bord Bia at this stage?

This all follows on from the way the Government dealt with Mercosur. Micheál Martin was out in China but he is still not committing to opposing Mercosur. It is outrageous. We have beef that is held to very different standards from what we have to face. I will say it again: the Government has driven our farmers mad with paperwork and it has put the highest demands on farmers with the highest environmental and animal welfare standards in the world, and then it will have our beef competing with very different standards. Micheál Martin dithered. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, took his stand. Other backbenchers in Fianna Fáil took their stands. Finally the Government opposed it but it could have formed a blocking minority and it could have done more around that. This issue we are discussing now continues on from that. I believe that the Minister's refusal to ask Larry Murrin to step aside in the interests of our industry and the interests of fairness is a continuance of his lack of stomach to fight for and stand up for our farmers, and to stand up for the standards that we have. This is why these farmers are making the stand. This is why these farming organisations are uniting. Tonight is the Minister's chance to listen and to speak to them. It will be another week before the vote. The Minister will have plenty of time to think. Larry Murrin will be before the committee tomorrow. The Minister has a week to do the right thing. It is far too late but he needs to do it.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Sinn Féin is proposing this motion because the Minister has allowed this scandal to fester and because Fine Gael in particular has circled the wagons to protect their man instead of standing up for farmers. Larry Murrin should have resigned weeks ago. He has not. Instead he has dug in with the blessing of the Government, with the blessing of the Minister, and with the blessing of the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, and the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin. He seems intent to brazen it out. It is two fingers to farmers, to the public, and to anyone who believes public bodies should operate with integrity. An Bord Bia demands the highest standards from Irish farmers. It inspects them, audits them, penalises them and markets their products on the basis of stringent quality checks and traceability. Yet, the chairman of that organisation imports Brazilian beef produced to standards that would be illegal here. There is no ambiguity in that. We all get the message. Farmers hear us clearly and so does the public. Farmers are angry because they are being undermined. The public is livid because we are being treated with contempt. The chairman of Bord Bia importing Brazilian beef while holding Irish farmers to the highest standards is a brazen double standard. When we put that in the context of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Independents preparing to open the door to beef produced

with hormones and banned antibiotics and linked to deforestation, the hypocrisy is obvious and farmers can see it clearly. They can smell the bull.

This controversy sits squarely in the context of Mercosur and the Government's double standard on trade, food safety, the environment and rural livelihoods. Fine Gael is at the centre of this. They are shielding one of their own and hoping this will blow over. Fianna Fáil and the Lowry and Healy-Rae Independents are content to stay quiet and let Fine Gael give two fingers to farmers and to rural Ireland. They say one thing at home and do another in Europe. Trust has been destroyed because people can see the hypocrisy so clearly. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, has the power to end this today. He can restore confidence in Bord Bia or he can continue to protect the indefensible. Larry Murrin's position is now untenable and if this Government votes against this motion next week farmers will hear that message again loud and clear. We in Sinn Féin stand with Irish farmers. Larry Murrin must go and the Government must quit the charade and get serious about opposing Mercosur.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The position of Larry Murrin as chairman of Bord Bia is untenable. The revelations surrounding his company's importation of substandard Brazilian beef into Ireland are an insult to Irish farmers and have created a crisis of confidence within Bord Bia. The farmers I speak to in my constituency have totally lost confidence in the chairman and they are also beginning to lose total confidence in the Government through the Minister's handling of this fiasco.

This is fundamentally about the double standards that are now on show. Through Bord Bia Irish farmers must meet the strictest food production standards while at the same time the organisation's chairman is importing Brazilian beef into Ireland. There is also the image of an organisation whose whole remit is to promote the quality of Irish food around the world yet its chairman is importing foreign beef into Ireland. How could anybody stand over this situation? How can the Minister seriously believe this does not damage the image of Bord Bia and undermine its work?

When this issue was raised last week the Minister decided against taking action to hold Mr. Murrin to account and instead chose to lay the blame for this controversy with Irish farmers and farming organisations. The Minister told them they were being "emotional". This was absolutely insulting. It shows that the Government seems to be totally indifferent to the views of farmers, the very same people who produce the food and on whom the success of Bord Bia is built.

The Government has allowed this situation to drag on for weeks now. Its failure to act has damaged further the reputation of Bord Bia. This comes at a time when the Irish Government has failed to block the Mercosur trade agreement. Given the recent outbreaks of bluetongue, and with the future of CAP at stake, this is the very last thing the farming sector needs to be dealing with right now. Yet, the Minister comes in here tonight and tell us that everything is all right and there is nothing to see here. Whether the Minister likes it or not, the farmers do not have confidence in Larry Murrin's position as the chairman. We have brought this motion before the Dáil tonight to bring an end to this fiasco. The Minister appointed Larry Murrin to this position and the Minister can also remove him from it. The message from farmers is loud and clear: Larry Murrin must go. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, must use his powers to put an end to this mess and restore confidence in this organisation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This Government has shown us time and again that it is allergic to accountability. The Government has shown us that there is one rule for those on the inside and one rule for everybody else. Larry Murrin is well and truly under the protective wing of the Government. For the head of Bord Bia to be the head of a meat processing company that imports Brazilian beef is simply not acceptable. Surely to God some of the Government backbenchers already recognise that the position is untenable, and the Government needs to recognise the same. It is not just Sinn Féin saying this; farmers right up and down the State are calling it out. Larry Murrin is the head of an agency that markets Irish beef around the world and at the same time he is importing and selling Brazilian beef. The Minister is making a mockery of the position by continuing to pretend not to see the massive conflict of interest that is staring him in the face.

8 o'clock

His appointment reflects the kind of due diligence we are coming to expect of Fianna Fáil. Last week, the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, said that his Government listens and engages, but it is not listening and not engaging. It is trying to delay and placate, hoping this will all blow over so it can make sure people at the top are protected and will not face any accountability. There is an absolute collapse in confidence in Bord Bia among farmers as a result of this debacle. The loss of confidence is spreading to Government because it is going out of its way to defend the indefensible. It is saying to farmers that their voice does not matter, their concerns do not matter, and it does not matter who is chairperson of Bord Bia and this Government does not think it is important for the chairman of Bord Bia to have the confidence of our farmers. That is an extraordinary position to take.

The Minister even started talking down to farmers, saying that they were being misled and do not really understand the situations, and talking about farmers only being upset because they are being tricked. What is this Government trying to do? Is it really to accuse the largest farming organisation in the country of misleading its members so the head of An Bord Bia can be protected? The chair of Bord Bia is the head of a company that imports Brazilian beef. It is produced to lower standards and is subject to weaker safety requirements. Those are the facts. It is black and white. At the same time, the Minister thinks he is fit to chair the State agency charged with promoting Irish beef, which is produced to the highest environmental, welfare and food safety standards, at home and abroad. Only wilful blindness can stop him seeing the conflict of interest here. Farmers are the heart and soul of our agricultural industry. It is their hard graft that delivers good quality food and meats every single day to ever-higher environmental, animal welfare and regulatory standards. They know, and they have lost confidence in the chair of Bord Bia. The Government now needs to do its job and remove him from his position.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The Bord Bia quality and trust mark is something I trust and look for as a consumer. It means something to people. It tells us that what we are eating is safe, meets the highest standards and comes from our land. The fact that I can trace what I am eating back to a farmer or field in Ireland is reassuring and something I value deeply, not just because you are what you eat, but because it allows me to know I am contributing to supporting local farmers and suppliers who work tirelessly to uphold those standards. This is not just a rural issue. This is an urban and rural issue. Transparency about what we are eating matters

to every family in every community. Yet, we now have a situation where the chair of Bord Bia, an organisation whose own website states it exists to promote Ireland's outstanding food, drink and horticulture to the world, is at the same time importing Brazilian beef that we know entered Ireland with banned hormones. This is an unacceptable conflict. As a consumer this leads me to have a lack of faith in the chair of the board. If he continues in that role, I and many others will lose faith in Bord Bia altogether. Trust once broken is not easily repaired. This conflict must end, and the trust that Irish people place in Bord Bia must be allowed to be rebuilt. The importance of Irish food and drink exports is at risk here. Our reputation is hard won, and it must not be undermined. The Minister has the power to remove this member from the board with immediate effect. Irish farmers and their representative organisations have lost confidence in the chairperson, and it is time to listen to them. For Sinn Féin this is about standing with Irish farmers, protecting consumers and defending the integrity of Irish food. The chair must resign, and he must resign now.

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "further notes that" and substitute the following:

"— the Board of Bord Bia, including the Chair, is made up of 15 members from across all areas of the agri-food sector, and its function is to promote, assist and develop, in any manner which the Board considers necessary or desirable, the marketing of Irish food and livestock;

— the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine estimates that total Irish agri-food exports in 2025 will be a record €21 billion;

— the growth in the value of agri-food exports has been remarkable, increasing from an exports value of €10 billion in 2011;

— beef exports to some 70 countries have increased over the last five years by 40 per cent, from €2.2 billion in 2019 to €3.1 billion in 2024, an increase of €890 million;

— Bord Bia is carrying out its mission to a high standard, making its contribution along with farmers and the wider agri-food industry to the export success of a vital sector;

— the Origin Green programme, supported by the work of farmers' and their participation in Quality Assurance Schemes at farm level, has been integral in providing proof points to international customers of the quality and sustainability of Irish food and drink products, and creating market opportunities for that produce;

— the Board of Bord Bia has discussed the issues raised, and the majority agreed outcome was to support the Chairperson to continue in office, with all of the Board members strongly endorsing the personal integrity and experience of the Chair, and acknowledged that there was no legal or governance issue at play;

— the Chairperson has accepted an invitation to appear at the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and Food on Thursday 5th February to discuss the issues raised; and

— the Government retains confidence in the Chairperson."

It is a deep disappointment to me that we are here this evening to discuss this motion. Tonight, a political party is trying to exploit the concerns of farmers for its own narrow interests. We face loads of challenges in agriculture that need to be addressed. Earlier this week I met the European Commissioners for agriculture and budget alongside the Tánaiste and the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs. On the table for discussion was the EU's budget for the next seven years and the proposed reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. We could have used our time this evening to debate and discuss that because it is critical to the incomes of over 120,000 Irish farms. The clock is ticking on how to make the best use of the time we have now before Ireland assumes the European Presidency, to put the green jersey on and act in the best interests of our farmers.

Earlier today I briefed my Cabinet colleagues on the latest situation regarding the first outbreak of bluetongue in Ireland, a serious development that has the potential to create real difficulties for our farmers during what is an incredibly busy time on farms. We could have had an opportunity this evening to discuss the issue and reassure farmers that everything that can be done is being done to set out the intensive testing and surveillance that is under way and ensure the continued flow of product and livestock, and the steps farmers can take to protect their farms. Instead, Sinn Féin has done what Sinn Féin always does. It has sought to divide, to enrage and to grandstand.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is about accountability.

Deputy Martin Heydon: That is not surprising. Explaining global food supply chains and contingency planning does not make for good social media clips. It is much easier for them to come in here and roar and shout as Deputy McGuinness is doing about giving a man the sack. Did Sinn Féin make any attempt to seek a briefing from the chair of Bord Bia on this issue before calling for his head? I did not think so; there is silence.

Deputy Noel Grealish: A kangaroo court.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is the same briefing I got and members of Bord Bia got. The Members opposite could have sought it before they called for a man to resign. Maybe the facts would not have been helpful as they are trying to whip people up. They have form on this. Their leader Mary Lou McDonald called for the head of the Garda Commissioner the day after riots in Dublin. Their housing spokesman Eoin Ó Broin called for a senior Department of Finance official to be sacked because he did not like his opinion. With Sinn Féin it is sack first and ask questions later. I believe tonight's motion sends a clear message to the chair of every other State board in the country as to how Sinn Féin operates. At the centre of this issue is a contract between an Irish food company, which employs thousands of people here, and a major international client. It is a contract worth hundreds of millions to Irish agriculture and one that extends to over 40 markets way beyond just Ireland, the UK and Europe to include the Middle East and Asia as well. Let us not forget that the vast majority of food produced on this island, over 90% of farmers' beef, sheep meat and dairy, is exported. Our industry operates in a global trading environment and that means we have to be responsive to the customers' requirements. The reality is that major international customers require proof of contingency provisions for

continuity of supply in the unlikely event of disruption to the supply chain in Ireland or across EU supplies.

The fact that we are talking about less than 1% of the overall contract demonstrates it is just that, proof of a channel for contingency of supply should a food outbreak break out like we had with pork dioxins in 2008 when every bit of Irish pork came off the shelves overnight.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is 10% acceptable? What about 20% or 30% maybe?

Deputy Martin Heydon: If this was about price, it would be a lot more than 1%. The Deputy does not like what I am saying. I did not interrupt him.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Timmy Dooley: They might learn something. If they stay quiet they might learn the complex issue.

Deputy Martin Heydon: If this were about price we would be talking about a lot more than 1%. It is not. In general, if an Irish food company-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is a startling admission, Minister.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Deputy.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I did not interrupt you lads.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Nobody on that side was interrupted.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I will offer the time afterwards to my colleagues as well.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You sold out a long time ago, Healy-Rae. You will not be standing in any markets much longer. You sold out the farmers a long time ago.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Do not point your finger at me.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I do not see you standing with them outside Bord Bia. You sold out.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Fifteen years as spokesman in opposition on finance.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Can I get his time afterwards?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: We know the price of a Minister of State now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Beating your chest in the markets.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Fifteen years mouthing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Deputy Doherty, no more please.

Deputy Martin Heydon: As I was saying, if an Irish food company failed to address the contingency supply as part of a contract for a major international buyer of Irish produce, that client company would take its business elsewhere. Imagine for a minute here, with all their shouting and bluster, if that contract had gone to a Dutch, German or any non-Irish food company-----

Deputy Pat Buckley: He is making up stories now.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----how much of that contract do they think would involve Irish produce? It is very little, I can guarantee.

The Bord Bia board met on Thursday, 22 January to discuss the issues raised and the recent media coverage. I sought and received a detailed report from Bord Bia following that meeting. It is worth repeating that the members strongly endorsed the integrity of the chairman, the transparency of his business and his invaluable experience that has benefited Bord Bia and the wider Irish food industry. There was acknowledgement that there were no legal or governance issues at play. The board had good and thorough discussion of the issues covered in the media and the majority of board members were fully supportive of the chair continuing to serve. The chairman has offered to meet the IFA and its full national council, and all of its county and commodity chairs. I know there are many here. He offered to provide a detailed briefing in relation to the company's approach to sourcing. To date, this offer has not been taken up. Just over three weeks ago, the Ministers of State, Deputies Grealish, Healy-Rae and Dooley and I addressed the IFA national council in Bluebell for over three hours at its AGM.

A lot of different viewpoints were expressed. We listened and responded and while we might not have agreed on everything, I think we all left with a better understanding of each other's perspectives at the end.

This current impasse does not serve farmers' interests well. I again urge the IFA leadership to consider this offer from the chairman of Bord Bia because denying IFA council members that same briefing is doing them a disservice too. In the meantime, the chairman has accepted an invitation to appear before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture and Food tomorrow, Thursday, 5 February. That will be an opportunity to hear the detail of the matter. Given its negligent or deliberate refusal to seek a full briefing on the issue before now, it is not a coincidence that Sinn Féin is attempting to suppress that process with a motion before the House here tonight, creating-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The motion was put down beforehand.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Prove my point.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Come off it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Prove my next line before I say it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister is so disingenuous. He is something else.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Sinn Féin is creating noise and bluster to try to make sure farmers cannot get any reasonable, detailed debate around the detail of this matter.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister knows this motion was put down last week before that happened. The Minister knows that.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister is misleading-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: As I said at the outset, we face loads of challenges in agriculture.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Honest debate seems to be gone, just like an honest chairman.

Deputy Martin Heydon: They will not be resolved by ultimatums or diktats. I have always defended the agriculture sector. I have done so in the best interests of our farmers and our wider agrifood sector. That is my job.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why is the Minister facing down farmers now?

Deputy Martin Heydon: That 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, whether it is on nitrates, Mercosur---
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Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Will the Minister join the sit-in protest?

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----CAP or on bluetongue.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Will the Minister join the sit-in protest?

Deputy Martin Heydon: Instead of coming in here looking for cheap social media clips on the back of an individual who has made a significant contribution to an important organisation-

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Minister for bluster.

Deputy Martin Heydon: -----Sinn Féin might reflect on whether it could have used its time better here in farmers' interests discussing another item.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister should have moved on this weeks ago.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I trust my colleague will get the appropriate four minutes that eluded him because of the interruptions.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: There was plenty of time in Government business today.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on the vital role played by Bord Bia in the continued success of Ireland's agrifood sector. Agriculture and food are at the heart of our national economy and rural and coastal communities. The agrifood sector is our oldest and largest export sector, delivering high-quality produce to more than 190 countries worldwide, accounting for almost 9% of all goods exported from Ireland.

The scale of our export orientation cannot be understated. Around 90% of Irish beef, sheep meat and dairy produce is exported each year, meaning our global trading relationships and reputation are essential to the sector's continued success. In this context, Bord Bia's role is absolutely central. Through comprehensive quality assurance programmes and extensive market expertise, Bord Bia provides confidence to international customers and strengthens Ireland's standing as a reliable supplier of high-quality food and drink. The strength of this work is evident in the performance of our sector. While the final CSO figures will not be available until later this month, my Department estimates that total agrifood exports reached €21 billion in 2025, the highest figure on record and an extraordinary rise from €10 billion in 2011.

While these results are positive, the global trading environment remains complex. Geopolitical issues, supply chain pressures and market volatility have challenged exporters in recent years. Yet, the Irish agrifood sector has shown resilience, with notable improvements in output prices, reduced input costs and better family farm incomes over the past year.

To strengthen our position further, the Government's action plan on market diversification is deepening our engagement with existing partners while targeting emerging markets. Throughout 2025, my Department maintained an intensive programme of bilateral engagement, technical negotiations and certification inspections to secure new market openings. Bord Bia has supported this work by sustaining current trade, identifying opportunities for innovation and seeking openings where Ireland has not traditionally traded. Bord Bia has the ability to find and sustain new markets, supporting Irish producers by strengthening existing trading relationships while also opening fresh opportunities across the globe.

Over the past year, we have seen considerable success in new market access. Irish beef secured entry into Libya, Thailand and Vietnam, while access for duck meat was achieved in Malaysia following extensive negotiation. Access for Irish beef into Japan has also been expanded to include cooked beef products. These developments greatly extend the global reach of Irish food producers.

In my role, I have had the privilege of supporting this international work directly. Only last week, I led a trade mission to the United Arab Emirates, delivered in collaboration with Bord Bia, that was centred on the Gulfood exhibition, the largest food and beverage showcase in the world. Similar engagements last year brought me to Mexico, South Am-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister of State said "South America" there.

Deputy Noel Grealish: -----South Africa, Vietnam, Cambodia and major European markets, including Germany and France. On each occasion, I witnessed the high regard in which Irish food is held and the strength of the relationships Bord Bia has built on the ground. The foundation of this sector's success is, and always will be, the people who produce our food. Our farmers, fishers, processors and food and drink producers-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Listen to them.

Deputy Noel Grealish: -----work tirelessly every day to ensure Ireland continues to deliver excellence to international markets.

I acknowledge the leadership and professionalism of the board and chairman of Bord Bia, Larry Murrin, in whom I have full confidence. Their strategic guidance and wealth of experience have been instrumental in promoting Ireland's reputation globally and supporting the long-term interests of the agrifood sector.

As we look ahead to 2026, our focus remains clear to strengthen existing markets, open new ones and ensure Ireland continues to be recognised worldwide as a provider of high-quality food and drink. Working together - Government, Bord Bia and all the stakeholders — we can continue to deliver growth, stability and opportunity across the entire agrifood sector.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister said in his script that he believes tonight's motions sends a clear message to the chairs of every other State board in the country as to how Sinn Féin rolls, and it does indeed. It tells them that accountability is important to Sinn Féin. Even if it does not matter to this Government, it will always matter to us. The failure of the chair of Bord Bia to read the room and resign raises serious questions about accountability. I have said it before and I will say it here again tonight: this Government is allergic to accountability. This latest fiasco is just another example of that. Larry Murrin is the figurehead for quality in Irish food. He and Bord Bia are responsible for ensuring that quality standards for Irish food are upheld. How can he continue in his role when trust has been broken? How can he have any hand, act or part in the importation of Brazilian beef while pretending that he can police and uphold standards for Irish farmers? I do not know an awful lot about farming and I do not pretend to but by Jesus, I know Government hypocrisy when I see it, and that is what is on display here this evening.

I am a consumer. I spoke to my constituents over the weekend about this motion and they all said the same thing to me. They said that we need to have confidence and Bord Bia should be the symbol for that. While the Government digs in and defends its man at all costs, that confidence is just not there. Consumers deserve to have confidence in the food they buy. How in the name of God can the man who imports beef that falls well short of the standards of Irish beef have people's confidence when he is importing Brazilian beef and undermining the standards that he is telling all the others in the farming community they must uphold? This is, again, another lesson learnt from this Government - it is, "Do as I say but not as I do". If Larry Murrin understood the damage that this scandal has caused to Irish farmers, he would do the

right thing and resign, but he is digging in so the Minister has to do his job. Larry Murrin's position is untenable. He must go. The Minister must do the right thing and remove him.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Bord Bia has done some very good work promoting Ireland's food and drink around the world and protecting the reputation of those exports but that very reputation is built on the work that goes on in cold yards, calving sheds, milking parlours and small farms where people are farming under ever-increasing pressure. Irish food and drink exports are vital to our economy but let us be very clear: there are no exports without farmers. Those farmers are expected to meet the highest standards. They are constantly told that they must do more, from environmental to welfare measures that incur more costs, and all of this is under Bord Bia's sustainable quality assurance scheme. Farmers do it. They comply and play by the rules. How does the Minister think they feel when they see the chairperson of Bord Bia linked to the importation of Brazilian beef into Ireland?

It is a slap in the face to every farmer here. Farmers are furious because they see the hypocrisy, even if the Government does not. Irish farmers are held to gold-plated standards while imports are waved through the door. They are told they must protect Ireland's reputation while the very person charged with protecting the reputation of Bord Bia is associated with undermining it. What has the Government done? It has done nothing. There have been nothing but delays, excuses and circling the wagons.

The Government is quick to come down hard on farmers with inspections, penalties and demands, but when it comes to accountability at the top of Bord Bia, suddenly it is missing in action. Farmers ask one simple question. How can they be expected to meet these standards if the leadership of Bord Bia does not even respect them? This comes at a time when farmers are already deeply concerned about Mercosur and the flooding of the market with even more South American imports produced to lower standards. There is one rule for Irish farmers, another for foreign imports and a third for the head of Bord Bia.

This is simple. Continuing with the current chairperson of Bord Bia undermines public confidence. It damages Bord Bia and Ireland's reputation as a world leader in high-quality food production. That is why the Sinn Féin motion calls on the Minister to stop hiding behind excuses, to stop ignoring the voices of farmer representatives and farming communities and to use his powers to remove the chairperson from office immediately.

Farmers have had enough of double standards, hypocrisy and being treated as an afterthought. They deserve better. Bord Bia must be worthy of the producers it claims to represent and trust must be restored.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome the farmers who have come to see the real Government tonight. They are very welcome to the Dáil Chamber.

Here we go again. Hot on the heels of the fake opposition to the Mercosur trade deal, the arrogance of the Government is palpable. The Government will hector and lecture Irish farmers about environmental standards while failing to meaningfully oppose European measures clearly designed to supplant their produce. Not content with that, the leader of the very organisation meant to champion Irish produce has been outed as a buyer of the same inferior products that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have enabled increased importation of. I can see why

the Government retains confidence in Bord Bia's chairperson. By importing Brazilian beef, Mr. Murrin was simply aligning himself with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael policy.

Our farming families face inordinate pressures, rising input costs and the need to meet ever-rising environmental standards. Too often, they are then left to absorb the related costs within already meagre margins. They are constantly told that they need to do more to receive less in real terms. They are treated as if they should be celebrating so-called record funding that equates, in real terms, to cuts, as if they are fools who cannot account for inflation. That is the crux of the issue before the House. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, alongside the chairperson of Bord Bia, felt that they could take our farming families for fools, that they could tell them there is nothing to be angry about and that they would buy it, and that families would eat this beef. The Government thinks it is acceptable to do so.

Mr. Murrin has decried farmers' anger over this situation as emotional nonsense. With empathy non-existent, I would say that Mr. Murrin clearly lacks the capacity to chair any board, let alone one that cannot function without our farmers.

Sinn Féin's motion offers the Members of this House a choice. Do they hear the anger of our farming families? Can they understand it? Will they acknowledge it and respond to it or do they stand with Mr. Murrin and his uncaring charge of emotional nonsense against our farming families?

Deputy Pa Daly: What is at stake here is fundamental, and that is trust. It is trust that our food is safe, that our high standards are upheld and that those at the top are bound by the same rules as those at the bottom. This trust and leadership is earned. We need to know that the State's own agency to promote and develop the Irish food industry has the best interests of the Irish people at heart, is 100% beside Irish farmers and stands with them, and will not throw Irish farmers under the bus as soon as there is extra profit to be made. As long as the current chair stays, we cannot have such confidence.

It is hard to see why the Minister has not acted already. Bord Bia is not just another agency. It is the voice of Ireland on the world stage, carrying the hopes of rural communities and family farms, and the ambitions of exporters. It is not credible to have a State agency demanding the highest production standards from Irish farmers while at the same time its chair is importing substandard beef from Brazil. Those are double standards and a two-tier system. Why am I not surprised? We heard the concern over Mercosur and Brazilian beef. This controversy has raged for two weeks and still the Government has not done what is required. How little it has done is astonishing.

Does the Minister think that farmers are being a little too emotional? Is the IFA in Kerry being too emotional? Are farm families in Kerry too emotional? An bhfuil daoine cosúil le John Joe Mac Gearailt ón INHFA ró-mhothúcháinach? What about the people in Gortalea Mart? Are they too emotional? The people of Kerry are watching. The people of Ireland are watching. Does the Government stand with farmers? Do its members call on the Minister, Deputy Heydon, to remove the chair of Bord Bia? Whose side are they on? It is astonishing that the Taoiseach did not even know the powers that he had to remove the chair. It is not good enough. The way the situation has been handled is a mess. It proves the Government is not on the side of Irish farmers. We all know it is not on the side of Irish people.

Farmers have made it clear that they are not giving up, leanann siad ar aghaidh, and neither are we.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to be clear that I believe this motion to be premature, not because questions about Bord Bia are unimportant, because they are, but because we, as elected Members of the Oireachtas, have well-established processes for accountability. Those process are already under way. A motion such as the one before the House is hasty, risks politicising a statutory body and undermines the very scrutiny we all claim to value.

The chair of Bord Bia is due to appear before the Oireachtas agriculture committee tomorrow. I welcome the fact that he is engaging in this process. That is where these matters should be first examined. We should not rush to judgment until we have heard directly from the chair before the committee. That is not avoidance; it is due process. I believe that Mr. Murrin is due that process. Committees exist for a reason. They allow for detailed questioning, for evidence to be put on the record and for members to engage in structured and informed ways. By contrast, a motion brought to the floor of this House before that engagement has taken place risks replacing scrutiny with speculation.

Bord Bia is a statutory agency that has a crucial role to play in supporting Irish food and drink producers, promoting our exports and safeguarding Ireland's reputation in international markets. Decisions taken lightly or rhetoric deployed prematurely can have real consequences not just for board members or the Minister, but also for the farmers, processors and workers across the country. That is why timing matters and hearing from the relevant people also matters. That is why I am concerned about the approach surrounding this motion. Accountability must never become a proxy for pressure or intimidation. If we are serious about governance, we must also be serious about fairness and process.

In that context, I want to address what happened today with the occupation of Bord Bia's offices. That occupation of the offices puts Bord Bia staff in a difficult position. These are workers; they are not decision-makers. They do not set policy and should not be placed in harm's way because of political or sectoral disputes. Whatever concerns people have, they are entitled to raise them. However, there are appropriate forums for doing so and the staff who come to do their jobs should never feel intimidation in their workplace.

Bord Bia is governed by a board, but it is important to note - and this is sometimes overlooked - that the board delegates specific functions relating to particular sectors to subsidiary boards, as provided for under legislation. Under section 13(1) of the Bord Bia Act 1994, subsidiary boards can be established for defined sectors, including meat and livestock. These subsidiary boards have specific responsibilities and remits within the overall structure of Bord Bia. It is, therefore, worth putting on record that the chair is not a member of any of the subsidiary boards, including the meat and livestock board, established under this section of the Act.

That distinction matters. If we are going to have a serious discussion about governance, responsibility and oversight then we must be grounded in the actual statutory framework, not assumptions and headlines. That is precisely why the agriculture committee tomorrow is the correct forum at this stage. It allows members to interrogate those structures, understand who is responsible for what and assess whether changes are needed based on evidence rather than conjecture. None of this is to suggest that Bord Bia should be beyond criticism. No public

body is, but criticism must be informed, proportionate and timely. Tabling a motion in the House before the relevant committee has even met the chair risks undermining our credibility as legislators. We should allow the chair to appear tomorrow, listen carefully to what he has to say, test him through questioning and then decide collectively what, if any, further action is warranted. That is how accountability is supposed to work. To do otherwise is to leap ahead of that process and is not what is needed. For those reasons, this motion is premature. I urge colleagues, particularly ahead of tomorrow's discussions, to allow for proper scrutiny mechanisms to their jobs. This debate distracts from core agricultural issues the country faces. Whether the chair goes or stays, we will still face these bigger outstanding issues which need attention. While we squabble over the chair, beef prices are up 25%, families are struggling to feed themselves and farmers cannot survive on what they earn. That is the real headline and what should be in the media.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome this opportunity to discuss Bord Bia. This issue goes beyond any single person or State agency. This issue goes to the heart of how we protect Ireland's reputation as a world-class producer of safe, high-quality food and how we as policymakers ensure the governance structures behind that reputation are robust and transparent. Bord Bia's job is to bring Ireland's produce to the world. That would not be possible without the work of Irish farmers. The success of our food exports is thanks to them and their expertise commitment, energy and hard work. Our farmers adhere to some of the most stringent animal health and welfare and sustainability standards in the world. That is no small feat. Irish farmers meet rigorous criteria that far exceed what is expected in many other markets. Each criterion represents time, cost and responsibility that is carried by farmers to uphold our reputation. Bearing all this in mind, I understand why farmers are frustrated and feel betrayed by what has transpired with the chairperson of Bord Bia. Believing as they do that those high standards are undermined by the actions of the agency charged with promoting them I imagine is a painful sting. The anger they feel comes from the real lived experiences of farmers who play by the rules and invest in higher standards all the while competing in an increasingly difficult global market. I understand that.

I also understand that this controversy does not exist in a vacuum. It sits against the backdrop of the Government's inaction and complacency on trade issues, most notably and most recently Mercosur. For years, farmers have warned that allowing beef from regions with lower environmental and welfare standards into the EU market would undermine the sustainability credentials of Ireland which Irish farmers have worked so hard to promote. They, as so many of us did, repeatedly called on the Government to take a firmer stance and be vocal and active at an EU level in its opposition to this deal, to form an alliance with like-minded states and lobby others to join. The Government had a responsibility to do all it could to fight this deal not only for our farmers but for the Irish public more broadly. Unfortunately, instead it took a passive approach, offering empty statements rather than action, and now Mercosur is as good as here. The Government seriously let farmers, the environment and the public down. I and others are deeply disappointed by that.

However, this motion asks us to support the removal of the chairperson of Bord Bia. While I support and understand the concerns, disappointment and fear farmers have about what the future holds for them, I cannot support that call. That would be an extreme step, especially considering that he has yet to appear before the agriculture committee to discuss this issue face

to face and at length. I cannot support a decision like this before hearing those discussions and hearing back from committee members. As was stated previously, there are processes that should be followed. There is a way of doing business. The committee should have an opportunity to interrogate and ask the questions they need answers to. All that is not to say there is nothing to see here. This controversy points to a deeper systemic issue in Ireland, which is the governance structures of our State agencies. We need to interrogate those structures and ask if they are sufficiently aligned with the expectations of their sectors and if accountability measures are fit for purpose. Farmers deserve clarity on this and a governance structure that reflects the values Bord Bia is meant to uphold. While I cannot currently support the specific call in the motion to remove the chairperson, I support the need for serious scrutiny and reform across our agrifood agencies. We need Government agencies that people and workers can trust. Farmers have done their part and it is time the Government did its part.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome all the farmers in the Gallery. They have been out protesting for the past week. It is thanks to democracy in this country that they can do so in very difficult circumstances for quite a lot of those farmers. I welcome that they are here tonight. They are carrying out their basic human rights to put food on the table - good clean Irish food - as they have done for the past decades. That is being challenged every day of the week now for the past few years. Tonight we stand firmly with the farmers of Ireland who should not have to be up in the Gallery of this House. They should be at home running their farms, not sitting here looking down on us, waiting for decisions that should have been made long ago.

Last week, I stood with IFA members outside Bord Bia headquarters where protests have continued day and night. Their message is clear: their confidence in Bord Bia has been deeply damaged. The controversy around the sourcing of Brazilian beef has only widened the divide between farmers and those meant to promote their produce. It does not stop there. We import over 740,000 tonnes of low-quality, poorly traceable Mercosur feed, undermining our own fully traceable Irish grain sector. We all know now that Brazilian beef treated with carcinogenic hormones entered the Irish food chain, and the Mercosur deal would also allow in up to 180,000 tonnes of poultry produced under weaker standards. What about the children of this country? Is this the standard we are willing to accept for them, a food chain where banned carcinogenic hormones have already entered Ireland through imported Brazilian beef and where more cheaply produced meat could follow under Mercosur? Parents expect the Government to protect their families, not expose them to risks created by weaker import controls. On top of that, imported British straw is risking the spread of blackgrass, a destructive weed that could devastate Irish tillage land if allowed to take hold. These farmers have been raising concerns for weeks. Their protest escalated to the point of occupying Bord Bia headquarters, driven by deep frustration at what they describe as inaction, warning that each day this drags on further erodes their confidence in the organisation. They should not have to be here tonight. They should not have to sit in the Gallery looking down on this Chamber, waiting for basic respect and common sense. They have far better things to be doing like running the farms that keep the country fed, employed and sustained. Farmers meet some of the strictest environmental welfare, safety and traceability standards in Europe, yet they are undercut by foreign feed, exposed to banned hormones entering our food chain, threatened by invasive weeds and let down by delays in updating rules that could protect Irish products and jobs. Their patience is exhausted.

I ask the Government, when did it become anti-Irish and so anti-farmer? That is how farmers feel - abandoned, ignored and undermined. They should not have to protest outside Bord Bia and occupy the office and they certainly should not have to spend their evenings in the Dáil begging for fairness. It is long past time for Government to truly listen and act decisively in support of Irish farmers, Irish beef, poultry and grain and Ireland's future and immediately remove the chair of Bord Bia.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate. I welcome the farmers from the farming bodies around the country. There are a few things we need to put into perspective. Farmers contribute €6 million to Bord Bia.

No one is knocking every part of Bord Bia. No one is doing that. There is a job for everyone to do. We are great at telling the story, and it is great to hear about the volume of exports each year.

I have carried out an analysis in respect of sheep. We do not hear that part of it. In 2022, we exported €475 million worth. In 2023, the figure was down by €35 million. In 2024, it dropped to €400 million. It is now down to €360 million. Not only are there fewer sheep, there is less money coming into the country. We do not hear that story.

Let us be honest. Milk prices were good last year. I compared cattle prices in 2023 with those on offer now. There was a difference of €2.50 or €3. Is that because we have experts, heroes or the greatest people running things? It is not. The fact is that Red Tractor in England was able to get 20 cent more for its beef than we got for ours. In Germany, and throughout Europe, the average price was €7.70. I am not saying that someone is doing something wrong. This is about supply and demand and the number of cattle. We lost 250 suckler cows because farmers were sick of pulling calves, and the weanlings were not getting a good price. That is the bottom line. Farmers vote with their feet.

Farmers put €6 million towards Bord Bia, and the Government gives money as well. There is legality and morality. Ultimately, if you lose the dressing room, you have a problem. I have not spoken to any farmer in the past two weeks who told me that they have confidence in the situation that has developed. If farmers have lost confidence, that is a problem. We rely on the farmers of this country to produce food of the highest quality. They even have to make sure a cat is vaccinated when there is a Bord Bia audit. They have to make sure that the dog is looked after. They have to make sure that the spraying machines and power take-off shafts are right. They do that to make sure that the Irish food that is being exported is a quality product and has the emblem on it. A wider debate has to take place on food labelling in this country and throughout Europe.

We are looking at what is coming in and what is going out. This is not just about beef; it is also about pork and chicken. We have to do a lot of research on this. As I said, there are ethical, legal and moral factors involved. We can talk about this until the cows come home, but if people lose hope in something, that is a problem.

Let us be honest about it. If I go to a trade fair in Europe as the captain of the ship charged with promoting something, there may be a story behind me, rightly or wrongly, that 99% of what I have come through Europe and the other 1% came from one of the Mercosur countries. The problem in that regard is that there are questions as to traceability, medicines and

hormones. What is happening has been proved to us by the *Irish Farmers Journal*. Fear and doubt enters people's minds. Tracking through companies and what is happening is like trying to go out into the world to discover where someone lives. Tomorrow will be an interesting day. When the farmers of the country who produce the finest food lose faith in somebody, we, as politicians, have to listen.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to welcome the farmers who are here today. I thank all the farmers who raised their concerns with my office. The fact is that farmers are hurt by the fact that they are subjected to strict regulations and rules by Bord Bia and are paying it €6 million a year. The latter is in addition to the taxpayers' money that is going into Bord Bia. They then learn that the person driving the ship of an organisation that is driving regulation, that is continually pushing standards and that is contributing to the inflation of standards in the food sector is the importing beef that would never qualify under those regulations. That is why the board and the chair have lost the confidence of farmers. Frankly, farmers are frustrated by the Minister's response to this.

There are serious questions about food labelling, particularly that relating to beef, poultry, pigs and fish, in this country. We must address those questions and ensure that the country of origin is inserted on the packaging of all food sold here.

Who chaired the meeting of the board on 22 June? Was it the case that the person who is the chair, that is, Larry Murrin, chaired a meeting on whether he would continue in his role?

Deputy Martin Heydon: No.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Did he step out of the meeting, given what was obviously a conflict of interest? That must be addressed here.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The answer is "No". It is not an issue.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We need a full investigation into how many tonnes of Brazilian beef are coming in. I do not believe that Larry Murrin is the only individual or business bringing Brazilian beef into this country. We need to have a serious investigation into this matter, not just in the beef sector but right across the board in respect of the food that is coming into Ireland and Europe. What is being imported would never satisfy the regulations policed by Bord Bia or allowed under the organisation's quality assurance schemes. Farmers and consumers across Ireland are extremely frustrated by the double standards at play. If the Minister cannot see that, I ask him to wake up.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: In principle, I support the motion because if you have lost the confidence of the farmers whose produce you are trying to promote, then the writing is on the wall. Mr. Murrin will, I understand, be making a presentation to a committee tomorrow. We have to listen to what he has to say. I am conscious that the vote on the motion will not be taken tonight in any event.

I am reserving judgment on this matter, particularly as we are not talking about Peter Mandelson giving away state secrets or a child molester like Jeffrey Epstein. We are talking

about someone whose company is importing Brazilian beef. Obviously, there are questions, as others have said, about Brazilian beef, including in the context of banned hormones, traceability and the environmental impact, which is why, on balance, I support the calls, on the basis of environmental grounds in particular, not to implement the Mercosur deal. There is a certain amount of hypocrisy and grandstanding involved here.

Let the man speak tomorrow and see what he has to say. The pressure might take a toll, but we have to put it into context. Ultimately, if you do not have people's confidence, then the writing is on the wall. He may have to make the decision in that regard himself. Let us give him a week or so and see what happens.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the farmers from all over the country who are here for this debate. I particularly welcome those from the Offaly branch of the IFA.

No amount of verbal or procedural gymnastics that the Government engages in can hide the plain fact of the matter, namely that there is an open, glaring and festering contradiction at the heart of this dispute. There is hypocrisy and there are double standards. Irish farmers and their representative organisations have lost confidence in the chairperson of Bord Bia as a result of his company's role in importing Brazilian beef into Ireland. Larry Murrin continuing as chairperson of Bord Bia undermines public confidence in the organisation.

It damages Ireland's reputation as a world leader producing food that adheres to world-class standards - the highest standards in the world, in fact. I am not interested in knee-jerk reactions; I am interested in a solution and in putting an end to this before further damage is caused to our reputation here in Ireland. I am not interested in kangaroo courts or anything else, but the longer this goes on the worse the damage will be. As I stated recently, Offaly IFA members as well as farmers throughout this country are really at a loss to understand how Bord Bia is failing to grasp the untenable nature of chairman Larry Murrin's position. We have another Larry causing problems in the beef sector. Can we just put an end to this now and call on Larry Murrin to resign? That would be the right, the honourable and the respectful thing to do for our farmers.

The issue here is not about the volume of beef; it is the blatant contradiction in terms of food standards promotion and the institutional attitude of Bord Bia, which amounts to telling farmers and Irish producers, "Do as we say, not as we do." It is, as I said, the height of hypocrisy. Farmers, the Government and all the agrifood agencies need to be pulling in the one direction. We need unity. A protracted and contentious standoff, particularly where further reputational damage is likely, cannot be allowed to develop. The Government and Bord Bia would do well to heed the lessons that farmers have imposed on the EU recently with respect to Mercosur. The message was very clear that the farmers were not for turning then, and they are certainly not for turning now. Let us sort this out and let us make sure that Larry Murrin resigns and that we put a credible person in Bord Bia to steer the ship quickly.

Deputy Michael Cahill: It is fair to say there is huge disquiet with regard to this issue. Farmers across the country, and indeed at home in Kerry, are very angry. It is fair to say we pride ourselves on the quality of our beef and the high standards we set. Farmers have been subjected to onerous inspections regularly. I appreciate that there have been a number of calls for the chairman of Bord Bia to resign. I think the right thing to do at this stage is to wait and

see what develops tomorrow at the agriculture committee meeting, but it is important to say that there is huge anger out there with regard to this issue. It is a shame that it has come to this following so closely on the Mercosur deal and vote. Tensions are high at the moment. I just hope for all our sakes that this comes to the right conclusion. I am already looking forward to attending the meeting tomorrow and hearing Mr. Murrin.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: All the farmers from around the country are very welcome here tonight. I know they have all been very anxious and upset for the past number of weeks. What has happened is not fair. We know that the same standards do not apply in Brazil as apply here. I myself and my young fellas are farmers and we know what inspections are like. We worry about the TB test and the Bord Bia inspections, and then you can have an inspection out of the blue. We know what it means to be on the right side and to have everything in the right place. If you have a tag missing or if you have a drive off a tractor or it is only half on or whatever, you will not get your approval. It seems very wrong to me that produce can be put into a restaurant, or whatever it was, and it is stated that it is 99% Irish beef and 1% Brazilian beef. The first question arises there. Is our Irish beef contaminated by that 1% that went through no inspection and landed here into the food chain? I know that all the farmers in the Gallery, like me, go to funerals evening after evening. Many people die of old age and many people die from accidents. They die from different things, but cancer is the predominant thing people are dying from. We do not know what causes it but we have our part to play in this country to ensure we have good food and the highest standard possible. I am afraid we are losing that traceability and that expertise we had. We always heard that one bad apple will ruin the pack. It looks to me like we had and still have the fox minding the chickens.

When people go to court, we always hear that the judge and the jury have their minds 50% or 60% made up as to whether or not the lad will be convicted. I will wait until tomorrow to finally decide but I am fairly sure that all the people I have talked to, like many of the people up in the Gallery, are saying that this man will have to go. I will decide finally tomorrow. I am a member of the agriculture committee. I am proud to be a member of it because it does great work. We believe we are doing a great job and we want to continue doing that. We have very important positions to take and decisions to make tomorrow and we will finally make those.

I am very hurt at what has happened for the people I represent. I love going into their yards to talk about inspections and all the different things in farming, whether it is the weather, the price of animals or whatever it is. I want to be able to do that and to face the farmers head-on anytime because I came up here to do my best for them, as I do for all the other sectors of people I am proud to represent from the county of Kerry. I will make up my mind finally tomorrow but, like I said, this is a very worrying thing. The good word we have had about our produce and Bord Bia monitoring is all being jeopardised by this episode. From what investigations I have done and carried out, it has been made known to me that this particular individual was at this over 20 years ago, taking beef from Naas down to Midleton to put it into cold storage, the same beef we are talking about, Brazilian beef. I am seriously concerned to know, first of all, that he was appointed to such an important position as he is fulfilling at the minute. I, like all the other Members, am very concerned about it. There is a big onus on our shoulders tomorrow to listen and to account for everything that is said and goes on in there. I would not be anywhere else in the world and will ensure that whatever role I play will be on

behalf of the farmers up in the Gallery, the farmers around the country and especially the farmers from Kerry, from Sleah Head all the way over to the Cork county bounds. I will do that tomorrow.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I acknowledge the presence of the president of the IFA, Francie Gorman, as well as Kathleen Herlihy and all the chairpersons of the different counties representing the IFA; John Joe Fitzgerald from the INHFA; the other organisations around the country watching in tonight; the ICMSA; and all the people who represent farmers.

9 o'clock

When I am speaking here tonight, and I am addressing people sincerely, I am here as a member of the Government, but I am also here as a lifelong member of the IFA, a thing I am very proud of. I paid my membership when it was a troublesome thing to pay it. Like all of you, when you would have had a bill, you would be saying what will I pay and what will I not pay. I am also speaking as a person. I hear an awful lot of people opposite me talking about Bord Bia inspections. To be honest, they would not know a bull from a heifer, a lot of them, and they definitely would not know what a Bord Bia audit was. I do.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Stop your blackguarding.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I do, 100%.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Stop your blackguarding now.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I can guarantee you one thing: being subject to Bord Bia audits is a worrying thing.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Most of us are farmers-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is a thing you are concerned about. I just want to say I have great respect for the IFA, and its members know that. The Minister alluded to it earlier when we were out at the organisation's 71st AGM, which we were very glad to be at and to be put through our paces, and rightly so, by the president and others from all the sectors of the IFA. That is our job. We are there to work for you and to represent you. I cherish IFA membership. I do have to say that one thing I will never do is mislead anybody. If the IFA wants me to give my honest opinion about this situation, if the IFA is hitching its trailer to Sinn Féin's wagon, that worries me. I will tell you why it worries me.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I will tell you why it worries me.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Will you stand your ground? Will you stand up for farmers?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: No, you see-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You stood your ground on Mercosur.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Did I shout at any of you?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Stand your ground now.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Can people see now what is happening?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: When I am trying to genuinely talk, you are shouting me down.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Not at all.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Did I try to shout you down?

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is a deliberate attack.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Have a small bit of manners, please.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Stop your coddling.

Deputy Martin Heydon: It is a deliberate attack by Sinn Féin.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption, please.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Try to use up my time, do. You do not like what I am going to say-----

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----but I will continue saying it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We are sticking up for the farmers.

Deputy Martin Kenny: You are a waffler.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: A waffler? I will tell you about waffling. Deputy Kenny made a statement earlier on.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Yes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: He made a statement. He said this Government had to be brought kicking and dragging over Mercosur. A lot he knows about it. Did he read the programme for Government-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Ah now.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----which was written 13 months ago?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Ah, for God's sake.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: What did it say? It clearly said that this Government was going to vote against Mercosur-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Two days before, the Taoiseach said we would vote for it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: That is right.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----and it was going to work with like-minded countries. A lot of work Deputy Kenny did on it. What did he do about it? He mouthed. He went on Facebook. I want to tell the IFA a thing about Sinn Féin and what it is doing.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Deal with the issue.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Deal with the issue.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Its members wake up in the morning, wet their fingers, see which way the wind is blowing and they go that way.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Ah now, stop coddling people.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The other thing is that they live for Facebook. Their governance is Facebook.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: You are on social media all the time. Deal with the issue.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Their governance is that they get up in the morning, wet their finger, see what way the wind is blowing and that is Sinn Féin policy for the day.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You never use Facebook or Twitter, do you?

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The IFA is hitching itself to its wagons. The killing thing about it is-----

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption now, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----that the IFA membership up and down the length and breadth of the country who I am listening to-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Stop your deflecting-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----and who I am talking to know what this crowd are at. They are using you.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You are insulting their intelligence.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Why are you shouting me down?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Mac Lochlainn, please.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You are only a messer-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is because I am telling the truth. You do not want to hear what I am saying. Will the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach call for order and keep my time?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Without interruption, thank you.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The other thing I want to say, because I want to call another thing out, is that when I hear-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: If you-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Bennett, please respect the House.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Without interruption.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Would I interrupt you? I would not dare.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister of State was the chief interrupter in the last Dáil.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Mac Lochlainn, will you please stop?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: That-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Mac Lochlainn, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am going to tackle another thing, and I am talking to Kerry IFA now. I heard a man speaking with great authority, and I am sorry he is not here now, and that is my colleague, Deputy Pa Daly.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I heard him talking with authority about Kerry IFA. Well, I can tell you one thing, he would have to put Gortatlea mart into Google Maps to find his way there because I never met him there. I never met him at an IFA meeting going back over three decades, 30 years, of going to IFA meetings in Kerry-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: Seriously.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----and then he goes lecturing here tonight.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are talking about the chair of Bord Bia.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Go back to Bord Bia. We are discussing Bord Bia.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You see, you do not like what I am saying because what I am saying is hurting.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Bennett, please. The Minister of State, without interruption, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: All you are doing is wetting your finger.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You are only coddling people.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You sold your soul.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am telling the truth.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You sold your soul and you sold out the farming community-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: At least I have a soul and a heart.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You sold your soul.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Gould, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am speaking from the heart, if you did not interrupt me, about what we need on this whole issue. That is why I welcome tomorrow. My brother is right when he says the work that the agriculture committee does is good-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Actually, next week, we are-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----because I was in before it today answering questions. Do you know what? Deputy Kenny's questions left a lot to be desired because he did not know what he was talking about. He asked me about schemes that he should have known about. He did not have a clue.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Ha ha.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Deal with this issue.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It is no harm to expose that to the IFA.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are talking about the chair of Bord Bia.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Deputy Kenny did not know what he was talking about.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There he goes again.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I am sure the Minister of State-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State to continue without interruption now, please.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We are dealing with Bord Bia. Come back to the issue.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister of State has not once dealt with the core issue. Should he stay or should he go?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Mac Lochlainn, please respect the Chair.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I welcome what is going to happen tomorrow. I welcome that there is going to be dialogue. What the Minister wanted all along was for people to sit down and have dialogue. I do not like what has happened over the last week and I will tell you why. I am going to tell the IFA leadership why I do not like it. The most genuine people in the world are at a protest-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Too late.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----at a time when they should be at home because they have enough to be doing at home at this time of the year.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I am sorry we are in this situation, but how it could have been handled was by dialogue, not by entrenchment and not by people saying it has to be this way, like Sinn Féin said it has to be a head and it has to be this and it has to be that.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Seriously.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We stopped fighting and killing each other above in the North by dialogue and by talking, and I recognise 100% the good work Sinn Féin did in that regard, in dialogue, in talking, in negotiating and in using the political system. What I would have liked to have seen happen over the last week was talking and not this entrenchment, because this is getting-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is no dispute on this issue. This man imported Brazilian beef. Was he wrong?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Kenny, please.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: -----because that is getting the farmers of Ireland nowhere. Again, I am saying this not as a person with my finger wet, like these people across here.

I had to listen to another lady a while ago from the Social Democrats talking about farmers in Ireland. She is the woman who, when the Minister brought over Commissioner Roswall about the nitrates derogation and extending it, stood up at a meeting, and Mr. Gorman from the IFA was there and heard what she said, and tried to undermine and sabotage the nitrates derogation the Minister was trying to get extended on the farmers' behalf. We then have a politician here paying lip service to the farmers, the same as these people are.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Double standards.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Ah, for God's sake, cop yourself on.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I call the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I ask the farmers to see what they are seeing tonight and see the people who are working for them, the people who want to work with them and to represent them.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We are their servants. We are there to work for the farmers of Ireland, and not this type of nonsense, this rubbish of throwing down a motion. It is like they put down a motion about leprechauns.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You are only a codder. You are only bluffing and coddling-

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: See them for what they are doing - rubbish and nonsense, and they know I mean that.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I do know what it is like to be up at 3 o'clock in the morning with calving.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: A lot you know.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I call the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to finish. Members, please.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I do know what it is like to be subject to Bord Bia reports. I do.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I call the Minister of State to finish.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: We are not all-----

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Ah sure, keep rabbiting on.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I do know what it is like.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Newsome Drennan, would you please respect the Chair? I call the Minister of State to respond.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: That was a great performance. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: All his time was taken up.

Deputy Martin Heydon: He is entitled to his time, because you interrupted him.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, and I cut our teeth in student politics 35 years ago. I learned a lesson back then and it is equally worthy today. Never be speaking after him, because you will certainly not outdo his capacity to hold an audience and hold people to account. I do not bear any ill will against Sinn Féin for taking an opportunity like this. Maybe we have all done it in opposition.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is not an opportunity, for God's sake.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are standing up for farmers.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister of State, without interruption, please.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I grew up on a small farm in the west of Ireland. I know what survival is like. I know what difficulties and issues faced a farming community.

Deputy Martin Kenny: So do we.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: So do people on this side of the House.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I do not mean this in any kind of an over-the-top way, but I do not need anyone in this House, from this side or the other, to lecture me about the struggles farming is facing.

Deputy Martin Kenny: No, we will go to the issue so.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Also, over that protracted period of time, I have come to see how successive governments have supported the farming sector and how it is a different place now from what it was 40, 45 or 50 years ago. I also know there is a much different approach now to marketing our beef abroad and that the integrated nature of the supply chain and the complexities of it are very different from the kind of abattoirs, the kind of butchering and the kind of processing that existed back then. It is a hell of a lot more complex. Some of the language I heard tonight from the Opposition would seem to me to suggest that it has a way to go, and this is not lecturing, in understanding how complex the supply chain is now-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: That is a bit patronising.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----how the requirements of the customer are very different-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: They want Bord Bia certification.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----and the way in which markets are provided for.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: They want it Bord Bia-certified.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: That is for another day, however. It is not for us.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Brazilian beef is central to the Irish market, is it?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I would expect that tomorrow, when he comes before the committee-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The customer does not want Brazilian beef.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----Mr. Murrin will be well able to explain the complexities of the supply chain-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I hope he will.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----and the complexities of meeting the demands and needs of a changing marketplace. It is not all about carcasses moving to and fro.

We have heard about the remarkable growth in the value of agrifood exports over the last decade and more from an export value of €10 billion in 2011 to an estimated €21 billion in

2025. That figure is a truly a record. Our export destinations are well balanced between the EU, the UK and international markets. We all know the importance of market diversification in these volatile geopolitical times. We also know that Bord Bia has played a key role in that success. We have heard about its success in promoting our top-quality food and drink overseas. Like the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, I have witnessed this at first hand on trade missions and at trade fairs. I certainly concur with his view of the excellent teams on the ground. I was recently in the position of political leadership of a mission to China. It was principally about fish but it was also about beef, offal and green offal. I saw the work that had been done under the guidance of the chairman and chief executive to put in place teams on the ground that were speaking in Mandarin, engaging with customers and bringing them to political events. I saw how well regarded Bord Bia was. That does not happen by accident. It is easy to suggest that you can isolate one individual and call for a head and for summary judgment so that you can get it done and move on. If the Government or some other body were to follow through on that approach, it would have implications. It would send the message that there was an issue at the core of the quality of Irish beef. It would bring into question the very standards that put farmers to the pin of their collar.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Nobody is questioning the quality.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Farmers talk to me regularly about the exactness and complexity of these standards and the challenges they present. If the people at the top of Bord Bia were to exit, those very standards would be questioned in third countries, markets outside of Ireland.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Farmers set the standards. Farmers are paying the price.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: You do not care about us. Give us Brazilian beef.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: While we might think we would have a handle on this debate and know what was going on, we do not know how it would be translated-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: So all the Government cares about is the exports, not the imports.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----by some of our competitors. Can the Deputies imagine how the delivery of a head, as Sinn Féin has been demanding of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, would be presented by those countries that seek to compete with us in international markets? They would say there was a problem with Irish beef and with the standards.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: There is a problem with the-----

Deputy Timmy Dooley: They would say there was a problem with the agency.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Government is the problem.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: They would undermine us. That would open up an entirely new front.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: They could say there was a proper Government in place.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I suspect that, within a number of weeks, we would have another motion from Sinn Féin, this one saying the Minister did wrong and hanged the wrong man and telling him to look at the negative consequences. It is sometimes easy to call for a head and to rush to judgment.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Did he not-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Bord Bia-certified means something to everyone.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: However, when you have the privilege, responsibility and burden of government, you always have to think things through.

Deputy Martin Kenny: So, Larry Murrin did not import Brazilian beef.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: You have to make sure the decisions that you take on behalf of the Irish people-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is one or the other. He either imported it or he did not.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----are in the best interests of the people we seek to serve. I cannot accept that Sinn Féin holds dear farmers and those communities any more than I do or the other people on this side of the House do.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Bord Bia's mission statement states "We champion responsible food production" and that it promises to show Irish food in a way that is "inspirational, empowering, and exciting." Those are beautiful words. At the same time, the man at the top is bringing beef in from Brazil and the Government thinks that is all right. The Government tried to sell Irish farmers down the river with the Mercosur deal. Two Sinn Féin MEPs in Europe put a stop to it. At the last minute, the Government came out to say it would vote against it. For years, it did nothing to protect the farmers. At the same time, while it is making promises to the IFA and the farming community, it is supporting the head of the IFA bringing in Brazilian beef. It is an absolute disgrace.

I am shocked at Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. He is a man who says he has stood up for farmers all of his life. He is now standing here to defend a man who is bringing in Brazilian beef. Is your junior Ministry so important that you would deny the people who voted for you? Is this what we get from the Lowry and Healy-Rae Independents? Do they sell their vote to the highest bidder?

I worked in a dairy years ago when I was a young fella. I am from Knocknaheeny in the heart of the city but I worked in Ballinahina dairies with Michael Buckley. I saw farmers

coming in to do the night shift before going out to milk the cattle and run the farm. They were working 14 and 16 hours a day. I have seen them. I worked there for years. As a fella from the city, I understood how hard farmers worked. Until you work with people in the farming community, you do not get it. The Government Members have come in here tonight to attack Sinn Féin. It is always about attacking Sinn Féin. They are attacking those in the Gallery, the IFA and the farming community, people who have given their lives up. When the Government Members criticise us, they criticise every farmer, every farm family and the rural community, which depends on Irish beef. We have one of the greatest products in the world and the Government wants to dilute it. It wants to let the Brazilians come in here. It wants to let the head of the IFA bring it in.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Bord Bia.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am sorry; I meant Bord Bia.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: You might clarify that because Francie Gorman would be cross with Brazilian beef.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I have to say this, Deputy Healy-Rae.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Gould is over time. I call Deputy Johnny Mythen.

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, let me just finish.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): No, you are out of time.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Does the Minister think it is right-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Ministers of State were given four and half minutes extra.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----that the head of Bord Bia can bring in Brazilian beef? It is a straight question for the Minister.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): This is not a back and forth.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Is it right that the head of Bord Bia can bring in Brazilian beef and keep his job? Does the Minister think that is right? It is a straight question.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Will Deputy Gould retract his statement about Francie Gorman?

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I am sure the Minister will agree that the chairman of Bord Bia is responsible for upholding accountability, managing conflicts of interest and maintaining high

ethical standards. Surely, if the chairman of Bord Bia is importing Brazilian beef through his own company, that is a conflict of interest and a breach of ethical standards. This is a serious matter. It is a matter of utmost importance to the reputation of Ireland's food and drink exports and our domestic market. Bord Bia holds Irish farmers to some of the highest and most stringent standards and conditions in the world through its sustainable quality assurance scheme. The same Irish farmers are now insisting that the chairman of the board meet the same standards and leave his post. His position has become untenable and has undermined public confidence. The longer he remains, the more damage will be done to Bord Bia and to Ireland's reputation as the producer of the highest quality meat and drinks in Europe, if not the world.

Bord Bia's code of ethics should require that stakeholders and the reputation of our meat, drinks and horticulture be protected to make them the best on the world markets. The Minister must recognise that the backbone of our beef, drink and food industries are the farmers and small producers. He must also recognise that the primary link between the Minister and his Department and the board is the chairman himself. This raises the question of whether the Minister was aware of the chairman's company using Brazilian beef as raw material for products it supplies. By anyone's standards, this is a conflict of interest and a breach of ethical standards.

As one farmer in my own county of Wexford put it, if the manager has lost the dressing room, it is time to go. That is the case here. The stakes are high. The reputation of our beef and food industries is on the line. We call on the Minister to do the right thing. He has the power to do so under section 18(1) of the An Bord Bia Act. Now is the time to stand firmly behind our Irish farmers. I ask all TDs to support this motion tonight.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We need to state the facts straightforwardly. Larry Murrin is chair of Bord Bia. Bord Bia has done a fine job in marketing food, drink and horticulture from Ireland. However, let us also be clear that Larry Murrin is the co-founder and CEO of Dawn Farms. Am I correct in believing that Dawn Farms imported Brazilian beef into Ireland?

I do not think there is any question about that. How can someone not see that this is a huge conflict of interest in the context of trying to sell and market goods and wares on the basis of the work done by the farmers in the Gallery and throughout the country? I am talking about farmers in Knockbridge, Kilkenny, Sheelagh, Omeath, Reaghstown and other areas across County Louth.

I did not grow up on a farm, but my father did. I worked on many farms. My uncle is a farmer and my cousins are farmers. This is not Sinn Féin deciding that Larry Murrin needs to go. Farmers were on to us, as they were on to the IFA and other organisations, to say that it is not okay to import Brazilian beef, that doing so is an absolute conflict of interest and that we are talking about marketing Irish beef.

The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, spoke about dangers in the future. There will be reputational damage done by the chair of Bord Bia taking in Brazilian beef. In fairness, the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, stood up in relation to the Mercosur deal. I know he is under pressure this evening. He stood up in respect of the Mercosur deal and, at the last minute, the Government decided it would, sort of, oppose it.

Deputy Martin Heydon: A whole year-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Let us be clear about what it is going to do. We also met Commissioners Piotr Serafin and Christophe Hansen, and we know the dangers of provisional application. I have not seen what the Government will do to oppose Mercosur or deal with the possibility of more Brazilian beef, with hormones and antibiotics and without the traceability that applies to Irish beef, being imported here. That is what we need to see.

The Minister, Deputy Heydon, said that explaining global food supply chains and contingency planning does not make for good social media clips. Does this contingency planning include the importation of Brazilian beef? The chair has to go. What happened is unacceptable, and the Government has been a disgrace.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This has been a heated debate, and that is fine. We debate matters robustly in order to make progress, so let us make a little of progress. There are a couple of things that are not disputed. Beef from Brazil has a lot of problems. The system in Brazil is different. The Irish Government opposed the Mercosur deal. We can debate whether it was as wholehearted in doing so as we would have liked, but it did oppose the deal because it recognised - and we take its word for this - that the beef coming from Brazil does not meet the standards that European consumers should expect. There is no dispute about that.

The head of Bord Bia imported Brazilian beef that does not meet these standards. That is not in dispute either. He is not coming here tomorrow to tell us whether or not he imported Brazilian beef. We know he did so. We know he has used it as part of his contingency planning, as the Minister outlined. If the contingency planning for the marketing of Irish beef is to mix Brazilian beef in with it, then the Government needs to start being honest with Irish farmers. Is that what the Minister is saying? The Minister seems to have said that we are not listening to the common-sense explanation as to why some Brazilian beef would have to be used in order to gain access to particular markets. That is a dangerous Rubicon to cross. That is the reality. There is a red line that Larry Murrin has crossed. As the chair of Bord Bia, the organisation charged with marketing Irish food, drink and horticulture of the finest quality to which the quality assurance mark is attached and with whose standards Irish farmers have to comply, it is unacceptable that he would also run a company that is buying, processing and selling Brazilian beef, which is possibly contaminated, mixed with Irish beef.

If the Minister does not understand the huge impact of this when it comes to the farmers of this country and to consumers across Europe and around the world, he does not understand the issue we are dealing with. We on this side of the House are not looking for a head or trying to make political capital; we are looking at reality. The reality is that the person in charge of marketing Irish food cannot also be selling-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: You are superseding the very committee you will sit on tomorrow. You are superseding the work of that committee.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Minister knows this motion was submitted last week, before the committee's decision was made for Larry Murrin to come in. The vote on this motion will not be held until next week. There will be a full week after we hear from Larry Murrin

tomorrow to digest what he says, ask further questions and deal with this issue. The Minister and his backbenchers, many of whom, including from his party, have told me privately that they are extremely unhappy with the position the Minister has taken, have a week to decide what way they will vote. I am confident that if they are true to themselves and to the farmers of the country, they will vote to ensure that Larry Murrin is removed from his position.

Deputies: Hear, hear

Amendment put

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time next week.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): 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 Shane Moynihan - To discuss enhancing public transport links between Lucan and the airport.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the provision of childcare facilities in Cork North Central.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - Timeline for construction of the new educational campus for St. Joseph's Secondary School, Rush, and Gaelscoil Ros Eo.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the process of exchanging international driving licences for Irish licences.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss implementing without further delay the agreed pension payment increases to retired staff of Éir and An Post.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the allocation of SET and SNA hours for primary schools where needs have significantly increased.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the need for Gaelscoil Choráin, Youghal, County Cork, to be included in the DEIS urban band 1 programme.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the Blackpool-River Bride flood relief scheme.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the review of the Garda vetting process and planned measures for simplification.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss publication of the north Kerry CAMHS look-back review.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the importance of the N20-M20 motorway project for the Munster region.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for additional school infrastructure in Fingal West.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the need to lodge an application for port listing of Killybegs.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss implementation of the agreed increases in pensions for former CIÉ employees.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss World Cancer Day and cancer services in Ireland.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the impact of the new PSO contract for flights between Donegal and Dublin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss schools infrastructure in Kildare North.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere - To discuss the Kilkenny school campus project for Kilkenny City Vocational School and Coláiste Pobail Osraí.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for increased resources for An Garda Síochána in the mid-west.

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

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the provision of special education classes across Galway East.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discussion provision of additional accommodation at St. Mochta's NS, Louth.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss regeneration on the north side of Cork.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss recurring issues with the No. 15 bus for commuters in north Dublin.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the Defence Forces informing the Garda that they will not be able to provide anti-drone security for EU Presidency meetings.

The matters raised by Deputies Shane Moynihan, Naoise Ó Muirí, Richard Boyd Barrett, Thomas Gould and Robert O'Donoghue have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Public Transport

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is mian liom an deis a thapú labhairt ar an gceist seo, ceist atá thar a bheith práinneach do mhuintir Leamhcáin agus Bhaile Formaid. This matter relates to the need, as has been documented by others in the House and as constituents have raised with me, for a direct public transport link between the Lucan-Palmerstown area and Dublin Airport. At present, there is no such link. This is despite the fact that Lucan is a large and rapidly growing suburban area and its population exceeds that of Waterford city. Previously, a privately operated service, the Airport Hopper, provided a direct connection that included stops

in Lucan village and Liffey Valley. Since the cessation of that service last year, residents have been left without a comparable replacement to allow them to travel to Dublin Airport. As a result, those who want to travel from Lucan to Dublin Airport and who want to use public transport have to make an indirect and time-consuming journey. Not only does this reduce the attractiveness of public transport for airport access, it also adds to the stress involved and to time it takes for someone to get to the airport, be it for business, pleasure or education purposes.

I will illustrate some of the difficulties involved. If people want to use public transport to access Dublin Airport, they travel on the C1 or C2 into the city centre and then transfer to route 16 or 19 to the airport. They can travel by bus to the Red Cow Roundabout and transfer to the private Dublin Coach service 750 to Dublin Airport. In both of these instances - and there are others - the travel time can exceed one and a half hours for what is a 30-minute drive at off-peak times. This means that many residents are left with little choice but to use taxis or their private cars. In many cases, taxi fares can exceed €50.

What is puzzling about all of this is that several regional coach services, including the Expressway route 22 from Sligo to the airport and route 23 from Ballina to the airport, pass through Lucan on the M4 and stop at the Lucan Spa Hotel.

We have made a suggestion to the NTA from my office to improve the connectivity for Lucan residents by providing an additional stop, for example, at the footbridge at the N4. The NTA has advised us that these services operate under a pick-up and set-down restriction designed to protect capacity for longer-distance passengers. Disappointingly, the NTA has indicated to me through replies to parliamentary questions that there are no current plans to amend these restrictions or to facilitate a direct connection between Lucan and the airport.

I know the Minister of State knows this area well and I thank her for being here and taking this Topical Issue matter. One of the successes of BusConnects over the past two-to-three years has been the introduction of the orbital routes like the W4 route that goes through our constituency, the S2 route, the N routes and so on. There is a real scope and opportunity to build on the success of those orbital routes, build on the very positive public disposition there is towards using public transport and providing a very direct link for people who live in Lucan and people who live in Palmerstown to allow them to access the M50 via a public transport link and to get to Dublin Airport. My ask today is that the Minister and the Department of Transport consult with the NTA with a view to creating that direct link between residents in Lucan and Palmerstown and Dublin Airport.

Lucan's population at this moment in time exceeds that of Waterford city and it is quite questionable that there is not a direct link between that town and Dublin Airport given the reliance of people in Lucan on the airport for business, holidaying and educational use. I look forward to a good and thorough discussion on the matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this really important topic which I am taking today on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. From the outset, I want to clarify that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, however neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the NTA, National

Transport Authority, which the Deputy referenced in his contribution. The NTA works with the public transport operators who deliver the services and have responsibility for their day-to-day operation.

That said, I want to reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department secured €940 million of funding for public service obligation, PSO, and TFI Local Link services. That is a significant 43% uplift and an increase from €658.4 million in 2025 to €940 million.

I understand that the Deputy specifically wishes to discuss the public transport links, or lack thereof, between Lucan and the airport. Officials from the Department of Transport have engaged with the NTA on this matter and have been advised, like the Deputy, that there was previously a direct service between Lucan and the airport which was operated on a commercial basis. That was a bus I used regularly so I have a vested interest in this and I did always find it reliable.

While most public transport in Ireland comprises the bus and rail services funded through the NTA's PSO programme, there is part of the national public transport system that comprises non-subsidised bus services, which are run on a commercial basis by bus and coach businesses of varying sizes throughout the country. As such, any decisions taken by commercial operators regarding route scheduling and timetabling are a matter for the commercial company involved, and the NTA has no powers to refuse an application from an operator to reduce or withdraw services on what is a commercial route.

In circumstances where a commercial operator ceases operating a specific route, the NTA undertakes an examination to determine whether, with the discontinuation of the commercial service, it is necessary for a replacement PSO service to be introduced to ensure no loss of connectivity to the travelling public. This process includes an assessment of the level of demand for public transport services in the affected area, an evaluation of whether existing PSO services can be reconfigured to meet any shortfall, or whether it is necessary to competitively tender for the provision of services.

The Minister for Transport has been advised by the NTA that, at present, there are no plans to introduce a replacement subsidised direct service on this route. However, a considerable number of journey options to Dublin Airport are available and the Minister has outlined them. To be honest, the Deputy puts forward a really good suggestion in relation to the existing route that passes by and stops at Lucan Spa Hotel, and for it to just stop at the footbridge on the N4. I will take that feedback directly to the Minister for Transport. As Deputy Moynihan said, the orbital bus routes servicing areas throughout Dublin have been a huge success and we really need to be thinking outside the box and making small changes that would have a big impact for the commuting public.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for her comprehensive reply. I note, as I said in my own contribution and the Minister of State mentioned, the ability to interchange with the likes of route 16 from the city centre is available to people. However, I would emphasise, as has been emphasised to me by constituents Mary and Gerard Sammon in Lucan, that the route 16 is one that takes a long time. It compounds the fact that one must travel into

the city centre to go out to the airport, whereas a link that goes onto the M50 allowing an orbital route would be far preferable.

The Minister of State mentioned the NTA undertakes an evaluation of whether a PSO is necessary on a route. I note that the answer did not state whether the NTA has actually done that evaluation. If that has taken place, I would welcome the NTA making it available in order to allow it to be scrutinised and held up for further analysis.

I welcome that the Minister of State will take on board the suggestions I made about inserting new pick-up and drop-off stops on the N4 for existing routes that go to the airport from the western part of the country in particular and those that use the N4. That should be consistent with the principles the NTA has set out in its response and conveyed to the Minister of State. If we are suggesting people can use existing routes that take longer to access from Lucan, surely it is consistent with that approach that we allow existing routes coming into the city from the western part of the county to have stops incorporated in them to allow people to access this.

This suggestion is coming from constituents and, from my point of view and that of the Minister of State, from a place of wanting people to use public transport. We regularly discuss congestion in this House. I would welcome the NTA making the results of its evaluation available to us for scrutiny. I would like to see how it has done that analysis. If that is not the case, will the NTA then engage with the public transport market to see if a provider will take on this route on a commercial basis? The population is there and the demand is there for what I think should be a commercial service. However, that certainty and guidance from the NTA will be needed to build that appetite in the market.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I fully agree. It makes absolute sense to utilise existing routes. It makes sense from a sustainability perspective, from an efficiency perspective and, most importantly, from a public transport users' perspective. I will absolutely take that feedback back to the Minister for Transport. Orbital routes have been a success in most instances. There has been huge investment in them and that is because nowadays everybody does not necessarily need to be going to the city centre. That is not everybody's destination. It is about being able to provide people who work on the outskirts of Dublin with a better commuting option as well. They have really worked and I take on board the Deputy's feedback that it would work in this instance too.

Regarding the commercial operator itself, the decision to cease operations on this route was solely a matter for the company. The NTA has no legislative powers to refuse an application from an operator to either reduce or withdraw services. I appreciate that there are not direct routes and that is having an impact locally. On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank Deputy Moynihan for bringing this issue forward. I assure the Deputy that his concerns have been heard. I will convey his points, including his very good suggestion regarding the existing bus route, back to the Minister.

Public Transport

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The No. 15 bus from Clongriffin to Ballycullen Road has served the people of the northside of Dublin for more than a decade. It is a great service and a crucial

service going into the city for a lot of commuters and has become even more important as Clongriffin has continued to expand with LDA work and other projects there. Since the route went to 24-hours in 2019 it has also become a vital option for students, shift workers and others travelling late at night who still wish to rely on public transport and, in fact, it may be their only option in and out of the city.

However, in recent months my Fine Gael colleague, Councillor Supriya Singh, and I have received a steady stream of complaints from local residents about the deterioration of that service. People are experiencing frequent no-shows, last-minute cancellations, long gaps between buses and, of course, the so-called ghost bus services that appear as due on the TFI Live app but never arrive. It is a particular problem at stop 6320 on the Hole in The Wall road where commuters travel towards the city centre. They can experience two or even three consecutive buses failing to show and wait times of 30-40 minutes, often in heavy rain and poor weather and without a structure at the stop to protect them.

That makes it even harder.

These delays are causing problems. People are missing work. They are missing educational opportunities. They are missing school. They are missing medical appointments and childcare commitments. It is made worse, as I mentioned, by the lack of that shelter.

My colleague, Councillor Supriya Singh, whom I mentioned previously, has raised these issues on a few occasions with the NTA, but the responses, to be honest, have been unsatisfactory. We get these responses to many Deputies in this House - that congestion is causing buses to miss return journeys; there are driver shortages and operational issues such as breakdowns or incidents in service. We all want good services. We want to fight for good services for our constituents. A service like this is very important and it is frustrating as a public representative, representing our constituents, that there appears to be so little progress in addressing the underlying problems. We should not accept the level of service that people have come to tolerate on some of these routes. I do not accept the level of service. I want the NTA to improve and to up its game, to step up and play ball. It must do better.

If we are serious about meeting climate targets and if we want to encourage people to make the famous modal shift whereby they get out of their car and onto a bus or a bike or they walk or take the train. We have to make sure that public transport is not only available but that it works for people. It must come on time, arrive when it says it will and when it is meant to, and leave on time so that we can go to work on it and come home on it. Public transport must be reliable and work. I would appreciate the Minister of State's views on this issue.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí very much for raising this Topical Issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport. To clarify, the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport, but he does not have responsibility for or involvement in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. That rests with the National Transport Authority. The NTA, which the Deputy referenced in his contribution, works with the public transport operators, who deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. That being said, I would like to reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal.

I appreciate that many customers in north Dublin, in the Deputy's constituency, have recently been experiencing some issues with regard to cancellations and reliability. As he predicted, the note I was handed today by the Minister speaks to traffic congestion, and a shortage of bus drivers and mechanics being part of the issue. From what I can see, it looks very much to be the case that traffic congestion is having a big impact on this bus route. Traffic conditions have been particularly challenging in recent months on that route. Traffic speeds have seen a decrease of 5%, while at the same time there has been a 5% increase in traffic volume. This has resulted in significantly higher lost kilometres for route 15 in quarter 4 than in quarters 1, 2 and 3 combined. That is heavily impacting both punctuality and reliability. They are the issues the Deputy has spoken about in regard to the constituents he mentioned who have missed work, school, appointments or other commitments. That is a direct result of the situation.

Dublin Bus introduced two additional morning peak capacity trips on 2 November to alleviate the issues facing the route. I compliment Deputy Ó Muirí and Councillor Supriya Singh, whom I know he has worked with on this to make sure that this happened. While the additional services have provided some relief, passenger loadings remain very heavy during the morning peak. A further capacity and demand review is now scheduled for later this year. At present, it is planned that a revised schedule for route 15 will be introduced in September, aimed at improving reliability and better matching capacity to demand. In the short term, an additional evening peak trip from the city centre to Clongriffin will be implemented from 8 February. I know this is something the Deputy has campaigned hard on and I thank him for doing that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State. It is good to hear about the revised schedule in terms of the additional peak trip and the morning peak capacity trips from 2 November. To be honest, I do not want to come in here and raise issues about specific bus services because it is a matter for the NTA, but in a situation whereby residents are finding that the service is deteriorating and the NTA is not responding, then I am obliged to do it here. Like the Minister of State or any other Member of this House, we are obliged to raise the issues that matter to our constituents.

I am going to give two examples. The first is from 17 December. I will read an email verbatim:

There are now so many cancellations of the 15 because Dublin Bus fear getting a fine from the NTA for being outside the timetable and allowed tolerance re:arriving late/arriving early, that you are lucky if you see two or three in an hour, a long way off the published timetable, which at this stage is but a work of fiction. From the 01st Jan to 30 Sep 2025 there were 2950 cancellations of the 15 route making it the 4th most cancelled bus route in the city.

That is one example. I will give just one other from 30 January.

This morning, I waited 50 minutes before a bus showed up (8am to 8.50am) – screen said 4 minutes for the duration of that time. My sister also travels this same route and this week alone experienced: Tuesday - 1 hour and 15 minutes wait; Wednesday – 30 minutes wait; Thursday – 20 minutes wait and a broken-down bus; Today – broken down bus again. As a fare-paying customer, I expect a basic level of punctuality and reliability that is currently not being met by this service.

They are just two examples of the many contacts Councillor Singh and I have received. I welcome the response of the NTA in terms of additional capacity. I also welcome what it is talking about doing, but the NTA needs to up its game in this situation because the 15 above many other routes in the city, goes from Clongriffin, which is growing, all the way into the city centre. It is a vital route. It is a workhorse of a route for the area.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I ask again that this issue would go to the NTA and that it would pay close attention to it.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy. He is right. He has to raise these issues on behalf of his constituents. At the end of the day, transport connectivity is massively important to people. It is important to people who are using it to get to work or to get to study. It is a part of day-to-day life. Public transport is something that should be able to be relied on. The Deputy spoke of published timetables being a work of fiction. That is not acceptable. We need to get to a point where published timetables are reliable.

I am really encouraged to hear that Dublin Bus has introduced two additional morning peak capacity trips, as of November, to alleviate the issues facing the 15 route, and that it is now going to introduce evening peak trips from the city centre to Clongriffin from 8 February, which is this week. That is really good news for Deputy Ó Muirí's constituents. It is also really good to know that a revised schedule for route 15 is to be introduced in September. That is aimed at improving reliability and better matching capacity to demand. It is really important that the Deputy continues to work with the NTA and Dublin Bus, and with his colleagues both locally and nationally to make sure that the new route in September adequately services his constituents. I will take this feedback directly to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State.

Cancer Services

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue for debate on world cancer day. I thought it was important that this Dáil should mark world cancer day and discuss the issue of resources and funding for cancer services in this country, not least because I had a cancer diagnosis last year and have undergone treatment. I am very grateful to the cancer services and to all the fantastic people who work in it: the doctors, the nurses, the allied health professionals, all the people in our cancer and health services, and indeed the people who are working and researching things like cancer treatments and cancer prevention and advocacy groups like the Irish Cancer Society. They all deserve our gratitude and their work deserves to be highlighted on this important day.

The statistics on cancer make it clear that it is an issue for absolutely everybody in this country. Every three minutes in Ireland somebody will get a cancer diagnosis. That means 44,000 people this year will be diagnosed with cancer. We have, unfortunately the second highest ranking among EU member states for new cancer diagnoses. Tragically, more than 10,000 people a year will die as a result of cancer. Ireland also unfortunately has the third

highest rate of cancer mortality in western Europe. Central to the concerns of those in the Irish Cancer Society and those who work in our cancer services is that the expected increase in cancer diagnosis that will take place between 2015 and 2045 is 100%. That is against a background where already 50% of people will be affected by cancer in their lifetime.

This is a serious issue. It is going to affect most people and there are worrying signs that cancer is increasing in prevalence. There was a report in the last couple of weeks by the Irish Cancer Society and the OECD that while it is often associated with older people, there is a very concerning rise of cancer in people younger than 49.

There are a lot of issues you could bring up. The Irish Cancer Society produced detailed reports that are asking about investment in resources, infrastructure, services, staffing and so on in a range of areas such as prevention, genetic services, costs of cancer screening, early detection, timely access to treatment, children and adolescents living with cancer, the end of life, and capital investment and infrastructure. All of those need to be addressed. The Minister is probably familiar with them.

There are worrying statistics and worrying instances of people not getting their cancer treatment in time. Early cancer treatment is critical. We have, for example, one hospital in the country where only 12% of people were getting cancer treatment on time. Ten hospitals missed their target of getting cancer treatment in time for their patients in half of the months of the year. That is a very worrying sign.

I have also raised the fact that there needs to be, on behalf of those working, a national replacement programme for radiotherapy machines - linear accelerators - because 35% of our machines, which are supposed to be replaced every ten years, are now 15 years old or more, and 40% of our machines need to be replaced in the next five years. While there is a replacement programme under way, those working in the services say that this is not centrally organised and is not being organised in advance, so we are responding to the immediate need but not planning for the future, particularly when there is a massive increase in demand projected over recent years.

There is a lot more else I could say, but I hope the Minister will respond to some of those points.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for raising this on World Cancer Day and thank him for continuing to be an advocate for cancer patients across the island. As the Deputy has said, he and I could speak about this for a good hour and not get through all of the different issues.

We are well aware that every person in this room and the people whom we represent are impacted by cancer in their families, in their broader families and in their community. While we have made huge strides in cancer care since the first national cancer strategy was launched, where we had only 45% of people surviving five years in the nineties and that is up to 65% now, with our mortality rate falling faster than anywhere else in the EU, as the Deputy correctly points out, however, the number of diagnoses is going to continue to increase and the population is increasing.

I attended the Irish Daffodil Day launch for the volunteers. The ambassador for the Irish Cancer Society this year is Katie Foley from Inch in Kerry. She is 30 and she has a four-year-

old girl. Katie was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. She runs her own business, a coffee shop. She has gone through a recovery process and is doing very well. She is ambassador this year. She has been speaking about the difficulty for every part of her life - looking after her little girl, looking after her business and getting the treatment that she needs. I highlight the example, as the Deputy has, of how it can impact so many young people.

As we live longer and we are diagnosed with more illnesses, we should expect the rate of diagnosis to increase. That does not mean that we change anything that we are doing, but we need to be diagnosing and treating much more quickly. As we both know, what we are looking at now is a future of people living with and beyond different types of cancer for much longer than would previously have been the case because we have the technology and the types of drugs that can keep people living with cancer much longer than would have been the case, but that does not change the challenge for those people's lives.

We have consciously chosen to invest in our cancer support programme, for example, Rose Rock House in Castlebar or ARC in Cork. We have given €5.5 million for the core funding of 21 centres around the country because they are providing therapeutic support, counselling support and psychosocial supports to people who are living with and beyond cancer, and those supports are just as important as every other element of the investment in our cancer strategy.

This year, in the Department of Health we are evaluating the success of the ten-year cancer strategy which ends this year and beginning to do the work on devising the next one. We want to be unapologetically ambitious for what is possible because of what we have learnt, in particular, through technology. In relation to artificial intelligence, AI, we saw some really interesting work on that in the media today in relation to its use in diagnostics. We want to be unapologetically ambitious in terms of where people are getting their cancer treatment. For example, I visited Bantry and Cork University Hospital. Repeatedly, I see people being supported in their transport needs to get from Bantry to Cork University Hospital, on a Tuesday for a blood test and on a Wednesday for their infusion. I do not want them to have to travel from Bantry to CUH. I would like people to be able to get their treatment - their specialist diagnosis and plan for treatment in our specialist centres but, thereafter, for them to get their treatment at home or as close to home as possible, in Bantry or in their home, rather than taking the fairly arduous journey for a cancer patient of travelling that distance to CUH. These are the sorts of changes that we are trying to make through a reallocation of funding this year. It is a really important shift.

The Deputy correctly identifies that there is too much variance in how people are treated around this country depending on where they happen to live and the type of cancer they happen to have, and that is not good enough. I want people in Donegal and Dublin to have the same equality of treatment. I want people in Cork to have the same treatment as the people in Galway and as the people in Tullamore, that they have the same expectation no matter what cancer they have that they will be diagnosed and treated in an equal way. We have not had the transparency previously of being able to assess which regions are meeting the standard and which are not. This new regional funding model enables us to put the 6% uplift that we have in the budget and the 3,300 people into the system and make sure that those resources are targeted in the most effective way to achieve a much better regional equality for people across this country.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank the Minister for that response. First of all, the inconsistency between the experience people have in different parts of the country has to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Indeed, I was conscious when I was getting my own treatment that people were coming from different parts of the country. There was a place available for them in St. Luke's to stay, but it was not provided by the State. To the best of my knowledge, it was funded by the Irish Cancer Society. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong on that. Services such as where people could stay should not simply be dependent on charitable organisations raising funds. My understanding was that the place that people could stay overnight was not run by the hospital even though it is fantastic that it was there for them, but that is an aside.

On the linear accelerators in the national replacement programme, the Minister has given me some answers. I got some answers from the HSE on the replacement programme. It is worth saying, while it is under way, that all in the St. Luke's Radiation Oncology Network, SLRON, are supposed to be replaced after ten years. Two of those will only be replaced when they are 19 years old, two will be replaced when they are 21 years old, two will be replaced when they are 14 years old, two when they are 18 years old, and two when they are 17 years old. All will be well over the ten years it is supposed to be. That shows a lack of planning to have a replacement programme that is organised centrally and that is ahead of the game rather than reacting afterwards and realising we have not replaced the machines and therefore the machines are breaking down, causing hardship for the staff providing the treatment and for those who are awaiting the treatment, often impacting on things such as childcare and their ability to travel back to where they live in other parts of the country.

On equality of access, I will read the following from a report that was sent to me by a radiation oncology medical physicist. He was talking about PET CT scanners. He said that only two of the Republic of Ireland's eight current PET CT scanners are fully or partly publicly funded and that there is a system where 75% of net national PET CT imaging capacity resides in private institutions. He has done a report on that. I do not know the detail of that, but that shows a worrying lack of those scanners in the public system, funded publicly rather than being only available in the private sector.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am here for the public system. I am here to invest in the public system and to champion the public system. A total of 80% of our cancer care gets delivered through the public system and that is my focus.

The Deputy is correct to highlight the replacement programme in St. Luke's. I have updated the Deputy that there is a replacement equipment supply commencing in quarter 1, with a contractor in place this year. In quarter 4, we are also working on a detailed business case for the Beaumont phase 2 expansion. There is also work to be done in Cork and Galway. There is a particular difference with St. Luke's, but the work is progressing. The Deputy is quite right that it should have progressed before now.

I highlight as well some of the other important developments that are happening more broadly. It is about machinery, treatment and additional staff. It is also about prevention programmes and screening programmes. We have recently announced the extension of the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme targeted at fifth and sixth years in schools.

10 o'clock

We would encourage anyone whose child, male or female, has not had that vaccination to get it where it is offered. We know it is most effective when a child is about 12 or 13, before they become in any way sexually active. Please take that vaccination if you can. It is there to try to eliminate cervical cancer.

I am examining, with the screening control programme and NSAC, the opportunities to most effectively extend screening for bowel cancer in a way that is going to get the best for us. I am very conscious of the “do not attend” rate and the rate of participation for that. It is one of the reasons we have prioritised that for the pharmacy extension, and in the agreement that we have reached with pharmacists, who are now going to try to proactively register some of their patients on the bowel cancer screening programme in an effort to get more people onto that screening programme.

Encouragingly, I met Professor Daniel Ryan from Beaumont this week regarding different options for lung screening and what opportunities may be there. We are not doing enough on lung cancer screening, particularly for those people who are not symptomatic or are very young. We are now able to pick that up much better than has been the case heretofore.

The Deputy and I could speak about all of the different elements of cancer care, from vaccinations to screening to identification. We have to recognise the exceptional work that is being done at the research level in targeting and manipulating cancer cells in completely different ways, so people are living longer. This year is an exciting year to try to really drive forward with ambition with what we are going to do for the next ten years.

Urban Development

Deputy Thomas Gould: Regeneration is not just a word. It is a lifeline for communities that have been neglected for years. In Cork, we have the north-west quarter regeneration. I attended the first meeting in September 2000, 26 years ago. Twenty-six years later, only 99 homes have been built and delivered. Less than €100 million has been spent, which is less than €4 million a year. At the same time, regeneration in Limerick got €513 million, and regeneration in Ballymun got almost €1 billion. This shows the neglect that the regeneration of Knocknaheeny and the north-west has experienced.

Why is the regeneration of Cork so far behind the other projects? There are people living in Killala Gardens and different parts of Knocknaheeny and the north west who live in homes that are cold, damp and mouldy and, because they are part of the regeneration, they are left like that for years. The council does not want to spend money on them because they know the house is going to be knocked. Should people be left to live in the damp and cold for 26 years? How many more years must they be left in these conditions? They have been waiting a generation for regeneration.

Many people cannot put money into their homes. Why would you put in a new kitchen or a new floor or paint the house? People still do it, but why would you invest in a home when you know it is going to be knocked down? The people who do invest in their homes are spending what little savings they have to try to make the best of the situation. It is not good

enough. We want a timeline for when the north-west regeneration will be delivered and completed.

I will give an example of how slow things are. There are 24 houses on Kilmore Road, Knocknaheeny. They have been under construction for six years. They built the Elysian Tower in Cork in two and a half years, but they cannot build 24 houses in six years. It is a scandal. Twelve years ago, the international sensations from Knocknaheeny, Kabin Crew, brought out a song called “Knocka Regeneration - Deal With It.” They said they wanted to be heard. They wanted to be known as the children who made a difference to our home. These children are now in their 20s. Their entire childhood was spent waiting for regeneration. That is still not a quarter way towards where it needs to be.

There are other areas like Mayfield. The delay in the north-west is having a negative effect on areas like Mayfield and Blackpool. Mayfield is crying out for regeneration. In February 2023, the Tarry Path regeneration was supposedly at the preliminary stages. Where is it? Where is the regeneration for Mayfield? There are empty homes in every terrace. It is unbelievable that homes are lying rotting. There are cold houses with mould, damp and leaks, with guttering falling down and windows that need replacing. Why have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael given up on working-class areas?

There is an area in Blackpool, the most historic area of Cork city, that is crying out for regeneration. It is one of the most disadvantaged areas in the State. There is a brilliant community there that is doing unbelievable, Trojan work. However, who came in and bought up loads of it? Vulture funds came in and bought it up. They closed down doctors’ surgeries, gyms and hairdressers because they only want to make money.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank Deputy Gould for raising this very important matter. I am happy to have the opportunity to discuss the regeneration on the northside of Cork city on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Browne.

The regeneration of social housing is a matter, in the first instance, as the Deputy knows, for local authorities. It is their responsibility to identify an opportunity to advance regeneration programmes in line with the circular N11/2007 policy framework for the regeneration of local authority estates in their respective administrative areas.

The Cork north-west quarter regeneration master plan and implementation report was published in 2011. The strategy outlined a departure from previous policy, with a proposal to carry out wholesale demolition of the housing stock in Knocknaheeny that had not been the subject of previous refurbishment works. To date, over €96 million has been allocated to projects that are either completed or on-site under this particular regeneration programme. Up to the end of 2025, 121 social housing units had been completed, and a further 165 units are on-site and progressing, while 127 units are in the pre-construction phase. The current programme runs until 2028, and it is envisaged that projects will be ongoing until this date.

The programme is funded project by project as submissions are received and reviewed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Additional funding for Cork city is also being provided to support a social, economic and environmental programme, SEEP, to address the physical regeneration of housing and support wider community infrastructure

projects, and the social and economic interventions which seek to address the causes of disadvantage in communities. This is funded on an annual basis, with an overall allocation of €450,000 in 2025. It is a matter for the council to shortlist the most appropriate projects that fit with the objectives of the social housing regeneration project in terms of revitalising the area and the built environment.

I must highlight that while the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is supportive of social inclusion initiatives within the overall regeneration programme, in order to ensure that maximum funding for housing regeneration is directed towards improving physical housing infrastructure, these complementary initiatives should be funded from appropriate funding sources. The council was made aware in 2024 that funding under the SEEP would be reducing in 2025, and that arrangements should be made for alternative funding should it wish to maintain such social inclusion initiatives into the future. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport has significant sports capital grant programmes to assist in the development or refurbishment of sporting facilities and the provision of sports facilities, while requests related to youth services funding should be directed towards the Department of children and the Department of justice for youth diversion projects. As the Deputy knows, Cork has received substantial funding under the urban regeneration and development fund, which comes under the Department. In total, it has received €407 million under that programme for the Cork city docklands, Grand Parade quarter, Tivoli docks and Kent Station yard, which is funded 75% by the Department.

It is absolutely the case that we want to continue to regenerate areas like Knocknaheeny. It is a priority for the Government, as outlined in my response. A number of housing units have been completed, and the remaining units will be completed. We continue to work with Cork City Council, but the onus is on Cork City Council to bring forward those projects.

In relation to taking six years to complete a housing scheme, perhaps Deputy Gould can talk to me offline in relation to that. Who is responsible for that? Is it the council? I do not know. Perhaps the Deputy will elaborate in his follow-up.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State mentioned the seed funding. The seed funding was actually a very good idea, although I will come in here and criticise, argue and disagree with the Government. However, there was a decision to cut it back last year. While €1 million was needed for community projects, only €450,000 was allocated, which was less than half. I think it was actually €1.2 million that was needed but let us just call it €1 million. This was an initiative that was good, with money that was to be spent on social initiatives in the community, and that could have made a difference. To me, this seed funding should have been expanded to other areas because it helped put money for sporting organisations and community organisations where it needed to be spent in the areas that required regeneration. The Minister of State mentioned 2011 when the original plan was changed. That was 15 years ago. Why has it taken 15 years to build 620 houses? That is what they are talking about in the plan - 620 houses. The Minister of State gave a date for it being completed - and I stand to be corrected - of 2028. That Knocknaheeny regeneration will not be complete for at least eight more years. They have not got to the Kilmore Road Lower houses. They have not got to the Dunmore Gardens site or Killala Gardens. This goes back to Hollyhill, Ardculen, Ardmore Avenue and Courtown Drive, which were the initial part of the regeneration but where the works were substandard.

I am from Knocknaheeny. My dad lives there. My mother-in-law lives there. I am proud. It is a brilliant community. Why is Limerick getting €500 million, Ballymun getting €1 billion, and Knocknaheeny getting less than €100 million? Is that fair? We need this to work. We need places like Mayfield and Blackpool to be supported also.

Deputy John Cummins: What I said in my response was that the current programme runs until 2028 and they are the projects that the council have put forward for the regeneration, which encompasses 121 units that have been completed, 165 units that are on site, and 127 units that are in pre-construction phase. We in the Department will always assess any application that comes in from local authorities, be they turnkey housing units, regeneration projects like this or Part 8 plans that the councils put forward. We are open to applications from every local authority in this State to come forward with social and affordable schemes, but it is the local authorities' responsibility to bringing forward those schemes.

We now have a single-stage approval process in place with standardised designs where local authorities will have responsibility for putting forward the projects to the Department. This is for any project that is under €200 million. These will go through a single-stage approval process within the Department. This is to try to avoid the situation that has happened heretofore where councils blamed the Department and the Department blamed the councils. Under these new rules, there will be no hiding for councils that are not putting forward projects. They will not be able to say a project is at stage 2 or 3 within the Department. There will be none of that. We want the local authorities, Cork City Council and Cork County Council included, to bring forward schemes to us. The Deputy is right. He represents that area in the same way I represent working class areas in Waterford that have gone through regeneration and still have to go through regeneration. We are both passionate about regeneration programmes but I also acknowledge that it is the responsibility in my area for Waterford City and County Council to bring forward those schemes that we, as a Department, can fund from Dublin.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to bring to the attention of the Minister of State the urgent situation affecting St. Joseph's Secondary School, Rush, Gaelscoil Ros Eo and the Rush education campus in my constituency in Dublin Fingal West with regard to the recent allocation of funding for schools building. While I understand projects that were fully documented as complete were eligible, it looks like it will take six to eight weeks before the tender is ready to go for the Rush education campus. That is six to eight weeks where children will continue to learn in overcrowded and outdated classrooms. Once the tender is committed, I urge the Minister of State to have it considered promptly and to give it the priority it deserves prior to the next tranche of funding, which I believe is in 2028.

St. Joseph's and Gaelscoil Ros Eo serve one of the youngest populations in the country and one of the fastest growing towns. The need for an education campus in Rush is immediate. We are not talking about planning for some distant future. Rather, we are talking about children today learning in buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. I worked in one of them, so I know that parts of them are more prefab than school at this point.

The site for the Rush education campus is ready to go. It is procured and the planning permission has been given. There are no obstacles to starting construction other than funding and political commitment. This project was promised and can be delivered if we act decisively. I am hoping that the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, will help secure the necessary funding so that children can finally have a safe, modern and suitable environment for learning. This is more than bricks and mortar - it is an investment in the future of the children in the north county, in our town and in our community. Every day of the week, the children continue to learn in inadequate conditions. We owe them to act now to ensure they have the education they deserve in the environment that they need. I urge the Minister of State to give the project the priority it deserves and to commit to seeing it through without further delay. St. Joseph's and Gaelscoil Ros Eo, the students - some of whom were my students - and their parents cannot wait any longer.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for the question. I will update the Deputy and the House on the current situation regarding the building project for St. Joseph's Secondary School and Gaelscoil Ros Eo in Rush, County Dublin.

The delivery of this campus project has been devolved to Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust, CEIST. The brief for St. Joseph's Secondary School includes the provision of a 1,000-pupil post-primary school, including a four-classroom special education base. The brief for Gaelscoil Ros Eo includes the delivery of a 16-classroom primary school with one special education base.

The project is currently at stage 2b of the architectural design process. This stage allows for detailed design and planning, obtaining the necessary statutory permissions, and the preparation of tender documents. Planning has been granted, and CEIST has advised that the stage 2b report is currently ongoing. Once the stage 2b report has been received by the Department, it will undergo a detailed technical and cost review in line with public spending code. Managing timing, scope and cost is crucial to staying within budgetary limits for the overall programme.

The Department recently published the €7.55 billion national development plan sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for the period 2026 to 2030. This plan involves a very strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. There will be a strong special education dimension to projects being roll out. Of the €7.55 billion investment, it is envisaged that circa €5 billion will be used for projects to roll out the support, delivery and modernisation of school buildings across the large-scale, additional accommodation, modular, and annual September accommodation needs programmes. Over the course of 2026 and 2027, there will be construction work at some 10% of the school estate nationwide. These projects will, when completed, provide an extra 57,000 additional and modernised school places with a strong focus on special education in all of the projects. It is important to acknowledge and understand that, going forward, we are going to put fierce emphasis in all projects, both at primary and post-primary levels, that they encompass special education as well. The Department will continue to build on the progress made over recent years and will continue to roll out projects on a prioritisation basis to meet the urgent needs in the provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing buildings.

In this regard, the Department has also published a list of 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over the coming years. I recognise schools with important building projects are not included in the first tranche of prioritised projects. As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, the Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the coming years to assess and evaluate the progress of individual projects through the design pipeline having regard to the continuing need to maximise existing capacity and determine the prioritised need going forward. This process will involve engagement with key stakeholders and individual schools. The accommodation needs at St Joseph's Secondary School and Gaelscoil Ros Eo will be considered as part of the ongoing overall Department-led prioritisation process in consultation with the school authorities and patron into the future. I assure the Deputy we are well aware of the challenges there and of the growing need within the community as it expands.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: It is nice to see the accommodation of St. Joseph's and the Gaelscoil will be considered as part of the ongoing overall Department-led prioritisation process. The people of Rush are looking for a commitment that the project will keep being progressed once the tender documents are delivered to the Department, which will be in a matter of weeks. The campus will not have to wait until the next tranche, should that be 2028, to fund a school that is oversubscribed and outdated. Will the Minister of State give me an indication on when the next tranche might be released? I believe the Tánaiste is visiting Dublin Fingal West later in the week. I would be happy to bring him around the school and show him the plight of my ex-students and the children of Rush should he be interested. We have spoken about it before in here.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I understand this is the Deputy's former school where he has taught, so he knows first-hand the challenges being faced in the school communities there. He has outlined it in his opening remarks. I reassure the Deputy that the project is at stage 2B and CEIST has advised that the stage 2B report is ongoing. It is important there is no delay at any stage. The Deputy outlined the issue with prefabricated buildings. We have had a huge investment across the education sector over the past number of years and into the future. Education is so important for the future of our students and our country and the students going to this school. The Deputy outlined the population growth in the community there. They are matters that will be taken into account. I reassure him that when the documentation is lodged with the Department we will give it the urgent attention it needs. There will be back and forth on the ongoing issues between the school authorities and the patron bodies on this project. It is important right across the country but particularly in growing areas. We understand the need of both St. Joseph's and the Gaelscoil with regard to this project. I am taking this on behalf of Hildegard Naughton, who is the senior Minister dealing with school projects. I assure the Deputy that I will press on her the urgency he has outlined in the Dáil. We will continue to work with it, not just tonight but I assure him we will continue to work. It is important that we are notified when the documentation is lodged with the Department from CEIST, the patron body. It is important that information is brought to us, and we can assure that we will work with it in a timely fashion, because these are important projects for every school community.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.24 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Dé Déardaoin, an 5 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.24 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 5 February 2026.

