



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 5 Feabhra 2026

Thursday, 5 February 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Community Development Projects

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the measures in place to support community centres with ongoing operational pressures such as energy, insurance, and staffing costs, beyond one off capital grants. [8731/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This is a fairly straightforward question with which he will be familiar. I am seeking to understand and to get some information from the Minister of State in relation to those non-capital grants. We understand the capital grants and the schemes but I ask about the actual level of funding that is available to cover those costs, such as energy, insurance, staffing, etc. This relates to the stream of funding that will go beyond the capital grants.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for her very important question. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are aware of the challenges that many large community groups that operate community centres face in relation to the operation and staffing costs. In our consultation processes for the new strategy for the community and voluntary sector, it has emerged as an issue of concern. As the Deputy knows, the community and voluntary sector is quite diverse and receives financial support through a variety and wide range of funding programmes and schemes from several Government Departments and agencies, including our Department.

Our Department's community service programme, CSP, for the four year period from 2023 to 2027 currently supports the delivery of 445 local services, which is 426 organisations. It is a total allocation of €59.4 million for this year alone. Some 78 community centres and other community facilities are funded under the CSP, supporting a total of 380 staff posts, 53 managers and 327 full-time equivalent staff. This amount of total funding allocated is €36.2 million over the current five-year timeframe of this programme. In line with the programme

for Government commitment and together with the Minister, our Department last year announced our intention to hold an open call early this year on the new CSP programme. The design of this open call is under way. Details, including eligible community services and organisations, will be announced in the coming weeks.

In the Gaeltacht region, there is a comprehensive development approach to managing the increased demand for funding from Gaeltacht community development organisations, with a 59% direct increase in funding to these organisations. Both the Minister and I are very much aware of the issues and challenges our community centres, which are operated in the main by voluntary boards, are facing.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The purpose of the question was to try to isolate those specific funding streams separate from grants that will contribute towards the physical running. The Minister of State is right that they are in the main run by volunteer boards. However, they are employers as well. It makes things very tricky. There have been welcome increases in the minimum wage. That has a knock-on consequence for other people who are working. Costs like energy in particular are rising. What we saw in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn and Storm Chandra was how badly exposed some, although not all, community centres were. They are a bit of a beacon in the community. People think when everything is gone they will head to the community centre and it is like a hub. In some instances, they were not sufficiently staffed to be able to respond. They are now having to cope with the energy bills. There is a huge increase in energy. The money available is not matching that level of increase.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The points the Deputy made are fair comments. Both the Minister and I are very much aware from our own involvement and engagement. We have travelled the country and met with the community and voluntary sector. As a former director of my own community association, I know they are very resilient in sourcing funding from a variety streams. In the budget announced last November, there is a 6% increase in funding from our Department, which is a demonstration of the ambition the Minister and I have in terms of supporting and developing community organisations in our rural towns, urban suburbs and communities across the country.

This is a very genuine point. As part of the consultative process for Our Rural Future and in new the community and voluntary sector strategy, there has been a strong articulation of the points the Deputy has raised. Both the Minister and I will reflect on that as we look at the new Our Rural Future design and the community and voluntary sector strategy when we publish it later this year.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Can I be a bit a cheeky and hijack my own time for a moment to remind the Minister of State that he promised me he would visit Foróige in Balbriggan? I will follow up with him again after this.

I understand the Minister of State is listening and hears what is being said. What I am trying to find out is how that is going to manifest itself in terms of money so that the community centres can be sure they are going to be in a position to be able to pay their energy bills. The fear many of them have is that they are not going to be in a position to fund because energy

costs have risen. They are not coming down. Even if the pace of increase has slowed a small bit, they have not come down. For very many, they are unaffordable. When times were very hard people, particularly in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn and Storm Chandra, they went to their community centre as a beacon. We do not want the lights not being able to be turned on there.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I look forward to going to Balbriggan. The Deputy was to come back to me with the invitation to arrange it.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thought I had done that but I will do it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I would love to do that because it is very important to support that organisation. The Deputy raised that already.

The reality is that we have seen - for example, in the community services programme - an increase of €4 million to €59.4 million this year. We have seen a 6% increase in the budget. We will reflect on the articulation by the community and voluntary sector in terms of the preparation of the strategy and in the consultative process for the new Our Rural Future. I assure the Deputy the Minister and I are very much rooted in this sector. We want to ensure the challenges that are being encountered will be considered in the development of any new policies. When we had Covid and the cost-of-living crisis, and energy was at its core, the Government was not found wanting. Again, our community and voluntary sector is very resilient in the sourcing of funds. We will look at what we can do to support what is a very important pillar of our society.

Community Development Projects

2. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht when a new programme for community centre investment will be announced given the urgent need of many community centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8769/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: Staying with the topic of community centres, will the Minister inform the House when the Government might announce a new programme for community centre investment given the serious issues many community centres are having at the moment in increasing what they have to offer for the public and if he could make a statement?

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): I thank the Deputy for his question. Both the Minister of State and I agree and recognise that community centres can be at the heart of every community and that they are a vital resource for any city, neighbourhood, town or village. Since joining the Department, we prioritised investment in community infrastructure. As part of budget 2026, we secured increased funding for the programmes delivering on this priority, including an increase in the annual budget for the community centre investment fund, CCIF, of €3 million to €20 million. The CCIF was introduced to provide high quality, accessible, community spaces that are available to groups in all communities in both rural and urban areas. Through the CCIF, €110

million has been allocated since 2022 for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of a number of new centres where such a need has been identified. I am committed to delivering further iterations of the CCIF in the coming years.

Following meetings with the Minister of State and myself, our officials are currently finalising the details of the next call for applications. This call will focus on refurbishment to existing community centres. I expect to open this new round of funding to applicants in the coming months with a view to announcing successful projects before the end of the year. We also support community facilities with enhancement works through a range of other funding streams, including capitably through the CLÁR programme, LEADER and the town and village renewal scheme.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister very much for his reply. We are all aware of the importance of community centres throughout the country and no more so in my own area. Tonight, I will have a meeting of my own local community centre where we will discuss all things relevant, including funding and how we can expand what we can offer to the local community. It is very welcome that there is to be additional funding allocated. How quickly can that happen? The Minister said the announcement will be this year and then there will be funding announced before the end of the year. A lot of the community centres I am dealing with are having issues around heating, lack of heating, heating that is obsolete, etc. It is making a difference, particularly over the past number of weeks, in that they cannot open their doors. That is the issue I wanted to raise with the Minister today. I am glad the Government will concentrate on refurbishment more than anything else. The heating systems in many of these local halls and community centres are so old that they are not fit for purpose. I would welcome it if the Minister could confirm that is the type of infrastructure the Department is looking at.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I confirm that will be part of the iteration. We are trying to make it as broad as possible. As the Deputy and Deputy O'Reilly said previously, these centres provide very important services. Many of them were built at different times when energy costs were not quite causing the pressure they are now. Regarding the impact of the CCIF today, 93% of centres that have been funded under the CCIF have reported an increase in user numbers following the upgrades, with new improved accessibility, inclusivity and comfort. There has been further engagement from older adults, people with disabilities, families and marginalised groups reflecting to the new centre and new investment. Energy upgrades have been a major feature of the CCIF refurbishment process. They will continue to be. We will work closely with colleagues in the CCIF to give the best possible advice to community centres through local authorities. The vast majority of them have voluntary boards of directors. I want to make sure the new iteration of the CCIF is as easy as possible for those volunteers to access in an efficient manner.

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister mentioned a very important point. Tonight, at our meeting, there will probably be six of the locals who have been there for the past 20 to 30 years. They are the volunteers who keep that particular community going. As the Minister just did and the Minister of State previously acknowledged, it is always important to acknowledge those volunteers. In relation to the disability and marginal groups, there is a growing demand

in urban areas for centres for marginalised groups. In relation to new centres, an area I have raised with the Minister before is the conversion of derelict buildings into community centres. Is that something the Minister will look at? I have mentioned previously rural schools that have become obsolete in some cases and unfortunately have closed in other cases.

9 o'clock

Again, is that something the Minister will look at? Obviously, those with a disability and those from marginalised groups need to meet, and need to have a location where they can meet. There are a number of obsolete and derelict buildings that could be used for these purposes. Is that something this fund would encourage?

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is. It is my intention in 2027 to have a specific round of the CCIF for new-build centres. The then Minister, Heather Humphreys, announced a range of those in 2024. We are getting all of those into construction at the moment. There are about 12 nationally. Under the town and village renewal scheme, through the buildings acquisitions measure, local authorities can identify properties that are derelict within communities for a number of uses. We have funded the acquisition of properties for use as community facilities for exactly the kind of groups the Deputy has looked at. We have done similar through LEADER. I encourage any group to look at the town and village renewal scheme if they want to invest in a new centre, particularly within an existing community. I gceantair Ghaeltachta freisin, tá airgead breise le haghaidh hallaí agus hallaí pobail a bhfuil daoine ag iarraidh infheistíocht a chur isteach iontu. We have a range of supports across every section of the Department, predominately in capital. As the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, has outlined, both he and I are working with the CCIF to try to assist that programme too.

Scéimeanna Teanga

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an nglacann sé le focail an Bhreithimh Humphreys san Ard-Chúirt sa bhreithiúnas maidir le cás Wild Ireland Defence CLG in aghaidh an Choimisiúin Pleanála, an Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht, an Ard-Aighne, agus an Aire turasóireacht, cultúir, ealaíon, Gaeltachta, spóirt agus meán, go bhfuil sé “seafóideach” agus “áiféiseach” a rá go bhfuil feidhm dhlíthiúil fós ag na scéimeanna teanga; an aithníonn sé nach bhfuil dualgas ar na comhlachtaí poiblí na scéimeanna teanga a chur i bhfeidhm a thuilleadh; agus cathain a fhoilseofar na caighdeáin teanga atá le teacht i gcomharbas orthu. [8767/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá an cheist seo dírithe ar an Aire toisc an breithiúnas a rinne an Bhreithimh Humphreys san Ard-Chúirt maidir leis na scéimeanna teanga. Dúirt sé go bhfuil sé "seafóideach" agus "áiféiseach" le rá go bhfuil feidhm dhlíthiúil fós acu. Cathain a bhfoilseofar na caighdeáin teanga atá le teacht i gcomharbas orthu siúd?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist. Tá an Roinn ar an eolas faoi chás cúirte a tógadh i rith na bliana anuraidh, inar tarraingíodh ar ghnéithe bainteach le hAchtanna na dTeangacha Oifigiúla mar chuid de. Mar a luadh roimhe seo, bhí mo Roinn ag feidhmiú i gcónaí de réir comhairle dlí a bhí faighte ar an ábhar roimhe seo, ach mar bheart taca sa bhreis agus chun aon amhras a sheachaint sa tréimhse idir aisghairm na scéimeanna

teanga agus teacht i bhfeidhm na gcaighdeán teanga, tá leasú molta ábhartha ar an Acht sin áirithe sa Bhille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024. Ó tharla nach bhfuil an Bille sin achtaithe go fóill, scríobh an Roinn chuig gach comhlacht poiblí i mí na Nollag 2024 le meabhrú dóibh nár chóir aon laghdú a theacht ar leibhéil na seirbhísí Gaeilge atá á soláthar acu le linn na hidirthréimhse seo.

Leagann an tAcht leasaithe amach nach féidir le caighdeán teanga leibhéal níos lú seirbhíse trí Ghaeilge a fhorordú ná mar a bhí geallta roimhe seo faoi scéim teanga nó eile. Chuige sin, tá athbhreithniú cuimsitheach déanta ar na scéimeanna teanga reatha go léir mar chuid den obair dhréachtaithe ar na caighdeán teanga, atá ag teacht chun críche anois. Áirítear roinnt gníomhartha bainteach le nithe a fhorordú trí na caighdeán teanga sa phlean gníomhaíochta um sheirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge a sheol mé le déanaí, chomh maith leis na bearta atá le tacú le comhlachtaí poiblí agus iad á gcur i bhfeidhm. Agus an plean sin foilsithe anois, tá sé i gceist tús a chur leis an gcomhairliúchán ar na dréacht-caighdeán go luath trí na meicníochtaí aitheanta faoin Acht.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Is léir ón bhfreagra go raibh comhairle dlí i gceist agus gur aithin an Roinn go raibh fadhb bhunúsach ann. Gealladh dúinn nuair a bhí muid ag déanamh plé ar Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla go mbeadh na caighdeán ann sar i bhfad. Ó thaobh an dlí de, ba chóir go mbeadh siad ann roimh dheireadh 2024. Tá na scéimeanna teanga as ord. Ní ann dóibh. Tá sé seafóideach agus áiféiseach a bheith ag brath orthu. Táthar ag brath ar dhea-thoil nó treoir ón Aire do na comhlachtaí poiblí gur chóir dóibh rud éigin a dhéanamh nach bhfuil go hiomlán dleathach má théitear de réir an méid atá ráite ag breitheamh na hArd-Chúirte. An príomhcheist ná cén uair a mbeidh feidhm dhlíthiúil ag na caighdeán. Tá an tAire díreach tar éis a rá go dtosóidh comhairliúchán. Ní hamháin nach bhfuil siad foilsithe, in ainneoin gur gealladh dúinn go mbeadh siad foilsithe laistigh de thrí mhí, ach tá an tAire anois ag caint faoi chomhairliúchán. Mar sin, ní bheidh siad i bhfeidhm, de réir cosúlachtaí, roimh dheireadh na bliana seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá an-obair idir lámha ag mo Roinn ó achtaíodh an tAcht ar dhréachtú na gcaighdeán teanga. Sa mhéid seo, táimid ag tabhairt aird ar chúrsaí níos luaithe go sonrach san Acht atá le háireamh, nithe atá le foghlaim ó thaithí na Breataine Bige, áit ina bhfuil córas ag feidhmiú go héifeachtach anois agus ar thóg sé roinnt ama an chéad dréacht a aontú. Tá an plean gníomhaíochta foilsithe anois. Tá sé i gceist tús a chur leis an gcomhairliúchán ar an dréacht ach tá an t-uafás oibre tar éis dul isteach sa dréacht sin agus beidh a lán sonraí ann. Bhí cruinniú leis na hoifigigh sa Roinn atá ag déileáil leis na dréachtaí an tseachtain seo caite. Tá muinín agam go bhfuilimid réidh le dul ar aghaidh go dtí an comhairliúchán sin chomh luath agus is féidir. Beidh mé ag cur brú go mbeidh sé déanta go tapa. Cé go bhfuil an dréacht agus na caighdeán chomh tábhachtach, tá sé tábhachtach freisin go mbeidh am ag daoine iad a phlé. Tuigim an gá atá ann dóibh. Is rud an-tábhachtach dom é go mbeidh siad foilsithe. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go mbeidh muid in ann caint le daoine fúthu agus aon bhuairt a bhíonn ar dhaoine faoin ndréacht a thuiscint.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: San idirlinn, an bhfuil sé i gceist leanúint leis an leasú a bhí an tAire ag cur chun cinn maidir leis an mBille a bhaineann le toghcháin Údarás na Gaeltachta? Is féidir é sin a chur chun cinn mar Bhille ann féin agus an reachtaíocht maidir leis na toghcháin

a chur ar athló, mar atá déanta ar aon chaoi, mar tá éigeandáil ann anois nach bhfuil aon fheidhm dhlíthiúil ag na scéimeanna. D'fhéadfaí rún nó Bille éigeandála a thógáil os comhair na Dála. Is é sin an rud a tharlaíonn de ghnáth nuair a deir an Ard-Chúirt nó aon áit eile nach bhfuil feidhm dhlíthiúil le reachtaíocht. Is é sin atá an breitheamh tar éis a rá. Mar a dúirt sé:

Go deimhin féin, seafóid agus rud nach bhféadfaí a rá is ea an argóint ar fad go bhfuil an scéim fós ag faoileáil os cionn talún agus ag feidhmiú cé gur baineadh uaithi na cosa taca dlí a bhí mar bhonn léi.

[...]

Chomh seafóideach céanna atá an tuairim seo gur féidir leis an scéim feidhm dlí a thabhairt di féin trí leas a bhaint as a foclaíocht féin d'ainneoin cinneadh an Oireachtais an reachtaíocht údaráithe a aisghairm.

An fhadhb bhunúsach, mar sin, ná nach bhfuil aon stádas ag na scéimeanna a thuilleadh gan reachtaíocht éigeandála.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Táimid beagnach réidh lena lán leasaithe a thabhairt chun tosaigh le haghaidh Bhille an údaráis. Tá leasú air seo mar cheann de na leasaithe sin. Tá mé ag plé an Bhille leis an bPríomh-Aoire chun é a thabhairt chun deiridh agus os comhair na Dála chomh luath agus is féidir. Beidh leasú ann faoin ndúshlán seo. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin go leanfaimid ar aghaidh leis an obair ar na caighdeáin agus go bhfuil muid in ann na dréachtchaighdeáin a phlé. Táimid dírithe ar an obair sin - ní hamháin na leasaithe - freisin. Beidh na leasaithe ag teacht os comhair na Dála agus an tSeanaid chomh luath agus is féidir nuair atá deis agam iad a phlé leis an bPríomh-Aoire.

An Gaeltacht

4. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to outline the way in which he is supporting Údarás na Gaeltachta to address an ghéarchéim tithíochta sna ceantair Ghaeltachta; and whether he intends to use his powers as Minister for the Gaeltacht, under section 9(a) of the Housing (Gaeltacht) (Amendment) Act 2001, to devise and implement housing schemes in order to support Irish speakers to build, buy or renovate houses in Irish-speaking parts of the Gaeltacht. [9039/26]

Deputy Rory Hearne: The housing crisis in the Gaeltacht is having a specific damaging effect on these communities and our language. Tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta na ceantair Ghaeltachta ag cur todhchaí na Gaeilge mar theanga bheo i mbaoil. It is putting our language in danger. Young people are being forced to leave. Will the Minister set out how he is using his powers as the Minister responsible for the Gaeltacht under section 9 to help Údarás na Gaeltachta to deliver homes and ensure the future of our language and our Gaeltachtaí?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Hearne as an gceist. It should be noted that housing issues pertain to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The primary objective of Údarás na Gaeltachta is to ensure the Irish language endures as the main community language in Gaeltacht areas and is preserved for future generations. To that end, an t-údarás provides funding for a wide range of enterprise and employment

development initiatives. The organisation also supports strategic actions relating to linguistic, cultural and community development. It is worth noting that Údarás na Gaeltachta will have a role, albeit a secondary one, in working with relevant stakeholders to support housing supply in the Gaeltacht. An t-údarás maintains a significant property portfolio across the Gaeltacht and wastewater infrastructure at various sites is part of that. As laid out in the Government housing plan, there are opportunities for an t-údarás to co-operate with relevant authorities to avail of that existing infrastructure through a strategic, plan-based approach, in order to fulfil the housing needs in Gaeltacht communities.

I have had meetings with the príomhfheidhmeannach of Údarás na Gaeltachta and it is my understanding that the organisation is having discussions with local authorities. I have also asked it to engage with Uisce Éireann to avail of current infrastructure and identify where that very necessary infrastructure is missing. I will continue to have further engagement with an t-údarás in this regard.

Although there is a challenge in terms of the scarcity of living accommodation in Gaeltacht areas, they also have one of the highest vacancy rates in the country. To that end, a dedicated vacant Gaeltacht homes co-ordinator was recently appointed in partnership with local authorities with Gaeltachtaí in their area, funded by an t-údarás, to aid communities in addressing issues of vacancy, facilitate access to various State grants and provide us with information on vacancy.

Since my Department's schemes under the Housing (Gaeltacht) Acts were changed some years ago, the Government has established a number of new schemes under which far more generous grants are available than those available under the previous schemes. On that basis, the return of the grant schemes that were available under the Housing (Gaeltacht) Acts is not currently under consideration.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank the Minister for his response. I welcome the engagement on housing. While housing comes under a different Department, we cannot separate the future of the Irish language from the housing crisis in Gaeltacht areas. As the Minister knows, there is a particular emergency there. This morning, there were ten properties to rent in Connemara on *daft.ie*, while Airbnb had 573. Young people are being forced out of Gaeltacht communities. It was reported by the One Million Homes project this morning that 12,000 homes are needed in Gaeltacht areas. We have had presentations by the GAA about how it cannot field teams. Housing is the core issue for Gaeltacht communities. I have met with BÁNÚ and Conradh na Gaeilge, as has the Minister. More needs to be done. Údarás na Gaeltachta could be playing a much bigger role in ensuring housing is available for young people, thereby ensuring the future of our language.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not disagree with the Deputy's analysis in terms of rental properties and vacancies. We must work on this in a strategic way. I have met with the príomhfheidhmeannaigh of the local authorities in Gaeltacht areas on two occasions and will meet them again before the end of this month to discuss how we can work together. The appointment by an t-údarás of a vacant homes officer with a specific focus on Gaeltacht area is an important development. Following my meeting with the príomhfheidhmeannach of an t-údarás, we are beginning to identify where the sites are and whether an t-údarás has plans for those sites. In particular, I want to gain an understanding of the deficiencies in those sites in

terms of infrastructure, especially wastewater infrastructure. That will allow us to start working with an t-údarás and Irish Water on a collaborative basis to address those deficiencies and then work with an t-údarás to develop the sites for housing purposes. I have also had meetings with the Minister, Deputy Browne, to ensure we get early publication of a housing statement for Gaeltacht areas focusing specifically on the challenges we all agree are there. We are very focused on that and I would love to get a quick result. We now have a pathway to some progress in this area.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I appreciate the Minister's focus on this issue. It is wonderful to see. I am one of the people coming back to the language agus ag foghlaim an teanga arís. Within that, people need to understand that while there is this great revival, the places where the language is alive, where we think of it as having its origins and being capable of being sustained, are, in fact, in serious danger. I have spoken to young people who are being forced to leave those areas. This is a particular emergency in Gaeltachtaí. I urge the Minister to do all he can to fast-track support and funding for an t-údarás and the local authorities in order that the young people who are cainteoirí na Gaeilge can stay in their communities and, from there, we can regrow the language of our country. The Gaeltachtaí are the heart and core of the solution. It is the contention of Conradh na Gaeilge and BÁNÚ that the future of the language is in danger if the specific housing crisis in Gaeltacht areas is not addressed. The market will not solve those housing issues because it is not profitable for the private sector. The State must lead on this and support these communities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are working with an t-údarás and, in particular, with the local authorities in the Gaeltacht areas, which are the planning authorities, to identify every possible opportunity and solution. The information will come through from the Gaeltacht vacant homes officer, the work of the local authority chief executives and the work of an údarás at both príomhfheidhmeannach level and board level. I want to ensure we bring all that work together, working with the Minister, Deputy Browne, to deliver on this major challenge. We want people not just speaking the language but using and celebrating it and getting involved in community organisations. The next question, from Deputy Conor D. McGuinness, concerning support for early childhood care centres, is central to that. The infrastructure is being put in place and we will make announcements in that regard in the coming days. However, unless there are people living in Gaeltacht areas, putting down roots and taking part in the community, that infrastructure will be for naught. I assure the House that this issue is a priority. It is not all in my control. I am working with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and with an t-údarás. We will work with the local authorities. Collectively, we can arrive at a solution.

Oideachas trí Ghaeilge

5. Deputy Conor D. McGuinness den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht cad iad na tacaíochtaí maoinithe caipitil atá ar fáil óna Roinn do naíonraí chun áitribh oiriúnacha a fhorbairt nó chun leathnú a dhéanamh chun freastal ar éileamh méadaithe. [8768/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá sé iontach níos mó daoine a chloisteáil ag caint mar gheall ar ghéarchéim thithíochta na Gaeltachta. Is maith an rud é sin. Baineann an cheist atá

agam le naíonraí. Tá an-chuid daoine ag éileamh anois ar shaol trí Ghaeilge, mar shampla ar oideachas trí Ghaeilge dá bpáistí, laistigh den Ghaeltacht ach lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht chomh maith. An srian atá i gceist anseo ná srian caipitil chun foirgnimh a thógaint agus spás a chruthú do pháistí atá ag freastal ar naíonraí fud fad na tíre.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste tábhachtaí seo. Tá maoiniú ar fáil faoin gclár tacaíochtaí pobail agus teanga agus faoin gclár scéimeanna tacaíochta Gaeilge de chuid na Roinne chun tacú le tograí caipitil laistigh agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Is é cuspóir an chúnaimh chaipitil a chuirtear ar fáil faoi na scéimeanna seo an Ghaeilge a neartú mar theanga pobail agus teaghlaigh i gcomhréir le cuspóirí an straitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge.

Faoin gclár tacaíochta pobail agus teanga, cuirtear cúnamh caipitil ar fáil do choistí agus eagraíochtaí Gaeltachta chun áiseanna pobail agus teanga a thógáil nó a uasgrádú. Faoi na scéimeanna tacaíochta Gaeilge, cuirtear maoiniú ar fáil do choistí pobalbhunaithe a fheidhmíonn trí Ghaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht chun cabhrú leis na costais a bhaineann le hionaid Ghaeilge a thógáil nó a athchóiriú. Áirítear naíonraí agus seirbhísí luathblianta mar ábhar iarratais inghlactha faoi na scéimeanna seo. Cuirtear tacaíochtaí sa bhreis ar fáil do thograí luathblianta sa mhéid is gur féidir maoiniú suas le 95% de chostais inghlactha a fháil do sheirbhísí luathblianta pobalbhunaithe atá ag feidhmiú trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is féidir costais chaipitil chomh maith le costais ghairmiúla a bhaineann le comhairleoirí a fhostú a áireamh sna deontais seo.

Moltar dóibh siúd atá ag smaoineamh ar iarratas a dhéanamh teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an rannóg cuí i mo Roinn chun maoiniú féideartha a phlé sula gcuirtear aon iarratas foirmiúil isteach. Is féidir teacht ar bhileog eolais don dá scéim agus ar shonraí maidir leis an bpróiseas iarratais ar shuíomh Idirlíne mo Roinne. Má tá an Teachta ag iarraidh an t-eolas sin, seolfaidh mé chuige go díreach é. Maidir leis an Roinn leanaí, tá an clár Building Blocks ann ó thaobh cúrsaí chaipitil freisin.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra sin. Mar is eol dó, tá tábhacht ar leith ag baint leis an tumoideachas agus an deis do dhaoine óga freastal ar oideachas d'ardchaighdeán trí mheán na Gaeilge ó aois an-óg, ó dhá bhliain agus naoi mí nó trí bliana suas go dtí an coláiste nó ollscoil, más maith leo. Is rud an-tábhachtach é sin agus tosaíonn sé i gcónaí leis an naíonra. Is dócha go bhfuil naíonraí mar bhunchloch an oideachais sin. Nuair a théann páistí isteach sa naíonra, b'fhéidir go gcloiseann siad an Ghaeilge ó pháistí eile don chéad uair agus foghlaimíonn siad scileanna sóisialta agus píosa neamhspleáchais. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go dtarlaíonn sé sin trí mheán na Gaeilge. Mar sin, tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil naíonraí ar fáil. Táim ag smaoineamh ar dhá bhaile i mo thoghcheantar féin: Trá Mhór in oirthear Phort Láirge agus Dún Garbhán in iarthar Phort Láirge.

I dTrá Mhór, tá Naíonra Philib Barún taobh le scoil náisiúnta Gaeilge. Níl spás ceart acu. Tá siad istigh in dhá prefab. Tá suíomh ceannaithe ag an naíonra agus táthar ag iarraidh áit a thógáil. Táim ag smaoineamh ar Naíonra Gharbháin chomh maith, atá sa riocht céanna. Tá an-éileamh ag teacht ar an naíonra áirithe sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta. Tá sé tábhachtach. Nuair a thosaíonn an turas Gaeilge ag aois óg cosúil leis sin, bíonn turas iontach ag an bpáiste on réamhscoil go dtí an bhunscoil, an mheánscoil agus an coláiste. Is iontach an rud é sin. Mar a dúirt mé, tá an t-airgead agus na scéimeanna ann. B'fhéidir go mbeidh plé againn maidir leis an dá scoil sin. Beimid in ann tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh, go háirithe agus iad díreach in aice leis an mbunscoil. Is é an rud is fearr do thuismitheoirí go mbeadh an naíonra agus an bunscoil san áit céanna agus an Ghaeilge in úsáid sa dá háit. Táim sásta an dá scoil sin a phlé leis an Teachta agus obair a dhéanamh ionas go mbeimid in ann dul ar aghaidh. B'fhéidir go mbeimid in ann obair a dhéanamh leis an Aire, an Teachta Foley, freisin, faoin scéim Building Blocks. B'fhéidir go mbeidh meascán airgid agus infheistíochta ann. Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta faoin turas Gaeilge. Má thosaíonn sé ag aois óg, mairfidh sé don saol.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Bheadh sé iontach dul chun cinn a dhéanamh maidir le Naíonra Philib Barún agus Naíonra Gharbháin. Ba bhreá liom cruinniú a dhéanamh leo, leis an Aire agus lena oifigigh chun é sin a phlé. Más féidir linn, ba mhaith an rud é obair a dhéanamh leis an Aire, an Teachta Foley, chomh maith chun an maoiniú caipitil sin a chur ar fáil dóibh. Tá na suímh acu, ach is éard atá ag teastáil uathu anois ná píos airgid chun dul ar aghaidh agus foirgnimh a thógáil ar na suímh sin ionas go mbeidh spás mar ba cheart ag na páistí atá fós ag feitheamh ar spásanna sna naíonraí sin.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Beidh mé lánsásta na tograí tábhachtacha sin sna naíonraí a phlé faoi na scéimeanna tacaíochta Gaeilge. Má chuireann an Teachta ríomhphost chugam, beimid in ann é sin a dhéanamh. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go bhfuil an infheistíocht seo ag dul go dtí na naíonraí. Tá infheistíocht bhreise le dul isteach i mbliana go dtí na naíonraí agus go dtí an obair atá á dhéanamh ag tuismitheoirí na Gaeilge. Mar gheall go bhfuil an t-airgead is mó sa Roinn againn le blianta, beimid in ann infheistíocht a dhéanamh sna naíonraí, sna scoileanna agus i gcúrsaí óige freisin. Beidh mé ag déanamh togra mór amárach faoi ionad óige mór faoi phlean caipitil na Roinne. Mar a dúirt mé leis an Teachta Hearne, tá an infheistíocht seo thar a bheith tábhachtach chun rud bunúsach a chur ar fáil do mhuintir na Gaeltachta ionas go bhfuil an deis acu ní hamháin tithe a fháil ach scoileanna, oideachas, cúrsaí cultúir agus ealaíon a fháil sa Ghaeltacht agus ceiliúradh a dhéanamh air sin sa Ghaeltacht agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Sports Organisations

6. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht his views on the findings of the recent report by the GAA national demographics committee; the measures his Department will implement to address issues relevant to this report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8648/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Minister and the Minister of State will be very familiar with the findings of the report of the GAA's national demographic committee. As we all know, the GAA, along with the Ladies Gaelic Football Association and the Camogie Association, comprise over 2,300 clubs and they have 760,000 members. We are not just talking about sporting organisations. We all know that these clubs are a key and integral part of every community. In so many instances, they shape local community life. It is essential that the

Government and the Oireachtas listen to and act on the concerns outlined in that report. Recently, the GAA made an excellent presentation to the Oireachtas housing committee. I hope the Minister and Minister of State encourage all the officials in their Department and in the agencies that come under its remit to study the transcript of that particular committee meeting. There were fabulous contributions by both members and the witnesses.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. I am aware of the recent report of the GAA national demographics committee, and the presentation it made. The Deputy drew my attention to it some weeks back. The Minister of State and I engaged directly with the GAA on this issue. We met the national demographics committee last September in relation to its work and the report.

We acknowledge the challenges for the GAA, but also for the communities that they serve that the report outlines, and the importance of their clubs as focal points for communities all across the country. We are aware the GAA is committed to working within rural and rural communities and at national level. I thank not just the national demographics committee, but in particular the county demographics officers around the country.

Our Rural Future adopts a whole-of-government approach, which will contain a wide range of measures aimed at ensuring that all rural areas are attractive for people to live, learn, work and raise families. Actions delivered under the current policy have delivered improvements in broadband provision, increased rural transport services, support for rural enterprise and ongoing support for the agrifood sector. My own Department has seen significant funding increases in recent years across a range of capital investment schemes such as the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme and the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. This investment is delivering real impacts in rural communities all across the country.

As the Deputy will be aware, we are currently revising Our Rural Future, and the process of developing this is well advanced. My Department undertook an extensive range of consultation to help shape the new policy. Many of the issues relating to attracting and retaining young people and their families in rural areas featured strong. The GAA has engaged proactively in the most recent call for written submissions. All such submissions received will feed into the development of the new policy. We will continue to engage with our Departments and other key stakeholders, including the GAA, ahead of the publication of the next iteration of Our Rural Future, which will address many of the challenges outlined by the GAA demographics committee.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the Minister's response. I fully appreciate the understanding that the Minister and the Minister of State have of the concerns outlined by the GAA. In my own county of Cavan, we have had a welcome increase in population, but there is a population imbalance and demographic imbalance. The east of County Cavan is in the commuter belt of Dublin. The clubs there face pressures because of increasing numbers of participation, which is great. The belt from Castlerahan, Ballyjamesduff, Virginia, Mullagh to Bailieborough and Kingscourt has experienced huge population growth. The Minister is familiar with the geography of west Cavan. Blacklion's Shannon Gaels, Swanlinbar's club or Corlough all face particular challenges due to population decline, particularly within a certain age profile. My own club of Templeport St. Aidan's, and our neighbouring club, Corlough,

have an arrangement where the players from Corlough have a deviation that they can play in competitive competitions with my own club of Templeport. They still retain their own identity, which is a very good thing. When the Minister has the opportunity to visit those clubs, he will see the excellent facilities they have. We need to put on the record that we value the work of those volunteers in ensuring sports are available for all age groups in every community.

Deputy Dara Calleary: All of us will agree that without volunteers we would not have any society, particularly the GAA, but any organisation. I always take the opportunity to ask those who give out about volunteers what they would do on a Saturday if they had no GAA, no drama, no rugby, soccer, swimming or anything to go to and if their kids did not have those outlets. They are run by volunteers. The Minister of State and I are focused on the challenge outlined by the demographics committee that we met in terms of the disparities within counties. I also raise the pressures within urban communities in our cities to get playing facilities within the city of Dublin, where the population is there but the facilities are not keeping up. In terms of Our Rural Future, we will seek to try to address that. Some of our discussion earlier was on housing. The Deputy and I have had discussions on the rural housing guidelines, the updating of which is necessary to encourage young families back into rural communities. I noted his comment about the pressure on clubs on the Meath border in Cavan. It did not seem to affect Meath at the weekend, but we will look at that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. As the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach knows, thankfully, in practically every parish in Cavan-Monaghan, we have excellent community facilities. I know that many communities in Dublin and the highly populated areas would love to have those facilities. As the Minister knows well, we have the social infrastructure in rural communities. We have community centres, schools, GAA and other sporting organisations. What we need is population. Perhaps the Minister and the Minister of State could try to continue the influence on other Departments on the need for investment in rural Ireland.

We need more jobs and, as the Minister said, more young families. We have to improve in some way the availability of housing for young couples. Planning is essential, as are changes to the rural planning guidelines. Only last night, I engaged with the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, who fully understands the difficulties. Where we have the infrastructure, the community facilities, education, health and other social facilities, we need people. The Government must try to ensure, through every means available to it, that more and more young people are in a position to live in rural communities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that the Department, including the Minister of State and I, and our officials, are currently engaging with our colleagues across government on what their responsibilities are in relation to the next stage of Our Rural Future. Rural affairs are not just for the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. It is an all-of-government approach, which is very much what Our Rural Future is about.

I reiterate my thanks to the GAA. Its demographics committee and demographics officers are an example. After the Minister of State and I met with the GAA, we certainly engaged with other sporting organisations with a challenge to them to give us similar reports and data. Many of them responded to that challenge. It is my intention that we will publish the next iteration of Our Rural Future ahead of the summer. We are in the final stages of negotiation; there is a

question later on the level of engagement with that process, which has been significant. The challenges identified by Deputy Smith, and known to the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, are real, not just in Cavan and Monaghan, but right across rural counties. We will seek to address those.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Departmental Policies

7. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht when he intends to publish the successor to Our Rural Future for the period beyond 2025; and whether that new strategy will include clear, measurable targets for rural services, rural employment, rural housing and ensuring population sustainability. [8692/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: My question relates to the old chestnut of Our Rural Future, which we have discussed many times in the Chamber and outside it. When does the Minister intend to publish the successor document? I understand there was a period of consultation late last year. I participated in that consultation, as did many others around the country. Will that new strategy include clear, measurable targets for rural services, rural employment, ensuring population sustainability, addressing the demographic crisis and, crucially, the issue of rural housing?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Since its launch in 2021, Our Rural Future has delivered vital investment and supports to rural areas that have strengthened local economies and improved the quality of life for people across rural Ireland. Measures already completed support many of the high-level issues the Deputy referred to, not just today but in his submission, including high-speed broadband, support for rural enterprise, increased rural transport services and ongoing support for many sectors, including agrifood.

The programme for Government commitment to publish and implement a new Our Rural Future strategy is currently being finalised. The new policy will build not just on the progress already achieved but will set out a renewed vision for the whole-of-government approach to rural development for the years ahead. It will contain commitments that reflect our continued ambition for rural areas that will make them an attractive prospect for people to work in and especially to live in.

Informed by the extensive public and stakeholder engagement already undertaken, a consultation paper setting out the key proposed themes and priorities was published for a public consultation, which closed on 12 December last. Engagement with all relevant Departments is ongoing to secure ambitious commitments for delivery under the new plan that will build not just on the success of Our Rural Future but on other plans. That engagement is consistent with ensuring that Government priorities in key areas, such as housing, will help to secure a more sustainable and resilient future for our rural communities.

To give the Deputy an idea of the level of engagement, an online survey in March 2025 attracted almost 1,300 responses, over 500 people attended eight in-person events led by the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and at the end of that consultation period referred to, we

had over 250 responses we are currently going through and analysing. As I said, we are engaging with Departments. I also attended and participated in a rural youth assembly in September 2025. As I said to Deputy Smith, we have engaged with a range of sporting and other organisations in one-on-one meetings to discuss their concerns.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I do not doubt the level of engagement that took place, which I welcome. It is the right way to do consultation and engagement. When a plan such as this that is of such importance to the future of rural Ireland is being put together, it is vitally important to go out and take the views of people. It is then more important, and the Minister knows this, to ensure that those views are captured in the final document and the recommendations therein are concrete, actionable and, crucially, have timelines and responsible parties attached to them, by which I mean Departments and State agencies.

Does the Minister have a timeline? Notwithstanding the volume of work and analysis required following that process of engagement, does he have a timeline for the publication of the document this year? My contention is slightly different from his in that I do not accept that the previous iteration included very concrete and defined goals that could be used as a yardstick to any great extent. There was a lot of aspiration but it lacked substance, vision and, crucially, as I have discussed with the Minister in the Chamber, an emphasis on housing. I imagine that came through very clearly to him in his engagement with young people, as did the demographic collapse, as mentioned in the previous question, that is affecting so many rural communities precisely because of housing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The process of developing a new Our Rural Future is going on in tandem with the other process, which is the OECD review of rural development policy in Ireland. We will publish that review shortly. I am intent on having the new Our Rural Future published ahead of the summer.

Housing has been one of the major inputs in terms of submissions. As I said in reply to Deputy Smith, we are engaging with an Roinn tithíochta, the Department of housing, on rural planning guidelines. It is essential we give opportunities for younger people and younger families to relocate and move back, in line with the opportunities that have happened in terms of infrastructure, such as broadband, and community facilities. As I said earlier as Gaeilge, I absolutely agree with him on the need for childcare and preschool facilities for those who are collocated, in particular. It is not just for Gaeilgeoirí, although especially for them, but for young families to have those facilities. We have also invested significantly in hubs to give people the opportunity to work from rural areas and in high-tech secure areas. That will allow them to do that. There are a range of issues, but my current timeline is that we will have Our Rural Future published ahead of the summer.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: One of the concerns and worries I have on this, and I am not entirely sure if the Minister shares this but it is realistic, is the level of engagement he will get from his colleagues in government around the Cabinet table and from State agencies in the local government sector. That is why I am so keen to see clear, responsible persons or agencies attached to every single action and timeline within the plan. The biggest one is the Department of housing, as it covers housing and local government, but there is also the Department of enterprise, when looking at employment and tourism as well. I am quite keen that there be

ongoing engagement and liaison at the highest level, Minister to Minister, to ensure that the final objectives and goals laid down in that plan, which we all eagerly await, will be measurable and there will be a level of accountability. That is something the Minister needs to bring back to Cabinet and to Government to make sure that not only is the plan read, at the very least, but its actions are understood at the highest level in each of the Departments and agencies responsible and at local government level.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I absolutely assure the Deputy this will be led from the highest level. There is a commitment in the programme for Government that this be a whole-of-government approach. The Taoiseach, Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, have directed all our ministerial colleagues to engage in this. If studs have to go on, they will go on but I do not think they will have to because there is genuine interest in ensuring the success of this programme. Fáiltimid roimh an bplean gníomhaíochta do sheirbhísí poiblí. Bhí moladh ann do gach Roinn agus bhí an Roinn in aice le gach moladh.

When we published the service plan last week, it included an action and a Department that owned the action. I have set up within Roinn na Gaeltachta a unit to drive that within Our Rural Future. It is my intention to publish actions and publish the lead Department, and to have a system of driving that from within our Department. I assure the Deputy we have the support of the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, in terms of leaders in government to drive this on to ensure it is ambitious. We will engage with all Government agencies. Local authorities also have a responsibility here. We will drive them but they also have to be driven by their own internal members as well.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

8. **Deputy John Connolly** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht nuashonrú a thabhairt maidir leis na hiarrachtaí atá Údarás na Gaeltachta ag déanamh chun tacú le forbairt tithíochta cónaithe sna réigiúin Ghaeltachta; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [7697/26]

Deputy John Connolly: Tá a fhios agam gur chuir an tAire freagra chugam maidir leis seo píosa ó shín, ach tá sé an-tábhachtach na hiarrachtaí a chur chun cinn agus labhairt fúthu chomh minic agus is féidir mar gheall ar an ngéarchéim tithíochta atá sa Ghaeltacht.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta agus gabhaim buíochas leis as ucht na ceiste faoin tábhacht a bhaineann le tithíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Níor mhiste a nótáil go mbaineann saincheisteanna tithíochta leis an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta. É sin ráite, is é príomhchuspóir Údarás na Gaeltachta ná a chinntiú go mairfidh an Ghaeilge mar phríomhtheanga an phobail i gceantair Ghaeltachta agus go gcaomhnófar í do na glúnta atá le teacht. Chuige sin, cuireann an t-údarás maoiniú ar fáil do raon leathan tionscnamh forbartha, fiontraíochta agus fostaíochta. Tacaíonn an eagraíocht chomh maith le gníomhaíochtaí straitéiseacha a bhaineann le forbairt teanga, cultúir agus pobail. Is fiú a thabhairt faoi deara, mar sin, gur ról tánaisteach a bheidh ag Údarás na Gaeltachta ag oibriú leis na geallsealbhóirí cuí maidir le tacú le soláthar tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht.

Tá punann suntasach réadmhaoine ar fud na Gaeltachta á bhainistiú ag Údarás na Gaeltachta agus tá bonneagar fuíolluisce ar láithreacha éagsúla mar chuid de sin. Mar a leagtar amach i bplean tithíochta an Rialtais, tá deiseanna ann don údarás comhoibriú le húdaráis áitiúla ábhartha chun leas a bhaint as an mbonneagar atá ann cheana féin trí chur chuige straitéiseach plean-bhunaithe ar mhaithe le freastal ar riachtanais tithíochta i bpobail na Gaeltachta. Bhí cruinniú agam le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis chun é seo a phlé agus tuigim ón chruinniú sin go bhfuil plé ar bun leis na húdaráis áitiúla agus an deis ann oibriú le hUisce Éireann chun tairbhe a bhaint as an mbonneagar reatha sin. Tá mé ag cur cruinnithe le chéile idir an údarás agus Uisce Éireann chun na deiseanna seo a phlé.

Cé go bhfuil ganntanas cóiríochta cónaithe sa Ghaeltacht, tá ceann de na rátaí folúntais is airde sa tír le feiceáil inti freisin. Chun dul i ngleic leis seo, tá comhordaitheoir tiomnaithe tithe folmha Gaeltachta ceaptha le déanaí, i gcomhpháirtíocht le húdaráis áitiúla agus maoinithe ag an údarás, chun cabhrú le pobail aghaidh a thabhairt ar shaincheisteanna folúntais agus rochtain ar dheontais éagsúla de chuid an Stáit a éascú.

Deputy John Connolly: Glacaim gur ról tánaisteach atá ag an údarás ach mar a dúirt an tAire, tá ról suntasach aige i saol na Gaeltachta. Tá sé ag déanamh oibre maithe le blianta fada. Glacaim leis chomh maith nach bhfuil sé éasca d’eagraíocht nach bhfuil aon chleachtadh ná taithí aici ar chúrsaí tithíochta tús a chur leis an dualgas sin, go háirithe gan an fhoireann. Glacaim leis go bhfuil sé ráite ag an Aire anois go bhfuil duine fostaithe ag an údarás chun oibriú sa réimse seo, agus gabhaim buíochas as sin. Ceapaim go bhfuil an duine sin lonnaithe i gContae Mhaigh Eo. Is tús maith é sin.

Chomh maith leis seo, cuirim fáilte go raibh cruinniú ag an Aire leis an bpríomhfheidhmeannach agus go bhfuil an tAire ag eagrú cruinnithe eile idir an t-údarás agus Uisce Éireann. Molaim don Aire gur cheart do dhuine ón Roinn tithíochta, nó duine ó na comhairlí contae áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta acu ina limistéir, a bheith ag an gcruinniú sin chomh maith, cosúil le hoifigeach ó Chomhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe, Comhairle Contae Mhaigh Eo, Comhairle Contae Chiarraí nó Comhairle Cathrach agus Contae Phort Láirge, mar shampla. Tá ról acu, mar a dúirt an tAire.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Bhí cruinniú iontach agam le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis agus phléigh muid na sites go léir atá aige. B’fhéidir go mbeidh muid in ann iad a réiteach le haghaidh tithíochta agus gach duine a fháil ar na tograí sin sa Ghaeltacht. Pléifidh muid é sin. Is maith an tuairim í go mbeidh duine ó na húdaráis áitiúla i láthair freisin.

Tá mé ag obair leis an Aire tithíochta, an Teachta Browne, chun go mbeidh muid in ann an ráiteas tithíochta Gaeltachta a fhoilsiú chomh luath agus is féidir. Tá mé fós ag oibriú air sin. Bhí cruinniú agam le príomhfheidhmeannaigh na n-údarás áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta acu ina limistéir agus beidh cruinniú eile agam leo. Tá mé ag díriú isteach ar an ndúshlán seo. Tá sé tábhachtach dom. Caithfidh mé oibriú leis an Aire tithíochta, an Teachta Browne, freisin. Ní bhaineann an dúshlán seo le Roinn na Gaeltachta amháin; is dúshlán é do Roinn na tithíochta freisin. Tá muinín agam go bhfuil sí ag leagan amach na ndeiseanna chun an dúshlán mór seo a réiteach.

Deputy John Connolly: Tugann sé muinín do mhuintir na Gaeltachta a chloisteáil go bhfuil an méid sin déanta againn go dtí seo. Glacaim leis gur tús é ach is maith an rud é go bhfuil an tAire ag labhairt leis na daoine tábhachtacha sin, lena n-áirítear Údarás na Gaeltachta, an Roinn tithíochta agus na húdaráis áitiúla, chun béim a chur ar an tábhacht a bhaineann le cúrsaí tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht. Tá mé dóchasach anois, tar éis an mhéid atá ráite ag an Aire, go mbeidh dul chun cinn againn air seo i mbliana, chomh maith le foilsiú na dtreoirínte, rud atá thar a bheith tábhachtach. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an Roinn ag oibriú ar na treoirínte tuaithe chomh maith agus, b'fhéidir, ba cheart an dá ceann acu a chur le chéile agus an dá chóip treoirínte sin a fhoilsiú le chéile, mar téann siad le lámh a chéile.

Is fadhb í an tithíocht ar fud na tíre ach is í an Ghaeltacht an t-aon áit sa tír ina bhfuil tionchar díreach aici ar ár dteanga féin, ar thodhchaí na teanga agus ar thodhchaí na Gaeilge mar theanga pobail. Más rud é nach bhfuil tithe ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht, ní féidir le daoine cur fúthu inti agus bíonn an baol ann go mbogfaidh siad go ceantair ina bhfuil an Béarla mar ghnáththeanga. Is mór an gá agus fainic atá air seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá an t-uafás oibre le déanamh air seo. Tá sé in am tógáil, ach tá muid ag déanamh na hoibre. Ba bhreá liom go ndéanfaí athrú níos tapúla, ach tá muid ag déanamh na hoibre agus tá muid ag tabhairt na gcéimeanna go gcaithfidh muid a thabhairt ag an bpointe seo. Tá mé fós ag coinneáil brú agus ag déanamh na hoibre. Beidh mé i gcruinniú le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis amárach agus oibreoidh mé leis. Tá muid chun labhairt le hUisce Éireann agus na húdaráis áitiúla freisin. Mar a luaigh an Teachta, tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go dtuigeann daoine go bhfuil ról le haghaidh na Roinne tithíochta anseo. Tá mé ag oibriú go dlúth leis an Aire tithíochta faoi seo i gcomhthéacs na ndúshlán tithíochta le haghaidh na tíre ar fad ach tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach an dúshlán atá roimh mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus clann na Gaeltachta maidir le tithíocht a thuiscint chomh maith.

Departmental Funding

9. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the funding available through his Department for community festivals such as a festival (details supplied) in County Meath; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [7869/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What funding is available through the Minister's Department for community festivals such as Dunshaughlin Harvest Festival, the Hinterland Festival Kells in my area of Meath, Kells Type Trail, Moynalty Steam Threshing Festival and the Samhain Festival of Food and Culture? There are a range of excellent community festivals all over the State. I wish to know the types of funding supports available through his Department.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht an eolais faoi gach uile féile i gContae na Mí. I do not think he forgot any of them. The positive impact of festivals is very much recognised by my Department, both in building local pride and boosting local economies. While we do not have a scheme specifically for community festivals, there may be avenues to support available under LEADER or the local enhancement programme, which is currently open for applications.

LEADER has been operating successfully in Ireland for 35 years. In line with the programme for Government, LEADER has a strong focus on rural tourism and funding has been made available under LEADER for festivals and local tourism initiatives. For example, the Deputy will be aware that the Samhain Festival of Food and Culture in Kells was supported by LEADER funding in 2024. In order for a project to be eligible for LEADER, funding of the proposed activity must be compatible with the actions outlined in the approved LEADER local development strategy and it must comply with the EU regulations and operating rules. As the Deputy knows, the programme is administered by local action groups. Prospective applicants or applicants organising festivals should, in the first instance, contact the local action group which, in this case, is the Meath local action group.

The local enhancement programme supports small capital grants to community and voluntary groups to improve facilities or purchase equipment. In some cases, this will help to support groups that run local festivals. The 2026 programme is now open until the end of February. It will provide €7 million in capital supports nationally.

This €7 million is broken down on a local authority by local authority basis into small capital grants. Some festivals require generators and other items. Finally, as the Deputy will be aware, we fund agricultural shows through a €1 million investment into 130 shows that we deliver through the Irish Shows Association across the country. For many communities, the agricultural show is a fantastic statement of their pride, not just in their area but in the agriculture industry that underpins their area.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Absolutely. We are grateful for that funding at the Nobber Show, Dunderry Fair and Royal Meath Show. They are well supported by the community and that is welcome. The contribution of community festivals is to strengthen social cohesion, support local economies, promote volunteerism, enhance local community identity, pride and well-being, and provide low-cost, accessible cultural experiences for people. They are fantastic. The Minister and Minister of State will appreciate that local communities look forward to them every year. They are built into the calendar. Funding is always a challenge. I ask the Minister to consider a dedicated funding stream and, more than that, for it to be multi-annual. A challenge for these groups is that there is competitive tendering and a competitive process every year. LEADER is very welcome but it has a cumbersome application for those seeking it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy about the importance of festivals. I put on the record my thanks and that of the Minister of State to the volunteers who put them together. I am always struck that the volunteers who pull this festival together are the ones who make the least out of it. They are not involved in any of the hospitality businesses that do well. They do it together because there is massive community spirit. I assure the Deputy it is something we have looked at. Other supports are available through LEADER. The LEADER process is cumbersome because it involves EU funding, but both the Minister of State and I constantly ask our officials to ensure that the application process for any of our schemes is the least cumbersome possible, bearing in mind that volunteers are doing this. The local enhancement programme, LEP, process, which in the Deputy's case is open via Meath County Council, is a good example of a relatively less cumbersome process. We constantly keep it under review. Supports are available for festivals through Fáilte Ireland, the Department of tourism and local authorities. The model that we have with the Irish Shows Association, which had its annual

general meeting in November in Trim, coincidentally, is a good model, in which we fund a national organisation, which, in turn, funds 130 local organisations.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I do not know if the Minister is hearing of the issue of insurance but I am sure he is. It is tangentially his responsibility in supporting projects such as this. As I said in my previous contribution, these festivals are important for local communities for reasons we all agree on. Insurance can be a challenge and put some of them at risk. That is potentially increasingly the case. Is the Minister aware of that, discussing it with colleagues, and considering possible supports for groups in that regard?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree. Insurance costs in this country continue to be a massive challenge, particularly for festivals, but also for businesses, including small businesses. I was a Minister of State in the previous Government in the Department of enterprise, which led on this work. It is a matter of enormous frustration and anger to me that all of the work that we have done has not resulted in insurance deductions for small businesses, festivals, homeowners or car owners. Insurance continues to be a challenge for festivals and for local voluntary groups. We work with the Department of agriculture, for instance, which provides funding for insurance for shows. Insurance is a major challenge. We will definitely zero in on it. Following today's session, we will ask our officials to work with officials in the Department of tourism in this space and work with the various festivals to identify if support is available. It will not be available in 2026 as festivals get to that planning phase. Insurance is a major challenge. The insurance industry has not delivered on the reforms that this Government and previous Governments have brought in.

Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Budgets

11. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if the cut in the rural development spend in budget 2026 is a trend he sees persisting throughout the lifetime of the current Government. [8710/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I am taking this question for Deputy Clarke. It relates to rural development funding, which is an issue close to my heart. We see all around us in our communities the impact it has on creating and sustaining employment and sustaining community initiatives. Last year, we saw a €5 million cut to the rural development spend in the budget. That seems to be on trend for this Government, and for successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Administrations when it comes to rural Ireland. Is it something we are likely to see replicated in budget 2027?

Deputy Dara Calleary: My Department manages its funding allocations across three programme areas: rural development, community development, agus an Gaeltacht agus na n-oileáin. For 2026, my Department's overall budget allocation is €613 million, with around €273 million in capital funding and €340 million in current funding. This represents a 7% increase on the 2025 allocation and builds on strong investment in the past number of years. The funding provision for the rural development programme has increased significantly in

recent years. When the Department was established in 2017, the programme allocation for rural development was €80 million. For 2026, it is almost €193 million. That investment is having a huge impact right across the country.

Within the Revised Estimate for 2026, the rural development programme allocation of €193 million compares to a 2025 allocation of just under €197 million. This specifically reflects the fact that the provision for the LEADER programme is reduced from €42 million in 2025 to €32 million in 2026. This is an estimate based on the stage the programme is at, and the resultant level of claims that local action groups expect to make this year. I ask the Deputy to note that the full €250 million allocation for the LEADER 2021 to 2027 programme will be provided over the programme period, with funding to be ramped up as demand increases.

Finally, as I noted at the outset, I emphasise that the Department's allocation has increased by 7% for 2026. This is ensuring additional funding for programmes such as the community centre investment fund, the social inclusion and community activation programme and the community services programme. These schemes, particularly with the increase in these schemes, will benefit both rural and urban communities. The increased funding will be spread across not just urban areas but many rural areas too.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire for confirming that. I understand that the LEADER programme is a five-year programme and that there may be peaks and troughs, but a €10 million reduction in the budget this year compared with last year is still €10 million of a reduction. I welcome the fact that that money is not lost. It is not out of the budget and the Minister will bring it back. However, there is a growing sense of disillusionment in rural communities, that it is on the back foot and its days are numbers, and that there seems to be indifference from Government to the plight of rural Ireland. There is a growing need for diversification. I do not need to tell the Minister about the debate in this House last night and over the past number of weeks, and the crisis in confidence that exists in Irish agriculture. I do not need to tell him about the crisis in the Irish fishing industry. As part of the wider rural development issue, what LEADER crucially does is support economic diversification, creating opportunities in rural communities. It is concerning that €10 million has been taken out of it this year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am going to disagree with the Deputy. We have been agreeing all morning. I see a great and growing sense of confidence as I travel across rural Ireland. I am visiting projects across rural Ireland that are volunteer-led and community-led. They are funded by my Department in partnership with local action groups, LEADER companies and local authorities. They are projects that reflect ambition and a plan. We are in a position to fund that. My Department's funding has increased by 7% for this year.

10 o'clock

We are ensuring that rural communities will see increased investment and funding increases in other areas. I assure the Deputy the LEADER programme will deliver its full allocated funding and I can see already the level of claims is increasing as LEADER groups are implementing the programme. The provision for the Gaeltacht and the islands is up 30% year on year from €123 million to €160 million. We discussed community centre investment earlier. That is communities with confidence in their community centres. That is going to €20 million

and this year we will see the opening of new centres across the country. Funding for the community services programme, CSP, programme has gone to nearly €60 million delivering services, including community services. I see confidence and we are investing in and supporting that confidence. We are investing in ensuring that confidence makes a difference on the ground.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I will start by agreeing with the Minister that there is definitely ambition in rural communities. There is no shortage of ambition and self-awareness within these communities but on my travels and in my engagements, I do not see the confidence the Minister speaks of because rural communities are reeling. They are reeling from the demographic crisis that has already been spoken about this morning. Indeed, Deputies from the Minister's side of the House mentioned that the GAA is very quick to point to, and has the statistics and evidence to back it up, instances where teams cannot pull sufficient players together to compete, where young people are being forced to go abroad or to larger urban areas or the cities to find housing solutions, where schools are struggling to keep children enrolled, where public services are bare on the ground and where people cannot access dentists or GP services. There is huge disillusionment in rural Ireland and if we in this Chamber are unable to acknowledge that, if we do not see and if our ears are open but we are not picking up on that, we have a difficulty. I am not filled with a huge amount of confidence a corner will be, or has been, turned. Going back to the rural development piece, we really do need to see that €10 million in additional funding being made available. I look forward to that and will be keeping a close watch on it because it is crucially important to the communities I represent.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I reiterate that we are backing that confidence. We are backing the confidence in rural communities and the confidence that is led by volunteers and are working with organisations, local authorities, development agencies and local development companies in terms of doing that. I can assure the Deputy the LEADER programme is fully funded and will deliver. We do have a challenge and I think I have been very straight in discussing it. We are working on the challenge regarding the next round of LEADER funding. As CAP negotiations are finalised this year, we are working hard. The Minister of State and I are working with colleagues to ensure CAP will be funded in the next EU funding programme. That presents a major challenge but it is one we are up for and are seeking to deliver on right across the country. All morning, we have discussed the community centres investment fund, CCIF, in Gaeltacht areas, in the community services programme and in the town and village renewal scheme. They are being driven by and in the interests of the rural communities and they are changing the future of rural communities. The forthcoming dedication of Our Rural Future will show our ambition as a Government working in partnership. The various independent analyses of our Our Rural Future that are to come will give a good sense of our ambition in that space.

Voluntary Sector

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to provide an update on the development of the new strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland for 2026-2030 and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8241/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Could the Minister provide an update on the development of the new strategy to support the community and voluntary sector 2026 to 2030? When we talk about the community and voluntary sector, that takes in a whole range of things. I am talking about everything from Muirhevnamor Community Centre through to the family resource centre, FRC, that was set up in Dundalk Counselling Centre. I hope another one will be set up in the Redeemer Centre. We know the work that is done and the support that is necessary.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Gabhaim buíochas leis Teachta Ó Murchú. As the Deputy knows, the process of the development of a new strategy to support community and voluntary sector as a successor to Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities is well under way. It is being informed by an extensive public and stakeholder consultation process. This process has included an in-person consultation event, which took place in Tullamore last July and which I attended. I can tell the House it was a very well-attended event. There was strong, robust and positive engagement. This was followed by a very in-depth online public consultation together with bilateral consultation with stakeholder groups and written submissions from across Government Departments. The Minister and I are very anxious that this partnership in collaboration with the voluntary and community sector is continued. There has been a lot of engagement in the consultation process. Almost 250 submissions were received in the online consultation, which took place over a six-week period in August.

The new strategy will be a whole-of-government strategy led by our Department and will reflect the ambition of the Minister and I to work in partnership with the sector. It will be implemented collaboratively with the community and voluntary sector and will be overseen by a cross-sectoral group on local and community development. It is our intention and our ambition that the new strategy will be a four-year one for 2026 to 2030. It will build on the existing structures, strategic objectives and achievements of the previous strategy while also taking account of new context challenges and priorities for the community and voluntary sector.

Our aim is to strengthen further the relationship and the partnership between the whole-of-government and the community and voluntary sector, which has developed significantly over the past couple of years. A further round of consultations with key stakeholders has recently concluded. It is my expectation that the finalised document will be submitted for our Department's approval in the coming weeks with a tentative publication date of quarter 2 of this year.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the timeline with the caveats the Minister of State provided. The element of engagement with the stakeholders is all very well and good but it is a matter of actually putting a plan in place and then operating it. Like any plan, it will be up for and will need review. We were talking about sustainability. We have all dealt with individual projects from time to time when the pressure is on. I had a meeting with Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland, SERI, which represents social enterprises. It would talk about the fact that sometimes social enterprises can fall by the wayside. We know we need to make sure that those operating, particularly in what would have been called RAPID or DEIS areas, are given support. We know about for family resource centres. I would have heard about the issues when we talk of whole-of-government. The idea would be that certain grant aid could be provided by enterprise, which is not necessarily available to social enterprises. I think they

would speak about a number of milestones in relation to them that are needed but have not happened yet. Will the Minister of State comment on that?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The new strategy will take into account the new challenges facing the community and voluntary sector. It is evolving and changing and we are not oblivious to that. Richard Bruton, in the social enterprise space, will certainly drive and hold us to account. The previous strategy delivered significant progress in terms of a variety of metrics. Our future direction, policy and decision-making will be a reflection of our engagement but also of lived experience. The Minister and I live in communities involved in the sector and we know the sector. It is about those values and principles of partnership and collaboration but also about recognising that we must build an inclusive society. For the Minister and I, it is about ensuring the five pillars are there and that we look at them and see how we can deliver for people in an evolving and changing situation, recognising that we have made significant progress.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all engage with the community and voluntary sector on a daily basis. Generally that is on the basis that these people can deal with some of the issues that sometimes one cannot get deal with the State agencies, particularly when we are dealing with more complex issues in communities - everything from addiction to mental health services and the supports that are required. I mention the likes of The House, the Redeemer Centre, Muirhevnemor Community Centre and Cuidigh Linn but I would also mention Creative Spark, Kilcurry Resource Centre and Haggardstown and Blackrock Community Centre. Some of these centres face incredible difficulties surviving.

They fit into different brackets.

When we talk about this policy and implementation, it is good to see there is a timeline but when we talk about the social enterprise policy, as I stated, there have been a number of milestones that have been missed and that needs to be looked at.

With regard to the national procurement strategy that is being looked at, there might be the possibility there of something that can be somewhat more sustainable. There is that idea of seed funding that makes social enterprises sustainable. I know that is only one small part but it is just on the basis that I spoke to Social Enterprise Republic of Ireland, SERI, lately.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The important point where we have shared commonality is that the Government is committed to supporting the implementation of a new strategy. The community and voluntary sector is an important pillar and we look forward to working continually to ensure that relationship is not just strengthened but that it is a partnership between the Government and the sector. I could list the Deputy a whole raft of projects, which I will not do, in his county that we have funded. I do not agree we have missed milestones. If we speak about social enterprise, it has been a success story and it has shown empowerment, innovation and employment and the opportunity presented to people. That is something we can come back to.

What the Department, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are anxious to do is to provide significant seed capital and significant investment to further support and enhance-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is what we need.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Yes. We will continue to do that but we must also recognise that we have seen a 6% increase in the budget. We have seen an increase in terms of the community service programme, which reflects that we are in an evolving and changing world and as needs change challenges must be met. This is not something we are oblivious to. We have an open-door policy. There is engagement. We are not living in an ivory tower. If the Deputy wants to come back to me one-to-one, I am happy to sit down and chat to him about some of the issues we need to address.

Rural Schemes

13. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on the implementation of rural proofing. [8717/26]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I want to ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to consider rural communities when making policies.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for the question. Rural proofing refers to the processes adopted by policymakers to ensure that new programmes and initiatives understand, and take account of, the specific needs and capacities of rural communities. Our Rural Future, the national rural development policy, commits to strengthening our approach to rural proofing across all Government policies.

In addressing this issue, my Department commissioned a research report on rural proofing and undertook a rural proofing pilot on a number of policy initiatives across a number of Departments. This work also took cognisance of the fact that a level of rural proofing is already taking place within the current system, although it may not be labelled with a formal "rural proofing" tag.

In recognising this, my Department developed a guide to rural proofing for policymakers to build on and strengthen existing approaches, and to serve as a practical tool to assist policymakers in the rural proofing process.

Including a simplified rural proofing assessment template and key resources, the guide provides a clear outline of what rural proofing is and seeks to make rural proofing easier to understand and, most importantly, to implement. The principal purpose is to aid and support policymakers to "think rural" when developing policies. The guide, which is available online, has been circulated to all Departments and will be added to the suite of tools used by policymakers.

My officials are also continuing to bring awareness to the importance of rural proofing through the many interdepartmental groups they participate in and in the ongoing engagements we have referred to with other Departments regarding the development of our new Our Rural Future policy.

I remain clear that by taking a clear account of rural perspectives in the policymaking process at the earliest possible stage, we will develop better and, most importantly, more effective policies for rural communities.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I must say that is an incredibly disappointing response. Let me tell the Minister what I heard. The last Government committed to developing a rural proofing model. The Minister took a look at it and said, "Hey, presto. It turns out we were doing it perfectly all along." The Minister then decided to make this a guide for rural proofing for policymakers. The Minister can do more. Where is rural proofing when it comes to free travel cards for kids effectively excluded in many rural communities? The Government did the same thing with the young adult travel card many years before this. Where was rural proofing when the Government jacked up the carbon tax earlier this year, disproportionately hitting rural dwellers without access to public transport? Will the Minister outline the great successes of his rural proofing model?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Rural proofing is delivering a record budget for the Department of Rural and Community Development agus an Gaeltacht - an investment that is going to make a difference in rural communities right across the country. Rural proofing is ensuring that Government is delivering on policies in many areas. I was in Achill last Tuesday and saw TFI Anseo, a pilot rural transport scheme that brings rural transport on demand. I am delighted to assure the Deputy that it is operating very successfully. We will work with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, as the Minister of State in charge in that space, to develop services in rural communities right across the country.

We are delivering record capital investment. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is delivering current investment. We spoke earlier about the community centre investment programme, and we may get to Deputy Gould's question on this. It is transforming community facilities in rural communities. We have spoken throughout the morning about rural ambition being delivered from within communities that is being matched by Government support and by Government ambition, which we clearly outlined in the new Our Rural Future policy, a policy that will be a whole-of-government one and which will drive rural proofing across all Departments and agencies.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: A budget for rural transport does not cut it. I accept that the Minister inherited this poor, lacklustre approach to rural proofing from his predecessor. It comes across as a box-ticking exercise; a sop to those who care about it while the Minister ditches an idea his Government decided not to follow through on.

I appeal to the Minister to review the Rural Needs Act 2016 that was introduced to the Assembly by the Sinn Féin deputy leader, Michelle O'Neill, in 2016. As the Minister will see, it is a much bigger body of work, and it went in to many more policies than the Government is including. I ask the Minister to consider this policy, read it and see what other substantive work he could do to underpin rural proofing. If we look at the two guides, it is apparent that one is serious about giving consideration to rural needs. I again ask the Minister to consider this policy Michelle O'Neill brought forward and everything within it that could be adapted.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will happily compare everything we are doing here to what is happening under other governments and under First Minister O'Neill. The Deputy referred to my predecessor. My predecessor delivered €440 million to over 160 projects through RRDF since 2020, over €235 million through the town and village renewal scheme and over €110

million through the rural social scheme. This money is changing and transforming rural communities across the country.

As Minister, Heather Humphreys, ensured a revolution in terms of the schemes initiated by the Department. I am building on that and on extra investment, working with Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to do that. We are also driving it. It is not just our Department, a point I made to Deputy Smith earlier. We are in charge of rural policy but every Department has a role in it. As we discussed with Deputy McGuinness, the Deputy will see that in the new Our Rural Future policy, actions will be assigned to Departments, and we will drive the delivery of those actions.

I am very happy to compare what we are doing here and to compare the ambition with what we are doing here. I would like to do more of it and I assure the Deputy that I will.

Rural Schemes

14. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht his plans to reopen the shovel ready community centre scheme. [8050/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister update the House on his plans to reopen the shovel-ready community centre scheme? This is a really important scheme for communities and it must be reopened.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We had a very good discussion earlier and I agree with the Deputy about the importance of the community centre investment fund, CCIF, which was introduced to provide high-quality, accessible community spaces available to all groups in communities. Some €110 million has been allocated since 2022 for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of 12 new centres in areas around the country where a need was identified.

The 2023 community centre investment fund was opened specifically for those groups striving to build their own community centre. That scheme provided funding of up to €6 million for new community centres on greenfield or brownfield sites.

Over €30 million was approved for the construction of 12 new community centres under the scheme. These projects involve considerable levels of investment but will have a transformational impact in the communities in which they are located. I have visited and made it a priority to engage with these projects and I am delighted to say that seven of the 12 projects have received final approval. They have appointed contractors, with the remaining five progressing through tender and design stage.

My priority in relation to this element of the scheme is to ensure those projects progress to completion and that communities will begin to see the real benefits of the investment. My focus for 2026 is to deliver a CCIF round to support the refurbishment work on existing community centres. There are hundreds of community groups out there that want enhancement works for their facilities. I understand that at the same time, there are areas that require a new centre. While my immediate focus is on delivering refurbishment this year, it is my intention to direct further iterations of funding towards support for new-build projects.

I also note that there are substantial levels of investment under way in community facilities through LEADER and the town and village renewal scheme. I would particularly direct the Deputy there if he has projects in mind in regard to the building acquisitions measure and also the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I welcome the investment in existing community centres in order to refurbish them. A lot of them are just old and need investment. I support that but I am very disappointed by the Minister's lack of commitment to reopening the shovel-ready projects scheme that was there. I have a few examples. The Fairfield community association is operating out of a house it owns in Fairfield. It deals with hundreds of children and different groups. It is an area that has been promised a community centre for 30 years. The volunteers are doing Trojan work. They have done a site survey and put plans together but their real fear, and my fear, is that when they are ready to go, the funding will not be available for this project. These are volunteers. Where is the support? There is one other thing I will ask the Minister to really take on board. Should we have supports to help communities because these are volunteers putting these plans together? I refer to, maybe, a one-stop shop where communities can come together when planning for their centres, whether it is meeting new specifications or delivering new centres. Communities need support.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There are supports available but the Deputy has given me an idea to think about in terms of centralising some of the supports there. In regard to the new-builds in particular, I am anxious to ensure the ones that were announced are up and running. We will take the lessons of those and put them into somewhere for communities to assist in bringing new builds on. The new builds programme is a priority because I understand there are many communities that need a new-build facility. I assure the Deputy it is a priority for me and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, during our term in the Department, that we will have another round of new builds.

The work the Deputy just described is the kind of work that needs to be under way now to prepare for an application process in terms of getting all those pieces together. Many of the new builds we are working on have been done in association with either local authorities or local development companies, which also have the expertise to assist community groups in doing that. I can give the Deputy some information as to what local groups can support in terms of providing that skill and expertise. The Deputy has given me an idea there and we will work on that in regard to a resource for communities.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister is expecting volunteers who work with kids in the community to be planners, engineers, administrators or negotiators. If they are trying to get a project over the line, it all falls on the volunteers.

We have another situation in St. Joseph's Community Centre in Mayfield. That has now passed planning so this will bring a state-of-the-art library and community centre to Mayfield but there is no funding there for it. It lost out on the library capital programme, so there is no funding and now the shovel-ready projects scheme is closed. Where does St. Joseph's Community Centre in Mayfield and its library go? It is at risk of its planning running out before the money becomes available. I am not trying to be political here but the facts are that places like Fairfield and Mayfield have been underinvested in. They feel forgotten about. Will

the Minister give a commitment to both Fairfield and St. Joseph's that the funding will be available when they are ready?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I cannot give commitments on the floor of the House to specific groups without seeing the detail. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is engaging and working hard with the Mayfield community in particular. We have substantially transformed the funding opportunities available for libraries in recent years. That funding is available through local authorities and working in partnership with local authorities. I can assure the Deputy in relation to investment in community centres. The investment in the refurbishment is very important. As we discussed earlier, this has resulted in a 90% increase in usage in existing facilities. In regard to new builds, I am very focused on delivering the current plans but also on opening up a new funding round for new builds. We will work to assist communities in terms of the knowledge and work necessary to prepare for that application process. That is work that will be worthwhile when we get to opening that particular scheme. I assure the Deputy the Government and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer and I are very focused on backing and supporting community ambition.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Foreign Conflicts

56. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the Government's position regarding the situation in Sudan, in particular the need to ensure access to appropriate aid; her position regarding the continuing concerning flow of weapons into the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8758/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State and I have spoken on a number of occasions in relation to the terrible situation in Sudan, which has seen tens if not hundreds of thousands of people killed, or certainly hundreds of thousands of people killed, in the past number of years. There has been the slaughter in El-Fasher. The conflict carries on unabated and there has been inadequate attention from the international community and inadequate pressure. There are steps Ireland as well as the international community can take. First, could the Minister give me an outline of the current position and actions? Actions must be taken by the Government on raising this issue and in continuing pressure in regard to this appalling conflict.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for consistently raising this issue. He is dead right; there is a distinct lack of attention on this around the world. I would like to think it is an exception here in Ireland. The Deputy is a part of that and I am very grateful for it.

Last month, the conflict in Sudan reached its 1,000th day. It is continuing to have a devastating impact on the Sudanese people, particularly women and children. The escalating violence in the Kordofan states is deeply worrying and underlines the need to ensure Sudan remains firmly on the international agenda. Ireland has been a consistent advocate since the

beginning of the conflict, including in the EU and UN, and as a principled and active donor. We remain resolute in our commitment to the Sudanese people.

It is vital to address the urgent humanitarian crisis, ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers and explore all avenues towards a credible and inclusive Sudanese-led political transition. The critical issue of humanitarian access and the need to remove bureaucratic impediments to aid are at the heart of our diplomatic engagement. Ireland's response also recognises the impact of the crisis on neighbouring countries, particularly in welcoming refugees. As the Deputy is aware, last year, we provided €14.3 million in humanitarian assistance to support the people most in need in Sudan and those displaced in neighbouring countries. We are committed to further increasing our funding and our focus on Sudan this year.

Last week, officials from my Department visited Adré on the Chadian-Sudanese border to visit refugee camps there and to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the situation; indeed, I hope to do a similar trip this calendar year. This will help to shape our ongoing humanitarian response. The Government will also continue to advocate for increased engagement on Sudan when Ireland assumes the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of this year.

It is essential that external engagement in the conflict ends. Specific allegations of violations of the UN embargo and EU sanctions are pursued, as the Deputy is aware, through UN and EU channels.

All parties must comply fully with their obligations and refrain from any actions that prolong the conflict and fuel further violence.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the Minister of State's intention to visit. I am glad the Department officials have visited those refugees. The humanitarian situation on the ground could potentially escalate even further. Even if the UN reaches its appeal for €2.9 billion, that will only reach 20 million of the 33 million people needing humanitarian assistance. That is the scale of the humanitarian crisis, of hunger and of need, that is there. This is all escalating alongside a very significant conflict and slaughter, in many instances that is being encouraged by external actors, unfortunately. I have two points on that and I have raised this with the Minister of State before. The major actor external actor, although not the only one, on the RSF side is the United Arab Emirates and I asked the Minister of State to raise his concerns directly on behalf of the Irish Government. Has he done that? The other element is the UN arms embargo. I understand it only applies to Darfur and not to the Kordofan and neighbouring regions where the conflict has very much spilled into.

Deputy Neale Richmond: On the humanitarian aspect, in terms of our partners, it is really important to stress the role of UNOCHA and the UN population fund. Ireland will continue to provide a commitment to all UN appeals because the humanitarian situation is grave. There is famine in Sudan, one of two man-made famines in the world at the moment, and it can be reversed through a co-ordinated humanitarian response and action.

On raising this matter, we do so on a UN and an EU basis. I have met four Ministers from the UAE in the past six months and have raised it on two occasions with the relevant Minister.

With the other two, it was not specifically relevant to their brief. I am due to meet the UAE ambassador in my constituency next Thursday and this will be a subject matter. We maintain regular discussion and contact to make sure our opinion, views and concern get across.

On the embargo, I am more than happy to take that on to the next level and investigate that with the Deputy as appropriate.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That would certainly be one of the asks. There are two layers to it. Obviously, the arms embargo is not fully effective by any means as things stand. We must always have hope but it is difficult not to be pessimistic when both actors in the conflict feel they can win and, therefore, the prospects for peace in that context are constrained. Dialogue needs to be at the centre of what the Government and the international community are calling for. There will be opportunities.

We had a very interesting and harrowing hearing in the foreign affairs committee recently with experts and some aid organisations. The point was made that until this becomes a priority for either Europe or the United States this is unlikely to see the pressure that is required. In engagements at whatever level in the next couple of weeks with the US Administration, whether with the State Department or whatever, this should be on the agenda. On that technical point, as a principle, it is important that if the conflict is across the whole country, then particularly in places like Kordofan, the arms embargo needs to apply there too.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I see no issue with that technical point. There are avenues to pursue that. The embargo in place is far from perfect on I think we can both agree but Ireland does believe in it.

On keeping it on the agenda, at every Foreign Affairs Council and at every UN meeting I have attended, I have raised this. It is one of the key pillars of Irish interest - Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan – that is raised consistently in all international arenas and is met with real funding and belief among the people in regard to humanitarian support. The Presidency of the Council of the European Union does give us a clear opportunity in chairing those meetings, co-chairing Foreign Affairs Council meetings with the High Representative and in chairing development formations of the Foreign Affairs Council to ensure this is on the agenda. We will consistently put this at the top of the agenda, namely the need for a real humanitarian surge into the region and a real plan to abolish famine in Sudan and make sure the embargo sticks.

Consular Services

57. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the number of Irish citizens her Department has been advised of as being detained by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, agency of the United States in 2025 and 2026; the number of Irish citizens in the United States currently being assisted by consular services due to an interaction or detention by ICE; the number currently detained; if their locations are known in all cases; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8647/26]

Deputy Duncan Smith: The entire world is aghast at the actions of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service, ICE, in the United States. I am asking a question about Irish

citizens, not documented or undocumented. It is not to make an exceptional case because all immigrant groups are being targeted. However, given that we are in the Irish Parliament, I am asking about Irish citizens. How many are being detained by ICE? Are their locations known in all cases? Will the Minister of State make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I wish to thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The provision of consular assistance to Irish citizens who get into difficulty abroad is a cornerstone of the work of the Department of foreign affairs. The provision of consular assistance is at the request of the citizen or, where the citizen cannot request such assistance, by a family member or friend. As such, there are many instances where a citizen gets into difficulty abroad and does not request consular assistance. In these cases, my Department may not necessarily be aware of their detention or impending deportation.

For data relating to the activities of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, the US Department of Homeland Security maintains a publicly available website. I can confirm that the number of citizens who have requested assistance in relation to deportation from the United States of America in 2025 was 65. To date in 2026, the number of people who have requested assistance is one. The number of 65 may seem small but it is a 330% increase on the previous year. This includes both those who have already been deported and those who are still going through the deportation process, which may include being held in detention by ICE. It is important to note that this figure only relates to cases where a citizen or their family has requested assistance and does not necessarily reflect all deportations to Ireland or where a citizen is currently being detained by ICE.

I assure the Deputy that my officials stand ready to provide all possible consular assistance to Irish citizens who get into difficulty abroad wherever that may be. We have nine diplomatic missions in the United States. However, as the Deputy will be aware, the Department does not comment on individual cases in order to protect the identity of the citizen receiving consular assistance. As such, the Department cannot provide detail on locations, in case doing so could compromise the citizen's right to privacy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Our figure is 65 plus one so that is 66. ICE's figures for January to September last year are 99. That means 33 people, based on those figures, have not sought consular assistance. I believe that is a low figure. We should be doing more to seek out where those Irish citizens are being held, what their status is and how they can be assisted. I do not think it is good enough in this circumstance to sit back and wait to give consular assistance.

Look at the case of Donna Hughes-Brown who had been living legally in the United States since the age of 11 and is now 59 years of age. As she had two cheques for low amounts of money bounce, because she was away in Ireland on a break, and which she then cleared, she was detained, taken out of state from Chicago to Kentucky and held in conditions that were absolutely deplorable. This is what is happening to Irish citizens, both documented and undocumented. For us to just wait for an Irish citizen to contact for consular assistance is not good enough.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I have great empathy and I do not necessarily disagree with the Deputy on that point but there are very real challenges. People may have dual or triple

citizenship and there are a lot of things at play. They may not want Irish Government assistance. One thing the Irish Government does in all jurisdictions is work through our network, not just of diplomatic missions but also through our coalition and alliances with Irish pastoral centres, community centres and the Irish Penal Trust which visits people who are incarcerated for whatever reason, to make sure that even where people are not seeking our assistance, they are aware we have a full obligation to Irish citizens wherever they may find themselves in the world and whatever difficulty they may find themselves in. We provide that consular assistance, or more importantly, our diplomats provide that level of assistance to the highest degree. It is not only a professional response but a humanitarian one in many difficult cases.

I have travelled to the United States five times since I was appointed to this brief and on each occasion met the Irish groups, whether in New York, Boston and Chicago, who are working with individuals who are frankly very worried. We are making sure our funding to those bodies has been increased. Indeed, our responsiveness has increased as well.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Given the size of the Irish diaspora and our cultural and historic links with the United States and the very real human rights concerns we have for anyone being held by ICE in detention facilities, should we not request formally - I believe we should - from the US Secretary of Homeland Security details of all Irish citizens, documented and undocumented, in detention and where they are being held?

We should request that from the United States on the grounds that we have real humanitarian concerns over how our citizens are being held along with other immigrant groups from around the world. This is a manifestation of the creeping fascism in the United States, pulling people off the streets and sending them out of state and holding them for terms of indefinite duration in absolutely deplorable conditions. We need to hold the United States to account on this. At the very least, our Minister should be asking their opposite number where our Irish citizens are.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The Irish Government maintains a very open and frank level of engagement with the US Administration at all levels, not only at federal level but also at local level, particularly at state and city level. As the Deputy knows, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is in the United States at the moment. Where appropriate, we always raise those concerns. I have to stress this point. On the rights of the individual, it is also their right not to notify the Irish Government and not to seek consular assistance. We have to respect that right of an Irish citizen in difficulty abroad. When they or their family or friends seek consular assistance, either directly through one of our diplomatic missions or through one of the very many agencies, organisations or partners we work with in any jurisdiction, our diplomats work day and night. Those diplomats deliver a level of compassion, care and service that all Irish citizens deserve regardless of the situation they find themselves in. We will continue to do that throughout our global network.

Proposed Legislation

58. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the current progress of the drafting of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory

(prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8759/26]

59. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the Government will finally honour its commitment to bring forward the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025; to give a timeframe for its passage into law through the Oireachtas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8644/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On that last question, I might just say that individual cases do not necessarily preclude the Irish Government from representing a category generally speaking and that should always be the case.

I cannot make up my mind as to what the Government intends to do with the occupied territories Bill. Does it intend to drop it entirely? Does it intend to water it down? Does it intend to put it on the long finger and maybe think about doing something later? I am not totally sure. However, I know it is vital. It represents the most obvious, practical and tangible way in which the Government can exert influence and can speak in the context of international law.

I have more time that I expected in this first intervention.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Keep going.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The key principle that underlines the occupied territories Bill is that the International Court of Justice case clearly states that trade with those occupied territories is illegal. The position of the Department of foreign affairs and the Government has always been that we should not trade with these territories. I see no reason that there should not be a criminal sanction for those who choose to do that. It is very much in that realm. This is not necessarily about catching every transaction; it is about ensuring that where people do that, they can potentially face prosecution. Not being able to capture every incident can be true of any criminal act. This is why it is so important to have this legislation on the Statute Book.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I propose to take Questions Nos. 58 and 59 together.

In June 2025, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The main purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, in line with the programme for Government commitment. Legally, the regulation of external trade in services is considerably more complex than is the case with goods at EU level. There would also be greater complexity when it comes to implementation than is the case with regard to trade in goods.

The Government has received the Attorney General's advice on the question of whether the inclusion of services in the Bill is permissible under EU law. The advice, which is detailed and extensive, identifies a number of significant legal and practical issues with the regulation by a member state of trade in services with a country or territory outside the European Union.

Following detailed consideration by officials in the Department, clarification has been sought from the Attorney General on a number of legal issues. Any legislation must be legally robust, able to withstand challenge and progress the Government's broader policy agenda.

Work is advancing across a number of strands at official level as well as engagement at EU level. It remains the Government's preference that collective action would be taken at EU level and we continue to pursue this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That raises a few questions. On the implementation, I have never received a satisfactory answer to this. The practical effect of the implementation is very similar to the preparation that would have been required for the implementation of the similar ban on trade with the territories of Ukraine that are currently occupied by Russia. It is absolutely right that those sanctions were put in place, but the implementation would have been the same. Whether the vehicle is different is immaterial as to what preparations a company or the Government would have to make. That is completely immaterial and the same preparations for implementation would apply.

The Government has been talking about this for about eight years. The Spanish Government announced it would ban trade with the settlements in September 2025 and two weeks later that passed fully into law. By the end of the year, it was being implemented, including in relation to services. If the Spanish Government can do it, and given that it is similarly subject to EU law, why can the Irish Government not put in place a similar ban?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Why has the Attorney General's advice changed? What legally has changed? The ICJ decision that all states must abstain from entering into economic and trade dealings and prevent trade or investment relations with Israel stands. That was the basis on which the previous advice of the Attorney General was made. In the previous advice of the Attorney General, he made no distinction between goods and services because legally in international law there is no distinction between trade in goods and services. Instead, he made the point that it would be a political choice to exclude services. The Government is making a political choice to exclude services to bow down before what Trump is asking for. Micheál Martin is quite open about it when he says it in the Dáil. Simon Harris tries to hide it a little bit but Micheál Martin is completely open; I can quote it.

The Government is watering this down and reneging on an election promise made by both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is trying to find some legal advice to hide behind. It does not work because Spain, an EU country, is implementing a ban on services traded with the occupied territories. How can Spain do it under European law and yet the Irish Government is not able to do it?

Deputy Neale Richmond: There are a few things there and I will try to answer them in order. Regarding the situation in Ukraine, obviously it is much easier to implement and find a vehicle for sanctions that have been adopted by the Union as a whole when it comes to an area of trade competence.

It is important to be clear as to what is happening around Europe because people have made assertions about what is happening in other European jurisdictions. Four other EU states have expressed an interest, desire or commitment or have started the process following the Irish

Government's commitment to do this in the programme for Government. I have discussed it with ministers at European Council level. Slovenia has a different legal system which does not require primary legislation in order to effect a ban on goods and goods alone. Let us be clear that Spain, using a different legal situation that did not need primary legislation as we do, was able to implement the ban on goods and also on the advertisement of services. That important distinction has not yet been made in this Chamber. There were commitments by the Belgians and the Dutch but they have not moved as far as the Irish Government has.

The ICJ judgment made it quite clear. The then Taoiseach, Simon Harris, asked the Attorney General on foot of that ICJ judgment whether there was a pathway to pass a version of the original occupied territories Bill brought into the Seanad by Senator Frances Black - indeed I was in the Seanad with her at the time. Since then, we have consistently looked for a way to do it for goods and then, following pre-legislative scrutiny at the foreign affairs committee, there was a request that we could guarantee services, bearing in mind that the Government commitment was only on goods initially. That is related to additional legal advice being provided. The legal advice has been digested by officials at the Department of foreign affairs and they have gone back to the Attorney General with additional questions. We await the clarifications on those. Some of them are technical and some are otherwise.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is very clear that the Spanish legislation goes into the area of services, the extent of which we can perhaps consider further. For example, due to the Spanish legislation, some rental companies been forced to remove the advertisement of the letting of properties in these occupied territories. Therefore, it is clearly having an effect. If EU law prevented member states from intervening in the area of services, that would be struck down. Obviously, any potential legislation can be challenged; anyone can choose to challenge any legislation.

It is about whether it is currently robust enough. We need to get a sense of the advice of the Attorney General by whatever means the Minister of State can communicate this. It seems that the Minister of State is saying he is not necessarily prevented from doing so. He spoke about raising a number of questions. Perhaps he can clarify that. Questions can be raised, including about practical implementation. I am sure it is not going to be simple to do but it is doable, that is for sure.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Let us remind ourselves that last year saw not only the continuation of the genocide in Gaza, but a record number of home demolitions, settler attacks and orders for new illegal settlement construction in the West Bank. That is all continuing this year. The urgency of this Bill has never been greater. Since the so-called ceasefire, well over 500 Palestinians have been killed. Yesterday 18 Palestinians were killed. It is the position of the foreign affairs committee that the Government should include the question of services. It is the position of this Dáil, which the Minister of State did not vote against. The whole Dáil voted for a motion two months ago to say that it should include services and should be enacted before the end of the year. We are two months on and the Government is just kicking the can down the road trying to avoid taking action.

The Minister of State made the point about all these other countries having different legal frameworks. That is fine, in terms of their domestic legislation. However, the Government's argument has also been that the problem here is European law. European law applies equally

to all European countries. If we cannot do services in Ireland because of European law, it cannot be done in Spain either.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The clear point I was making is not necessarily in relation to EU law but the ability of different jurisdictions to progress legislation in a different manner as per their domestic parliamentary structures for creating legislation. We have to recognise that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Eight years is plenty of time.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Of course, the Deputy is right that any legislation can be challenged. We have made it quite clear that we will not produce legislation that we feel will actually fail the test of EU or international law. That is a very real commitment because we are talking about the rule of law and the importance of it. We have to act as such.

I must stress that this is not the only thing the Irish Government is doing in relation to the absolute horrors of the genocide that is going on at the moment in Gaza. On our response at EU level, twice we have called for a suspension of the association agreement. We have asked for investigations under article 2. We have led the way. I am not looking for a clap on the back; I am just providing the context. We have no material opposition. I absolutely respect and support the declaration of the foreign affairs committee last summer and of course I did not vote against the motion in the Dáil. I have no political obstacle to this. We have said consistently as a Government that we need to work in something that is fit for purpose in terms of international law. We have prepared legislation, as we committed to in the programme for Government, in relation to goods. There was the clear response, request and instruction from the foreign affairs committee on services. We sought advice from the Attorney General to provide that legal guarantee. That has been received and now we are looking for the technical details and responses. In fairness to the previous Minister, and I am sure it will be no different with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, briefings will be provided to the Opposition and there will be full engagement not only in this House but also in the Seanad, noting that the genesis of this was Senator Black's Bill back in 2018.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Education Policy

60. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will report on the support she is providing the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation's Holocaust education programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8340/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: It is appropriate to be able to pose this question in the aftermath of International Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January. I want to ask what the Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is doing to support the work of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation Holocaust education programme.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for this very timely and important question. Ireland is deeply committed to the cause of Holocaust remembrance and to ensuring that the suffering and horror of the Holocaust is never forgotten. At a time we are witnessing a deeply concerning rise in global antisemitism, including Holocaust denial and distortion, it is more important than ever that the victims of the Holocaust are honoured and that the lessons from that terrible time are learned.

Ireland has a long-standing relationship with the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, a non-profit, independent organisation created to secure the long-term preservation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. I am sure I am not alone in having visited the site over the years. Through the Department, Ireland has provided grant funding for a number of years to the foundation's perpetual fund for the essential work of maintaining the Auschwitz museum and preserving its artefacts for future generations. In 2025, a grant of €50,000 was made available for this purpose, marking the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the camp's liberation. The funding of €100,000, announced by the Minister, Deputy McEntee on the occasion of Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January, represents a significant increase on previous funding. This funding has been provided and is a response to the realisation that Holocaust denial and antisemitism generally has grown in recent times.

We have also seen the results of the recent survey by the Claims Conference which demonstrate that, despite an existing strong programme of Holocaust education in Irish schools, 12% of those surveyed had never heard of, or were unsure if they had heard of, the Holocaust. Almost 10% of young adults in Ireland believe the Holocaust did not happen and many more again were unaware of the numbers of Jewish victims. These figures are outstanding and alarming.

The programme for Government contains commitments to give effect to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism and to the implementation of the EU Council declaration on fostering Jewish life and combating antisemitism. The funding of €100,000 to Holocaust education is a strong illustration of the Government's firm commitment to counter the scourge of antisemitism, of which Holocaust denial forms an important element.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: If we needed proof that an education programme is important, that was given to us in a recent survey undertaken by the Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, with the involvement of an Irishman, Professor Gideon Taylor, son of a former distinguished Minister and Member of these Houses. As the Minister of State has pointed out, it was established that 10% of people believed that the Holocaust was a myth and 19% believed that the slaughter was exaggerated. We can never lose sight of the fact that two thirds of European Jews were slaughtered mercilessly, deliberately and in an industrial fashion during that Holocaust. The antisemitism we see today is linked to and caused by the atrocities experienced by the Jewish people then and in the many pogroms that happened beforehand. What else is being done by the Department to combat antisemitism and to ensure that we build the best possible understanding of what happened during the Holocaust, so that it will never, ever happen again?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I want to elaborate a little on the work of the funding. The funding will build upon the existing programme of Holocaust education provided by the Department of

Education and Youth in Irish schools. It will enable the foundation to make available to schools in Ireland virtual guided tours of the Auschwitz Museum and Memorial, further enhancing opportunities for Irish young people to deepen their understanding of the Holocaust. I do not need to repeat the worrying statistics that myself and the Deputy are both appalled by. Ireland places great value on the importance of education to counter Holocaust denial or distortion with inclusion of the Holocaust in the school curriculum. My Department works closely with the Department of Education and Youth. There have been ongoing commitments in recent weeks where senior members of the Government have met regularly with representatives of Ireland's Jewish community, including the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, Minister for Justice and Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs. Most recently, the Minister, Deputy McEntee met with the Jewish Representative Council. Just last week, the Tánaiste visited Stratford College, the only Jewish denomination school in the country, with Deputy James Geoghegan and a number of other local representatives.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I commend the Minister and the Government on what they are doing. It is really important work. When does the Minister of State imagine that this work will commence in the 600 schools around the country where it is going to be delivered? Does he think there is a possibility, given that children and young people are not just influenced by what happens and what they experience in school, but particularly by what they experience in their homes, that there is a need to educate some members of the public who are inculcating false thoughts, ideas and motivations in their children? Would it be possible to have some sort of public media campaign via the Department around the period of International Holocaust Memorial Day, which would drive home to people the extent of the slaughter and the extent of man's inhumanity to man that happened at that stage?

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome the comments by the Minister of State and the question. It is important that support is provided for organisations such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. The statistics from the survey are concerning. Unfortunately, they reflect similarly concerning findings, perhaps worse findings, in other jurisdictions.

11 o'clock

Clearly, it is important that the message goes out from all sides of these Houses that Holocaust denial or minimisation is appalling. We need to be very clear that the Holocaust happened at the scale at that it did and that it was an atrocity of a very particular and repugnant character. Human history should always record it and we in Ireland should acknowledge it. It is important that all sides of the House speak out against antisemitism, particularly in the context of incidents such as what happened on Bondi Beach. Nobody should be targeted for their religion, whether they are Jewish, Muslim, Christian or any other, but it is important the we speak out against antisemitism.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to both the Deputies for their timely interventions. To directly answer Deputy Ó Fearghaíl's question, it is expected that these tours will be made available to Irish schools in the next academic year, so that is not too far away at this stage. There is a great opportunity for all of us as local representatives to engage with schools in our constituencies to encourage them to be part of this programme. Just making it available and providing funding are not enough alone. We need to encourage people to partake

and we need to encourage people to speak out and be quite clear that Holocaust denial and Holocaust distortion are forms of antisemitism. There is zero place for antisemitism in Ireland or anywhere else around the world, but sadly we are seeing increasing levels of high-profile incidents, not necessarily in this State. It is therefore incumbent on us as elected representatives to lead, to engage with our local media and local communities and to make sure that we have this education foundation going to school-age children, which can then make its way into homes but also we need to reach out to those who are not in formal education any more as well.

Foreign Policy

61. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the action Ireland is taking in relation to the repression of civil society and democratic opposition, and the undermining of democracy and the rule of law in Russia; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8285/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: Deputy Ardagh and I are trying to establish what the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is doing regarding the repression of civil society and democratic opposition and the undermining of democracy and the rule of law in Russia.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Ireland remains deeply concerned at the ongoing erosion of human rights and democracy in Russia, which has been exacerbated by Russia's illegal, full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we have seen a heightened number of arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as harassment and persecution, of peaceful anti-war activists, human rights defenders, journalists, cultural figures, members of the LGBTQI+ community and ethnic minorities. Domestic opposition leaders have been arrested and prosecuted. Legislation has been introduced to limit civil society activity in Russia. The Russian authorities are rapidly expanding the numbers of individuals designated as foreign agents, terrorists or extremists to inhibit further any remaining scope for open political discussion.

Mariana Katzarova, the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia has reported that there are over 2,000 political prisoners in Russia, many of whom face life-threatening conditions. Some, including Alexei Navalny, have died in detention. In her September 2025 report, the special rapporteur highlighted the prosecution of at least 912 people on politically motivated grounds between 2024 and mid-2025. At the Human Rights Council in September 2025, Ireland participated in an interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur, where we condemned the widespread use of torture, enforced disappearances, and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment and punishment as tools for systematic oppression by Russia.

As an EU member, Ireland has supported the EU's response to the accelerating and systematic repression in Russia, including the adoption of a specific sanctions regime relating to the human rights situation in Russia in 2024. This regime allows for restrictive measures to be imposed on those responsible for serious human rights violations or abuses, repression of civil society and democratic opposition, and undermining democracy and the rule of law in Russia.

I commend the bravery of those Russian citizens who, despite great personal risks and under extremely difficult conditions, continue to work towards a free and democratic future for Russia, which respects human rights and the rule of law.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: For the past four years, the world has been focused on Russian aggression and the appalling war in Ukraine perpetrated on a foreign, sovereign people by the megalomaniac that is Putin. We have lost sight of what may be happening within Russia itself, and that is understandable. When we think of opposition in Russia, we think of the late, brave Alexei Navalny, whose second anniversary will be marked next week. We are aware of the commitments and the strength of his wife Yulia in the aftermath of his death and her commitment to carry on the campaign. Prosecutors in Russia have banned 78 organisations as undesirable, including prominent human rights groups. Human Rights Watch itself was designated undesirable. What we can do on our own is very limited. Will the Minister of State tell us the degree to which there is active engagement between ourselves and our European partners to support opposition and to support civil society organisations in Russia?

Deputy Neale Richmond: There are a couple of measures there. First and foremost, Ireland has fully supported all 19 sanctions packages promoted by the European Union against Russia, the latest of which was agreed in October 2025. A 20th package of sanctions is currently being worked on and Ireland will be to the fore in supporting it. We absolutely condemn Russia's withdrawal from the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Ireland is a consistent funder of a range of human rights-dependent organisations around the world, and we acknowledge the very real atrocities that are being carried out in Russia by the Russian regime.

I might just raise one concern. We talk about the very real, brave opposition people who have been repressed, but we have not mentioned the very worrying number of, quite frankly, foreign stooges propagating from Russia - some of whom have Irish citizenship - talking about the regime and spreading misinformation and disinformation. We also need to be in a position to call them out and challenge them for their craven propaganda towards this regime.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: It is interesting that the Minister of State talks about stooges. There are 450 members of the Russian Duma. One wonders how many of them are actual puppets or stooges because we have not heard very much in the West about any opposition from the ranks of the Duma to the activities of Putin and his foul regime. One would wonder how, on the law of averages, among 450 people, there are not, if even by chance, some people who have some moral integrity and who might have some of the courage that Navalny displayed when he literally put himself in a situation where he was inevitably going to be murdered, as he eventually was by the Putin regime. I reiterate it is vitally important, through whatever measures possible, that Europe supports those who are trying to build a normal, decent, civilised society in Russia and to save the people of Russia from the monsters that control them at present.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It should be really important to say the Irish Government condemns the Russian Government. The Irish Government and our European partners condemn the regime of Putin and those who support it and fund it, particularly the oligarchs.

We have great sympathy for the people of Russia who live in a state of fear and repression and it has been made quite clear what happens to those who speak out against the regime. Alexei Navalny, whose death we mourn, is the most obvious one. We also have to remember that the efforts made to counter this have to be made primarily at a European level, be that through the European Union or the Council of Europe. One thing that always strikes me is that not only do we have Irish-accented stooges broadcasting on social media from Russia, but we have countless numbers of MEPs, including Irish MEPs, who fail to actually vote with the European consensus in criticising Russia, backing sanctions or indeed stating support for those who speak out in favour of human rights within the Russian Federation.

Questions Nos. 62 and 63 taken with Written Answers.

International Relations

64. Deputy Erin McGreehan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which she is developing our links with Canada; if her Department is providing to a school (details supplied) to support this work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8288/26]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I ask for an update on how the Department is developing links with Canada and I request that it provide support for the Thomas D'Arcy McGee summer school in Louth as a way to support this important link

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy not only for raising this issue but also for her consistent advocacy for stronger Irish-Canadian relations in her role as convener of the Canada-Ireland Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group.

As the Deputy knows, Ireland and Canada have cultivated strong political, economic and cultural connections, grounded in our shared history, values and commitment to a rules-based international order.

Under the Global Ireland programme, Ireland significantly expanded its diplomatic presence in Canada opening new consulates generals in Vancouver in 2018 and in Toronto in 2022 complementing Ireland's trade promotion agencies in Canada. Plans for a new Ireland House in Toronto are under way while a new embassy chancery in Ottawa was opened by the Taoiseach during his visit in September 2025 where he met the new Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. The Taoiseach has invited the Prime Minister to Ireland noting that three of his grandparents are Irish. The Government intends to fully ratify the EU-Canada Comprehensive and Trade and Agreement, CETA, in the coming months to build on our strong trading relationship with Canada. Since the provisional application of CETA in 2017, trade in Irish goods and services with Canada has increased from about €3.2 billion in 2016 to more than €10 billion in 2023.

Last November, the Minister for enterprise Deputy Burke, led a trade mission to Canada with representatives from 31 Irish companies. Just last week, the Minister for the arts, Deputy O'Donovan, led a creative industries trade mission to Canada to meet with cultural, sporting and educational leaders. In addition, last week, the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy Lawless, launched the de Chastelian scholarships. This is a new programme that is jointly funded by the Irish and Canadian Governments. I visited Toronto in September. The

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, is aware of the good work done by the Thomas D'Arcy McGee summer school. As I mentioned at the outset, I addressed this two years ago. I understand that a number of public bodies provide funding and a number of former civil servants from my Department have spoken at the school in recent years. We could not be more supportive of the work of the summer school. It is a wonderful initiative.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The Minister of State was very welcome to Carlingford on that fateful day in late August a couple of years ago. I wish to highlight the extraordinary cultural and historical bridge that is between Ireland and Canada through the legacy of Thomas D'Arcy McGee. He was born in Carlingford, County Louth in 1825. He was later the father of the Canadian Confederation. His life embodies those shared democratic values, and the people-to-people links between our nations. The annual Thomas D'Arcy McGee event is very well supported by the Department. The Minister of State, many other officials and former officials of the Department have attended. It brings together academics and policymakers from Ireland, Northern Ireland and Canada to examine modern challenges through a lens of McGee's legacy and evolution into a pluralist democracy. The Minister of State said that we can support this, but he can do one more little thing with financial support. Public bodies support it but every year that funding is decreasing for numerous different reasons. There are a lot of pulls on the money of other organisations. Considering the huge efforts that the Government and the Canadian Government are putting in together to support those links, a cash funding would be a great way of supporting the summer school.

Deputy Neale Richmond: From a Department point of view, most of our spending in relation to strengthening ties with Canada happens within Canada. This is not just from the direct diplomatic missions, including in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa, but also with a range of groups that promote Irish culture and heritage and work with the Irish communities across the broad expanse of Canada. In relation to funding in country and the opportunity for the Thomas D'Arcy McGee summer school, there is a range of possibilities through general funding, particularly shared island funding, given the significance of this as a North-South project. I am more than happy to work with the Deputy to identify those. It might not necessarily come under the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, but that does not mean that we cannot lean on agencies or partners, be they public or private. It must be remembered how complex a character Thomas D'Arcy McGee was. Looking at that complexity, it is noteworthy in itself for a range of people from across this island to see how that diversity and complexity transfers from Ireland to a country like Canada.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: We should have a debate about Thomas D'Arcy McGee in this House. As the Minister of State said, there are a lot of learnings to be taken from the complexities of his life from leaving Ireland as a Fenian to being shot on the steps of the Canadian House of Commons by the Fenians. There is a huge circle there. His legacy is hugely celebrated in Canada. As a son of Carlingford, it is important that we celebrate him too. He created the modern Canada. His spirit and legacy can also help create the future united Ireland that we all want.

Deputy Neale Richmond: One of the key strands to the Government's approach to Canada is promoting those cultural and historically links. That will not only be reflected in the new

Global Ireland diaspora strategy that I look forward to launching at the end of April, but also in our commitment to working with our Canadian counterparts and using CETA not just for economic enhancement but looking where the real cultural and shared values are on a global scale. I find myself regularly at meetings of the United Nations' bodies, the G20 or otherwise. It is the Canadian Minister I always seek out to see what their interaction and intervention are going to be like. Enshrining that by support of the very famous Thomas D'Arcy McGee summer school in a no more appropriate and no more beautiful location as Carlingford would be absolutely appropriate. Whatever we can do to work with the Deputy in her role as convener of the friendship group to make sure that adequate support is provided, I undertake to do that with her fully and enthusiastically.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I appreciate that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I go to the next question, I welcome those in the Public Gallery, particularly the guests of Deputy Newsome Drennan. I do not know if the Deputies have noticed but over the past few minutes they have been jumping up and down frantically waving to try to attract their attention. They are all very welcome and I hope they enjoy their day with the Deputy.

European Union

65. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether her Department has concerns regarding the ability of citizens to exercise their rights under GDPR and the EU AI Act being undermined by the provisions currently proposed in the digital omnibus simplification packages; whether these concerns have been raised in early discussions on the packages; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8708/26]

70. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her Department's stance on the digital omnibus proposal, in its current form, as published by the European Commission; the proposed changes or concerns they have; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [7871/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: There is a lot of talk right now about online safety and regulation. The overwhelming sentiment from the public is that we need to tackle it head on and not be cowed into inaction by big tech. Yet the digital simplification packages as currently drafted stand to erode people's rights, not support them. Is the Department concerned about the package? What steps is the Minister of State taking to raise these concerns at EU level?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I propose to take Questions Nos. 65 and 70 together.

I am grateful to both Deputies Gibney and O'Rourke for tabling this timely intervention. The Government strongly supports the EU's competitiveness agenda. Simplification is a key enabler of this. The European Commission put forward ten separate simplification omnibus packages in 2025. Each package usually contains several legislative proposals relevant to multiple Departments. My Department has been co-ordinating Ireland's approach across government to these packages. The digital simplification omnibus package was published by

the European Commission on 19 November last year. In the lead-up to its publication, Ireland strongly encouraged an ambitious digital simplification package that can support the EU's strategic positioning as the location of choice for trustworthy digital innovation, while maintaining a central focus on protecting data privacy and fundamental rights of citizens. The proposals are a first step, and an important element of the overall approach to improving competitiveness at an EU level in line with the Draghi report and related work.

The package contains two legislative proposals, which are the digital omnibus on AI and the digital omnibus. The first legislative proposal, the digital omnibus on AI, aims to simplify and streamline the EU's AI Act. The proposed changes to the AI Act respond to practical implementation challenges highlighted by stakeholders and are aimed at increasing certainty for regulators, businesses and citizens, reducing compliance costs and administrative burdens, and supporting innovation while maintaining protections. The Government has welcomed the EU's focus on simplification, having consistently advocated for targeted and proportionate regulation, ensuring the right balance between stimulating innovation, boosting competitiveness and enforcing regulation when necessary. The second proposal, the digital omnibus, aims to simplify and streamline the EU's data rulebook and cybersecurity incident reporting. The Government welcomes the proposed amalgamation of the open data directive, the free flow of non-personal data regulation, the Data Governance Act and the Data Act into a single consolidated data Act as it will streamline the data framework and provide greater clarity and alignment of the data rulebook.

The Government supports amendments to the general data protection regulation, GDPR, that can reduce compliance burdens but maintain the strong safeguards on the use of personal data in keeping with the core principles and objectives of the GDPR. Essential principles of public trust, transparency, data protection and improved public outcomes and public good are central to any simplification package. The Government further welcomes the efforts to simplify the reporting of cybersecurity incidents as the complexity of incident reporting has been repeatedly highlighted by stakeholders as a major issue, particularly for SMEs. However, we have concerns on the proposal to develop a single entry point for incident reporting across a number of legislative files, including non-cybersecurity ones such as GDPR. Discussions on these proposals remain at an early stage. We will continue to consult with stakeholders and engage constructively in these discussions. It is important to note also that the proposals under the digital simplification omnibus package must proceed through the EU's ordinary legislative procedure, requiring review and approval by both the European Parliament and the Council of the EU, which we will have the Presidency of for the second half of this year.

As we move forward, it will also be important to future-proof the EU digital regulatory framework, with the overall aim of increasing the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's digital rulebook. This means ensuring forthcoming digital regulations are developed with the same objectives around simplification, harmonisation and coherence strongly to the fore. In this context, the Government supports the broader review of the digital rulebook through the fitness check of the digital *acquis* announced by the Commission as part of this package.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am really frustrated by the Minister of State's reply, as I was by a similar answer given by his colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, at the AI committee last week. The dogs in the street know big tech cannot be trusted. We have all endured the Grok scandal over the past number of weeks. A recent "Prime Time Investigates" programme

reported on how our location data is being sold. Despite all of that, the Government remains stubbornly committed to backing omnibus proposals that give the very tech companies that are harming us more of our data and subject them to less regulation and oversight.

There seems to be a disconnect between the rights and protections of citizens and the push for deregulation. We are not seeing any critical engagement on how this will impact ordinary people. I am really concerned that at a time when we should be shoring up protections and rights, they are being totally ignored. The conversation is completely about how to remove rules. We are told that this is about simplification and harmonisation and that they will be achieved while balancing rights. Those rights are always the secondary thought. Unfortunately, I do not see any balance. Digital regulation and our digital rights cannot be construed as two separate issues. That does not work because the regulations exist in the first place to protect those exact rights. There are not adequate safeguards in the proposal from the Commission. What will the Minister of State do to ensure that is addressed in any digital omnibus package?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I share the concerns that have been raised, which were not addressed in the Minister of State's response. The identified concerns include the impact on the ability of citizens to exercise their GDPR rights, that a redefinition of personal data may narrow GDPR protections, a risk to enforceability of rights, expanded derogations and reduced obligations, and the weakening of safeguards on sensitive data, including AI. Similarly, in regard to the EU AI Act, there are concerns regarding delayed or diluted high-risk AI obligations, potential for underclassification of high-risk systems and relaxed rules on processing sensitive data for AI training. In his response, the Minister of State repeatedly made the point that he wants to support the implementation of this proposal and reduce compliance burdens while maintaining safeguards and protections. In fact, those protections and safeguards are being diluted and whittled away. We need the Government to stand up against that.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is important that I be crystal clear on this matter. The Government's position is that simplification must be about better regulation, not deregulation. We need to reduce the regulatory burden, particularly for SMEs, while maintaining high ambition in terms of protections, including environmental, human health, privacy and a range of other standards. The omnibus proposal is not actually an omnibus; it comprises ten pieces of legislation and we are referring to just one element here.

The role of the Department of foreign affairs is to co-ordinate all Government responses to the proposal. Some of them will come from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, and Deputy Gibney has referenced the role of the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth. Others will come from the Department of Health, the Department of the environment and so on. It is really important that our legislative approach be in line with core better regulation principles and the inter-institutional agreement on better law-making while prioritising smarter, simpler and more streamlined regulations. The Government recognises the importance of regulation, crucially to ensure markets operate efficiently and fairly. That in no way waters down our recognition that we also need to protect consumers in a range of areas.

In that context, it is important that regulations are targeted and proportionate to the policy objective, whether it is to protect consumers and citizens or to promote competitiveness and

innovation. That is why the Government had advocated for a dynamic, ambitious and risk-based approach focused on removing regulatory overlaps and administrative burdens, for example, while also supporting compliance. This package was introduced in November. We are in the position of working through it in each of the different frameworks and policy areas. I hear the Deputies' concerns. They are valid and they need to be worked through. However, I do not necessarily conflate seeking to make things more simplified and more competitive with a rush to deregulate and some form of race to the bottom. I reject that assertion. It is worth working through this process in its entirety.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Minister of State telling us simplification is not deregulation is as hollow to me as saying the removal of the triple lock will not affect our neutrality.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Where is the relevance?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is just misleading. He said in the same breath that it is about relieving the regulatory burden. He must admit that what he is doing is removing regulations and, therefore, removing rights and protections. He referred to stakeholders in his first contribution. Who are those stakeholders? I am fairly sure they are businesses and industry. My problem with the governance we are pursuing in this area is that it is completely driven by the Department of enterprise. It is not considering the broader societal impacts of online and digital harm while we are all experiencing those impacts.

We are potentially allowing companies to self-certify their AI in lower-risk categories. We are potentially allowing companies to collect personal data that previously was protected. I mentioned the "Prime Time Investigates" report that, not too long ago, exposed how we are allowing third-party companies to track us using our data. Now we face a situation where that data is not even illegal to collect and sell. I do not disagree with the Government that we have huge issues with the enforcement of these regulations. What I disagree with is walking away from those regulations and seeking to get rid of them instead of properly enforcing them.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: This move cannot be stripped away from the wider context around AI and the conversations happening internationally about how the European Union is a difficult place to do business, how America needs to be the home of it and where Britain stands post Brexit. The real risk is that protections are hollowed out because Elon Musk and the huge tech companies will have their way. They have very willing allies in the White House. That is something against which we must caution.

As a measure of the Government's assessment of this proposal, has the Minister of State's Department conducted an internal assessment of the potential impact on citizens' ability to exercise their GDPR rights arising from the proposed redefinition of personal data? That would be one indicator.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will not be baited by the needless false comparison from Deputy Gibney in somehow bringing the triple lock and neutrality into this really serious debate. She asked who the stakeholders are before, without any evidence, telling me they are just businesses. In fact, stakeholders include civil society, work organisations, the trade union movement and citizens as a whole. There is a clearly enshrined EU consultative process. This

is a really serious issue and I accept the bona fides of both Deputies in raising concerns. I do not dismiss their concerns for an instant. I may disagree with some of their points, which is allowed in this House, but I do not need to start making false assertions.

Deputy O'Rourke makes a very fair point in terms of what assessments are being carried out on an internal basis. Each assessment is done, depending on the policy area, by the relevant line Department. Regarding the initial assessment in relation to GDPR and citizens' rights, overall assessments, although not necessarily as specific as the Deputy outlined, are carried out by each Department, including the Department of justice, which is the relevant one. It is our responsibility in the Department of foreign affairs to co-ordinate those assessments and provide unified responses when we come to discuss this at a Council meeting or between officials at COREPER level.

Foreign Conflicts

66. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her assessment of the current situation in Belarus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8282/26]

87. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her assessment of the current situation in Belarus; if she has had any engagement with the Belarus government-in-exile; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8280/26]

90. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the engagement Ireland has had with Belarus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8284/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 66 in the name of Deputy Séamus McGrath will be asked by Deputy Ó Fearghaíl.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: What is the Minister of State's assessment of the situation in Belarus, where the dictator Lukashenko is an ally and, indeed, puppet of the Putin regime? How does the Minister of State feel about the situation there at present?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I propose to take Questions Nos. 66, 87 and 90 together.

It might not be wise for me to tell Deputy Ó Fearghaíl how I feel about the situation in Belarus. Personal emotions might be slightly stronger than the Government position. Belarus continues to live under the shadow of repression. The Government remains extremely concerned at the ongoing erosion of human rights and democracy there and Belarus's ongoing support for and complicity in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. The Lukashenko regime's repression of human rights and restrictions on political participation and access to independent media are intended to stifle opposition voices and shore up its own authority. Former political prisoners, including Siarhei Tsikhanouski and Ales Bialiatski, have given harrowing accounts of prolonged isolation, psychological pressure and other inhumane treatment suffered in Belarusian prisons.

I share their grave concerns about the treatment of the more than 1,150 political prisoners. Shockingly, since May 2021, at least eight political prisoners have died in the regime's captivity. Deputy Ó Fearghaíl can correct me if I am wrong. I am one of a number of Members from the last Dáil who adopted Belarusian prisoners as godchildren, be they godsons or daughters, based on a campaign. I am delighted that my Belarusian political goddaughter was released from prison. She simply had the crime of having a cigarette in the wrong place at the wrong time and being a young student. I welcome, therefore, efforts by the United States to achieve the release of all political prisoners of the regime in Belarus, which most recently secured the release of 123 political prisoners in December last. While the regime has released political prisoners in recent months, it has exiled many of them, separating them from their families and their homeland. It has also placed many more people in prison for their political views. I reiterate Ireland's long-standing position that all political prisoners must be released and the regime must end its repression against the Belarusian people.

Ireland's response to the situation in Belarus has focused on working bilaterally, and at EU and multilateral levels, to support civil society and the democratic movement in exile and to highlight concerns regarding the Lukashenko regime's violations of human rights. At the same time, we seek to assure the people of Belarus of our continued commitment to their well-being, human rights and legitimate aspiration to a prosperous future in a democratic Belarus. In 2025, my Department provided funding to the Viasna human rights centre founded by Nobel Peace Prize winner Ales Bialiatski, and to the international humanitarian fund for the victims of repressions in Belarus to offer support to current and former political prisoners. In recent years, my Department has also provided funding to several other Belarusian civil society projects, including in support of independent media, through grants provided by the European Endowment for Democracy. Our connection with Belarus and its people is reinforced by the compassion and empathy of Irish families who welcomed Belarusian children and young people into their homes and lives, creating permanent bonds in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster almost 40 years ago. Belarusian democratic leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, was one of those young people. I am aware of the close ties of friendship that she holds for Ireland from her childhood stays in our country. I know I am one of a number of people in this House who has met her, as have other Ministers and the Tánaiste, who have also met her husband who was released just last summer from detention in Belarus after spending five years as a political prisoner. There is also ongoing contact between officials in my Department and representatives of the Belarus democratic movement.

Ireland continues to support strong co-ordinated EU sanctions and other measures, including action at the OSCE and at the UN, to hold Belarus accountable for its violations of human rights and the rule of law, and its complicity in Russia's ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine. Ireland has very limited engagement with the Belarusian Government. A Belarusian diplomat is accredited to Ireland to perform consular functions on a non-resident basis and an Irish diplomat is accredited to Belarus on a similar basis. My Department's current travel advisory for Belarus is simply not to go there.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I compliment the Minister of State on the positive and comprehensive response. I note that on 13 December Belarusian authorities released 123 prisoners following negotiations by the US Administration, which had agreed to lift a sanction on Belarusian potash. The majority of prisoners were sent to Ukraine, and a group of nine sent

to Lithuania. Most of those released had been prosecuted and imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their human rights. One of those released, Maria Kalesnikava, has since given an interview with the *Financial Times* in which she called for EU engagement with Belarus on the basis that the lack of it only serves to drive Belarus closer to Russia. Another of the released prisoners, Ales Bialiatski, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022, has also called on the EU to enter talks with President Lukashenko. I know the Government and Europe would be walking a tightrope on this particular matter but this suggestion has been made by two influential people who are intimately involved in the situation in Belarus and are advocating greater EU engagement. How does the Minister of State respond to that and what are his thoughts on how Ireland and the EU together might proceed?

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is a very serious proposition by the Deputy that needs to be dealt with quite delicately. In December of last year, the EU widened the scope of sanctions against Belarus in response to hybrid activities affecting EU member states. That decision was not taken lightly. While, of course, we welcome the release of political prisoners by Belarus and we are very grateful to the role of the US Administration, we have yet to see evidence of a change of policy in Belarus. In addition to its violations of human rights and the rule of law, and its absolute complicity in Russia's ongoing illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the regime's hybrid activity directed towards the EU continues to increase in scale. We have strongly condemned the large-scale incursions into Lithuanian airspace from Belarus. We will continue to work closely with EU partners to examine options for further actions to respond to Belarus's persistent and provocative hybrid activities. That means engaging directly with the regime is extremely difficult. I say that quite frankly. I take with great sincerity the interventions by the released political prisoners. We engage with those former prisoners as an Irish Government at a political and an official level as well as, crucially, at a European level. Some of our own European political affiliations and networks do so as well. We will take their views and their opinions into account but we also have to respond to the actuality and the hybrid incursions were actualities. It is a fact that Belarus is tied at the hip with Russia when it comes to the Russian atrocities in Ukraine. We have to bear all that into account and perhaps tread carefully when it comes to the suggestion or the request to engage directly.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I agree with the Minister of State because it is a tightrope situation. I think most of us in this country would look to what was said by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who is a charismatic leader many of us in this House have met. She displayed tremendous courage in taking up the baton after her husband was arrested and has effectively been running a Belarusian Government in exile. She has said the European Union sanctions have a much stronger impact and must remain in place until long-term changes are achieved, including an end to the regime's involvement in the Ukraine war, the restoration of Belarus's sovereignty and its transformation into a democratic economy, which would appear to be a long way away. She said:

Without sanctions and international isolation, the Lukashenka regime would not have begun releasing political prisoners. It is not acting out of humanity – sanctions hurt, isolation hurts, and he understands that he has reached a dead end. That is why he is willing to hand over even his most dangerous opponents in exchange for relief. But lifting or substantially easing sanctions against the regime is dangerous, as it directly strengthens Russia: Belarus'

economy works for Russia's war machine, Belarus is used as a route to circumvent sanctions, and its enterprises are involved in weapon production.

We know where the weapons are going. Does the Minister anticipate that the current level of EU sanctions will be maintained, or, indeed, possibly strengthened?

Deputy Neale Richmond: In direct response to the Deputy's question, I do not envisage a lessening of sanctions any time soon. They were only just increased in December due to the hybrid incursions into Lithuanian airspace. I go back to his original point on how we get guided by the application of sanctions. Sanctions do work. Sanctions forced the Belarusians to release so many prisoners and the sheer prospect of them being weakened by the Americans provided that support. When we talk about Belarus, bearing in mind that we are, most likely, the EU member state located the furthest away geographically, the diplomat who services Belarus for us is accredited to our embassy in Vilnius. I think of the mindset and the interventions of my counterparts, particularly in the Baltic states and in Poland, who, on a daily basis not only face the very real undermining of their civil and political infrastructure by hybrid activities by Belarus but also the sheer impact of the complicity of Belarus in Russia's horrendous full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In many cases, I therefore defer to my Lithuanian colleague, a country which will assume the Presidency of the Council of the EU after Ireland as part of the trio system. We continue to engage with all our contacts both on a civic society basis within and outside Belarus as well as those from the political movement in exile. There is a clear demand to maintain the level of sanctions and be responsive to any more antagonism or protagonism from Belarus.

Let us be quite frank: Lukashenko is a dictator who has repressed his people since the collapse of the Soviet Union. He has done so willingly, aided and abetted by another dictator in the form of Vladimir Putin. They work in concert to repress their own people and undermine the very stability of the global world order that has kept Europe, until recently, in a level of peace that had not been seen before in history. Any sort of softening when it comes to the regime in Belarus is, by proxy, a softening when it comes to the regime in Russia. I am extremely heartened to see more political prisoners released. I am extremely heartened when they give us the honour to visit Ireland and to engage with us as a member of the EU, bearing in mind the human ties going back to the Chernobyl disaster. We all have to be very wary when it comes to Belarus and make sure that the sanctions are maintained at a level deemed necessary by us within the European Union as an entirety.

Trade Agreements

67. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on her Department's stance on the amendments to the EU-Morocco trade deal; the use of provisional application for the deal; the way in which it interacts with the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8707/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The previous EU-Morocco trade deal was struck down by the European courts because it was found to violate the rights of the Sahrawi people. This new trade deal has entered provisional application, despite persistent concerns around the involvement of the Sahrawi people, and the lack of engagement with or tangible benefit for

them. What is the Department's stance on the deal and its compliance with the ruling of the Courts of Justice of the European Union?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Gibney for raising this. If the Deputy does not mind, I acknowledge the work of Senator Alice-Mary Higgins in this regard. I have taken a Commencement matter for her in the Seanad and have had many engagements on what is a complex issue. It is good that we are discussing it.

On 4 October 2024, the Court of Justice of the European Union upheld an earlier ruling of the General Court annulling the Council decision on the conclusion of a 2018 agreement in the form of an exchange of letters between the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco. The 2018 agreement sought to extend tariff preferences laid down in an EU-Morocco association agreement to products originating in Western Sahara. The court set a deadline of 4 October 2025, in that it maintained the effects of the Council decision until that date. The Commission thus worked to negotiate a new agreement between the EU and Morocco by that date. The EU and Morocco signed a new agreement on 3 October 2025, and its provisional application began. On 2 October 2025, Ireland voted in favour of the Council decision via written procedure, indicating that Ireland would not stand in the way of EU consensus and in order to ensure that the EU complied with its legal obligations. However, Ireland also registered procedural and substantive concerns about the Commission's handling of this process. Ireland made clear that we expect to receive regular updates from the Commission on key issues as the agreement is implemented.

The process towards adoption of a Council decision on the conclusion on behalf of the EU of the new agreement with Morocco has not yet reached its conclusion. The next step requires the consent of the European Parliament. Ireland has continued to follow up with the EU institutions with regard to an expected date for this next step. We have not yet received an update in that regard. Throughout the process, Ireland has made clear our view that the compatibility of the agreement with the fundamental principle in international law of the right of peoples to self-determination should be paramount in the implementation of this agreement.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State. It is comforting to hear that there is activity on the part of the Government on this. The Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that the consent of the Sahrawi people had to be sought or that there had to be a tangible benefit for them. Instead of seeking their consent, the EU committed to provide tangible benefit to them and to a regular control mechanism to evaluate the benefit required for implicit consent. Can the Minister of State provide clarity on that control mechanism in the deal? What is Ireland doing? The Minister of State stated that we are seeking updates and so on, but I ask him to seek that clarity and ensure it is robust enough to uphold the rights of the Sahrawi people or guarantee them that tangible benefit in line with the ruling. It is incredible to me that we have a trade deal that has been in provisional application since October, yet there is no clarity on how it is better than the previous version of the deal, which the courts ruled against. I welcome Ireland registering those concerns. Morocco enjoys preferential tariffs while the Sahrawi people in Western Sahara continue to be dispossessed of their land and occupied.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It must be made clear that Ireland maintains bilateral relations with the Kingdom of Morocco. We have an embassy there and a resident ambassador here, but

we also maintain engagement with the opposition within Western Sahara. We do have that full engagement with all peoples, recognising that about 20% of Western Sahara is under the control of the self-determination movement. We tread a delicate line here, to be quite frank. I am not trying to be evasive or dismissive in any regard. The irony of having to uphold obligations under EU law and implementing something while there is still a full ratification process under way is not lost on me. The concerns that the Irish Government raised were multifaceted, but the pace with which this agreement was concluded was of major concern to us, and we raised that. There is a little bit of extra detail that I might supply the Deputy with in written form. I do not have it to hand at this moment.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State. I would like the Irish Government to champion a pathway for a referendum on self-determination, something which was promised after independence from France decades ago and never actioned. Instead, it seems like the world is keen to move on and ignore it if it means cheaper Moroccan imports and co-operation on migration policy. The Commission's proposals for delivering on tangible benefit as part of this deal include investment in Moroccan companies in Western Sahara, essentially financially incentivising continued occupation which features well-documented human rights abuses and surveillance of Sahrawis. Another aspect of their proposal is to deliver tangible benefit, as I mentioned, via humanitarian aid to Sahrawi refugee camps. I know the Minister of State agrees with me that humanitarian aid should not be used as a bargaining chip to trade away the rights of a struggling people. I am asking that this conviction be expressed by the Department on this specific trade deal. It is clear that this trade deal has serious flaws and has not complied with the ruling of the Courts of Justice. What are the Department and the Government going to do about it? I appreciate the Minister of State's stance on the delicacy.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I had another question on this, which probably will not be reached. I have to say a couple of things. First, the Irish Government has historically had a strong position in relation to this. I ask the Minister of State to maintain that and to maintain support for Sahrawi self-determination. On a minor note - it may not be minor in some respects - I do not agree with the framing of the SADR as "the opposition". That implies that it is the opposition within Morocco. It is recognised by some countries as the legitimate government of Western Sahara. I do not believe that it is recognised at this point by the Irish Government, but it is recognised as a government. It is the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The current situation is not sustainable. There is nearly no other country in the world that I can think of where the majority of the population is in exile in refugee camps. That is the case currently. The majority of the Sahrawi people are in refugee camps in southern Algeria. It is important that there is a referendum. It was promised decades ago back in the early nineties. That needs to progress. Ireland should insist on that. We must ensure that the rights of the Sahrawi people are not discarded through this process of the trade deal.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I want to make a brief comment as co-ordinator of the Ireland-Morocco Parliamentary Friendship Group. In recent times, I have become increasingly aware that an ever-increasing number of countries have moved to a position where they see the solution to this intractable problem, which must be resolved, having regard to sovereignty and human rights. More and more countries, including many of our European colleagues, see the resolution to the problem resting in establishing Western Sahara's autonomy under Moroccan

sovereignty. That seems to be the proposal that is winning ever-increasing support. It is something that I raised with the Minister for foreign affairs here some weeks ago.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I would encourage the Deputy not to.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the intervention - I am looking up to make sure I am not missing anyone - from all three Deputies. What I want to get through is real clarity. Ireland's position on Western Sahara has been, and continues to be, guided by the aim of achieving a just and lasting political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, as to Deputy Ó Laoghaire's point, and we make that point at every opportunity that we are given. Ireland's engagement on this issue will also continue to take account of the role of and the insights provided by the personal envoy of the UN Secretary General for Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura. Officials in the Department continuously keep any relevant developments under review, including in the context of the EU and UN discussions. On 31 October, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 2797, extending the mandate of the UN mission for the referendum in Western Sahara for one year. Ireland is considering the implications of the MINURSO mandate renewal following its adoption.

We maintain a full awareness of what is going on and the complexity it provides in EU negotiations and the changing shifts of other member state governments. Ireland has not changed its opinion. It has maintained it. That underlines all aspects of negotiations and discussions as laid out here today.

Question No. 68 taken with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 69 is grouped with Questions Nos. 108, 121 and 125.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I am not on that one.

Question No. 69 taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 70 taken with Question No. 65.

Question No. 71 taken with Written Answers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to Deputy Ó Laoghaire and Question No. 72.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I probably just addressed it. I had not anticipated this question would come up. It is on the same matter so I have probably addressed the point. I am satisfied to pass on it.

Questions Nos. 72 to 76, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 78 taken with Written Answers.

EU Presidency

79. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether her Department will prioritise overseas aid and development as a key topic during the EU presidency, particularly in the context of decreasing overseas development aid budgets across Europe, and the impact those cuts are having on communities around the world; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8704/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I had not prepared for this as such but I am keen to get the Minister of State's thoughts on it. It is about whether the Department will prioritise overseas aid and development as a key topic during the EU Presidency. I am sure this is a topic he will happily speak to for two minutes, particularly in the context of decreasing overseas development aid budgets across Europe and the impact those cuts are having on communities across the world.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The Deputy and I occasionally disagree. We actually agree more times than we disagree but let us not let the people of Dublin Rathdown know that. I like to think one area we passionately agree on is Ireland's role when it comes to official development assistance and development. I am relishing Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union putting development back at the centre of European discussions.

We are faced, quite frankly, with possibly the most destabilising and worrying approach to overseas development assistance since Irish Aid was created in 1974. It is not just the withdrawal of USAID's funding, which is massive, but the commitment by the British Government to withdraw from 0.5% to 0.3% is really destabilising. Last year, Ireland and Spain were the only two EU member states to increase their development budget. Credibly, Denmark maintained theirs and Norway, which is not an EU member state, also increased theirs. However, what I was confronted with at my first development Ministers' Foreign Affairs Council meeting was a real mix. Some member states said that for budgetary reasons, and a focus on defence and pension reform, they were cutting. Others, from a range of member states but traditionally member states who had been strong on this, gleefully relished that they were going to cut their development budgets in some sort of Trumpian act.

We have to make sure that all the development Ministers come to Ireland in early October and that we engage with Barry Andrews MEP, who is chair of the development committee in the European Parliament, to make sure, crucially, that the multi-annual financial framework, within its global Europe provision, does not cut development. We can increase spending in other areas. I have no problem with that and we will debate it in another forum but we have to make sure that Ireland is unified. There are voices in this Chamber, who are not here, who will tell us this is a waste of money. I visited eight of the 13 Irish Aid countries in the last year. I will go my ninth and tenth next week, and my eleventh for St. Patrick's Day, to show that we believe in development. It is an investment that works, not just for the people who receive that investment but, crucially, for people here in Ireland.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I agree. It is great to hear that it will be a point of focus for the Minister of State in the second half of this year, when we have the opportunity during the Presidency of the European Union. As he referenced, which I also did in my question, this is obviously within the context of USAID being cut, for example. That is really just storing up problems. It is the definition of storing up problems to cut aid in the way we are seeing this happen across the globe.

I question the unconditional aid piece. One of the other issues we are having across Europe is the fact that it is not being given unconditionally. That is problematic. Does the Minister of State see a connection between this drop in aid and the increase in defence spending? There is a connection in potential member states. It is so important we continue to maintain an emphasis on peacekeeping and not shift to peacebuilding and peace enforcement, which is a threat and is linked to development aid. I would love to hear the Minister of State's thoughts on that.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Crucially, every challenge we face in Europe at the moment goes back to global instability. When the pillar of development is removed, the foundation stone of that global stability is removed. You are creating more problems for yourself on direct bilateral relations and allowing more malevolent actors fill the space of more benevolent actors.

The Deputy is quite right that certain member states are cutting development aid and saying they need to put it towards security and defence. I do not buy that argument for an instant. If you are serious about security, including energy, food, political and domestic security, and managing migration in supporting those who need to migrate as well as making sure countries can handle and meet the requirements they have, you have to invest in development. It is a complete misnomer and false argument to say we are taking money from development to put into security. By taking money from development, you are forcing yourself to put more money into security. It is why the Government has not only not cut our development budget but is committed to increasing our security budget. The two are absolutely interlinked. You cannot do one by cutting off the other.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: On defence without peacebuilding, you can end conflicts and ensure peace and human rights are championed, which builds the off-ramp for war-torn regions. This is concerning for me because earlier this week at the European affairs committee, I pressed Commissioner Serafin on this. It is clear to me that Europe is investing in war and military spending. All of the mechanisms that are available to member states and all the ways we are offering opportunities for development, employment and growth are around the military. There is a conflict there. I appreciate and am heartened by the Minister of State's comments, the connection he made between the two and how he will champion this during the Presidency. I look forward to seeing that work and co-operating with him on it.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Absolutely. As I said, I have no issue with European member states or the Union investing in security and defence. It is sensible, but I do not think you can make the argument that money can be taken from development and not expect to end up spending more on security and defence as a result. The Deputy mentioned early intervention and the source of the conditionality of aid. Something I am concerned about is the notion of tied aid. We do not believe in tied aid. We believe in development being the right thing to do and being an investment. It is an investment in people that will be paid off, not in our terms but perhaps on their terms. That is the empowerment of people, including making sure that women and girls have the same opportunities for human rights, dignity and education that we take for granted, but there is a regression on that.

I will make a particular reference to peacebuilding and the work of Irish Aid in Columbia and in the very fragile peace process in Liberia. That was a peace process that started with

Irish peacekeepers and is going from strength to strength. The fact that people are willing to remove resources from that is just creating a recipe for potential disaster.

EU Meetings

77. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on the recent engagement her Department and the Government has had with the European Union and the EU Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [8653/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will now go back to Question No. 77. Deputy Ó Murchú is here so we will take the question while we are waiting for other Deputies.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The question relates to governmental engagements with the European Union and the European Commission. I was at the committee during the week when we met with Commissioners Hansen and Serafin. I will ask specifically about Mercosur. We can have an argument about how strong the Government was in its opposition to it but what the Commissioners said was that it is within the EU's gambit, if it wants, to allow for provisional application of Mercosur. We know the huge issues there are, particularly from the farming sector and beyond, about Brazilian beef and other issues. What will the Government do from the point of view of ensuring there is not provisional application? We await the outworkings of the Court of Justice.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will address the generality of the Deputy's point and then get to the specifics.

Ireland's engagement with the European Union is comprehensive and deep, reflecting our commitment to the European project. Since the Minister, Deputy McEntee, assumed office in November, she has participated actively in all three formal Foreign Affairs Council meetings that have taken place, including most recently in Brussels. These meetings are vital for co-ordinating our response to international challenges. The Minister also participated in the Foreign Affairs Council in trade format last November. The totality of Ireland's relationship is further evidenced by our consistent representation across all Council formations and our engagement at all levels with Commissioners here and abroad. Officials engaged in meetings with the relevant Directorates-General of the Commission to advance Ireland's interests in a wide range of areas, including development co-operation, trade and competitiveness.

Trade is the key part of the Deputy's question and his secondary point. Ireland's extensive engagement is not just tied to the fact we assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from 1 July. Ireland has very real concerns, however. We made our concerns clear not just over the last year but over the last five or seven years, since there was a Sinn Féin motion in this House in relation to Mercosur and its impact on the beef and poultry sectors and its very real environmental impacts.

12 o'clock

We lobbied and negotiated with the Commission, which is the trade negotiating entity of the European Union throughout that process. Unfortunately, the deal it secured was not acceptable to Ireland, France, Austria or Poland. Belgium abstained and the Hungarians also opposed it.

We will continue to provide that level of engagement throughout the process, bearing in mind the European Parliament had an impactful vote two weeks ago, referring the deal. We made quite clear that we have very serious concerns about the trade deal in its current format and we are not in favour of its implementation or application. Hence we voted against it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We do not have time to get into arguments about what the Irish Government could have done to oppose the Mercosur trade deal, which is a lot more. The fact is - we heard it from the commissioners recently - that the Commission can allow for the provisional application of the Mercosur deal, which would undermine democracy and the vote that already happened in the European Parliament. We need to ensure this does not happen. There are huge worries about Brazilian beef and poultry, that is not up to the same standard as European, and particularly Irish, farm produce. There is a particular issue in Bord Bia around this at the moment. What will the Government do to ensure there is no provisional application of the Mercosur trade agreement at this time? It would be utterly unacceptable to Irish farmers and the Irish people.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The Deputy's point is well made. He knows as well as I do the complexities of EU law and the right of the European Commission to negotiate a trade deal and of the European Council to give it the power to implement something in reflection of a vote passed by absolute majority or qualified majority voting, QMV, as was decided.

The Irish Government is clear that it does not back the Mercosur deal. We are against it. We voted against it. We lobbied against it for an intense period, building an alliance with many member states. We recognise the vote of the European Parliament and think there is absolute cause to pause everything relating to the Mercosur deal until that judgment is made. We will continue to work at a bilateral level with other EU member states, particularly those like-minded ones. Our Ministers have been in discussions. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, was at a European Council meeting in Larnaca this week alone. Other Ministers will continue to raise it at every opportunity, at Council level and bilateral level and, crucially, directly with commissioners and directors general in the European Commission.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is iomaí pobail atá ag ullmhú do thuilte anois agus arís uile ina dtithe agus ina gcomhlachtaí. Tá imní orthu ar fud an Stáit agus tá siad ag mothú tréigthe. Tá sé seo ag tarlú roimh súile an Tánaiste agus ní rud nua é. Bhí sé agus tá sé i gcroílár an Rialtais le breis agus deich mbliana agus bhí sé ina Aire é féin le linn eachtraí tuilte arís agus arís eile. Le linn na blianta sin, thug Rialtais ina raibh sé ina bhall sinsireach dóibh dearbhaithe arís is arís eile go mbeadh cosaint bhuan ar deireadh i gcoinne tuilte, ach níl sé sin feicthe againn.

Today, many communities are bracing themselves for repeat flooding of their homes and businesses. Homes have been destroyed and businesses have been wrecked. Families are once again clearing out the water and debris knowing this destruction was predictable and preventable. This is happening on the Tánaiste's watch and it is not new. He has been at the heart of Governments for more than a decade now. He has been a Minister during repeated flooding events and, during those years, Governments of which he was a senior member repeatedly assured communities that permanent flood defences would finally be delivered.

After the floods of 2015 and 2016 when communities were devastated, he was the Minister of State with responsibility for flood defences. Yet years later, many of the same flood relief schemes identified, prioritised or advanced during that period remain incomplete, with a significant number still stuck at planning stage, or worse, at design stage, rather than being built. This is the reality behind his record of broken promises. This is not a failure of information; it is a failure of political follow through.

In 2018, the Government completed a nationwide flood risk assessment. It knows where the danger points are. Nearly every county has flood relief issues and communities have been lobbying for action ever since. Yet, the figures are stark. There are 94 flood relief schemes that are described as ongoing, 68 of which have not even reached planning stage and 54 of which are not in active consideration at all. Many of these schemes were identified or progressed during the very years when communities were being assured by the Tánaiste that the Government was acting. Instead of accepting responsibility, the Government has blamed everyone but itself, the weather, local authorities, even Met Éireann has been thrown in for good measure. Met Éireann does not build flood defences. Local authorities do not decide on national capital priorities. The responsibility rests with the Government and the consequences of this are being felt by communities across the State in Aughrim, Arklow, Enniscorthy and Bunclody, where repeated flooding has damaged homes, businesses and vital infrastructure.

Years of cuts to local authority road budgets since 2008 by successive Governments of which the Tánaiste was a member have left roads in a dreadful state. Flooding and heavy rain are now finishing them off, creating a serious road safety issue in counties like Wexford and Wicklow. Last week in Bunclody, a school bus was forced to abandon its route when the road beneath it collapsed and 53 families were affected. This damage was foreseeable. It was warned about and it was avoidable.

Given the Tánaiste's record and the broken promises made during his years in government, what concrete action will he take now to ensure permanent flood relief is finally delivered? Will he set out clear decisions, timelines and funding commitments today for flood defences and emergency road repairs? Will these communities be asked to accept this and wait another ten years - another decade - and for another series of broken promises, clearing out their homes and businesses after every storm, while the Government recycles the same old promises, broken again and again?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Hear, hear

The Tánaiste: First, as we are not talking about this weather situation, we are not looking back; we are talking about here and now. I am conscious as we discuss this in the House today that a status orange weather warning is currently in place for counties Dublin, Wicklow,

Waterford and now also County Louth. Yellow warnings are in place for nine other counties as well. On top of that, the Road Safety Authority has issued advice in the last little while asking people, particularly in the orange warning areas, but more generally as well, to try to avoid driving in impacted areas if possible today and if they do have to drive to allow significantly more time. We continue to work on this on a constant basis and have done so for what has been a prolonged period. I know well some of the communities that have been flooded, including communities in my county. The Government will do all we can to assist.

We have already taken practical action in the here and now. The Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, opened a scheme for businesses to be able to get assistance and we took a decision this week to significantly increase the amount of financial assistance people can avail of, up to €100,000. There were 14 applications for that scheme when I last checked this morning. We opened the emergency assistance scheme for homeowners who have been affected and more than 100 claims have now been processed through it. Community welfare officers are on the ground helping people to avail of it and get assistance as quickly as they can.

I have had a number of engagements in government this week. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, who is present in the House, for the huge amount of hard work he is putting in on the ground. He made the point to us which is worth amplifying that while a number of communities need large scale flood relief schemes - I will get to that in a moment - we cannot have a situation where there is a kind of impasse until those large scale schemes are delivered. We have to look at what can be done in the here and now. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, made the point to me, that in such areas as Portrane, Clontarf and Listowel relatively minor works have made a real and meaningful difference. The Government's focus in the days ahead will be to work intensively with local authorities to identify what more can be done in the here and how, like AquaDams, pumps, embankments and minor works, alongside advancing the major flood relief schemes.

It is not a question of blaming anyone. Met Éireann does an absolutely excellent job. There is no doubt about that, but there is a legitimate question to be asked about how we can modernise our warning systems even further. I hope the Deputy agrees with that. It should not be a partisan issue. A yellow rain warning can mean one thing if the river levels are low. It can mean a very different thing if the river levels are high. The county by county warning system can sometimes be misleading. The rain and wind do not neatly abide by county boundaries.

There is a legitimate conversation to have about what more information we can put into the public domain, listening to the experts, scientists and local authorities. That is what we intend to do. More broadly, a lot of progress has been made on flood relief. There is €1.3 billion in funding in the national development plan to deliver major flood relief schemes. The OPW has already completed 56 flood relief schemes, protecting 13,000 properties and avoiding estimated damage of around €2 billion. We have seen 900 projects already funded and approved through the OPW's so-called minor works schemes. Ten schemes are under construction nationwide, including in Athlone, Crossmolina, Glashaboy, King's Island, the Morell River, Morrison's Island, the Poddle River, the River Wad, Templemore and Whitechurch.

We will need, and I hope we will, have cross-party support on this. As well as doing the interim works I have mentioned, we will need to look at how we can assess this as critical infrastructure alongside a number of other areas. The Government intends to bring forward a

critical infrastructure Bill. It is working around the clock on this with State agencies. I thank the people on the front line for the work they are doing in this extraordinarily challenging situation.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let us park the weather forecast to one side because that is not our responsibility.

The Tánaiste: That is a disgraceful comment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: RTÉ does a fine job with that. Let us deal with what we are responsible for. The Tánaiste has been a Minister through flood after flood. What did the Tánaiste say, sorry?

The Tánaiste: That is a disgraceful comment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let us look at what the Tánaiste is responsible for. He has been a Minister in Cabinet, indeed even Taoiseach, during flood after flood. Each time, communities were told that action would follow. He talks about the new buzzword "the here and now". I am talking about what has happened in the last ten years, because people were promised that there would be action from the Government. Does the Tánaiste know how many schemes have been delivered since he made the promise in 2016? It is not 56; that number goes back to 1997. Did he know that? That is 30 years ago. Since the Tánaiste became a Minister, promising people that his Government would take action, only 17 major schemes have been completed. One hundred and forty-eight schemes have been identified. These are areas that are prone to flooding, identified by a specialised report, and none of those 148 have been completed. Some are not even in design stage yet. That is not the here and now. That is ten years on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is going to be different this time? Please do not recite the weather again. What is the Government going to do differently this time to fulfil the promises that it made to communities ten years ago that have seen repeated flooding and families having to clean out debris, their houses and their businesses, with no action from Government on the horizon?

The Tánaiste: I hope I will get the same latitude. Deputy Doherty just cannot help himself. Flood warnings are in place in Northern Ireland. If, God forbid, anywhere floods in Northern Ireland, I am not going to blame Michelle O'Neill, because this is not about party politics or partisan politics. This is about acting. If the Deputy wants to say that me doing my job, coming into this House and amplifying, as we have been asked----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want you to build the flood reliefs. Build the flood reliefs. That is your job. Do you want to tell the families to get the sandbags ready? Protect the communities. You have had ten years to do it.

The Tánaiste: Leave the bully boy antics out of the Chamber today and just for once take off the party jersey. If you are suggesting that amplifying, as we have been asked to do by the RSA, the fact that people should be careful on the roads today and avoid driving-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Stop, stop

The Tánaiste: If you are suggesting that the glib weather forecast-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: People are watching this today and it is extremely important to get the facts out.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Please answer your broken promises. Diversion tactics.

The Tánaiste: I do not care about engaging with Deputy Doherty but the people who are---
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(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste, please.

The Tánaiste: Please, Deputy. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. A bit of decorum would be great. People are looking at this today and want to know what is going to happen, and I want to tell them. There will be an increased focus on allowing local authorities to fast-track more works that can be done in the here and now. There are already examples, with 900 that have been delivered. Flood relief schemes have been classified as critical infrastructure. There is an overhaul of the flood warning schemes and help for people, including business assistance and humanitarian assistance. I also hope-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Tánaiste embarrassed?

The Tánaiste: -----the party that are climate deniers will come back and have a discussion.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Seventeen schemes in ten years. Is he embarrassed? He should be. He has abandoned those communities over and over again.

Deputy John Cummins: They are not listening.

The Tánaiste: Today is not a day for party politics but, unfortunately for Deputy Doherty, he just cannot reach deeper, even on a day like today. Shame on you, Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Shame on you. You have left your own communities abandoned. Seventeen schemes in ten years, or do you want to go back 30 years? You should be embarrassed.

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please. Every Thursday morning-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Twenty years-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould. Every Thursday morning is turning into a bad exchange between the Tánaiste and Deputy Doherty.

The Tánaiste: It is what-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, it is between both of you

Deputy Thomas Gould: He who is without sin

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I appeal to Members around the House to please observe a bit of decorum and respect. Make your point, by all means, and be as robust as you wish, but recognise the time that has been given and that people are listening and suffering because of the floods, so they need to get information as well.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: "Who will care for our daughter when we are no longer able to do so? Nobody is able to answer that question." These are the words of Tony Murray, a 71-year-old man from Dublin who is at his wits' end looking for answers. Tony and his wife Susan are full-time carers for their 42-year-old daughter, Aoife, who has an intellectual disability. They are just one of the thousands of families where elderly parents are working as full-time carers well into their 70s, 80s and even 90s. Adults with intellectual disabilities deserve to live with dignity, security and independence but, as Tony said on Newstalk yesterday, there is no plan to even have a plan for housing adults with intellectual disabilities. There is no thought-out system in place in the devastating circumstance of parents passing away. Instead, what takes place is a haphazard series of events that can be incredibly traumatic for the person who is taken into care.

Tony described how he feels the State is waiting for him to die. Only then might there be an emergency placement for his daughter. Aoife will be taken from her home and brought to a not-for-profit care home that could be anywhere in the country. Over a period of a few weeks, Aoife will have lost her parent, her primary carer, her home, her friends and any semblance of the life she once knew. This is why Tony has started the campaign Before We Die to fight for appropriate housing for adults with intellectual disabilities. It is shocking that such a group needs to exist in a country with the resources at the Government's disposal. These families have already spent their life battling at every corner for therapies, school places and respite services. Nothing is straightforward and everything must be fought for. Now, the very act of planning for a future when they will not be around is met with a brick wall put up by the State. There is no plan and no system. Their cherished son or daughter will have their life upended.

Why are parents in their 70s, 80s and even 90s being left to worry about what happens to their loved ones when they die? Why is there no plan? Why is there no transition to appropriate accommodation for adults with intellectual disabilities?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for raising this important issue. I thank Tony for his advocacy in relation to his daughter, Aoife, and for speaking up for all the other mums and dads. This is an issue I have come across in my own constituency when I knock on a hall door and meet somebody behind it who, not to age people, is perhaps in his or her 70s or 80s. Deputy Whitmore meets these people in Wicklow too. They have been doing their best. In some cases, the family are working well, but are of course worried about what will happen to their loved one if and indeed when they pass on. It is a real issue. I am familiar with the work of the group Before We Die. I have been following some of its advocacy, particularly in recent weeks. I happened to have a conversation with the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, on this earlier this week. She will meet this group next week, I think on Wednesday, about its specific campaign. When we raise these issues, Government members generally read through statistics and talk about progress we see, and Opposition members talk about areas in which they do not believe we have seen enough progress. I want to be clear that we have not made enough progress in this area. The issue is legitimate and real. It is one reason why we have increased the budget for disability services by 20% this year, so there is an extra €618 million.

Of that, €40 million is going to provide new residential places. I think there is a commitment to at least 152 new residential places. It will require a conversation that is deeper than just the number of residential places because not all people are the same, not all people with a disability are the same and not all needs are the same. The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is very committed to working with this group but also more broadly, under the national disability strategy, in terms of how we get this plan in place. The Deputy used the word "transition" in the context of transition plans when a person with a disability wants to move from primary school to secondary school. At the other end of the life spectrum, there is the need for that level of transition planning and much earlier conversation. At a high level, we are increasing the disability budget significantly. We now see 8,911 residential places provided for people with disabilities between the HSE and 90 service providers. We have provided significant additional funding this year for more places. That is important and welcome. Between 2020 and 2025, we created 955 new priority one residential places. Is it enough? The answer is "No". Is there complexity beyond the number of places in terms of having a person-centred approach? There is and we look forward as a Government to engaging with this group through the Minister of State next week. I will also ask that she might engage with the relevant Oireachtas committee about how we develop a way forward on this.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. The disability capacity review in 2021 identified a very urgent need to substantially increase the amount of appropriate housing for adults with intellectual disabilities. What precisely has been done on foot of that review in 2021? The State is literally waiting for the advocates for people with intellectual disabilities to die before anything happens so not only do they lose their parent, carer and person who is looking after them, they also lose the person who has been advocating for them. This is completely and utterly wrong. When will transition planning be put in place? It is welcome that the Minister of State will meet with the group but the Tánaiste cannot stand over, and to be fair, he has not stood over, the current situation. When will the Government act

decisively so the State no longer just waits for parents, carers and advocates for people with intellectual disabilities to die before any arrangements are put in place?

The Tánaiste: It is a fair question. I understand why the Deputy says what he says and why parents can feel like that. Certainly the State is not waiting for that to happen but we need to avoid that emergency and cliff-edge moment where the conversation the State has with the person with a disability only happens at a moment of crisis, personal trauma and loss. That is what we need to get much better at. The Deputy asked about what we have done regarding the disability capacity review. We have genuinely tried to ramp up significantly the investment in disability services, both capital and current. I can point to additional places.

I do think, and I say this humbly because I do not profess to speak for parents or people with disabilities about this, that there are probably mixed needs in terms of services. Some people are living in a family home and may have other family relatives. Other people manage to live reasonably independently in that home and they may need a level of in-reach support. Some people may require a residential place. It involves pulling all that together. Between the Minister and Minister of State using the structure of the national disability strategy, it is our intention to bring that forward. The Minister of State has a meeting next week. In fairness to the seriousness of the issue, I will then come back to the Deputy in writing in terms of the next steps.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: After the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday, the Minister for Transport announced an important measure to ban scrambler bikes in the wake of the tragic death of Grace Lynch. That measure is vitally needed and must come with greater enforcement. From media reports, I understand a second proposal was withdrawn at or before the meeting that would have made helmets and high-vis jackets mandatory for people using e-scooters, e-bikes and ordinary pushbikes. An Garda Síochána would be empowered to fine those without a helmet making this a criminal matter.

No EU country makes helmets mandatory for cyclists on a push bike because they know that to criminalise the users of ordinary bikes in this way makes no sense. It would overnight row back the significant progress made over the past ten years in the uptake of cycling. How would Dublinbikes or Bleeper work if a helmet is mandatory? The ability of a bike to facilitate a simple daily activity is suddenly constrained if merely cycling your bike is criminalised. Of course, helmets are an important part of how cyclists can protect themselves but criminalising the absence of a helmet is basically saying that we are going to reduce cycling deaths and injuries by reducing cycling itself. Yesterday at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, we heard from cycling organisations about the measures they want to see implemented to make them safer so we do not see 14 cyclists die on our roads this year like we did last year. We heard their' frustration at the Government's U-turn on a decision that was made by the previous Government to split the Road Safety Authority to allow it to focus on its safety mandate and they voiced real anger at the Government's decision to delay the introduction of life-saving 30 km/h zones in built-up areas. Here are actual policy proposals, evidence-based, that will make journeys safer for all vulnerable road users, including cyclists, yet the proposal the Government seems to be prioritising is one that puts all the responsibility back on the cyclist, and not on the dangerous road environment we have to negotiate and the big cars that knock us down.

IrishCycle.com reports that the Tánaiste is one of the main people pushing mandatory helmets for cyclists on a push bike. I do not know if that is true. Is it true? Is he aware that mandatory helmets for cyclists is seen as the primary barrier to new people taking up cycling in jurisdictions like Australia where it is in place? Why has the Government chosen to push this unevidenced measure when there are so many other steps it could take to make our roads safer for those of us on a bike and for everyone else?

The Tánaiste: I get blamed for everything sometimes but I am certainly not behind that proposal nor is there one. I thank the Deputy for raising the issue because road safety is an extraordinarily important issue. Our road safety statistics in this country are going in the wrong direction. We all think of Grace Lynch. We are pleased and proud in this House that the new regulation on scramblers will be named in her name, in her honour and in her memory. I think of her family this morning. The action we have taken regarding scramblers is important, proportionate and clear. Scramblers do not belong on public roads or in public spaces and there needs to be no ambiguity about that.

Most people agree that we need to do more regarding e-scooters, most particularly in relation to our children. Somebody under the age of 16 is already not permitted to be on an e-scooter. However, talking to doctors, as we all do, they say that e-scooter accidents are the number one cause of induced brain trauma in children in Ireland. It is horrifying. Yes, it is illegal but when I talk to gardaí, the current structure is a bit cumbersome. We need to make it easier for An Garda Síochána to enforce the regulations and give gardaí the power of seizure. I think they have to issue summonses at the moment, which is too complex. The Minister for Transport and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, are coming back to Government on that.

As the Deputy very clearly said, we need a conversation about how different users share the road. We need to do a hell of a lot more about that and education on road safety more generally. Of course, wearing a helmet is an important and safe thing to do - we all agree about that - but there are no plans to change the law to make that mandatory. That would be a really bad use of Garda time and the immediate answer to everything does not have to be a new law.

I saw some reporting of the comments yesterday and found myself largely in agreement with many of the points being made by Cycling Ireland, which is why I was rather bemused by some of the reportage this morning but such is life. We can and should differentiate. The letter "e" is a bit of a giveaway. If something is motorised and electric and can do great speeds, that is one thing that needs to be looked at but with regard to traditional pushbikes, we should use education, engagement, enforcement of existing laws and continuing to make sure we invest in safe infrastructure. That is the Government position. The concerns articulated by Cycling Ireland reflect a broader evidence base on existing enforcement gaps. It makes the point about the risk of counterproductive regulation. At a time we are about simplification, I do not see the need for new legislation in this space.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcome the Tánaiste's confirmation that there are no proposals for mandatory helmets for cyclists using pushbikes.

This would have been hugely damaging to the transition we are seeing and the supports we are seeing for people taking up cycle. We agree on the point of the need to differentiate between pushbikes and the electronically powered vehicles. Some of those vehicles, particularly

scooters, are a major driver of brain injuries and many of those are already illegal. Under 16s using them is already a crime. The souped-up scooters are already illegal. The enforcement of those laws is key.

Continuing in this spirit of agreement, I ask that the Tánaiste looks closely at what was said at the transport committee meeting yesterday by his former colleague, Ciarán Cannon. There is real anger about steps that the Government has taken in the past 12 months that are seen as directly damaging to road safety for all vulnerable users but particularly for cyclists.

The Tánaiste: I certainly will. I know Ciarán Cannon well from his past posting in the House. I know him to be a very good and reasonable person and a good, evidence-based advocate. He was in this House and he is in his new role. If there was ever an issue that we should not be partisan on, and it is not in our discussion, it is road safety. We all want to see a reduction in deaths and injuries. I think we are all alarmed - I am certainly alarmed - at the dangers we see on our roads. There are more distractions than ever before in cars. Some distractions are illegal and should not be happening while others just seem to happen. The environment, in general, is more distracting. There are more road users and a greater volume of vehicles. There has also been an increasing in cycling, which is a good thing that we want to continue to support, but driver and cyclist education is also important.

I take the Deputy's point on e-scooters that there are laws and regulations there. I remain to be convinced that there is not more to be done on e-scooters. I just think there is. I am deeply concerned about this. The Deputy's comment on enforcement is definitely right. We also need to listen to An Garda Síochána to make sure that what we put in place is enforceable and practical. This is an important point, but I am happy to have further engagement with Cycling Ireland on this, and the Government will continue to engage closely.

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland tabled a motion on Uisce Éireann two weeks ago. All we asked for was accountability and timelines. Nothing more and nothing unreasonable, yet the Government opposed it. It was shameful to oppose a motion that simply asked a semi-State body to answer to the people they are supposed to serve.

Uisce Éireann will receive €2.2 billion from the Exchequer in 2026 and a staggering €13.6 billion between 2025 and 2029. With that level of public funding, this Government cannot wash its hands of responsibility. It is accountable for how this organisation behaves, but for some reason, the Government seems afraid to hold Uisce Éireann to account at all.

Accountability is a small ask. Some communities have been waiting 28 years for a simple timeline on when their wastewater treatment plants will stop leaking into local drinking water and community playgrounds that were once meant for children. That is not politics. That is public health, public safety and basic respect for citizens.

Instead of demanding answers, this Government signed off on a €108,000 salary increase for the CEO of Uisce Éireann taking his earnings from €225,000 to €333,000. This was approved by the board last Friday and sanctioned by the Government before Christmas. Uisce Éireann claims it reflects the scale of complexity of the role and the leadership needed to manage a €12.2 billion budget. How can anyone talk about accountability when the

organisation's track record tells a different story? Niall Gleeson has been in leadership since 2019 and the CEO since 2022. During this period, delivery has gone from boom to bust.

Before Irish Water took over, local authorities, even under massive pressure, always gave public representatives a timeline. Do you know what? That kept communities calm. What we get now is a copy and paste generic response that mocks the people who are already stretched beyond words. It is absolutely scandalous that a semi-State company's CEO is rewarded with €333,000 a year and the company cannot give a straight answer to the communities in crisis. Instead, we have wastewater plants leaking across this island, polluting local rivers and oceans and water mains that are constantly leaking. Uisce Éireann was hit with €20 million in fines last year for failing to meet leakage reduction targets, fines the taxpayer ultimately covers.

While this is happening, this Government's priority seems to be signing off on a pay rise and bonuses, not accountability. In this year's budget, many workers got no relief whatsoever. Households are stretched to breaking point during a cost-of-living crisis, yet somehow the Government approved a €108,000 wage increase for the CEO while hard-working people got nothing.

I am asking the Tánaiste the same question the nation is asking. How in God's name did the Government think it was appropriate to approve this massive salary increase at a time Uisce Éireann is failing communities and ordinary workers are getting absolutely nothing?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge that this is an issue that the Deputy has raised a lot in this House. It relates to Uisce Éireann, how it functions and, perhaps almost as importantly, how it answers to and engages with the Government, the Oireachtas and communities as well.

To be honest, I expect a bit better in relation to this too. I can assure the Deputy that it is not just an issue on his side of the House. On this side of the House, many of my colleagues point out the need for better community engagement and better engagement with public representatives. I spoke to the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne about this in recent days and to the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, who is due to meet Uisce Éireann shortly.

We need to have a conversation. I saw a debate in the Dáil, I think it was last week, about how Uisce Éireann even answers to Oireachtas Members and that it is not included in parliamentary questions and the like. We need to look at getting a better information flow because, at the end of the day, we have to answer to our bosses, who are the people of Ireland and the people in our constituencies. We need that information and that regular and respectful engagement. The Government has an open mind on how to improve that flow of information in terms of accountability and the likes. We will engage on that with Irish Water as well.

I want to make a broader point. It is, of course, answerable to quite a number of bodies. There is extensive oversight and regulatory control of Uisce Éireann as well. It is commercially audited in accordance with the Companies Act. It is subject to an audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is subject to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. It is accountable to Oireachtas committees, including the public accounts committee, which is always a body that focuses the mind. The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities is responsible for the independent economic regulation of Uisce Éireann and that ensures that it operates efficiently as well.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, has emphasised the importance of better and improved communication with elected representatives and with communities. He made that point when he met Uisce Éireann. He received assurances that it will be back to them with proposals on that. We want to see them urgently because this is an important issue in many communities right across our country.

To be balanced in our comments, I want to point to some significant successes we have seen since the establishment of Uisce Éireann. For the first time we have a single public water utility organisation. We have seen the investment in infrastructure grow from just €300 million in 2014 to €1.4 billion as part of the budget that we agreed in this House last year. We have also seen significant improvement in the provision of water services in many areas. Hundreds of water and wastewater treatment plants have been upgraded. Thousands of kilometres of new or rehabilitated water mains have been installed. The national leakage rate is still too high but has been reduced, and, overall, the quality of drinking water does remain very high as well.

One of the things I am most eager about is the developer-led infrastructure delivery. We had a frank conversation with Irish Water and I do not mind sharing it here. We have significantly increased the amount of taxpayer funding to that organisation. In return, we want to see developer-led infrastructure where relatively small-scale developers can deliver the infrastructure to an Irish Water standard, but they can deliver it. We also want to see an improvement in connection rates and a direct correlation between the extra investment we are giving to Uisce Éireann and the delivery of housing supply.

I take the Deputy's point about engagement and accountability and I will be back to him on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: As the Tánaiste said, answers and engagement from Uisce Éireann to Oireachtas Members is a non-goer. Any improvements there would be greatly welcomed because we are pulling the hair out of our heads to get responses for our communities. I do agree with the developer-led scheme he referred to because that is the only way we are going to deliver.

I do, however, believe that people deserve pay increases too. I am not standing on this side of the House saying absolutely not, but how can I explain how this Government sought to reward the CEO of Uisce Éireann with a rise of 47% when others on the breadline got nothing? How can I tell the people of Adrigole, who were forced to close their crèche as they are two days without mains water and experienced 16 breaks since last June, that Uisce Éireann is looking after them or the people of Ballinascorthy and Shannonvale who went without water at Christmas or the people of Goleen, Ballydehob, Rosscarbery, Dunmanway and Shannonvale who are waiting decades for upgrades to their wastewater tanks? They never get any updates as to what is happening and when it is going to happen. How can I tell Councillor Noel Thomas in Galway that the new wastewater treatment plant in Connemara will deliver across to Carraroe, Costello, Tully and Ros an Mhíl? I cannot as Uisce Éireann has become untouchable and non-contactable on its road to non-delivery, but shamefully this Government saw fit to give the CEO a 47% pay rise without a shred of accountability. It is little wonder that the Government refused Independent Ireland's motion on timelines and accountability.

Simply put, it stinks. It stinks to the high heavens.

The Tánaiste: The only reason I am smiling is I thought it was a very good way of sticking in the name of the Deputy's by-election candidate. We will select our by-election candidate on 22 February for Galway West.

The point the Deputy made is a very serious one. I take his support for the developer-led infrastructure. It is important. It is particularly important in rural communities where even forgetting developers, local authorities and public representatives say to us they could deliver 15 homes here or 20 or 30 homes there. If that is added up across the country, it is quite a lot of homes but we need to have the ability to put in the water infrastructure. Yes, this was done badly in the past but that is not a reason to not go back and do it properly this time. We did not have an Irish Water in the past to oversee it but we do now. I expect progress on that by the end of this month and we are engaging closely on that.

In relation to Adrigole, which the Deputy referenced, I am told that a case for mains rehabilitation works is currently under consideration by Uisce Éireann. I ask that it would assess that quickly because I know this is causing a significant challenge for the Deputy's constituents as well. Ultimately, CEOs of all semi-State agencies need to be judged on the basis of their performance. We have resourced Uisce Éireann. It has a good leadership team, we have resourced it well and now it needs to get on with the job.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Grace Boland: Ireland's greatest asset is us. It is our people - our hard-working, skilled and educated women and men. For this country to continue to prosper, we must invest in us for the future, which means investing in our educational system. Fingal, as the Tánaiste knows, is rapidly growing. It is the youngest area in the State. We are delivering homes in Rush, Lusk, Skerries and Balbriggan but this housing delivery has to be matched by delivery of appropriate school places in safe, warm and modern buildings. Schools are at the heart of our communities. They are where our children learn, families connect local life is built. When school infrastructure falls behind, entire communities are also left behind.

I want to raise two capital projects that are very close to my heart for the communities of Skerries and Rush. I am determined to see both of those projects delivered. The first is in Skerries, my home town. Skerries is its own town planning area with six feeder primary schools. At primary level, there are currently four special classes, with two more under construction. However, there are no special classes at post-primary level in the only second secondary school in the town, my old school, Skerries Community College. Families are being forced to travel long distances outside their communities to access appropriate places but too many others are facing the prospect of having no suitable school places for September 2026. That is simply not acceptable. That undermines inclusion, places a huge strain on families and weakens community life. Urgently delivering dedicated special education provision at post-primary level in Skerries is a necessity.

Second, the population of Rush has grown by over 60% in the past 20 years. It continues to rapidly expand. The building project for a combined campus for two excellent schools, St. Joseph's Secondary School and Gaelscoil Ros Eo, is now approaching submission to the Department for approval to tender. Once that application is lodged, the community needs a

very swift and positive response from the Department. This urgent action is not only needed for the students and parents but for the principals, the school faculties and the support staff who are working in appalling conditions. Both schools regularly flood, leading to damp rooms and teachers mopping them out for hours before children arrive at the campus. Gaelscoil Ros Eo is in prefabs in the car park of a Gaelic club for nearly two decades so this campus project is critical, not least for the community but also to deliver more homes in Rush. There is a planning application for 48 homes on the site of the secondary school, which cannot progress until the school is built.

Could the Tánaiste please give me an update as to the status of both these projects, and a commitment to work with me and the Ministers for education and public expenditure to make sure these projects are urgently delivered?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue with me in relation to Skerries and Rush. It is not the first time she has raised it with me and I acknowledge that she represents and is from a community that is in the fastest growing area of the country with one of the youngest populations. She makes this point as we make progress on housing, and I am pleased to see we are making progress on housing. There has been a 20% increase in the number of homes built last year compared to the previous year. We have to make sure the infrastructure goes with it and we will never regret investing in education. That is why the Minister for education, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, last week published her Department's €7.55 billion national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan. I want people to know that this is just the first tranche. There is lots of capital to spend in this country, thankfully, and we will deploy that capital as projects occur and get ready. Over the course of 2026 and 2027, there will actually be construction work at approximately 10% of the overall school estate. I say that to give people some context.

On the specific projects the Deputy mentioned, the first related to Skerries Community College. I understand the building project for this school has been devolved for delivery to the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board, ETB, under a service level agreement. There were significant technical challenges in the delivery of the project on the current site and given the complexity of the challenges on the site, the Department is engaging with the ETB as patron of Skerries Community College to advance the provision of the required accommodation at the school, including, very importantly, the issue the Deputy mentioned regarding the facilitation of special educational classes. I am advised that the ETB has received agreement to progress a project for Skerries Community College under the Department's modular accommodation framework. This will address the immediate - it is only the immediate, I know - accommodation requirements for the school community. It will facilitate the delivery of additional accommodation in respect of four special classes, four general classrooms, a multimedia room and ancillary accommodation.

St. Joseph's Secondary School and Gaelscoil Ros Eo is a shared education campus project in Rush. I understand that the project has been devolved to Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust, CEIST, the patron body. The brief for the secondary school includes the provision of a 1,000-pupil post-primary school building, four special classes and other ancillary accommodation. The brief for Gaelscoil Ros Eo will be the delivery of a 16-classroom primary school with one special education base and other ancillary accommodation. This project is currently at stage 2B post the planning and architectural design processes. This allows for

detailed design and planning, obtaining necessary statutory permissions and preparation of tender documents. The Department is currently awaiting the submission of the stage 2B report, which the Deputy tells me is imminent and which CEIST has advised it is currently finalising.

I will work with the Deputy, as will the Minister for education, on both of these projects. She mentioned a third one to me the other day, Rush National School, which a revised planning application is now required for. The Minister will sit down with the Deputy on these shortly but I want people to know - people in her constituency and more broadly - that the educational capital plan is tranche 1. We have plenty more to come in the time ahead and we will work to progress St. Joseph's Secondary School, Gaelscoil Ros Eo and Skerries Community College.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Tánaiste. I appreciate his really constructive engagement. I know delivering schools is as important to him as it is to me. I thank him for also mentioning Rush National School, which is something I have raised with the Minister for Education and Youth. I will continue to raise it with her and the Tánaiste.

I look forward to welcoming the Tánaiste in the coming years to the opening of both of these school projects. As he will be aware, I will continue to raise these repeatedly with him until I see the shovels in the ground.

The Tánaiste: Of that I have absolutely no doubt, knowing the Deputy well. Please do because this is what we need to do. We have to invest in housing but also in communities like hers. My own is not that dissimilar, where there is an increased volume of development and a growing young population. We need to make sure that we put that social and educational infrastructure in place as well. I get the acuity of this and the pressure that schools and parents are under too. Tranche 1 of the capital plan last week was a really important step. We have got to start somewhere. It gets a lot of school projects moving but I also know other schools are saying, "Hang on, we want to move too". My message to them is that we will keep working with them and constructively engaging, and there will be more projects moved in the time ahead.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The new contract about to be signed by the Government for public service obligation, PSO, flights from Donegal to Dublin will mean a loss of afternoon flights. This is a public service obligation; it is supposed to serve the public but it is not. We know the people of Donegal are rightly outraged at the new proposed contract. Flights from Donegal to Dublin in at 8.30 p.m. and coming back from Dublin at 6.30 a.m is ludicrous. Nobody is demanding that. It will not work and there will be ghost flights. This is a €17 million contract. The midday service has worked for decades. It is why nearly 10,000 people have signed a petition in 48 hours. This is being led by a charity that provides support for over 500 people who depend on this flight to get their treatment in Dublin because we live a nine-hour return journey away by road. I have spoken to many of the patients myself. If it was not for this flight, they would not be able to avail of their cancer treatment.

They cannot even book flights after the 26th of this month because there is no contract in place. This route is not a luxury; it is a lifeline. This is a Government contract. It is a public

service obligation. It has to serve the public and not the airline. I am asking the Tánaiste to commit that the Government will not enter into this contract until the midday service is secure.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Doherty for raising this issue. I am acutely aware of the deep concern felt by people who live in Donegal and particularly, as the Deputy rightly pointed out, patients and their families who depend on this air service to access specialist medical care, including cancer treatment. He has given us a sense of the depth of feeling with so many people having signed a petition in such a short time. I am clear that the route is not about convenience. It is about trying to manage illness with dignity and reducing the physical and emotional strain of the long journeys. I have briefly engaged with the Minister for Transport on this issue. I know it is currently operated on a PSO contract funded by the Exchequer which provides two daily return services. The Minister is continuing to monitor the operation and performance of the service in line with the terms of the existing PSO contract. However, on foot of the Deputy mentioning this I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to come back to him directly.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Some years ago, working with Deputy Ged Nash, we steered the Competition (Amendment) Act 2017 into law to protect freelance actors, musicians and writers in bogus self-employment. These were people who should have been designated as employees. A recent Supreme Court decision clarified the test for determining employment status under the Taxes Consolidation Act. The Supreme Court ruled that Domino's Pizza delivery drivers were employees and not independent contractors. Responding to that recent decision, Revenue is updating its code of practice in determining employment status. The decision is welcome, particularly for workers exploited through the gig economy, but recently it has been brought to my attention that unforeseen consequences may follow for a small number of low-earning sole traders, such as journalists who need to contribute to multiple media outlets. There are concerns that a one-size-fits-all approach may not take into account the legitimate practices of genuine freelance contributors who are tax-compliant as sole traders. I am raising this with the Tánaiste to see if it has been brought to his attention. I am happy to correspond with him further on it. I have engaged with the NUJ on it. There are concerns that a blanket ruling from Revenue might inadvertently have the impact of restricting a diversity of voices in our media. I stress that it is very welcome that we see the Supreme Court decision in the Karshan, or Domino's Pizza, case. For most people in a scenario where it is not clear, particularly in the gig economy, it is very welcome to see their employment status designated as that of an employee. However, there is concern about this unforeseen consequence, specifically in the media.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Bacik for raising this. Of course I am aware of it. I would appreciate further engagement with her on it. It will probably require longer engagement than we have here today. As she said, it arises from the Supreme Court judgment of October 2023 in the case of Revenue Commissioners v. Karshan (Midlands) t/a Domino's Pizza Limited. There has been a period of time since then. It goes without saying that Revenue is independent of me, as it should be, in relation to how it applies tax law in Ireland. Obviously, it cannot ignore the Supreme Court judgment and I cannot interfere with its application of the judgment. However, I have heard directly from some of the sectors that have expressed concern about this. To be truthful, the immediate solution does not seem apparent but I am happy to have

engagement on this. Revenue would make the point that it has engaged extensively, set out criteria and so on but I would welcome further engagement.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: This weekend the Social Democrats will hold our party conference in Cork, which is a city starved of Government investment. The people of Cork have been long promised light rail but not a single penny has been provided under the new transport plan. However, that is not the only broken promise. We have no BusConnects; no new dental school; no business school; no safe injection facility; no new homeless hub; and no new library. The most notorious example is the failure to build the Cork events centre. Ten years ago, in the dying days of a general election campaign, the Tánaiste's former party leader and then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, flanked by other Fine Gael and Labour Party Ministers, turned the sod on the project. It was a nice photo op but nothing more. The press release from the developer, BAM, said that a 6,000-capacity multi-purpose venue would be built within two years. A decade on, the only thing the people of Cork have been left with is a large derelict site in the city centre. It is nothing more than an eyesore with a new bridge to nowhere. Next week marks a decade since the sod was turned. To mark the tenth anniversary, I will host an event where the events centre should be. I would love to see the Tánaiste there and I would love to hear what he has to say to the people of Cork about the Government's failure to deliver on these key infrastructure projects for our city.

Simon Harris: The Deputy mentioned the "bridge to nowhere". I remember Sarah Palin using that phrase. When Barack Obama rang Sarah Palin when she was chosen as a vice presidential candidate, he wished her luck but not too much. I wish the Deputy good luck with his party's conference this weekend in Cork. I would push back on the idea that we have not invested in Cork. There has been €400 million in URDF funding for Cork alone.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: It was not used.

Simon Harris: I have long made the point that we need to see a Cork city task force. When I was Taoiseach we set one up for Dublin and we are seeing the benefits of that. I think Cork should follow that lead. It is also a commitment in the programme for Government. I have raised it with the Lord Mayor of Cork and the Cork city chief executive. I am due to visit shortly. I will get the Deputy a specific update on the events centre in advance of his gathering, I hope. In fairness to the Taoiseach, I know he takes this issue very seriously. There was a requirement on the basis of legal advice to undertake certain actions but the Government remains committed to the Cork events centre. The Government remains very committed to Cork. I assure the Deputy that the Taoiseach remains very committed to Cork too.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Saoirse and Darren are a couple in their 50s, both of whom are working. They have been renting for 15 years. They pay €2,000 a month in rent in a big residential development in Cherrywood. Incidentally, their rent may get hiked because of the Government's Bill. They have enough for a deposit and want to buy a home – a one- or two-bedroom home – but the banks will not look at them because they are in their 50s. What they need is genuinely affordable housing. The last bit of affordable housing in our area was 30 affordable homes in Shanganagh but there were 640 applicants and there are no more in the pipeline. Cherrywood's developers were given €13 million of LIHAF funding to build it. At

the time, we were initially supposed to get 40% of the development in affordable housing in exchange for that funding. That did not happen. Then we were supposed to get 300 affordable homes. Now we are told that is not happening. In the place where this couple live - they are currently renting at €2,000 a month and cannot buy - we were supposed to get affordable housing which would actually give them an option. There is no sign of it despite the fact that the public put in €13 million precisely on the condition that there would be affordable housing, something that is now not happening. I want somebody to look into what I think is a scandal that leaves people like Saoirse and Darren high and dry.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for raising the need for more affordable homes and the concerns of Saoirse and Darren so that it is an option for them to purchase their own home which is something they want to do. We have included in the new housing plan that local authorities not only must have commitments to social housing and social housing action plans for their own county but must also now have affordable housing plans as well. I do not have the specifics in respect of Cherrywood with me but I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to consider the issues the Deputy raised and revert to him directly.

Deputy Michael Collins: This country has been washed out by flooding the length and breadth of Ireland. It was Wexford last week, Bantry a couple of months ago and Midleton over a year ago. It is scandalous that it can take a couple of decades to get flood defences to the point of being ready. It must be explained because it seems that no one has control. There is one thing we can do, however, and that is the cleaning of our rivers. I have advocated for this here for over a decade. In Wexford last week they were saying that the rivers are full of silt and the same thing was said in Midleton not so long ago. I have always said that if the bath is full of silt or sand, the water has only one way to make its way out, and that is over and down, and to wash out the house. Will any river cleaning programme be put in place? This is something I have requested for a long time. If it is going to happen, when will it happen? This is very serious.

Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this. He is right. In areas like his constituency in west Cork - Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Bandon - we have seen a number of flood relief schemes that have really helped. I know the people of Bantry are waiting and we are very eager to work with them on that. The point I am trying to make, and to be fair to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, the point he is loudly making in Government and we agree with him, is that there is a need to look at what can be done in the interim and in the here and now. He has also identified the issue of river cleaning, as well as the issue of small trees in rivers and under bridges over rivers impeding the flow. The Deputy can expect the Minister of State to want to engage with Cork County Council in relation to this issue.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The national development plan is an important investment in the future in terms of infrastructure. Last week's sectoral announcement on education was welcomed in parts of my constituency. A new nine-classroom school extension has been approved for St. Canice's Girls National School. However, I must say there is a lot of confusion on the ground regarding the announcement.

1 o'clock

Schools that would have been regarded as being at very advanced stages are wondering if they are still on the list. Are they still being funded? Where are they? I want to raise some specific schools and the Tánaiste might want to come back to me in writing on them. There is a general point about us providing more clarity to school principals and boards of management. St. Aidan's CBS in Whitehall and Gaelscoil Uí Earcáin are both at advanced stages. If they need funding to be drawn down, they are wondering whether it will be available. The Department of education site on the Swords Road will include four schools, the largest development the Department of education will ever undertake. It will be Gaelscoil Áine, Ellenfield Community College, An Cosán Community Special School and Clonturk Community College. It is part of the ADAPT 4 programme. It is not on the list but surely given amount of work that has gone into it, it will be funded. I would like more clarity on those. General communication to other schools is also needed.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy's broad point is right. Without being flippant, when it comes to capital planning we have to start somewhere. It was important to get the first tranche out there and moving because a lot of other schools are wondering what it means for them. The Minister for education is conscious of that, as am I along with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy Chambers. In the period ahead, we will be looking at what other schools not on the list have an ability to move forward. The Deputy has been in this House long enough to know that when it comes to capital, there is often a churn and opportunities to add more schools. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, on the specific projects - St. Aidan's, the Gaelscoil and the four-school development on the Swords Road - and ask her to come back directly to the Deputy on them.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I wish to raise ophthalmology services in Longford-Westmeath or the lack thereof. In 2024 we lost our service in Longford and since then we have had periods of no service with people having to travel to Dublin or Athlone or a temporary service back in Longford. The most recent correspondence I got from the HSE stated that for patients in Longford-Westmeath requiring a consultant ophthalmologist the pathway for access to the service is currently the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital in Dublin as there is no consultant based in the Regional Hospital Mullingar, which covers Longford and Westmeath. When will we get our service back in Longford-Westmeath?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carrigy for raising this important issue. He is right that people in Longford are currently being told that the pathway to access a consultant ophthalmologist is the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear Hospital in Dublin. I think that is the primary referral centre. It is a long way from Longford to that hospital in Dublin, particularly for someone with an ophthalmology condition. Currently there is no consultant ophthalmologist based at the Regional Hospital Mullingar. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is engaging with the HSE to see whether recruitment of a consultant ophthalmologist based in the Regional Hospital Mullingar is viable. It is something that she and I are eager to progress. Once the Minister hears back from the HSE, she will engage with the Deputy. I will also keep in touch with him on it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: After three and a half years, next week or the week after we will reach the cliff edge for the pilot basic income for artists scheme without any sign of the

promised successor scheme, nor any clarity as to when the new replacement scheme will open for applications or even what it will look like. I ask the Tánaiste to enlighten us as to the shape, size, cost and timing of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's, newfangled basic income scheme for artists. When will it be open for applications? That is the main demand from the artist community.

The Tánaiste: I know that Deputy Ó Snodaigh has been a supporter of this initiative for quite some time. There will be a new development in relation to this. I am reluctant to say it will be at Cabinet next week. That is what my memory tells me, but it is certainly imminent. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, will be bring proposals on it to Cabinet this month. It could be as soon as next week but certainly this month. I will ask the Minister to update the Deputy directly on the details.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I wish to raise the issue of the Aer Lingus, Dublin Airport Authority and Shannon Airport Authority pensioners who retired before 2014. They report an erosion of between 55% and 60% in the value of their pensions since 2007 due to cost-of living freezes, the pension levy and retroactive pension cuts introduced in 2015. They were defined benefit pensions built up over as much as 45 years yet the rules were changed after a time without compensation or mitigation. Pensioners had no representation in these decisions. They have no income protection or security in retirement. Will the Minister review the cumulative impacts and engage directly with the affected pensioners?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brabazon for raising the need for clarity for these pensioners, which I know he has raised previously in this House. I will speak with the Ministers, Deputies Chambers and O'Brien, and get the latest update.

Deputy John Clendennen: In December 2020, the west Offaly power station in Shannonbridge closed due to the failure to secure planning for transition to biomass. This left a financial void of €1.7 million per year from a commercial rates perspective. Thankfully the Government stepped in and has supported Offaly County Council ever since. However, that support is due to conclude at the end of 2026. Measures have been taken by Offaly County Council to try to fill the void but right now we need to be able to give certainty to the people of Offaly that there will be no impact on services as a result of this. I ask the Government to engage with officials from Offaly County Council and, rather than having a cliff-edge effect at the end of 2026, to consider a tapered reduction so that we can phase this out and mitigate the impact.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): Deputy Clendennen has engaged with me on this matter. He has made the point fairly and forcefully that we should not have a cliff edge with Shannonbridge. We have provided €1.7 million to Offaly County Council over the last number of years and that will be the case this year. I have asked my officials to engage with Offaly County Council and with Longford County Council. Deputy Carrigy has also been in touch on having that tapering. That will occur.

Deputy David Cullinane: I acknowledge that Irish cancer services are among the best in the world. I want to pay tribute to all the staff who work in cancer services. However, we are beginning to see slippage in some areas which is disappointing. The response to a parliamentary question from me on key targets set by the HSE for diagnostics and treatment shows that we are beginning to see serious slippage. One in seven chemotherapy appointments did not happen on time. In my constituency of Waterford, it is one in three. Only half of breast cancer surgeries happened on time. It is worse for lung cancer surgery where 39% did not happen on time. For prostate cancer surgery 62% did not happen on time. I have engaged with the Irish Cancer Society, which has advised that there is equipment which is either not available or only working partially because the staff are not there. A lot of it is outdated. We do not have enough radiation therapists. I do not want to see slippage. I do not want to see us go backwards. I want us to always have the very best, world-class, gold-standard cancer services. I ask the Tánaiste to engage with the Minister for Health to look at the data and ensure that the investments which are needed in the national cancer strategy and in cancer services right across the State are in place so that we do not have a geographical postcode lottery in accessing care. No matter where people come from, they should have access to timely care.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cullinane for raising this issue. Yesterday was World Cancer Day and it is really important topic. I fully accept his bona fides in this. We all want to see real progress on this. We have made significant progress as a country but there is certainly no room for complacency. The Deputy and the Irish Cancer Society are right to highlight the areas in which we have to challenge ourselves to do better. I know the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is fully committed to this. I will certainly take the Deputy's challenge in engaging with the HSE, the Minister and the whole of Government to see what more we can do. I am also due to meet with the Irish Cancer Society shortly for further engagement on this.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I recently had a very engaging chat with students from the politics and society class in St. Joseph's College. It is a school the Tánaiste is very familiar with. They asked some very interesting questions, including one on Seanad reform and specifically about having more diverse voices and minority voices included, going beyond the Taoiseach's nominees to assist. I was thinking about that in the context of the Manning report which proposes having more of a democratic input from the public. We have seen the expansion of the universities on the university panel, which is welcome, but we need to make the Seanad more democratic. For example, we could have different sections like labour and arts where a member of the electorate could choose the section they wish to vote in. We should engage and open that process again to have real Seanad reform, as was the wish of the people in the referendum over ten years ago. The Government might revisit the issue and look at real Seanad reform this time around.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I know St. Joseph's well. It is a school I have frequently visited. I was out there relatively recently with the school principal, Bernadette, and others for the opening of their extension. Any time I have been there, including during the general election, I always find the students give me a good grilling and are very engaging. I thank the Deputy for raising with me the output of some of his engagement with them.

On the issue of Seanad reform, the Seanad referendum was one of those ones that we clearly got wrong. The people of Ireland said they wanted to keep a second Chamber and they wanted a bicameral system. They were right, as the people of Ireland always are. They are sovereign in these decisions. What everyone did say during the referendum, though, was that we want to keep the Seanad but we want to reform it. The question was always whether the reform would ever happen. Years later, truthfully, it still has not. I need to engage with colleagues to see where that is at. Any reform of the Seanad would require a cross-party view as to how to take it forward. The Manning report did do some interesting work but I will speak to the Minister for housing and local government in the first instance.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Finglas is a strong, proud community. However, it faces challenges and some very high levels of disadvantage from a long-standing lack of public investment in communities. It is a community devastated by recent tragedy, so it is deeply disappointing that a vital counselling service for young people in Finglas, the Hear Me Out youth mental health service run by the Finglas Youth Resource Centre, is facing a lack of funding. The service has provided support for hundreds of young people in relation to various issues such as anxiety, drug use, school refusal, self-harm and trauma. Now the service has had to take the initiative to organise a fundraiser in Erin's Isle GAA club on 21 February. I know the community will support that.

Is it not unacceptable that a youth counselling service providing vital support in Finglas has to organise a fundraiser because of the lack of certainty of funding? Hear Me Out has submitted a detailed business proposal to the HSE inclusion office and to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. The service has been given limited funding by Dublin City Council but is likely to face funding uncertainty in less than six months. Will the Tánaiste raise this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the HSE and ensure that this service can continue?

The Tánaiste: I certainly will. I acknowledge the huge sense of loss and tragedy the Deputy's community is experiencing now. I thank him for telling me about the Hear Me Out youth mental health and counselling service. It sounds like it has made a really positive impact in his community. On foot of the Deputy raising it here today, I will raise it with the chief executive of the HSE and with the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, in relation to where the service's application for funding certainty is at. I will ask that the Minister of State comes back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I want to raise the importance of proceeding with the N/M20 Cork to Limerick motorway project. It is not just a road project; it is a vital piece of national infrastructure that will shape the economic and social future of our region for generations to come. For far too long, communities and landowners along this corridor have endured congestion, delays and safety concerns. Families, commuters, businesses and emergency services all feel the impact of an outdated and overburdened route on a daily basis. Proceeding with this project in 2026 is essential. I am calling on the Tánaiste to maintain the momentum this year to provide certainty of funding and to ensure that this project proceeds without any further delay.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Shea for raising this important matter but also for his continued focus on infrastructure development in Cork. I agree that the N/M20 Cork-Limerick project does represent one of the most strategically important infrastructure investments we can make for the southern region. When completed, this project will really transform connectivity between Ireland's second and third largest cities, Cork and Limerick, and will deliver better links not just for these cities but for all the communities including many the Deputy represents across the corridor, including Buttevant, Croom, Charleville, Mallow and Blarney. This investment will also improve connections to west Cork and Kerry and will help support balanced regional growth and ensure communities outside the major urban centres can fully participate in our economic success. There are critical safety deficiencies on the existing N20 route, so this is also about saving lives and preventing serious accidents on a road that currently poses significant risks. I am absolutely committed to working with the Deputy to deliver this project through the proper planning processes. I look forward to continuing to work with him and all public representatives to see it progress.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The people in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West wait for up to 14 years in most cases on the Fingal County Council housing list. Some of them are left waiting in overcrowded accommodation, some of them in emergency accommodation, some of them paying eye-wateringly high rents. When a person has a medical condition or a disability, this is often made worse by their housing situation, as I am sure the Tánaiste can appreciate, so they can apply for assessment for medical priority. It takes an awful lot to fill out the HMD 1 form and, in fact, I am told on a very regular basis now that GPs are refusing to fill it out for medical card patients. That is something that should definitely be looked at. When they fill out that form, and it is hard to fill it out, they have to wait. The Tánaiste will be well aware of the waiting lists to see doctors and every other medical professional. When they do fill out and submit the form, it is now taking 16 months, nearly a year and a half, to get that assessment done. By any measure, that is too long. I am inundated in my offices in Balbriggan and Rush with people and all they are looking for is an update. They want to know if anyone has looked at their medical priority and if it is going to be considered at all. It is not the case that the waiting times are this long in every other local authority. I ask the Tánaiste to investigate this and find out if the source of the issue is resources or what the blockage is. It is unacceptable and I am sure the Tánaiste will agree with me that people should not have to wait between 14 and 18 months.

The Tánaiste: I do agree and I thank the Deputy for raising it. I will certainly undertake to engage with the Minister for housing, primarily, and the Minister for Health on this and revert to the Deputy directly. While I am on my feet, I also want to say the Deputy raised an issue with me before in the House in relation to victims and survivors of domestic abuse, when they are moving from one local authority list to another, and the time they were on the previous list not being recognised. It is an important issue. I acknowledge and thank the Deputy for raising it. On foot of that, the Minister for housing has said he will issue a direction to all local authorities to make sure that issue is rectified. I want to acknowledge that while it came to my mind.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Tánaiste.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.17 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.57 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.17 p.m. and resumed at 1.57 p.m.

Road Safety: Statements

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I welcome the opportunity to address the House this afternoon to update it on road safety matters. I will be sharing my time with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, will be delivering the closing statement.

I would like to take the opportunity to offer my sincere condolences to the family of Grace Lynch. Neither the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, nor I can imagine the pain the family are going through and the sense of loss they are experiencing. To lose someone so obviously cherished by her family is a traumatic event. The direct reason for this debate on road safety matters is the tragic accident that happened to Grace Lynch. There will obviously be significant Government and enforcement responses to that.

I also want to update Deputies about the unfolding accident on North Earl Street involving a bus and a pedestrian. I regret to say there has been a fatality and three others have been taken to hospital. Our thoughts are with the family of the person who has been fatally injured and the people who are in hospital. We wish them well.

As a society, we find ourselves all too often expressing these condolences arising from serious road traffic accidents. Already in 2026, too many people have been lost on the roads in Ireland and we are just over one month into the new year. We need to grasp the simple reality in front of us. Reckless behaviour, selfish choices, excess speed, drink and drug driving, distracted driving and not wearing a seatbelt are all choices and behaviours on our roads that, as we know, lead inevitably to death, destruction and despair. For my part, I want to be clear that the Government is committed to reducing road deaths and creating safer roads for everyone in Ireland. However, this will not be possible without behavioural change. We have done it before, and we now need to do it again.

In 1997, almost three decades ago, there were 472 fatalities on Irish roads. That was an extraordinarily number of lives lost and, thankfully, today we do not have such high figures. That year marked a turning point for road safety in Ireland. In 1998 implementation began on the first national road safety strategy. Over the course of that strategy and its successors, we witnessed a remarkable improvement in safety on our roads, as deaths began to fall. From 472 deaths in 1997, we reduced the figure to 162 by 2012, with a further reduction to 133 by 2021, which was the lowest level since records had begun in 1959. Road safety strategies and measures taken by successive Governments have played a very important role in reducing deaths on our roads.

2 o'clock

However, these improvements have also only been possible as a result of a great many of us changing and improving our behaviours on the road. Unfortunately, more recent trends are less positive and the gains we have made are beginning to slip. Last year saw an increase in road deaths, with 188 fatalities on our roads. That is a very significant number. That is 188 families

and communities experiencing tragedy and loss and attending funerals of loved ones. Not only that, but for every fatality there are eight serious and possibly life-changing injuries. We obviously need to do better. For my part as Minister for justice, I am determined to see a return to the progress we have seen previously and know we can achieve.

Enforcement is a key aspect of ensuring greater safety on our roads and the Garda continues to play a key role in prioritising road safety. This includes the implementation of 30 minutes of high-visibility road safety policing per garda shift. That was introduced in April 2024. In addition, since May 2024, the powers and provisions introduced by the Road Traffic Act 2024 mean that An Garda Síochána can now conduct mandatory drug testing at the scene of serious collisions. This is facilitated by the provision of tens of thousands of drug rapid testing kits by the Medical Bureau of Road Safety each year. I welcome the significant awareness campaign the Road Safety Authority ran last year highlighting these drug-driving enforcement powers and capabilities.

Since November 2023, the Motor Insurers' Bureau of Ireland has been providing insurance details to An Garda Síochána. Details for 3 million vehicles and 5 million drivers are provided daily to identify vehicles being driven without insurance. The Garda continues to carry out enhanced road safety and traffic enforcement campaigns, with the latest over the recent St Brigid's bank holiday weekend. Over the weekend, An Garda Síochána and mobile and fixed GoSafe cameras detected nearly 3,500 motorists speeding. The highest volume of detections was on bank holiday Monday, with over 800 speeding detections. A total of 193 drivers were arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence of an intoxicant. Nearly 400 drivers were detected for driving while using a mobile phone. Over 660 vehicles were detained by members of An Garda Síochána, with 50% for no insurance. This serves to highlight that some people continue to behave badly on our roads and make poor choices, the consequence of which is endangerment of fellow road users and in particular vulnerable road users. Despite this concerted effort by the Garda, unfortunately, over the course of the weekend there were two fatalities and 14 serious injury incidents due to collisions.

We must redouble our efforts on all fronts to further ensure road safety for all. We need to ensure that enforcement is effective, but it is also about behavioural change on the part of drivers on the roads. We need to slow down and be more careful.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I too extend my deepest sympathies to the family of Grace Lynch. Her death leaves an unfillable void in their lives and the lives of her friends and the wider community. Regarding the accident that happened in Dublin city centre this afternoon, our thoughts are with the families who are affected by that accident and everybody involved.

Yesterday, we announced that we will introduce regulations as a matter of urgency to further prohibit the use of scramblers and strengthen the existing enforcement powers that An Garda Síochána has in relation to the dangerous use of scramblers and powers of seizure. These regulations will be introduced within a matter of weeks. Currently, under the Road Traffic Act 1961, a mechanically propelled vehicle, such as a scrambler, can only be legally used in public places if it is registered, taxed, insured, roadworthy and has a registration plate. The driver must hold the relevant driving licence. Most scramblers are designed for off-road use only and do not meet these requirements. Their use on the road is illegal. To further strengthen the legal

position and help tackle the antisocial use of scramblers and other off-road vehicles, the Road Traffic and Roads Act 2023 introduced three new provisions. It is now an offence to drive dangerously in any location, not just in public places. Gardaí have the power to seize vehicles being driven dangerously. The Minister for Transport can make regulations to restrict certain vehicles or classes of vehicles in particular locations. These three provisions are designed to work as a package and should be read together. They were all commenced in July 2023, one month after the enactment of the Act. Since commencement, off-road scramblers are no longer just illegal for use in public areas. It is illegal to drive them dangerously anywhere, even on private land. More importantly, gardaí have the full power to seize a scrambler being driven dangerously in any location. They can enter the curtilage of a dwelling to retrieve a scrambler after the fact.

These powers are being used. Since 2023, over 1,000 scramblers, e-scooters and quad bikes have been seized. The measures I outlined represent a comprehensive legislative response to the dangerous use of off-road scramblers. It must be emphasised that using them on our roads is already illegal. The new regulations will help bring additional legal clarity to the existing position that scramblers are banned for use on the road in almost all circumstances. The regulations being prepared will explicitly prohibit the use of vehicles such as scramblers in a public place while continuing to allow for legitimate off-road recreational and agricultural uses. They will make the use of a vehicle, such as a scrambler, in these prescribed locations an offence, building on the current position where a member of An Garda Síochána has to form a reasonable belief about dangerous use before it can be seized. They will also increase the charges that accrue each day after a scrambler has been seized to reduce the number of seized vehicles that are released and end up back on our roads. While the focus has rightly been on scramblers in recent weeks, as we approach the two-year mark since e-scooter regulations were introduced in May 2024, it is now appropriate that we look at the evidence and consider if additional regulation is warranted to promote road safety in relation to e-scooters. Proposals on this front will be presented to the Government shortly.

The current national framework for road safety is set out in the Government's fifth Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030, which was launched in December 2021. The strategy aligns with EU and UN targets and is based on the safe systems approach. It aims to reduce road deaths and serious injuries by 50% this decade and to achieve Vision Zero, or as close as possible to no deaths or serious injuries on our roads, by 2050. In July 2025, I published phase 2 of the action plan under the road safety strategy, which will run from 2025 to 2027. In total, the plan contains 12 primary and 77 support actions, with the potential to deliver transformative changes. Actions will be delivered through partnership and collaborative working by road safety stakeholders. Some of the key actions include: investing significantly into new and improved active travel and public transport; expanding network safety analysis of the road network to identify high-risk locations, guide investment decisions and prioritise safety interventions including for the local road network; implementing in full all actions of the phase 2 action plan based on the 2023 speed limit review; and reviewing and overhauling our learning to drive curriculum.

Implementation of the speed limit review published in 2023 is a key action under the road safety strategy. The review made three principal recommendations: a reduction in the default speed limit on rural local roads from 80 km/h to 60 km/h, the introduction of a 30 km/h default speed limit in built-up and urban areas, and a reduction in the default speed limit on national

secondary roads from 100 km/h to 80 km/h. The first of the recommendations came into effect on 7 February 2025, when the default speed limit on rural roads decreased from 80 km/h to 60 km/h. This represented a reduction in speed on 80% of the road network in Ireland. This impacts approximately 83,000 km of Ireland's 102,000 km network. It involved the installation of approximately 27,000 new poles and over 50,000 new signs. With respect to the second of the recommendations, namely, the introduction of the 30 km/h default speed limit in built-up and urban areas, following direction from the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, my Department issued a circular to local authorities on 16 October 2025 requesting that they implement built-up and urban areas speed limits no later than 31 March 2027.

The proposed speed limit changes in urban areas will be implemented by way of special speed limit by-laws. Accordingly, in respect of those roads in urban areas for which local authorities propose to change existing speed limits, local authorities will undertake a statutory public consultation process and consider all representations, in accordance with the requirements of the Road Traffic Act 2004, as amended. The approach that is now being followed recognises and respects the positive and important role local authorities and their elected members fulfil in setting speed limits in urban areas. The period of statutory public consultation will provide an opportunity for members of the public and stakeholders to engage with the process and to make representations to local authorities and their elected members on the proposed speed limit changes.

The third recommendation under the proposed speed limit changes concerns the reduction of the default speed limit on national secondary roads from 100 km/h to 80 km/h. While the Road Traffic Act 2024 made legislative provision for this change, it has not yet been commenced as a further legislative change is required to ensure local authorities will be permitted to set a special speed limit of 100 km/h on certain national secondary roads, where appropriate. That amendment will be progressed in the national vehicle and driver file Bill.

The increased deployment of safety cameras in the coming years is a key action to be delivered under the phase 2 action plan of the road safety strategy. This action, which is being delivered collaboratively by road safety partners, aligns with commitments in the programme for Government. Work on the first national safety camera strategy is now at an advanced stage. My Department is working closely with road safety stakeholders, including the National Transport Authority, NTA, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, the Road Safety Authority, RSA, and An Garda Síochána, on how best to implement it. The strategy focuses on speeding, red light running and bus lane infringements, with flexibility for the enforcement of other types of offences in future.

It is expected that the strategy will be approved in the coming weeks. Once in place, it will provide the framework for increased deployment of cameras across the network, in both urban and rural locations, to assist with the enforcement of a wide range of road traffic offences. While work continues on finalising the strategy, camera enforcement has been increasing. There are 9,000 hours of GoSafe monitoring carried out on our roads each month. Since late 2024, An Garda Síochána has worked with TII and local authorities to install three additional average speed camera zones and nine static camera locations.

Long-standing issues are also being addressed. Currently, learners can renew their permits multiple times if they have booked or scheduled a driving test. This will no longer be the case. In November, I signed regulations to ensure learner drivers can no longer repeatedly renew

their permits without taking a driving test. These regulations will come into effect on 1 November 2026. Learners who have held a permit for seven years or more will not be able to renew and will have to restart the learning to drive process. For learners in category B, this means taking a theory test, obtaining a learner permit, taking 12 essential driver training lessons and sitting a practical test.

Seven years is more than enough time for learners to complete the learning process and become qualified drivers. From a road safety perspective, it is vital that learners are encouraged to complete the learning to drive process and become fully qualified drivers and that people are not encouraged to hold learner permits without ever taking a driving test. Road safety is promoted by ensuring all learners meet a high standard of ability, attain sufficient driving experience and training and prove their ability to drive safely by passing a driving test.

We are also progressing a significant legislative programme. The national vehicle and driver file Bill is a priority for the current legislative term. I aim to see it enacted before the summer recess. The Bill contains a range of provisions to modernise road safety enforcement, improve the use of data and address identified gaps in road traffic legislation. Among other measures, the Bill will: provide a clear legislative basis for local authorities to directly receive and process road collision data; abolish the requirement to display a motor tax disc as part of the wider paperless windscreen project; allow a jury to consider a charge of careless driving where a defendant is acquitted of dangerous driving, thereby addressing a gap identified in Judge Haughton's report into the death of Shane O'Farrell; and provide legislative clarity on the application of penalty points in multiple-offence incidents, ensuring drivers committing more than one offence in a single incident receive multiple sets of penalty points.

My officials are also progressing the next road traffic Bill to take forward key programme for Government commitments. A general scheme will be presented to the Government in the coming months. Among other things, the Bill will provide for a graduated penalty points system designed to strengthen deterrence and address repeat offending. It will also make provision for camera enforcement of seat belt and mobile phone offences, building on existing non-intercept Garda powers in relation to speed.

The safety of all road users continues to be supported through improvements in infrastructure and services. To that end, in 2025, approximately €600 million in Exchequer capital funding was allocated through TII to local authorities for national roads. This included funding for measures to maintain and improve the existing national road network, in addition to funding for new national road projects such as the M28 Cork to Ringaskiddy, the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge and the Adare bypass. In addition, €33 million in current funding was provided to local authorities to carry out regular maintenance activities on the network.

A further €713 million was allocated to regional and local road grants in 2025, with approximately 90% of the funding directed towards maintenance and renewal works. This funding has supported local authorities in carrying out an extensive programme of maintenance and restoration works. It also supported various safety improvement works, bridge rehabilitation schemes, drainage works, climate adaptation measures, community involvement projects and the maintenance of former national roads. In addition to maintenance, targeted improvements are a priority. This action has been identified for progress under the national development plan. The 2026 allocations for national, regional and local roads will be finalised and announced shortly.

Education and public awareness campaigns are also key to promoting safer behaviours on our roads. Primary action 9C of the road safety phase 2 action plan specifically addresses the expansion of road safety education programmes to deliver sustained interventions for young people from primary school through to third level. The new Road Safety Matters transition year programme was piloted during the 2024-25 academic year and exceeded expectations, with the RSA successfully delivering training to teachers from almost 140 schools and more than 12,700 students nationwide. In 2026, the RSA aims to complete a national roll-out to all 730 post-primary schools offering transition year. In addition, the RSA aims to scale its junior cycle road safety education for children aged 13 to 16 years, with a view to launching a national roll-out next year.

In 2025, the RSA launched its new third level education initiative, engaging students at 62 campus events and reaching approximately 8,955 young people nationwide. The programme's mission is to empower 17- to 24-year-olds to make safer road choices by embedding road safety into everyday student life. In 2026, the RSA will proactively re-engage every third level campus in Ireland and roll out a new phase of student-led road safety communications.

As part of budget 2025, €18 million of RSA funding was ring-fenced for road safety public interest activities, including awareness, education and promotion campaigns. This was part of a wider shift to bring a renewed focus on campaigns that make our roads safer for all users. Significant new national campaigns were delivered in 2025, including a drug-driving campaign and a major new drink-driving campaign. This approach will continue in 2026, with €18 million once again set aside for similar campaigns and initiatives.

Road safety is an all-of-society concern and it is beholden on all of us to make better choices for safer roads. Recent tragedies bring into sharp focus the human cost of every fatality on Irish roads. Any death is one too many. Work continues to progress on delivering our road safety targets but much is yet to be done to protect lives on our roads. I look forward to the contributions of Deputies on this very important topic.

An Ceann Comhairle: Now we will move to Sinn Féin. Deputy Pa Daly who is sharing with four others.

Deputy Pa Daly: At the outset, I wish to sympathise with the family of Grace Lynch and also with anyone who was affected by the collision on North Earl Street this morning. In the light of all of this, and the increase in the roads deaths in 2025 - 190 people died on our roads last year, that is, 190 families shattered, 190 chairs empty at kitchen tables and 190 sets of hopes and dreams suddenly cut short - I want to pick the Minister of State up on what he said about whether the powers An Garda Síochána has are being used. Is he seriously saying the Garda is using those powers enough? We have seen certain pockets around the country, such as in Limerick, where gardaí know who are using these scramblers illegally and have the powers to go in and seize them. The Minister of State mentioned that they can enter the curtilage of homes and take the scramblers. I understand that in all the circumstances where such scramblers were seized by the Garda in the Limerick area, not one protest or court case was brought by families trying to get them back.

It is simply not correct, or else it is disingenuous, to say the powers are being used because they are clearly not being used enough around the State. Of course we need trained Garda

scrambler units, and drones and other technology that already exists but has not been used, but we need the Garda to use the powers it has, go into homes and take those scramblers off our streets because that clearly has not been happening. We also need accountability for the adults who are providing these scramblers to the mostly young men who are using them. We need stricter regulation of e-scooters also, not just keeping up with what is there. Helmets and hi-vis gear must be mandated and proper enforcement needs to be used by An Garda Síochána against those who are using e-scooters at over 20 km/h. The serious injuries, including the massive increase percentage-wise of horrific brain injuries to mostly young men, demand that stricter action be taken by using the powers that are already there, and that is clearly not being done.

In 2020, as the Minister of State mentioned, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael committed to Vision Zero to drastically reduce fatalities by 2050. Not only have they failed to reduce road deaths, however, but deaths have increased, whereby we had 190 deaths last year, the highest level in more than a decade. The Minister of State's colleague in government mentioned earlier that statistics had been brought down in 2021 to a low point but did not say that this was in the middle of the Covid pandemic when there were fewer people on the road. Using that as a statistic is not painting the full picture, to put it mildly.

This is a failure of responsibility, a failure of investment and a failure of leadership, not only by this Government but by the last Government. While Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their supporters Deputies Healy-Rae and the regional Independents will point to the fact that there are flashy announcements, reports and new legislation, it does not really amount to anything meaningful. The Minister of State has already rowed back on a commitment to disband the RSA, as had been recommended by an independent review commissioned by the Government. It was announced at the time when the review was published with much fanfare but it has resulted in no meaningful change - change that is much needed. Did it really have to take another tragedy on our roads to bring about legislation that Sinn Féin has been calling for for over a decade and a half? Unless the legislation is actually enforced, of course, it means very little to the people it is supposed to protect.

Let us be clear: road policing is at crisis point. It has been for some time. In September 2025, there were only 640 gardaí in roads policing units across the entire State. Despite repeated promises to get this in order, there are barely any more than there were in 2024 and 406 fewer gardaí than there were in 2009. These are more empty promises at a time when road deaths have been increasing. There has been a decrease in road policing numbers. The deaths are increasing. The Minister of State needs to step up and give us the reason for this and the excuse. There was also another independent review of a system that was defined by a culture of poor performance in An Garda Síochána. What steps has the Minister of State taken to address gardaí parking up for shifts, turning off automatic number plate recognition, ANPR, systems and operating without supervision? The number of deaths demands an answer to that.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: My thoughts are with all those impacted by the crash in Dublin today and the family of Grace Lynch. The year 2025 was the worst year for road fatalities in over ten years and represented a growing trend of Irish roads becoming less safe. Last year, An Garda Síochána recorded 190 people dying on our roads and over 1,000 people being injured as a result of collisions. Each statistic represents a life lost, a wider family devastated, and demonstrates the constant work needed to make our roads safe for all who use them. In 2024,

a report commissioned by the then Minister for Transport recommended the splitting of the RSA into two separate bodies; one with responsibility for road safety and another to oversee processes such as driver testing. Despite the tone of the Department of Transport's initial reaction stating that the report's recommendations would radically transform road safety in Ireland, we recently saw the Minister of State backtrack on these plans. Sadly, this backtracking reflects a wider failure by the Government to implement road safety actions and infrastructure across the State. We see this also in the Government's failure to ensure legislation and regulation is fit for purpose and enforced in relation to scrambler bikes, which are terrorising many communities across the State. This is something that has been raised by my colleagues in the House for many years.

In my constituency, Galway East, many towns and villages have seen road safety projects delayed. This is having a significant impact on safety in those areas. In Dunmore, I recently attended a protest, as did the Minister of State, where hundreds of residents expressed their frustration at the failure to progress the Bridge Street regeneration and road widening project. Bridge Street is a bottleneck for users of the N83. The junction there is also a major safety risk. It is a scandal that a street anywhere would be left in such a dangerous and derelict condition, never mind one on a national road. Residents have waited years for these promised improvement works. That must be prioritised for delivery.

In Headford, local residents have been voicing concerns for years about the area surrounding the Cloughanover junction on the N84, a national road. This is an extremely busy road in an area with shops, a community centre and a school nearby, yet cars can fly by at 100 km/h. I met local residents there recently. It is absolutely lethal. That also appears to have been put on the long finger.

The town of Kinvarra has also seen little progress in seeing much-needed pedestrian crossings and traffic calming measures installed on the N67 through the village. This is a very busy road. A lot of students use this road to walk to and from school. There have been a number of accidents in the village recently, yet the local community cannot get as much as a pedestrian crossing, which they have been demanding for years. There are countless other examples but the likes of these projects need to be prioritised.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: This debate is on road safety. I will tell the Minister of State all about road safety in County Wexford and the area of south Wicklow where I live. We have been forced to drive on deadly, dangerous roads for three decades now. I am sure the Ceann Comhairle will verify this. Roads are disintegrating in front of our very eyes; I kid you not. Even today, on the East Coast FM news, an engineer said he had to close many roads in south Wicklow for safety reasons because they had been washed away, and they were like this before the flood. County Wexford was at the bottom of the intercounty roads comparison study back in 1995. Three decades later, we are still at the bottom. When I meet oncoming traffic at night, say if I am coming from Leinster House or wherever, I am on narrow, winding, uneven back roads so I have to make a split-second decision as to whether to swerve across the road to avoid a massive pothole that will burst my car's tyres, wreck its rims and knock off the tracking of the steering. We do not bother doing tracking any more because it is a pointless exercise. There are deep, sharp craters with jagged edges on them and most of them are hidden beneath pools of water because there is a huge amount of surface water.

It is absolutely infuriating that the Government does not view this as a primary road safety concern. It is all down to Government funding because there has been a deficit of €66 million since 2008 in County Wexford. We have 2,000 km of tertiary and secondary roads. They are so neglected now that the head of engineering in Wexford sent a document to the Oireachtas last year saying we would need €190 million to bring these roads up to what would be classed as a passable state. Just under 30% are in need of complete reconstruction. This is the elephant in the room that nobody is talking about in terms of road safety.

We are anxiously awaiting the funding announcement to local authorities. I was raising this for ten and a half years on the council. I have been writing every week as a TD to the Minister's office. It will be like the lad in "The Shawshank Redemption" - I will write twice a week if I do not get a reply soon. I may have to hold people back. People are so angry over this because nobody is listening. The Minister's own quote is "the objective is to allocate funding to eligible local authorities on [an] equitable a basis ... taking the length of the road network into account." It is the complete wrong metric to approach-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Maurice Quinlivan.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I have only spoken for two minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy was scheduled to speak for two and a half minutes.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I was told I had three minutes, but anyway.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry about that, Deputy. I call Deputy Maurice Quinlivan.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As we talk about road safety, we do so with the backdrop of the tragic, avoidable death of teenager Grace Lynch in Finglas on Sunday, 25 January. She was a teenager who left her house and was struck by a scrambler on her home estate - a young life snatched away in its prime. I extend my deepest sympathies to her family and friends during this most difficult time for them. I welcome news that new laws are being introduced to implement the total ban on scramblers in public spaces and to strengthen existing laws for gardaí. However, more could and should have been done, and done sooner. I firmly believe that if scramblers were being used in more affluent areas across the State, a swift and robust response would have followed, but working class communities, as usual, were abandoned. I recently asked the Minister a parliamentary question. He said he was satisfied with the existing legislation dealing with the misuse of scramblers. In an answer provided to me on 15 January 2026, the Minister of State stated, "Both I and my Department are satisfied with the current regulations in place." I would like to know what has changed since then.

This is not a new issue. The scourge of scrambler bikes have plagued residents of working class estates for years. My party has been consistently looking for the Government to act. I have spoken here many times over the past decade on the danger of these vehicles. Tragically, the focus on this matter has come too late for Grace and her family. My colleague sitting next to me, Deputy Dessie Ellis, had previously introduced a Bill in 2012. Sinn Féin brought

forward Bills in 2015, 2017 and 2021 that aimed to give An Garda Síochána more powers to stop individuals from using scramblers, but these Bills were blocked by the Government.

In 2019, while debating legislation on scramblers, I said that I did not believe the legislation would address the issue, that it was a significant issue in Limerick and other places, and that these bikes were a "danger to children and result in intimidation for many residents [who] cannot live safely in their own homes." However, in Limerick, as Deputy Pa Daly pointed out in October 2023, when An Garda Síochána seized 44 scramblers and other off-road vehicles and five people were arrested over two days, the superintendent said, "We are acutely aware of the problem ourselves and can correlate the use of scramblers and e-scooters to criminal activities with [several] detections in the sale and supply of drugs in recent months." My time is short. While the Minister of State looks at dealing with scramblers, this tragic death must compel the Government to ensure that these scramblers are taken off public roads and spaces for good, and that it also seizes this opportunity to address the safety issues concerning horses in urban areas and that e-scooters being driven illegally and not complying with road regulations are seized as well.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I want to be associated with the words of sympathy in relation to the crash on Dublin's North Earl Street. I only have a couple of minutes. I wanted to focus on the dangerous and antisocial use of scramblers on our streets and green spaces. It is nothing new, as my colleagues have said. In a lot of cases, it is young men and boys speeding around dressed in black, some of them in balaclavas, creating an extreme risk to adults, children and particularly our older neighbours in our communities. For years, colleagues have been trying to force the Government to tackle this issue. As has been said, it goes back as far as 2012. Deputy Dessie Ellis has raised it. I think the Deputy had sponsored four Bills at one stage. It is with tragic irony that Grace Lynch lost her life in Finglas, the very area that he represents. Back in 2014, we were told by the then junior Fine Gael agriculture Minister that "clear and adequate systems and structures [are] in place". Three serving Fine Gael Ministers voted against us on that occasion and said adequate legislation was there. Again, we are in that situation.

The Minister of State said he is going to act. That is good, but people want to see that action. In a lot of cases, what we are seeing is a situation that is getting worse. I raised this issue two years ago, when an elderly woman in my own constituency was knocked down by a scrambler motorbike. I was talking to her husband today. She is still recovering. It has an impact on her physically, but there is also the mental impact. Eileen survived that crash in Killinarden, but two years later Grace Lynch did not. It is time for action.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I express my sympathies and that of the Labour Party to the pedestrian who died and the three other people who have been injured in Dublin city centre this afternoon in a terrible crash.

Where do we start on road safety? A total of 190 lives were lost on our roads last year, the highest since 2014. We need to get a grip on this. I am not sure that the Minister of State has the political will or the courage to do so. We do not need new laws that we have heard trumpeted in the past few days. We have loads of existing laws on speeding, penalty points and driver behaviour. We just need enforcement - relentless enforcement. We have not seen any urgency from this Government in providing the resources to facilitate this enforcement,

whether it is additional gardaí or traffic cameras. We were told there would be 150 new recruits into the Garda traffic corps over the past two years. We got about half that. Pre-recession, the Garda traffic force was around 1,300 strong. Now it is somewhere between 600 and 750. It has been decimated. The number of traffic gardaí has been cut in half, and, at the same time, about a million new cars have been added to our roads. Is it any wonder that it is like the wild west on our roads now?

I do not think this Government gets road safety. First, the Government has completely undermined the commitment in the Road Traffic Act to introduce a default urban speed limit of 30 km/h across the country. Lower speed limits work. Let us look at Wales. Road casualties dropped by 25% in the 18 months after they introduced a similar measure. The Minister's approach now is to make this an individual county councils to decide themselves. It undermines the national nature of this measure. We know that many county councils are going to struggle to pass these laws. They have to do it. They have to pass individual by-laws for every road that they want to make a 30 km/h zone, rather than a blanket urban area of 30 km/h. It is just not the way to do it.

The Government's change in policy regarding the RSA is also hugely concerning. There is an inherent conflict at the heart of the RSA; it is both poacher and gamekeeper when it comes to vehicles on our roads. On the one hand, the RSA is funded by driving tests and the NCT, and on the other, it is tasked with making our roads safer via restrictions on car use. While it is doing well in reducing driving test wait times, it is failing miserably when it comes to road safety. All it does is act as some kind of PR firm, doing photo-ops with Ministers and trying to wrap our children and vulnerable road users generally in high-vis clothing, as though that will keep them safe. The Government must split up the RSA as recommended by an external independent review and endorsed previously by the Government. The Minister of State has basically said that the RSA has got driving test wait times down, so let us leave it alone. We also heard that cost was an issue in this decision. That the Department would penny-pinch on this is pretty appalling. What does it say about our attitude to road safety? What does it say about the value we are placing on those people's lives?

Another issue I want to touch on is this proposal or gimmick coming out of Cabinet over the past few days around mandatory high-vis gear and helmets for cyclists. The fact that this is even being proposed betrays a lack of seriousness and a lack of understanding of exactly what is making our roads unsafe. Road safety is not a personal protective equipment issue. Treating it as such shifts responsibility onto the potential victims, rather than addressing the actual causes of road danger such as road user behaviour, speed, vehicle design, safe infrastructure and so on. There is no credible evidence to suggest that helmets or high-vis mandates reduce collisions, serious injuries or deaths on our roads. Standard bike helmets are not designed to cushion the blow from a two-tonne SUV smashing into you at 50 km/h or 60 km/h, or a HGV rolling over you at a dangerous junction. The helmets are designed for low-speed falls, not collisions involving cars or HGVs, whose size and speed far exceed the conditions that helmets are tested for.

Most cyclists wear helmets anyway. If the Government wants to encourage more of that, just make helmets free, rather than making it an offence not to wear one. International evidence shows that helmet mandates result in a reduction in cycling, which, in turn, leads to higher emissions, worse public health outcomes and essentially criminalises cycling. I met with the

Climate and Health Alliance this morning, who, like me, are appalled by this proposal. The NTA wants to increase the number of cyclists by 14% by 20, which is not a hugely ambitious target. How will criminalising certain forms of cycling lead to an increase in cycling?

It will undermine the Dublinbikes scheme and other city bike schemes around the country that we are currently trying to expand.

The beauty of cycling is the freedom it gives, the ability to pick up a bike on a whim, enjoy the wind in your hair and to just go where you want to go, but cycling is terrifying, particularly in Dublin. I cycle all the time and I also drive. I wear a helmet and high-vis on my bike but I do not feel safe. I have to presume that everything else on the road is trying to kill me every minute I am on it. I get a chill of fear any time on my bike when I stick my hand out to change lane with my son on the back seat of the bike. Is the driver behind me watching? Will they let me into the lane? Are they paying attention or are they on their phone? Are they staring at the iPad-type screen displays that are in cars now? Are they slowing down sufficiently? Can I make contact with the driver to ensure they know I am there? All these checks, fears and chills you get, you never get when you are driving a car - never.

We know what we need to do to make our roads safer: lower speeds; well-designed junctions; segregated walking and cycling infrastructure; proper road maintenance, as mentioned; and relentless enforcement of the rules of the road via gardaí and cameras. This is not just on bank holiday weekends and for Christmas but all the time. Attempts at mandating helmets and high-vis gear are a distraction and a gimmick to make it look like the Government is doing something. It is an exercise in victim-blaming that does nothing to address the actual dangers to cyclists and other vulnerable road users. Any proposal to extend mandates from e-scooters and high-powered e-bikes to ordinary bikes would represent a major policy regression contradicting both international best practice and the Government's own ambitions with regard to active travel and public health.

I will briefly touch on the scrambler issue. I extend my deepest condolences to the family of Grace Lynch. Every parent will have been touched by the incredible bravery shown by Grace's mother Siobhán in the wake of such an unimaginable tragedy. The Government will have the Labour Party's support in any efforts to take scramblers off our roads and public spaces.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank my colleague Deputy Ahern for providing me with some time to address a matter the Minister of State knows is very close to my heart and the hearts of the people of Drogheda. I have a very straightforward question for him. Where is Drogheda's new permanent driving test centre? He and I have engaged on this on a number of occasions in recent weeks. I appreciated the helpful updates he provided. For the benefit of the House, it is worth recording that in July of last year, the RSA said that the new driving test centre in Drogheda would be open and up and running in August. What then followed were a series of "nearly there" statements from the RSA that are in effect continuing without any public statements, at least, clarifying exactly where we are at the moment.

There is a huge amount of frustration in my community. Drogheda is the largest town in the country that has yet to become a city. The fact is we do not have even a temporary centre at this point. The temporary centre was closed a short number of years ago and not replaced. It should have been, in the interim, to allow for the permanent centre to be developed. The fact

we do not have it is a disgrace. The profile of the population in the area is very young. People who are actively seeking to get into the workforce, or maybe to change job where they are required to have a driving licence, are required to go to already stretched centres in Navan and Dundalk. Admittedly, the numbers have come down in Navan and Dundalk, thanks to the work of the Minister of State and the RSA. We know that the testers who were taken on with the intention of working at the Drogheda centre in late August or early September have been deployed to other regional centres to address issues with the list. It is not unrealistic to expect that young people who are living in one of the largest urban areas in the country would be able to have their driving test done in their home community on the roads with which they are familiar and drive on with their instructors. This is something that needs to be addressed.

I would appreciate it very much if at the end of this debate, the Minister of State could put on the record the very clear position of the RSA. I believe this will happen. I know technical issues have arisen. The RSA is committed to this. I absolutely accept that but it would be useful if a public statement were made recommitting to the permanent driving test centre in Drogheda and clarifying and confirming precisely when it will be in operation.

Deputy Seán Canney: A Cheann Comhairle----

An Ceann Comhairle: No, not at this stage.

Deputy Seán Canney: I will not be here for the end of the debate but I will give the Deputy-

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State can correspond.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I have a copy of the RSA's provisional review of fatalities for last year. I encourage all Members, as policymakers and legislators, to read this review because it reflects the crisis we have in this country when it comes to road safety. Last year, 190 precious lives were lost. They were 76 drivers, 21 passengers, 41 pedestrians, 14 pedal cyclists, 30 motorcyclists and three e-scooter-related deaths. Forty-five were under the age of 25 and 43 were over the age of 66. In my county of Tipperary, ten lives were lost compared to two the previous year. It is interesting to see the counties with the highest numbers were Dublin at 22 and Cork at 21, yet, in counties such as Longford, there were zero fatalities. There was one fatality in Leitrim, one in Sligo and two in Cavan.

Of course, behind all of these statistics are families who are absolutely devastated having lost a loved one. It is those families that guide me in my role as Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport. As the Minister of State knows, yesterday marked the first of a series of committee hearings focused on road safety. The committee is keen to move beyond just broad commentary to concentrate on enforcement, operational capacity, legislative gaps, licensing and regulatory gaps, the role of the RSA and other key stakeholders, shortcomings in data capture and data access. The goal is to frame clear, evidence-based proposals that can be implemented in the short to the medium term, with the ultimate goal being to save lives. I look forward to working with the Minister of State and I thank him for his close co-operation to date.

I will focus on the matter of enforcement. Why is enforcement so crucial? It is because it shapes driver behaviour. The biggest cause of accidents on Irish roads is as a result of driver behaviour. We have got an urgent issue to address - the strength of our roads policing unit. What shocked me was the extent of non-compliance with existing legislation during the December period with the Garda operation of 10,000 checkpoints. During that period, there were: 26,500 speeding fines; 1,700 fixed penalty notices were issued with regard to mobile phone usage; 450 individuals were not wearing a seatbelt; 765 were arrested for either drunk or drug-driving; and, amazingly, 3,000 vehicles were seized at the side of the road for various offences, 60% of which did not have insurance. The reality is we have less than 650 gardaí currently in our roads policing unit. In 2009, that stood at 400 more, when we had perhaps 1 million less cars on Irish roads.

In May 2024, former Commissioner Drew Harris appeared before the Oireachtas committee. He gave a commitment that by the end of 2025, 150 additional Garda members would be appointed to the roads policing unit. Unfortunately, assistant commissioner Gunne, in a recent appearance before the committee, confirmed that only 50% of those posts had been filled. Notwithstanding any outcomes of our Oireachtas hearings on road safety, my appeal to the Minister of State is that the number one priority be enforcement. Enforcement shapes driver behaviour. It is about enforcement of existing road traffic legislation. Driver behaviour matters. It is not good enough that we simply say that numbers in our roads policing unit are a matter for the Garda Commissioner. We have to strengthen our roads policing unit.

We have to get back to where we were in 2009, with 1,000 members. That is the number we need in our roads policing unit.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I will use my time to discuss the scourge of scramblers on our streets and in our communities. I offer my deepest and most sincere condolences to the family of Grace Lynch in Finglas. Her death has devastated a family, shaken a community and forced a national reckoning with the criminally dangerous use of scramblers and other vehicles. Grace had her whole life ahead of her and there are no words that can lessen the pain her loved ones and the wider community are suffering.

I welcome the legislation that is being brought forward to ban these vehicles from our streets but we have to be honest and admit this could have been done a long time ago. It should not have taken the death of young Grace to spur action. In my community, we are all too familiar with the reckless use of scramblers. We see youths with no helmets who are ballied up speeding up and down roads and footpaths, doing wheelies against the flow of traffic, beckoning and jeering at gardaí and having no regard for their safety or that of others. This is sheer thuggery and part of a systematic wider criminality where vehicles are used to intimidate and terrorise local communities and as mules for the transport and dealing of illegal drugs at ease.

There is now a section of society that has become untouchable because it is not being pursued and facing the full rigours of the law. Middle management in An Garda Síochána is hesitant to order chases of suspects because it cannot afford to have personnel tied up or suspended because of a Fiosrú investigation. However, as a country we cannot surrender to lawlessness. We have to empower our gardaí to ensure they can pursue those using scramblers in public areas. To do this, we must consider a statutory indemnity for members of An Garda

Síochána who act reasonably and within strict protocols, like that of the London Metropolitan Police, to ensure they are not unfairly penalised for doing their jobs.

We need a system of electronic tagging for e-scooters, e-bikes and scramblers so they can be traced from retailers to consumers. Ultimately, there must be a fear of consequences. The law must be applied with full rigour to ensure recklessness, thuggery and criminality are met with appropriate punishment. We cannot compromise on this. We owe it to the Lynch family and every family in Ireland to ensure our public spaces are no longer playgrounds for criminals or those with scramblers.

I will also touch on the use of sulkies. We have seen recent incidents around Dublin and in Limerick-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: -----where they have been used recklessly and put lives in danger.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Ministers of State for being here to facilitate this important discussion on road safety.

Looking at road safety overall in the past few decades, significant progress has been made and that has to be acknowledged. We went from 472 lives lost in 1997 to 137 lives lost in 2021. However, unfortunately, the progress has halted and we have seen an increase in fatalities on our roads in recent years. Last year, as the Ministers of State will be aware, 190 lives were lost on our roads. It is frustrating to see the trajectory going backwards, given the progress that had been made. The road safety strategy the programme for Government committed to is important in this respect to try to arrest the decline in progress.

I share the concerns raised about scramblers. Many speakers spoke about that today. The progress in improved regulations and enforcement is important, as it is in relation to e-scooters. However, I want to focus on pedestrian safety today, in particular because it is also an important aspect of road safety. Last year 41 pedestrians lost their lives in road traffic incidents. That is a significant number. On the infrastructure to improve road safety for pedestrians and pedestrian crossings, there is a total lack of consistency in how crossings are designed and constructed. There are uncontrolled crossings, controlled crossings and zebra crossings. There is a lack of consistency in the road markings, signage and so on. Any road safety strategy will have to address that issue so we have consistency in the infrastructure to serve pedestrians. For example, the high incidence of the breaking of red lights at pedestrian crossings must be dealt with. There needs to be zero tolerance of this. We need to install cameras at busy pedestrian crossings to try to deal with this offence because it is very dangerous. It can have serious consequences and is prevalent, regrettably. We also need to look at our crossings. All pedestrian crossings should be raised platforms to make them safer. Again, there is a lack of consistency with that. Many new crossings have a raised platform but existing crossings do not. I ask that be taken on board.

I share the concerns Deputy Michael Murphy raised earlier about the roads policing unit and replenishing the numbers in the traffic corps of An Garda Síochána.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy

Deputy Séamus McGrath: This is critical because enforcement has to be a key part of road safety. I ask the Ministers of State to take that back.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Irish roads are growing increasingly dangerous with 190 people losing their lives in 2025. There have been some truly horrific accidents on our roads in the north east in recent years. I have no doubt the Ministers of State have the same reaction as the rest of us when they see reports of collisions and loss of life and that they absolutely wish to meet the objective of achieving vision zero, that there would be no deaths on Irish roads. I will highlight a few areas where the Government has got it wrong and ask the Ministers of State to reflect on and give consideration to these matters.

The N2 Clontibret to the Border and Ardee to Castleblayney roads schemes are crucial to the north-east region for various reasons. Where the project scored the highest in an appraisal by Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, was on safety, being appraised as highly positive for safety, which is the highest possible score. TII has described these works as suspended due to funding constraints. Therefore, my first request as we debate road safety today, is whether we can do a reappraisal of projects which are currently underfunded and give an additional level of priority on the basis of safety.

Second, I welcome that recently during oral questions - and it was actually quite refreshing - the Minister conceded to my party and constituency colleague, Deputy Carthy, that Cavan and Monaghan County Councils have been constrained by resources in terms of road safety and maintenance and repair and that they have not received the funding they need. There was a ridiculous situation last year where almost half of the increased funding provided to councils was for speed limit signage rather than maintenance and repair.

I understand the Minister had hoped to publish the local and regional road funding allocations by the end of last month so I would appreciate if the Minister of State could indicate in his closing remarks when it is intended to publish them. Given the Minister has acknowledged that Cavan and Monaghan have been underfunded, will the Minister of State provide reassurance that he intends to redress this and provide a substantial increase to both local authorities so we can address this matter?

Deputy Jen Cummins: Road safety is an issue in every part of the country. In recent weeks and today, we heard of yet more tragedies. I welcome any measures that can be taken to make road safety better but I will not hold my breath.

These are some examples from my constituency, Dublin South Central. Calm Crumlin Road was set up a few years ago because of the absolute danger zone that road is. Two years ago, a woman was tragically killed on her bicycle and two years later - recently in November - another accident almost identical to that one happened, so nothing is happening in that area to make it safe for people to use it. The absolute tragedy of the intertwined lives that were impacted by that woman's death was recently spoken about on "Liveline". This is echoed throughout the country.

Dublin South Central has scramblers. I would love to say it is scrambler city but I am sitting beside Deputy McAuliffe and scramblers are in his area and many other areas. I was coming home from work the other day and going towards Christchurch Cathedral and there was a scrambler doing a wheelie all the way up the road. This was a few days after that poor young woman in Finglas was tragically killed by a scrambler. Scramblers are a mode of transport for many young and older people. I am glad we are putting measures in place now but it has taken the death of a young person for that to happen. My heart goes out to that young woman's family and friends and all who loved her.

I am a cyclist and the mother of cyclists and my heart is in my mouth half of the time because of the absolute state of the cycling infrastructure in this city. Kilmainham Lane is one example. It is a two-way road but it is only wide enough for one car and cyclists often bear the brunt of that.

3 o'clock

St. Cillian's National School in Bluebell has been begging for road safety measures outside the school. They have still not been implemented. That is an accident waiting to happen.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We are facing a road safety crisis in Ireland. It is worsening year on year. After a stint of progress earlier this decade, recent years have seen a deeply worrying trend of increasing deaths. There were 190 in 2025, 175 in 2024, 184 in 2023, and 155 in 2022. They are hundreds upon hundreds of people whose lives were tragically taken from them and families who have been destroyed by this. This is not for lack of policy, because we have the Vision Zero policy running from 2021 to 2030 which seeks to halve road deaths by 2030 and eliminate all road deaths by 2050. We are halfway through that time period now and the Government is not meeting the targets in that policy. We continue to see life after life being lost on our roads.

Phase 1 of that policy, which ran from 2021 to 2024, saw investment of €3.8 billion. It had a target of 122 or fewer deaths. It was not met. Phase 2 runs until 2027 and we are halfway through that phase now. There is no target for that period. That speaks volumes and it seems to me that the Government has, unfortunately, given up on this. The overarching national target remains a 50% reduction by 2030, meaning annual deaths should at this point be down to 72 or fewer, which is still 72 too many. So far this year, we have seen 11 people lost on our roads. Policies mean nothing if implementation fails.

What we are witnessing is a steady, consistent rise, year after year, at a time when our national strategy had promised to do the exact opposite. The Road Safety Authority, gardaí and indeed the Minister of State's Government colleagues have acknowledged the worsening trends and the need for a reset of approach, but the pace of change is simply too slow. Enforcement remains inconsistent and vulnerable road users are bearing an increasing share of this danger. Without a major acceleration in the delivery of road safety measures, we will see more people lose their lives on our dangerous roads. It is down to driving behaviour, speeding, congestion, lack of enforcement and deficits in infrastructure. There is no single solution to this, because a series of measures need to be taken on board and implemented. We are just not seeing movement on that quickly enough.

I will talk about a road. Ideally, our roads would not be a priority for building. We have climate obligations. However, some of our roads are just so dangerous at the moment that there is a need to put resources into them to make them safer. I will specifically talk about the N81, which runs from Tallaght through west Wicklow and Kildare. It stands out for all the wrong reasons. It is the only road outside Dublin that has never been upgraded and is one of the major national roads still operating as a single-lane route for most of its length. Each morning, the N81 is a long line of red tail lights. A single collision, big or small, can bring the entire route to a standstill for hours. It is one of the most dangerous roads in the country. I and others have been calling for it to be addressed for years. Despite all these repeated calls, it was not included in the national development plan for 2027, and Government signals about it have been vague at best. While recent interactions have indicated that it may be advanced before 2030, no firm commitments, timelines or funding allocations have been given to me. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could look into this. A road as dangerous as the N81 cannot be left in limbo like this any longer. It needs to be brought to the same standard as other national routes in Ireland.

As I said, there is not a single solution to road safety. What we are seeing is that many roads are at capacity now. We see increased congestion, which leads to more risk of accidents and poorer driver behaviour. A key element of the solution to this is improving our public transport. I know a stated aim of the Government is to improve public transport, but I and my constituency in Wicklow have not seen that happen. I will give an example. This morning, on East Coast Radio, a young woman, Mischa Cleary, was talking about how she had to drop out of her college course in Grangegorman, where she was doing politics. She had to drop out this year because she could not get public transport to college and she cannot afford to live there, the same as many other students. Her town was promised a bus, the 199 service. The NTA told me that funding was available for it last May and that it was a priority. It was meant to start in September. It still has not started. I have repeatedly raised this. Indeed, I have raised it with other Ministers too. I ask the Minister of State to look into this. It is not acceptable for a young student like Mischa to have to drop out of college because a simple Local Link has not been delivered nearly a year after it was meant to be.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I share my sympathies and condolences with everybody involved in the terrible accident this morning on North Earl Street.

I am contacted regularly by my constituents in Dublin Rathdown about road safety issues. I will focus my comments today on cycling. There are so many topics I want to talk about but this is to get the best use out of my time. People contact me about things like the need for pedestrian crossings, new developments in Carrickmines, the need for traffic calming measures near schools in Churchtown, and concerns about the speed of traffic in particular residential areas in Ballinteer and Stillorgan, but the reality is that people overwhelmingly want to opt for active travel like walking and cycling. As we seek to encourage active travel as a viable alternative to driving, it is imperative that we address persistent safety issues. The safety of pedestrians and cyclists must be factored into our shared use of the roads. Funding for active travel has not been increased with inflation and we are seeing the cracks and shortcomings as a result of this.

As a mode of transport, we have seen huge uptake of cycling over the last number of years. Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has overseen transformative cycle infrastructure

implementation. I commend it on its leadership in this space. On weekends in my local areas, I see families with cargo bikes travelling to places like Marlay Park, to sports training, and to visit friends and families by bike, which is all great, but this usage is curtailed by hazards and sometimes by real risk. A lack of segregated cycling infrastructure in areas with sections that are not connected creates unstable, unusable routes. A lack of education on the rights of cyclists for other road users and sometimes the rights of pedestrians is particularly prevalent. As has been raised by the Dublin Cycling Campaign and the Love 30 campaign, speed restrictions due to council-by-council assessment create inconsistency that also proves dangerous for cyclists on our roads. If we are serious about road safety and active travel, then co-ordinated planning and connected infrastructure funding and education on the rights of different categories of road users are all imperative. There is a lot to be positive about with the current road safety strategy, but to see further progress in this area, we must listen to pedestrians and cyclists.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the statements on road safety this afternoon. I am conscious of the dreadful accident in the city centre today that many Deputies have mentioned. I know everyone's thoughts and prayers in the House are with those affected, their families and indeed the emergency services that have responded.

I welcome the series of decisive actions taken by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, in response to the death of Grace Lynch. I put on the record my own condolences to the Lynch family. The danger posed by scramblers is an issue that I and my Dublin colleagues, Deputies McAuliffe and Lahart, have raised on numerous occasions in this House. We welcome Grace's law and we want to see it implemented as soon as possible. The Minister recently visited Dún Laoghaire, where we met senior gardaí to get an update on a range of issues, including the use of scrambler bikes, antisocial and criminal activity and the need for high-visibility products. Forty new gardaí have been deployed to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. These are welcome and are having a meaningful and visible effect.

As raised by other Members of the House, enforcement is key to road safety. Risky behaviour like using a phone while driving, speeding, breaking red lights, or cycling without lights at night is unacceptable and we need to see continued enforcement. There must also be a focus on continuing to improve individual behaviour. The RSA, which has been into the House this week, has been proactive in this regard and should continue its work. This is about saving lives and preventing life-changing injuries. Locally, I welcome the recent allocation for schools such as St. Kevin's National School in Sallynoggin, which has long awaited road safety improvements on Pearse Street. I thank the Minister and his colleagues for decisively dealing with the issue of scramblers and I look forward to working with them to continue to make progress on road safety.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank my colleagues for giving me a little extra time on this issue. Last Friday, Father Séamus Aherne reminded the people of Finglas that 25 January was Burns night, celebrating the famous poet Robbie Burns, who spoke about old acquaintance not being forgot. I suppose for our community, as Father Aherne said, 25 January will be remembered as the day when our community was shaken by the tragic death of Grace Lynch, a 16-year-old girl with her whole life ahead of her who was killed crossing a pedestrian crossing. There will be many victims of road traffic accidents but I just want to remember Grace's life for a moment. Grace's parents Siobhán and Martin have spoken about their daughter as a beautiful young girl.

She was laid-back, she had a messy bedroom like many teenagers and she had an eye for borrowing a nice top that her mam might never get back. She spent her time with her friends and her boyfriend Harry. She would often take two buses rather than take a short walk.

She lost her life due to a vehicle that should never have been in a public place. That is the reality of road safety. This is an issue on which many people have campaigned for a long time. We have campaigned on it because we see it at first hand in our communities. Last week, we were getting calls to our office from people who were angry, people who wished they had shouted louder and people who wanted to know what they could do, what powers An Garda Síochána had and what more the Government and An Garda Síochána could do. That is totally understandable so a lot of us welcomed the new regulations and laws this week, which will be known as Grace's law. There will be a ban on the use of scramblers in any public place. They will further strengthen the powers around safety, seizure and destruction.

Of course, the 2023 Act put many measures in place that give An Garda Síochána powers like the ability to hold the bike for up to eight weeks and not to return it unless it is returned at the permission of the court, the ability to seize the bike from the court, the ability to fine an adult who supplies the bike to a child and the ability to prosecute an offence on the belief that dangerous driving has been taking place. Many laws were already being broken with regard to scramblers. Yes we have now added a fourth, fifth or sixth law but the question is how those six laws will be enforced. There is no point in us passing laws if they are not enforced. I understand An Garda Síochána has a very difficult job and that pursuit is a very high-risk pursuit for gardaí where the Garda is exposed, the person is exposed and the public is exposed - it is not easy - but there is now a range of powers. I believe that in operational terms, An Garda Síochána can put together measures that will tackle the very small number of people in our communities who hold these scramblers. As Father Aherne said, these young bucks will kill and be killed. Last week I spoke perhaps in anger but we will give the Garda Commissioner time now to operationalise these powers. However, it must be very quick. We need to make sure that An Garda Síochána has the resources, and the Minister is expected to provide them, and that gardaí at every level know their role, know what they can do, feel empowered and do not feel restricted. It is incredibly important that every Garda knows what he or she can do in terms of tackling scrambler bikes and that senior gardaí, including the Commissioner, put in place operations that use section 109A and sections 1 to 4, inclusive. They are all there to be used. We now want them to be enforced because another incident of this nature is just unthinkable.

I welcome the measures announced this week. Having studied it for some time, it is more complicated than simply introducing a ban. There are other elements to it but it is incredibly welcome. As Siobhán said, she wants her daughter to be remembered. These laws will be known as Grace's law to remember her but the important thing now is that we put in place the measures to enforce them. Grace's mam was really clear; this was not an accident. She does not want to call it an accident. We need to ensure this can never happen again. I also acknowledge the loss of life in the city centre today and the families that were there.

Deputy Grace Boland: I echo Deputy McAuliffe's calls regarding making sure that An Garda Síochána understands the powers it has and has all of the supports and equipment necessary to enforce these powers. My constituency borders that of Deputy McAuliffe. I express my condolences to Grace Lynch's family. What happened was horrific. There is a

similar issue with scramblers in Santry in my constituency. We have to do everything we can to ensure that An Garda Síochána has the resources, manpower and technology to ensure this never happens again.

At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Transport this week, we heard about the stark and distressing rise in road fatalities. Again today, we have seen a major crash in Dublin city centre in which a number of pedestrians have been injured and, unfortunately and tragically, another person has lost their life leaving a family devastated. I am sure the thoughts and condolences of all of us in this House are with those affected today and the emergency service personnel who have had to deal with it.

We know that reducing speed saves lives. At the transport committee this week, we heard overwhelming testimony from the witnesses that we have to reduce the speed on our roads. We have to achieve a default of 30 km/h in all urban areas. The Government has directed local authorities to reduce speed limits in built-up areas by March 2027 with investment, signage and implementation. We heard very concerningly from the witnesses this week that the procedures the local authorities have to undertake to implement these reduced speed limits are overly bureaucratic. They have to go out to public consultation and they have to pass it through votes. We need to see the Department of Transport really leading and supporting local authorities to deliver on this. Lives are being lost. We have to deliver reduced speed. All of the research tells us this. We have seen it in Spain and Wales and we need to see it here in Ireland before March 2027 but no later than March 2027.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Since my election, I have constantly raised the dangerous conditions and layout of roads across my constituency. Nowhere is this crisis more severe than in south Kilkenny along the N25. The stretch past the Rhu Glenn can be described as a deadly accident black spot. The statistics are not just numbers. They are families and communities left devastated. Over the past 40 years, more than 80 people have lost their lives on this road alone. In recent years, we have endured several fatal collisions. A road traffic report confirms what the local community already knows. Life will never be the same for these people and their families. They have to shout loudly. There have been delays and delays. This is not about manpower; this is about money. This road has been pushed beyond its limit with a 360% increase in users. It is not fit for purpose. While progress on an upgrade is under way, its pace is mind-bogglingly slow. Every month of delays is a gamble with lives.

This is not an isolated issue. Across Ireland, our roads are becoming more deadly. We have seen this all too often. In Kilkenny, the N24 runs on from the N25 and is just as deadly. Extreme weather from flooding to relentless rainfall is ripping apart rural roads that are already in a poor state. On the quays in Thomastown, roads and walls are collapsing. Again, this is down to money, not manpower.

We need a substantial increase in central funding to local authorities, not for patching potholes, but for proper repair, resilient materials and modern engineering that can withstand these new climate realities.

Too often, the Government's sole answer to road safety is to lower speed limits. This is a pointless action if we lack the gardaí to enforce it. The facts are stark. Over the past 15 years, the number of gardaí in road policing has collapsed by a staggering 41%. As the roads have grown busier, the number of gardaí tasked with policing them has been nearly halved. This is

an utter failure of policy by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Minister speaks of recruiting new gardaí but he is silent on the high volume of experienced members leaving every month for police forces in the likes of Australia. We are losing our wealth of knowledge and experience.

Addressing road safety demands accountability. We need a serious commitment to restore road policing units, and we need clear accountability from the leadership of An Garda Síochána for its performance around road safety.

Deputy Paul Murphy: First, I want to express my condolences to the family of the person who has died and those who were injured in what sounds like an awful crash in the north inner city. I hope there are no more deaths as a result.

We are obviously here because of the tragic and awful death of 16-year-old Grace Lynch. I want to express my condolences to her family and friends. I also want to pay tribute to her mother, in particular, for the way that she spoke out so bravely and strongly and as a consequence we are now going to have Grace's law. Of course, it did not have to be Grace's law as this is legislation that was passed in 2023. A regulation could have been signed at any point since then but was not. It should not have taken this tragedy to force action by the Government because this is not a new issue. It is an issue that particularly affects working class communities. It has certainly been an issue for the entire time that I have been a TD in Dublin South-West. It has been a scourge in working-class communities. People try to go for walks in parks or wherever and they face the threat of being run down by someone on a scrambler.

I got an email just last week from a woman saying that on several occasions she was forced off the path while pushing her four-month-old baby in her pram as riders deliberately sped towards them and performed wheelies directly in front of them. Her eight-year-old daughter now refuses to go for local walks out of fear of these bikes. That is not new and not the first contact like this I have received. I have received many over many years.

The safety of working-class communities should not be ignored until tragedy strikes. That means far wider reaching preventative measures to protect our communities. It means banning the sale of scrambler bikes except to those who are in licensed clubs. It means investing in safety initiatives that target groups using scramblers. It means investing in diversion programmes, community outreach, sports and roads safety, which will go a lot further than having gardaí chase after teenagers on bikes.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Traffic volumes are up, speeds are up, and mobile phone use is up. I want to highlight the N80 that goes through Laois. Safety measures are needed in the village of Arles, which local councillors and local people have been years looking for. I handed in petitions to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and Laois County Council demanding that traffic calming measure be put at each end of the village and that it be made safer for pedestrians with a pedestrian crossing, proper footpaths and improved signage. Laois County Council made a submission to TII long ago but it is not being funded. I want the Minister of State to take note of this. This needs to be funded by the Department and by TII. Drinagh, which is in the Mountmellick area, is on the N80 and also needs some traffic calming measures where traffic is coming from the west and into Mountmellick town.

I want to raise the issue of local roads. We reduced the speed limit on local roads to 60 km/h, and this is a bone of contention for me. In my naivety, I thought we would see 80 km/h signs being removed and being replaced with 60 km/h signs all over the country. However, we got a white sign with lines across it. The only person in this room who can probably tell me what that means is the Ceann Comhairle because she is a former truck driver. I asked a number of TDs if they knew what the sign means and none of them did. We are the people who made the laws. Those signs are ineffective and need to be changed. We need a 60 km/h sign. We are asking for a bit of common sense here. Stripped lines across a white background do not tell people anything. The figure 60 tells them that this is the maximum speed. This is a common-sense measure. The speeds on local roads in Laois are crazy. There is a cohort of drivers driving like lunatics on them and that needs to stop.

I want to raise the issue of e-bikes as well. I am in favour of e-bikes but now some of them are higher powered than motorbikes. If anyone here ever had a Honda 50 or a Honda 100, they had to have tax, insurance and a driver's licence for it. People can now have an e-bike that can do 70 km/h and 80 km/h. One passed me the other day and I was doing 65 km/h. He flew passed me on an e-bike that had tires the width of a good motorbike. That cannot be allowed to continue. We have to regulate them. People who drive them need to be licensed, taxed and insured. We should also make sure they know the rules of the road. We cannot continue like this. I also support the legislation on scrambler bikes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It would be utter hypocrisy to begin a debate on road safety without mentioning that it does not just apply to 16 and 18-year-olds and that it also applies to TDs and that we have a TD in this House who was driving at 190 km/h. They could have killed anybody on that road that day only the gardaí arrived. It was the second time this person had an offence. They paid compensation to a family in 1990 when they were councillor. To be frank, it is utterly disgraceful that someone like that has not been mentioned by the Minister for justice. There was no political penalty except coming off a committee. They are still on other committees and they spoke here yesterday. It is not setting a very good example because, as I said, it is not just young people.

I want to send my sympathy to the family of Grace Lynch. It is heartbreaking and her mother's call-to-action was inspirational. Scramblers should not be permitted on public roads or in public spaces. Forget about having tax and insurance, which is in the current law. They should not be on public roads. They are not suitable. They are far too dangerous. A person should need a licence to buy one or to sell one and should be part of a motor club which is where scrambling is actually meant to take place.

In this context, I want to mention that when I was on the council, it took the initiative and set up a scrambler bike club in Mulhuddart where I live. It is now closed because the club is expected to pay the insurance, and it cannot get insurance. We have this scenario where clubs are using public facilities set up by councils. The clubs are then expected to find the insurance, so the public facilities are no longer in use. This has to stop. We should give young people that outlet so that they do not have the excuse to be on public roads and all local authorities should be involved in providing such facilities.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I had the opportunity to raise road safety with the Tánaiste earlier this afternoon. I was glad he was able to confirm that the ridiculous notion of a proposed

mandatory requirement for helmets for people using a push bike is not going ahead. I welcome his confirmation of that.

During that discussion, I also raised some of issues raised at the Joint Committee on Transport's meeting on road safety yesterday. Three key issues were raised by people who represent cyclists but other vulnerable road users as well. First, there is their concern about the U-turn with respect to the Road Safety Authority, RSA. There had been a clear agreement reached in the last Government to separate out that public information element and to let the RSA focus on that. That has been reversed and it will have to continue to try to do that while at the same time bring in its own income. That is not the right focus there.

Second, there is the issue of 30 km/h zones in built-up areas. When I was on Fingal County Council, estates were fighting to be part of that pilot because they knew it would bring a greater degree of safety for communities, particularly for children. Somebody hit by a car travelling at 30 km/h has a 90% chance of surviving that crash. When the speed goes up to 60 km/h, there is almost a 100% likelihood that the crash will kill them. That is the difference. We have the power in law that makes it easy to bring in those 30 km/h zones across large parts of built-up areas but the decision has been made to make it harder with each local authority undertaking long, arduous processes to deliver what could be a life-saving decision for an area.

People raised the Crowe report early last year and issues to do with policing, particularly the focus of An Garda Síochána in regard to roads policing. That really undermined confidence in people, whether they are in the car, on the bike or on foot. It is important that the Minister for justice give us an update on the response to that report.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I wish to talk about road safety in the context of the quality of our roads. I represent, as the Minister of State knows, a rural constituency with a huge number of regional roads where the county council is expected to maintain and improve road surfaces, but it cannot do that to the level we need without a major funding increase.

I will give the Minister of State some examples of roads I am talking about: the old N7, now the R445, particularly in Toomevara village; the old N8, now the R639; the Cloughjordan to Borrisokane road; the Cloughjordan to Nenagh road; and the Templemore to Johnstown road. The Portumna to Birr road, between the bridge at Portumna and the bridge in Riverstown, is entirely in my constituency and needs major enhancement works, particularly from the pike back as far as the ferry near Portumna. Other examples are the Cloughjordan to Roscrea road; the Nenagh to Ballina road through Portroe and Newtown; the Nenagh to Carrigahorig road going between Puckaun, Coolbaun and Terryglass; the Nenagh to Dolla road to Tipperary town, particularly going through Curreeney; and the Thurles to Limerick road, in particular going through Ballycahill, Milestone, Rear Cross and Kilcommon. That is a lot of regional roads and I did not even cover all of them in one rural constituency.

Tipperary County Council has a huge amount of work to do. It is doing its best but with inflation it can only do so much. I am getting a lot of complaints at the moment about the Thurles to Limerick road, particularly from Rear Cross towards Newport. We need further investment in our roads in Tipperary if we are going to bring the road surfaces and structures up to the standard that is needed. After the rainfall we have seen in recent weeks and months, they are now even more damaged. Sending a team out to fix potholes only does so much. We

need to deal with the structure of the roads if we are going to have safer and better ones in north Tipperary. That is what our taxpayers deserve.

Deputy John Connolly: I will confine my comments today to the issue of road safety around schools and enabling children to access schools in a safer manner. I welcome, as part of that, the implementation of phase 2 of the national speed limit review, which proposes to reduce the speed limit in urban areas to a default of 30 km/h. It is not so clear, however, what is expected of local authorities in relation to schools on national routes, and we should give them greater clarity.

The Minister of State will be very familiar with some of the routes I am going to discuss, such as the R336 and the N59. In the case of the N59, Scoil Baile Nua, Rosscahill national school, Leam national school and Derryglinna are all on a national route. We should provide direct guidance to Galway County Council and other local authorities that we expect the speed limit, at least periodically around the time of school operations, to be reduced to 30 km/h at those spots. Similarly, on the R336, at Scoil Náisiúnta na bhForbacha, Scoil Náisiúnta Sailearna and scoil An Tulach, we should also ensure that at those locations the county council will reduce the speed limit to 30 km/h.

On a general point, across the country, while we welcome the work local authorities are doing specifically on urban areas, we should ask them to reduce the speed limit on those national regional routes to 30 km/h during school times at least.

I also want to talk about the safe routes to school scheme. We all welcome the ambition and objective of that scheme to make it easier for children to walk, cycle or scoot to school. A level of frustration has developed around the completion of those projects. I was the principal of a school that was involved in the first tranche of the safe routes to school scheme and, as yet, the work has not been completed. One of the challenges is that money is being provided to the active travel team within the local authorities but they also have lots of other tasks to do such as maintaining bus shelters, cycle schemes and road-narrowing schemes. We should provide the local authorities with staff specific to the safe routes to school scheme. The investment deserves that.

Deputy Emer Currie: I do not think we have a legislation problem in road safety. I believe we primarily have an implementation and enforcement problem. Our Vision Zero strategy is heading in the wrong direction. Road deaths in Ireland rose by 22% from 2019 to 2025, while the EU average fell by 12%. That is not progress. Behaviour on our roads is worsening, while the system meant to protect people has failed to keep pace with the reality - more people, more cars, new vehicle types and more pressure on infrastructure. There has been a loss of confidence in our road safety strategy and the Government must act now to restore it. We have to remember the families affected and listen to road safety groups like PARC and people like Susan Gray who are dedicated to road safety. Fourteen people have lost their lives already this year, including somebody today. I am thinking of that family.

What are the concrete plans to prioritise road safety, reform the RSA and properly tackle enforcement? Awareness and education matter but they are not enough. From the past six months, I will give the Minister of State three examples of where I have seen a worrying lack of co-ordination between agencies and Departments. Take illegal licence plates. Despite

assurances from the Department of Transport, the Garda already had enforcement powers. It took two years and repeated parliamentary questions before fixed charge notices were implemented for illegal licence plates. Then there is Garda access to the national vehicle and driver file, NVDF, which records licence status, disqualifications and penalty points. It is the backbone of enforcement on the roadside. For months, I was told by the Department of Transport that gardaí had full roadside access via their mobility app, and had so for at least three years. The Garda then said access was partial, that a memorandum of understanding had only been signed and that a pilot was under way. Since December, all Garda members now have full NVDF access and I welcome that, but what was happening over the past three years?

Even now, I do not have full confidence that gardaí and insurance companies have all the information they need from the NVDF. The courts system is not capturing driver numbers of people who are disqualified or assigned penalty points, so a process then has to be undertaken to match drivers to offences on the NVDF. I have a simple question that has not been answered yet. Fifteen hundred court-issued penalty points have not been matched to drivers but a report from the Department of Transport says they could have been. Has there been any follow-up to see if any of them were for drivers who could have breached the 12- or seven-penalty-point threshold for disqualification? These are fixable issues: co-ordination, implementation and enforcement.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I wish to join with every Member of the House in remembering and paying tribute to the 183 lives that were lost on Irish roads in 2025, the largest number of fatalities on our roads since 2014. Of course, my heart also goes out to those impacted by this afternoon's horrendous bus crash in Dublin city centre and to the family of the deceased and those injured. Every life lost on our roads is a family devastated, an empty chair at the dinner table and a heart broken beyond repair.

Of immense concern to me and no doubt my colleagues in this Chamber is the fact that since the end of Covid-19, road deaths have been on the rise in Ireland. Last year, there was an average of 15 deaths per month on the roads in Ireland, an increase on the average of 14 deaths per month in 2024. Clearly we must do more in this Chamber to ensure the message gets through: slow down because speed kills. For families grieving the sudden loss of a loved one in a road traffic accident, it can only feel like a meaninglessly cruel and random event.

Last year, over half of the fatalities occurred on high-speed roads, those with a speed limit of 80 km/h and above. Carlow County Council has led from the front in applying a reduced speed limit to the section of the N80 that runs through the county, in direct response to an uptick in recent incidents on that stretch of road. Likewise, Kilkenny County Council's road safety plan has set out a strategic vision for the remainder of the decade aimed at engaging with the relevant stakeholders to bring about a safe environment on our roads. Outside Glenmore in south Kilkenny, a 6 km stretch of the N25 is among the most lethal pieces of road in the country. You are five times more likely to be killed or seriously injured on this section of road than on any other road in Ireland.

Similarly, the Waterford to Cahir scheme on the N24 is stalled between stages 2 and 3, awaiting the necessary backing before it can proceed. People in Kilkenny are crying out for this work to be progressed urgently and to curb the senseless and utterly preventable tragedies. The time for talk is over; now is the time to act.

I urge the relevant Ministers to do everything in their power to ensure these life-saving projects across the N24 and N25 are progressed as quickly as possible. Road tragedies remind us that everything can change in an instant and we should adopt that attitude when it comes to safety on the road. Everything can change for the worse, but it can also change for the better. I commend the RSA on its dedication to Vision Zero and on the outreach and education work it does on an ongoing basis to increase awareness of our own responsibilities on the road.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Communities have suffered the scourge of scramblers for too long. The death of Grace Lynch, a 16-year-old girl from Finglas, demands urgent action. People are frustrated by what they see as the lack of a proper response by the Garda to this menace. Gardaí are frustrated too, and while they have had some successes in seizing scramblers, the recent tragedy in Finglas shows that much more needs to be done. The current legislation is failing to tackle the scourge of scramblers and is not enforced.

I have raised these concerns both in the Dáil and at local policing forums. I have also tried to bring legislation before the Dáil as far back as 2012. I introduced a Private Members' Bill that addressed the nuisance and dangers caused by scramblers in public areas, housing estates, parks and greens. My Bill would have given the Garda powers to seize, remove and dispose of such vehicles. This Bill was voted down by the then Government. In 2017, the then Deputy Imelda Munster and I introduced another Bill that again would have given the Garda the power to seize and detain quad bikes and scramblers when they were being used unlawfully. Once again this was voted down by the Government. In 2020, Sinn Féin introduced another Bill on scramblers and addressed concerns raised by the Government with regard to such legislation. Again, this Bill would have given the Garda powers of seizure, but also included a call for the Garda to be given the necessary resources and training to chase and apprehend people using scramblers unlawfully. Unfortunately, the Government voted down that Bill as well. It has taken the death of a young girl in Finglas for the Government to finally act.

In framing the proposed legislation, the Government should take note of best practice for dealing with this problem in other countries. Communities want to see scramblers being seized and they also want to see people prosecuted. In Britain, police forces have been using a DNA spray that tags riders and bikes. This spray is an invisible, uniquely coded dye that aids in the identification of an offender, allowing for future prosecution. Drones are used to track offenders and scramblers, thereby avoiding the dangers of high-speed chase. In Britain, police forces have also used specialised scramblers to pursue and apprehend riders. It is unacceptable that people on scramblers are able to cover their faces.

Along with such measures, the Garda needs to work with schools and local authorities to educate young people and parents about the dangers and legal consequences of the illegal use of scramblers. The Government must take this opportunity to tackle this menace once and for all.

Deputy Mark Ward: Hear, hear.

Deputy Michael Collins: There is no doubt the roads in my constituency are in an atrocious condition. I would dearly welcome the Minister of State coming down to see some of them. I spend most of my time travelling, but during the weekend when I am in my constituency, I

spend most of my time trying to go around potholes. It is not good enough. It is the height of danger. We have verges that are not cut and there are trees hanging over onto roadways. The other day, *The Southern Star*, our newspaper down there, ran a piece by Kieran O'Mahony on the front page about how people cannot pass their driving test because they cannot see the lines on the road. There are no lines on the road and all the signs are blocked because everything is overgrown. There is a complete lack of funding and a complete lack of understanding that Cork County Council has been underfunded not for a couple of years but for decades, and it cannot deliver when it does not have money. It is a very serious issue.

I am on the transport committee and I raised this next issue the other day. Has the Minister of State met the car manufacturers? The biggest problem we have today is that there are computer screens inside cars. There is a bloody portable television up on the dashboard. People can no longer just put down the hand and turn on the radio or put on the heating. You did not have to look; now you have to work a computer. A lot of people give out to us if we use mobile phones, which we should not do, of course, but when you are driving, there is a computer screen at the front of every new car you can buy today. That is an appalling situation. There are many issues. Take passing bays. On the N71, the R586 and the R585, there is not one passing bay. I could be held behind a tractor for 25 or 30 minutes on the road by someone pulling stuff. I would appreciate a little bit more money. Maybe the Minister of State could take a visit down there some time and we can have a look at all these issues.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It has been a year now since we last had statements on road safety, and in the interim, we have multiple vehicle-related deaths. In 2025, there were 185 fatalities recorded by the RSA - that is up 8% - comprising 76 drivers, 41 pedestrians, 30 motorcyclists, 21 passengers, 14 cyclists and three e-scooter users. There have been too many tragic deaths in the first five weeks of this year as well. My thoughts go out to the families and individuals involved in the bus incident today. More details will come out in due course.

The Government has to bear responsibility for all these deaths over the last number of years because the system is not functioning. Enforcement has weakened as Garda roads policing numbers have fallen and it will get worse. There is dangerous behaviour in cars – speeding, phone use, breaking lights, selfish behaviour, dangerous scramblers, e-scooters and illegal driving, unchecked far too often – and while safety measures have been announced, they have not been implemented yet or delivered quickly enough. These include the lower speed limits, stronger penalties and rules for the long-term learner drivers. Meanwhile, more families grieve. We need a zero-tolerance approach to breaking red lights, yellow-box misbehaviour, scooters with no visibility, scramblers and sulky racing on public roads. We probably also need a dedicated Garda traffic corps that goes beyond the internal Garda roads policing unit. We need higher fines, more seizures and zero tolerance at this stage.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I agree with speed limits but not all of them. Speed limits on our roads were brought down to 60 km/h on a blanket basis. I do not agree with that. Some roads are 6 m or 7 m wide on areas that are down to 60 km/h. Then there are roads you could not park a car on, and they are also at 60 km/h. I would have loved them to leave speed limits with local authorities. They know where accidents happen or where there can be free-flowing traffic. Creating this blanket 60 km/h speed limit causes congestion where people could be driving at safer distances over a longer period.

Another thing I do not agree with is people coming into this country being able to hold their licence for six months before they change it for an Irish licence. We have 1 million extra people in this country. The number of accidents is getting higher. I am not blaming all the people coming into this country but when people come from another country, their driving pattern is very different. I was in Rome recently. My God. I did not find one person on their phone but their driving behaviour was very different from the behaviour here. It was in and out, in and out. Not one person walked out in front of a car or truck saying, “Oh look at me, I am on my phone” because they have personal responsibility. Here, it has gone the other way around. There is no personal responsibility for a person walking or doing anything. You should be seen on the road. Everyone should have responsibility, whether they are driving a car, walking on the road or cycling. Everyone has personal responsibility but they should take into account the different widths of the road so that we have a reasonable speed limit on them rather than having a blanket limit and then not even paying local authorities for the repair of the roads.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The councils are underfunded. The Minister of State is from the same county as me and he knows this. Galway is probably one of the worst funded counties in general, but in roads especially.

Another issue is roadside hedges. Anyone who drives a lorry will know that the first thing that will happen is the mirrors will be clipped. Two rows of hedges will have been cut and the third one will not have been. They have to keep hedges out of the road. That is causing more problems.

We have to sympathise with anyone who has lost their life, but then we decided we would solve it all and reduce the speed limit. If you are going from Ahascragh to Ballinasloe, you would cycle faster on a road that is dead straight and then on a by-road you could go faster. It is absolutely nuts what we have done. Then there are the GoSafe vans, which of course are put in places where they are sure to catch you - if you are doing a lot of mileage generally, they are sure to get you – instead of being in places that are real black spots.

The Government brought down the speed limits. What has happened? Unfortunately, more people have lost their lives.

Another thing we have done is around older people and the computer system. People talk about learner permits and all that. Bring them with you; do not bring them away from you. We are now going to say you have to go back to square one.

For older people who have had it for X number of years, we need to get them to do their test or sort out something. Some of these people are afraid at the moment to even go in to do the test to get a provisional licence when they have to go in and answer the 40 questions. We need to be considerate and work with people. Above all is safety on roads. The problem is those roads are in a bad state around the country and it is causing a lot of accidents. However, we blame everything else to make sure that we do not have to put more money into it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Road safety is not being taken seriously by this Government; that is a fact. We have all the legislation but no enforcement. Legislation does not mean tuppenny damn if we do not enforce it. Let us consider the new legislation the Government's bought in yesterday for scramblers. I have spoken to representatives of the Garda. They say gardaí do

not have the ability or the right to pursue an individual on a scrambler. The press statement put out yesterday said that there will be pursuit of individual scramblers. Gardaí are not trained to do it. One of the most dangerous things they can do is pursue somebody in a particular situation like this. There has been no discussion with the Garda representative organisations on this at all. The day after the Government announced the legislation on scramblers, we are in limbo as to whether or not anybody can be pursued for it. That is a really significant problem in. If a garda does pursue and someone dies, they could be brought before Fiosrú. They could be stood down. They could find themselves in a civil court defending the fact they pursued without any training. Those gardaí have the same licences the Minister of State has in terms of pursuit.

The Minister of State will be embarrassed by the figures I am going to read out now. Figures show that between 2021 and 2024, 32,700 drivers were disqualified. Of those, a third did not even have a bloody licence, an incredible situation. Of the 21,000 who did have a licence, only 5,000 bothered to surrender them afterwards to the people they were meant to surrender them to. There were people disqualified in those years who had already been disqualified twice. They were driving and they were disqualified, they were driving again and were disqualified again, and they were driving yet again and were disqualified yet again. What difference does the bloody legislation mean at all if the Government will not put in place the number of gardaí that is necessary? Garda numbers have fallen significantly in the last number of years. There has been a 40% fall in the number of traffic gardaí and behaviours are changing as a result.

Deputy Keira Keogh: Can I confirm that Deputy Lahart and I are sharing ten minutes?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I start by extending my sympathies to the family of Grace Lynch and also to the family of the deceased from today's bus accident and those recovering in hospital, as well as the 183 families from last year, nine of them in Mayo. It is important to remember those people because that is why we are here. Even though in my county there were 19 deaths in 2024, which reduced to nine last year, every single life lost is one too many. The RSA is to be commended on the good work that it is doing. Representatives from the RSA were in the audiovisual room yesterday and gave us a good presentation. We can all agree that lots more work needs to be done. One of the first things that could be done very easily is to update the traffic watch online. Right now, it is still a form that people can fill in, but with so many cars having live dashcams, it is a no-brainer that we should be able to upload that footage and be able to prosecute from that. That is something that should be done very quickly.

I am looking at tackling car enthusiasts in an area in my home county called Derrinumbera, where the local recycling centre is. Car enthusiasts gather there most Saturday nights with up to 100 cars at a time. Families are struggling to get their young children to sleep. More than that, doughnuts are being done and there is lots of dangerous driving. An holistic approach is needed to meet young people where they are at. There are a lot of car enthusiasts in Westport, Mayo in general, Donegal and Galway. We have to meet them where they are at in an holistic way by bringing them to the table and offering them organised ways to show off the cars they are so proud of in a safe manner.

We also need to tackle distracted and dangerous driving in general. I would love to see more of the work that the RSA is doing with young people in transition year, at the AXA roadshow and going around to things like the ploughing championships where they are using virtual reality. We know from the Defence Forces and from nursing and medical courses that virtual reality is having a very positive effect on real-life behaviour. We should look at expanding virtual reality scenarios of driving on ice, driving when tired and falling asleep, having an accident while holding a phone, driving under the influence and perhaps make that as a mandatory one-hour finisher to the 11 hours already required by a learner driver. It is one thing to do it in schools, but it would be great to do it right before people take their test.

Many Deputies have spoken today about the frustration with driving slowly and speed limits coming down to 30 km/h in some areas. We have to remind ourselves of the statistics. If hit by a vehicle at 60 km/h, 40% of people will survive. If hit at 50 km/h, 70% of people will survive. If hit at 30 km/h, more than 90% of people will survive. A driver who hits somebody at 60 km/h will wish for every second afterwards that they had only been driving at 30 km/h. People might be frustrated today getting to work doing 60 km/h on a 50 km/h road, but I guarantee that if a child happens to run out in front of them and they are within the speed limit, they will not regret this for the rest of their life.

I also want to thank Hayley Coleman and Myles O'Brien, who came to speak at a road safety event I held in Mayo last year. It demonstrated to everybody there the benefit of hearing real-life stories. If this can be incorporated into the learner driver courses and people hear real life-changing stories, it will have real impact. Myles O'Brien is a talented chef. He has talked about the fact that he was a novice motorcyclist and had an accident that left him paralysed. He is graciously giving up his time to talk to people about his experiences and what he wished he knew then. Hayley Coleman is a talented make-up artist who was involved in an accident where her friend passed away and she was left with life-changing injuries. Whether it is at the AXA roadshow or wherever, if anybody gets to hear at first hand a life-changing experience, it will impact their driver behaviour; we know that. If that can be rolled out when people are doing their learner driver courses, it would be really beneficial.

We definitely need more streamlined funding for lollipop people. In my home town of Westport, a school has been without a lollipop person for a long time. We know that is because it is a short-term role for a couple of hours a day but it is a vital role. We should definitely consider streamlining funding across local authorities for lollipop people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on Deputy Lahart, I believe we have some members of the Order of Malta with us. I am not sure where they are from but what they do is very valued in society and I thank them very much.

Deputy John Lahart: As you have used 20 seconds of my time, a Cheann Comhairle, you might be nice to me at the back end of it. I echo your welcome. The Order of Malta would absolutely take priority if I was in the Chair too.

I echo the comments made by all previous speakers and by the Taoiseach and the Minister in recent days. I offer my sympathy to the family of Grace Lynch on their unbearable loss. Unfortunately, sometimes it seems to the public that events like this coax Government and politicians into action. When I first came in here in 2016, we had the scourge of scramblers in

my constituency of Dublin South-West not only on streets but particularly in public parks. They destroyed public parks and public pitches and caused accidents to young children, near accidents and near misses. There had been a death on the northside of Dublin as well, which motivated me as spokesperson on Dublin at the time to move to introduce legislation. We were not in government but when we came into government, Deputy Paul McAuliffe and I doubled down on that. It is worth reiterating what that legislation involved. It was passed in 2023 by the Government at the time. It made dangerous driving an offence not only in public spaces but everywhere, including in public parks. It also gave An Garda Síochána new powers to seize scramblers being driven dangerously in any location. One month after the Bill was enacted, off-road scramblers were no longer just illegal for use in public places.

4 o'clock

It was illegal to drive them dangerously anywhere, even on private land. More importantly, gardaí had full powers under that legislation to seize a scrambler being driven dangerously in any location where they had reasonable belief that the vehicle might be driven dangerously. It also gave the Garda the powers to enter the curtilage of a dwelling to receive a scrambler after the fact. Why was it given those powers? It was that senior gardaí had issued an instruction to rank-and-file members not to engage in pursuit of scramblers being driven in a dangerous fashion, as that would cause danger to the public, the garda and the person driving the scrambler. It was just dangerous all around. All of these powers we have spoken about were actually granted to the Garda. We have to ask ourselves why the regulations to ban scramblers in public spaces were not being made. That comes down to an elongated consultation process that was going on between officials at Garda level and in the Department of Transport.

I am not going to say politicians did their bit on this but we certainly did our utmost in passing that law to give the powers to those who requested them to ensure that the scourge and antisocial menace of scramblers could be stopped once and for all.

I welcome the complete ban. I am disappointed about certain initiatives. I tried to bring one to south Dublin. I refer to the Moyross initiative where gardaí have engaged with scrambler users, the Road Safety Authority, community workers and social partnership. Essentially, it is a pretty sophisticated Garda youth diversion scheme where scrambler riders are taught to respect the rules of the road, how to maintain a scrambler bike, the correct reflective clothing to wear, how to ride and drive safely and how to respect other users on the road. There has been a lot of success to that. I tried to replicate it in my own local authority and brought the Moyross people to meet and engage with South Dublin County Council. It never went farther than that and I am hugely disappointed that it did not happen.

I welcome the ban because the destruction caused by scramblers to parks in my community, and the menace caused to people, particularly children and older people, continues. I want to say to the Minister of State that we still have to find a way to catch them. A scrambler that appears on the street when these laws and regulations come in still has to be pursued and the rider still has to be caught safely. This has been raised by previous speakers. I support the use of drone technology in this and the expertise that other police forces have garnered.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy John Lahart: The Ceann Comhairle took some moments of my time welcoming people. I can say that because she is gone.

That power to destroy scramblers existed under previous laws because of a lack of insurance or a lack of tax. If we do succeed, and I hope we do, they will be replaced by something else. We have to prepare for that. This is not the end of the story. We need to remain really vigilant. I welcome the work the Minister of State and the Ministers for justice and Transport have done.

Deputy Mark Ward: I want to start by saying that everybody who was involved in that tragic incident on North Earl Street this lunchtime is in my thoughts and prayers. I thank the first responders. They do not get enough thanks from us in this House for being there and assisting people at this tragic time. I also want to ask people to refrain from sharing images and videos on social media. I know somebody it happened to before and it is an absolutely horrible way to find out that a loved one was involved in a tragic incident. I ask people to refrain from doing that.

As a father, I watched the heartbreaking reaction to the tragic death of 16-year-old Grace Lynch by a scrambler. Those of us who have represented communities that have been plagued by scramblers are not surprised. We have given the Government ample warning. In 2012, Teachta Dessie Ellis brought forward legislation to deal with scramblers in our communities. In recent times, Teachtaí Donnelly and Ellis and I again brought forward more legislation. Despite the efforts of some Government backbenchers, the Government did not put anything concrete in place.

My area of Dublin Mid-West is just one of the neighbourhoods that has been terrorised by people on scramblers. They feel they can do what they want, when they want and how they want. It is not just scramblers that are causing problems in our communities. E-scooters are being driven recklessly and with impunity, often transporting drugs and cash for organised criminals. People coming off e-scooters are the leading cause of traumatic brain injuries presenting at the Mater hospital.

The Government has said it will commit to looking at regulations for e-scooters and scramblers but they need to be comprehensive. We need to see what powers are going to be put in place for the Garda to be able to seize them. These are absolute weapons in the hands of wrong people. They are lethal weapons. We need to put everything in place that will take them off our streets.

I want to talk about potholes. It is the first time I have brought them up in the Dáil. It is a big issue in Dublin Mid-West. I have lived in the area all my life and I have never seen the roads so bad. Driving through parts of Clondalkin and Lucan is like driving through an obstacle course trying to avoid potholes. The roads literally are in bits. Some people actually name the potholes in my community they are there that long. They get a temporary fix and then they reappear a couple of days later. You could drive down a road one day and if you drive down the same road the next day, a pothole could have magically appeared. I would invite the Minister of State for a drive around Dublin Mid-West but it would be a bumpy ride with the number of potholes we have. We drive on the left in Ireland but in Dublin Mid-West we drive on what is left. That is what someone said to me as that is how bad the roads are. It is getting even worse. Residents in my area pay their road tax like everybody else and the least they should have are safe roads.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I join Deputy Ward in offering condolences following the recent incident in Dublin. I would also like to stress to the public not to be sharing incidents like this online and to allow everyone to investigate it. I thank first responders, An Garda Síochána, the ambulance service and the Order of Malta from Fairview and Marino, who I have in with me today. I thank them for all they do, for how they help the communities and how they serve the communities in these situations.

Regarding road safety, every conversation has to begin with the people who are no longer with us, and those who have been injured. We have heard Deputies across the House describing how people's lives can be changed within seconds. Parents and children and the recent tragic deaths are not just numbers, they are lives. My father was a traffic policeman for over 35 years. He was one of the hardest men to ever learn how to drive with but he made sure I was doing everything correctly.

I would love the current driving test to be reviewed and made more accurate to current driving conditions with the three-point turn. I do not know if the Minister of State ever reversed around a corner but I had to do it for the test and I have not done it since. We still have delays in our driving test and people failing it.

I will go back to the issue of safety. The issue is personal to everyone. As other Deputies have said, gardaí are often the first on the scene as are our emergency supporters. They see the worst of road incidents and accidents, the reality of how road danger looks and why enforcement matters. I welcome the clampdown on scramblers and congratulate Deputies on the work that has been done across this House on the issue. It is sad that it took this tragic death to happen. We needed to get it done and it is being done. We have to go through it and make sure it is implemented correctly.

On implementation, I have heard other Members speaking about how the Garda must have tools, the legal backing and the confidence to act. Gardaí should not be second-guessing whether doing their job will result in criticism or penalty. I know the Department of Transport is examining that. They are not the problem; they are the solution. They work tirelessly for us to make the roads safer. We need safer streets.

We speak about open drug dealing on e-scooters. It needs to be targeted. Giving gardaí the authority to act decisively will also recognise that these men and women are not just public servants, they are guardians and heroes. I look up to my dad to this day. For the first responders who are at these scenes, the things they go through stick with them and it is something for which they need to be recognised.

They should not be punished for doing their jobs correctly. If we are serious about road safety, we also must look into issues such as potholes. In my constituency I could provide a list of about 200 of them. We need look at the speed with which other countries deal with potholes and everything that results in safer roads.

Seapark Drive needs a speed test. There are over 80 children on the road, but the speed test has still not been done. At the heart of the issue is roads. I was speaking to residents on the way down here, currently the Clontarf Road is flooded, but there has not been a direct response. Sadly, there was still traffic going straight through it, and flooding damaging houses. Thankfully we got through to Dublin Bus and the buses have stopped. However, joined-up

thinking is needed when it comes to these public services and road safety. We all read the recent article about the Clontarf Road and the traffic management plan that is going to be put in place. This is going to bring more cars together and put children at risk. Public representatives were not consulted. What is the point of holding a local election and a general election if there are State bodies that are going to do what they want on our roads without consulting someone who knows where there should be more security or more traffic management? This needs to be looked into. I spoke recently about this to the Minister for Transport and how the Clontarf Road, Oscar Traynor Road and north Dublin as a whole, one of the busiest routes in Dublin, the artery of Dublin, was locked up for 18 months or longer and now people are fearful that they are going to do it again. Of course they are fearful. It is the conjunction of the entire north Dublin. The communication needs to be there.

To go back to road safety, there is built-up traffic. Recently, one of the lollipop men in one of the areas was saying that traffic on the road when it is built up, leaves a spot for children that drivers cannot see and the child comes out. Traffic needs to be managed in that sense, especially around schools. I do welcome the engagement the Minister of State has had with me on this and I appreciate what he has been doing in helping me raise that, especially in north Dublin. We need to act on this quickly. These are not just statistics; they are lives. I join with all the Deputies who back the Garda and back the people who are making this country better.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I would like to thank Deputies for their contributions to the debate. I would also like to join with all Deputies and offer my sincere condolences to the family and friends of Grace Lynch on their tragic loss. I am also aware of the incident in Dublin city centre earlier where there was a loss of life and a number of people injured. Our thoughts are with them. As other Deputies have said, I also want to acknowledge the tremendous work of the first responders. I concur with Deputies Mark Ward and Heneghan and I ask people not to share images of the incident online. I hope that people would pay heed to that request.

I also want to acknowledge the members of the Order of Malta who are in the Gallery. We all know the tremendous work they do all around the country. I am delighted that they got the opportunity to visit Leinster House. We, in this Chamber, acknowledge the tremendous work they do and I thank them for coming in.

I am sure that every Member has, in some way, been impacted by a fatality of our roads. Setting aside party politics, road safety is an area where we all want to see improvements, and most importantly, a reduction in the number of deaths on our roads. While we may not always agree on the exact policies for doing so, I thank Deputies again for their contributions. The Government and the Garda Commissioner take road safety very seriously. Successful road safety strategies requires us to consider several matters that taken together can allow us to save lives. These include technology, road design, driver behaviour and education, severity of penalties, speed limits and enforcement. Ongoing enforcement is a very important aspect of road safety strategy, be that by gardaí, mobile, static and average speed cameras or other technology being deployed. Investing in better, safer roads, continued enforcement of the law and increasing the allocation of gardaí to front-line duties will assist in significantly improving road safety. That is why all uniformed gardaí are directed to undertake 30 minutes of high-visibility roads policing on each tour of duty. This, along with increased Garda numbers,

improved technology, additional speed cameras and enhanced data sharing is helping to ensure a multifaceted approach to road safety enforcement in Ireland.

I assure the public that we are committed to supporting the implementation of Ireland's Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030. I want to increase public awareness and crack down on dangerous driving. As outlined by the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, earlier, the phase 2 action plan under the road safety strategy will run from 2025 to 2027. The actions in this plan have the potential to be transformative. Work is continuing on implementing this plan. I welcome the progress to date on implementation of the recommendations under the speed limit review, the tackling of multiple learner permits and the work under way to deliver on significant legislative priorities, such as a national vehicle driver file Bill and the next road traffic Bill. To be clear, across provisions and powers set out in the Road Traffic Act 1961, the Road Traffic Act 1994 and the Road Traffic and Roads Act 2023, it is illegal to use an unregistered scrambler in a public place. It is illegal to use a scrambler dangerously in any location and An Garda Síochána has powers of seizure for a vehicle being driven dangerously or which lacks registration, insurance or motor tax or where the driver does not hold the relevant driving licence. In short, outside of appropriate use in appropriate off-road settings, scrambler use is already illegal and enforcement powers exist. As outlined by the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, the Government is now moving swiftly to introduce new regulations that will help to bring additional legal clarity to the existing position that scramblers are banned for use on the road in almost all cases. I fully support the introduction of these new measures. The regulations will explicitly prohibit the use of vehicles such as scramblers in any place where the public might be present, such as private car parks. The regulations will make the mere use of vehicles such as a scrambler in these proscribed locations an offence and significantly increase the charges that accrue each day after a scrambler has been seized, to reduce the number of seized vehicles that are released and end up back on our roads.

An Garda Síochána has at its disposal significant enforcement powers and these powers are being used. Between 1 January and 30 January 2025, a total of 449 scramblers, quads, e-bikes and e-scooters were seized in the Dublin metropolitan area. This marks a steady rise in effective performance in this particular area of policing when compared with figures from the same period in previous years. There were 128 seizures in 2024; 67 in 2023; 63 in 2022; and 65 in 2021. These figures are indicative of the Dublin metropolitan region's robust and operationally active policing response to this issue.

A new Garda spontaneous pursuits policy was introduced in 2024. This policy aims to provide direction to gardaí, who in the course of their duties, use pursuit tactics and pursuit management to reduce the risk associated with pursuits and stopping of subject vehicles. This applies to any vehicles, not just cars, motorcycles or scramblers. Gardaí must operate within the law and have to be mindful of the dangers to members of the public, themselves and the rider and the issues involved with a pursuit of this type, which could have fatal consequences. Interception poses significant risks, not only to the drivers and passengers of these vehicles but also to the members of the public and local gardaí in affected communities. These difficulties would remain irrespective of any legislative enhancements. In this regard, it should be noted that gardaí have other enforcement options open to them, including investigative expertise to locate and question suspected persons after the fact, which would pose less of a risk to public safety.

In recent years, An Garda Síochána has been given significant new powers and tools to enable it to fully enforce road safety laws. Since November 2023, the Motor Insurance Bureau of Ireland, MIBI, has been providing insurance details to An Garda Síochána. Details for 3 million vehicles and 5 million drivers are provided daily to identify vehicles being driven without insurance. In addition, since May 2024, An Garda Síochána now conducts mandatory drug testing at scenes of serious collisions. The publication of the Crowe report highlighted that while most roads policing personnel are committed to their roles, further improvements will enhance enforcement activity on our roads.

I welcome the ongoing commitment of the Garda Commissioner to deliver on the recommendations contained in the Crowe report. To that end, I welcome the fact that road safety and collision reduction is included in a strategic commitment up to 2028 under An Garda Síochána Strategic Plan 2026-2028. The plan includes a commitment by An Garda Síochána to strive to reduce the numbers of fatal and serious injury collisions on our roads through robust national education, local enforcement and proactive detection of lifesaver offences, which will increase by 10%.

This will be supported by local performance monitoring and strategic collaboration with key partners to improve road safety. Progress towards achieving this service goal will be reported to and assessed by the Policing and Community Safety Authority. At the end of December 2025 in the latest data for the which figures are available, 647 gardaí were assigned to the roads policing units across the country. As gardaí recruitment continues and accelerates, more gardaí will become available to be deployed to priority areas. While significant numbers of gardaí are assigned to roads policing units, all front-line gardaí contribute to policing our roads. Around 65% of drug driving and drink driving checks are carried out by regular gardaí. Of course, it is not just about personnel numbers. Technology will continue to play an increasingly important role in enforcement. Increased numbers of gardaí and enhanced gardaí visibility will form an important pillar to help deliver the Department of justice's action in supporting the National Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030. Managing deployment of resources in a large organisation, such as An Garda Síochána with competing priorities that include roads policing, economic crime, drugs and organised crime, cybercrime and managing front-line policing, is a complex process. Roads policing is one of many competing priority areas. Numbers applied on roads policing remain consistently higher as a percentage with over double of the entire organisation compared with other priority areas.

This has been a very useful exchange of ideas and thoughts today on this important issue. The road safety strategy combined with a robust enforcement strategy provides us with the basis to deliver better outcomes on our roads. Behind every statistic, there is a life, family, friends and a community. It is beholden on all of us to make better choices for safer roads and to protect ourselves, our loved ones and all others who use our roads, particularly vulnerable road users. I thank all Deputies for their contributions on this important issue.

Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy John Lahart: I echo the sentiments expressed regarding the loss of life in the city today at lunchtime in the public transport accident. I echo what the Minister of State said about people not posting images of it on social media. Our thoughts are with them. There has been one fatality and a number of injuries. Our best thoughts go from this House to the people involved.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. I support the legislation because it addresses two realities that we cannot afford to ignore. First, renters need stronger protections and real security. Second, our rental sector needs a stable, reliable, predictable framework that helps to grow and retain landlords within it. This Bill attempts to do both in a way that replaces a degree of confusion and complexity at times with clarity through a new approach that looks at the entire issue from a national perspective as opposed to a piecemeal geographical perspective.

I wish to put a human face on the debate that all of us here as TDs can do by reflecting the reality in our own constituencies. During my time as a TD representing Dublin South-West, I have met far too many people living with deep insecurity in their tenancies. These are people who pay their rent, and exceptionally high rent in some cases. They contribute to their communities and they are trying to raise children and hold down jobs. In some cases, they are carers. They still live with the constant fear of a termination notice. I have spoken to individuals and parents have come to my clinics who are terrified of having to pull their children out of school mid-term or face another long commute across the city because they have been priced out of their area. The Minister for housing is aware of this as well and is sympathetic to it.

As colleagues have, I have listened to renters who simply cannot make a plan for the future because they do not know if they will be in the same home in six months. As we all know, housing insecurity affects every facet of life, including work, family stability, health, mental health and well-being. That is why the most important promise in this Bill is greater security of tenure. The Bill significantly restricts so-called no-fault evictions for new tenancies. The Minister has strengthened protections in a way that renters will feel in their day-to-day lives. It certainly brings a measure of medium- to long-term stability that simply does not exist unless one has the securest of tenancies. A major step forward is the restriction on no-fault evictions, particularly in relation to larger landlords. From 1 March 2026, tenants entering new tenancies with landlords and companies who hold four or more tenancies will no longer face no-fault evictions. That is a profound shift in the balance of security for renters. Importantly, tenants of smaller landlords, which is those of three or fewer tenancies, will also benefit from substantially improved protections. This matters in a constituency like Dublin South-West where many renters are renting from smaller landlords and need clearer, fairer rules.

The Minister is also building on the principle of long-term renting by strengthening tenure duration in the Bill. That goes back to the original point made in the Bill of people being able to plan their lives. A six-year period gives a degree of security. I hope some day that we get to that Vienna model where people can take out a tenancy for life that reflects their living situation and the changing life situation, they are in whether it is illness, out of work or retirement and reflects the manner in which people live. This gives people a degree of security moving forward through rolling tenancies of a minimum duration of six years for new tenancies. That is another tangible improvement in stability for individuals and their families.

That ability to plan matters affects children, schooling, employment, carer and whether people can truly build a life in a new community and set down strong roots.

The Bill introduces a simpler and fairer rent control framework nationally. I never quite got my head around some of the rules that have applied for the past decade or so. We are moving from rent pressure zones to a national system of rent control providing clarity and consistency across the country. Annual rent increases for covered tenancies will be capped in line with inflation using the consumer price index with a 2% cap in higher inflation periods. That is a real comfort for renters. It is a clear straightforward protection for tenants and removes the unevenness and confusion that developed under the rent pressure zones.

I welcome the increased emphasis on transparency in rent setting, including measures aimed at improving the information available in the system around rent levels. Better transparency supports fairness for tenants and better compliance overall. As the Minister has been in his contributions to the debate and about housing generally since his appointment, I wish to be direct about supply. Supply of new builds is the only durable way to bring down pressures on the rental sector. Protecting tenants is essential. I have outlined that in the first part of my contribution. We must also ensure that the rental sector is capable of growing. The current system has not been serving people properly. The Housing Agency review informed the legal framing and direction of these reforms. We need a functioning market that supports the construction of more rental homes, especially apartments and that retains landlords who might otherwise exit the sector. This is why the Minister has provided measures in this Bill designed to retain and attract investment and new supply while pairing those measures with stronger security for tenants. The ability to set rent to market at the start of a new tenancy in defined circumstances and to reset between tenancies is part of that balancing act. However, in return, tenants get stronger security of tenure, including a six-year rolling minimum duration and significant restrictions on termination grounds.

I think the Minister has tried to make that balance central to his package of general reforms of the market.

On the development of new apartments, and new developments generally, the Minister's approach links rent changes to inflation. This is intended to deliver certainty and encourage investment and building at scale. Having listened to the Minister, I know he has done his homework on this. The country urgently needs more rental accommodation and apartments in particular. Investors like to have certainty, a predictable playing pitch and clear visibility of the horizon ahead. The Minister's objective is to make delivery more predictable in order that the pipeline of new rental homes can grow.

Regarding the timing and fairness of the legislation, I support the provision that these measures are designed to apply to new tenancies from 1 March this year. That gives clarity as to who is affected and when. It ensures the new framework will be introduced in an orderly way as the rent pressure zone provisions expire.

The Bill offers necessary and balanced reform. It is one of many such reforms the Minister has introduced. Since his appointment, his approach has been to take his time while being very thorough and to come up with a good policy at the end of that thoroughness. The Bill supports the conditions needed to grow rental supply. For renters in my constituency and elsewhere, who include families, workers, students, carers, retired people, older people, single people and

married people, security and predictability are not luxuries; they are the foundation of a stable life. I believe and hope this legislation will move us in that direction. I join the Minister in commending it to the House.

Deputy Réada Cronin: This truly is one of the most bizarre Bills I have seen come before the House. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, at a time when families are pinned to their collar by the highest electricity and energy bills and the highest rents in Europe, the Government thinks it a good time to bring forward a Bill that seeks to increase rents even further. Is the Minister aware we are not in a competition here? This is not a race to the bottom. How can anyone see the Bill for anything other than what it is, which is a love letter to the big institutional investors with which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in bed for many a year? It is Irish renters, families and young people on whom the Government is cheating. This rent hike Bill will allow vulture funds and big landlords to hike up the rents of 60,000 people a year. The Minister is calling it a market reset. In fact, it will mean thousands are paying more in rent from 1 March. Whom exactly will this benefit?

My constituency of Kildare North has some of the highest rents in the country. The demand for housing, including rental properties, has increased so much because when rents spiral out of control in Dublin, people exchange cheaper rents for longer commuting times. Tenants in County Kildare are paying an average of €1,500 a month. A person would be lucky to get a four-bedroom property in north Kildare for less than €3,000. Rents will increase by 20% on 1 March, which is €300 a month on the average rent price in Kildare. This is the Government's solution to the biggest rental crisis we have faced as a State. Renters are being made to pay to line the pockets of big landlords.

Any legislation that seeks seriously to address the regulation of the private rental sector would focus on cutting and freezing rents, not allowing them to rise even further. This Bill will not protect renters; it will push them further to the brink. The average length of a private rental tenancy is three and a half years, according to the RTB. Of all tenancies registered in 2025, 25% were first-time tenancies. If this trend continues, within four to six years the vast majority of private renters will be caught by the market reset rule and big landlords and private investors will be laughing all the way to the bank.

Again, the question I have to ask the Minister is "*Cui bono?*". What is the logic behind such daft legislation? How can he justify these measures at a time when so many people across the board are experiencing hardship? We need rent freezes, not rent increases. What is the Minister at?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá an tAire agus an Rialtas ag dul sa treo mícheart leis an reachtaíocht seo. Níl siad ach chun tuilleadh praiseach a dhéanamh den chóras cíosanna tithíochta agus cur leis an bhfadhb bhunúsach tithíochta atá sa tír seo. An t-aon leithscéal a bheadh ann as dul sa treo seo ná go bhfuil an tAire dall go hiomlán ar cé chomh dona is atá fadhb na tithíochta faoi láthair agus le blianta anois, agus nach bhfeiceann sé nach bhfuil an Rialtas ach ag cur leis an gcrúachas tithíochta. Ní chreidim go bhfuil an tAire dall. Caithfidh go mbíonn sé ag labhairt le gnáthleanúin nach bhfuil d'acmhainn acu cíosanna an lae inniu sa chathair seo, nó lasmuigh den chathair seo, a íoc agus atá ag smaoineamh ar dul ar imirce. B'fhéidir go mbíonn sé ag labhairt leis na hoibrithe atá ag dul in aois a bhfuil cíos breá orthu faoi láthair atá siad in ann a íoc ach nach mbeidh d'acmhainn acu é a íoc a thuilleadh nuair a

théann siad ar phinsean. Beidh orthu brath ar an gcóras tithíocht shóisialta atá cheana féin ag cur thar maoil agus gan aon áit dóibh ann.

Muna bhfuil an tAire dall, tá sé féin agus an Rialtas ag glacadh an cinneadh seo lena gcuid súile oscailte go hiomlán. Caithfidh go dtuigeann siad an loitiméireacht a bheas mar thoradh ar an mBille seo: cíósanna agus díshealbhuith ag ardú; liosta dóibh siúd atá gan dídean, páistí ina measc, ag ardú; imirce ag ardú athuair i measc déagóirí; agus iad siúd atá sna 20idí agus iad siúd atá cáilithe ag bánú na tuaithe agus na bailte tuaithe athuair. Cén fáth? Is í sin an cheist. An t-aon loighic a d'fhéadfadh a bheith taobh thiar de seo ná go bhfuil sé á moladh chun cuidiú leis na tiarnaí talún mhóra - na boic mhóra sna cistí baidhbhe, nó b'fhéidir le bheith níos cruinne, na coistí alpairí. Is iad siúd atá ag sú an t-airgead go smior astu siúd atá ag íoc cíosa. Muna bhfuil na rachmasóirí ag tógáil go leor árasáin nó tithe, is í sin an áit ar chóir go mbeadh an Stát ag cur a ladar isteach. Ba cheart don Stát tithe sóisialta a thógáil é féin agus tithe inacmhainne ar cíos nó le céannacht ar phraghas cóir ar chur ar fáil. Má tá na tiarnaí talún ag díol áitribh toisc an brabús a bheith déanta acu nó toisc an price is right agus iad ag dul ar pinsean, ba chóir don Rialtas féachaint ar iad sin a cheannach. Ba chóir don Rialtas an t-airgead ceart a chur ar fáil do na comhairlí contae agus na comhairlí cathracha ionas go mbeidh siad in ann an scéim tenant in situ a úsáid i gceart sna cásanna atá díshealbhú ar tí tarlú do na cíósóirí gan locht. Caithfidh a bheith praiticiúil sa chur chuige atá againn. Caithfidh a bheith radacach chomh maith agus muid ag tabhairt faoin ngéarchéim ina bhfuil an tír seo. Ní seo an leigheas ar an fhadhb atá againn.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The people I represent in Dublin Fingal West are already paying huge rents, with an average cost of close to €2,500 per month. A person on an ordinary wage is at nothing and has no hope of being able to rent. I am genuinely struggling to understand the logic of this Bill. The Minister has said openly that it will cause the cost of renting to increase. Any reasonable person would agree that rents in this State are too high. Perhaps the Minister disagrees but I would contend they are far too high as it is. This legislation will put them up even more. The impact of the Bill will just be to create people who simply do not have the money to pay more, all for the crime of wanting and needing somewhere to live.

I have been contacted about this by a large number of constituents.

They call into my offices, they ring the office and they contact us by email. The Government rep in my area is clever enough now. She has no office and nobody can find her. We are thankfully Fianna Fáil-free, as it goes. When people contact me - and they do - they are really nervous. They hear what the Minister says about the impact of his legislation and they see that it does not bother him. It should but it appears not to. When they come to the office they want an answer in terms of how they are going to be able to afford somewhere to live into the future and I cannot give them one. They are waiting 14 years on the social housing list as it stands. People's entire lives are going to be on hold and the Government's big idea appears to be to put rents up. I genuinely cannot fathom it.

I spoke to a family recently who have just been taken off the housing list because they are slightly over the income limit. The reason they are slightly over the income limit is because they have been waiting for social housing for so long that their children have grown up to the point where two of them now have part-time work that has pushed the family income over the limit. They pay for the rent themselves; they do not get HAP or any other assistance. They are

private renters. They now have a notice to quit and they see the impact of this. Renting is already tough. They cannot find anywhere to rent as it is. They are going to have to leave their property and now they are facing having to pay even higher rents. When this legislation goes through, it will push the rent up even more. I spoke to the mam. She was in tears. She asked me what this law was for and who it will benefit. I gave her an honest answer, as the Minister would expect me to, which was to say it will certainly not benefit renters; it will benefit large-scale landlords and vulture funds. She asked me why. I genuinely could not answer. I hope the Minister makes that clear because she watches the proceedings in here and, given her own situation, she is worried and anxious. As this legislation goes through, there is no comfort I can give her unless the Minister has some words of comfort to offer her, which I doubt.

Deputy Jen Cummins: This Bill is deeply flawed. It says it is going to protect security of tenure, but it is like I am living in a parallel universe. I am hearing two sides. The Minister's story is one thing and the reality for our constituents is different. The suggestion is that the Bill will protect existing renters from rising rents. Apparently, it is going to protect renters and set rents at market rates. It promises the sun, moon and stars but the reality is that it will not deliver what it purportedly sets out to deliver. New tenants will face immediate market rent increases. There are no guarantees that people will not be evicted. The rents are set at market levels that are so high that I am really concerned. Each time they are reset, I will be particularly concerned about those who are already vulnerable in paying the rent at the rate it is currently at. When that rent increases to a higher level, they will not be able to pay it. I am also very concerned for students. Students move regularly because they rent for ten months of the year and then they move somewhere else. They are subject to this change as well. It means it is not safe for them. Of course this Government does not build affordable student accommodation, which means students have to rent on the private market.

Before I came into the Chamber, I looked at *daft.ie* for rental properties in my own constituency. A one-bed apartment in Crumlin is advertised at €2,266 per month. A three-bedroom, two-bathroom house, which is advertised as a family home, is €3,200 per month in Chapelizod. I do not know who can afford this. I do not think this Bill will do anything to protect anyone who is in this situation. The Minister has openly stated that the goal is to stop long-term rents from falling behind market rents, but this means that all renters will eventually pay an unaffordable rent. The Bill fails to protect against evictions of current renters. When they are evicted, how will they then afford the rents in newer places where rents are really high? People will be locked out. They will be left in renting for the rest of their lives, if they can get somewhere to rent. It will make home ownership impossible for young people. It will create unaffordable rents for key workers, which I am very concerned about as my party's education spokesperson. We hear time and time again about teachers, particularly newly qualified teachers, who are unable to afford to live in Dublin and pay their rents.

Every single week, my clinics in my constituency are inundated with people in absolutely dire housing situations who are being evicted through no fault of their own and literally have nowhere else to go. People who are approved for HAP, for homeless HAP and for everything cannot get somewhere to live because they just cannot afford it. As I have already outlined, given the average going rent today in Dublin South-Central, it is no wonder they have nowhere to live. Then they turn up in homeless situations.

I live in the Tenters in an area called Fairbrother's Fields. It was the first tenant purchase scheme that this State ever built. It was built by the fledgling State, between 1922 and 1924, at a time when we were not rich. We had our centenary recently. We were a fledgling State trying to get up on our feet. We were able to produce these homes, which are of a really high standard. If we could do that then, why now when we are so wealthy can we not build homes? Yesterday, my colleague, Deputy Hearne, launched the State construction company proposal that the Social Democrats are offering as a solution to the Government as to how we can do this. We cannot just rely on private investors and private developers for the housing situation because that is the problem. That is the place we are in now.

The last thing I will say, before my colleague comes in, is that I am concerned about how young people will ever get on the property ladder. I may have skipped a step because how will they get out of their childhood bedrooms to get to rent somewhere or to buy somewhere? A colleague of mine, who is 26 years of age and an administrative assistant in this House, can no longer afford the rents in the place where they live and has moved back to their family home because the rents are so unaffordable. That is a colleague of ours in this House. I am really concerned about students travelling up and down to apprenticeships, universities and technical colleges around the country who cannot afford the rents there. They are spending a long time travelling because they cannot afford to live there. This Bill is deeply flawed. I am very concerned not only for the current people who are renting but also for the people in the future.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I cannot tell the Minister how many times I have marched in the streets protesting about housing. I have done it against what feels like every single one of the Minister's predecessors. A huge reason I have been so frustrated with Government parties and why I joined the Social Democrats was the utter failure in housing for my generation over multiple governments. Today, years after I first started political activism in protesting on housing, I find myself in this Chamber as a private sector rental tenant with the unique opportunity to tell the Minister exactly what is wrong with housing in Ireland and how his proposed legislation runs the severe risk of making it worse.

First, some facts and figures. About 30% of the population in this country rent. In my own constituency, where we are standing right now, about 50% of people rent. I am one of the very few renters who has ever entered this House and spoken in it. The number of people renting in the private rental sector in Ireland has approximately doubled since the 1990s. After the property crash, private equity institutions that were welcomed by this Government and previous governments flooded the Irish market. Today in Dublin, 25% of all tenancies are with large institutional landlords, among the highest concentration anywhere in Europe. Dublin's rents and property prices are among the highest in the developed world. Why is it that Irish exceptionalism always revolves around property?

The core proposal in this Bill is the reimagining of tenure based on six-year rolling tenancies for all new entrants. This will provide landlords with the opportunity to reset rents, perhaps even drastically, at the expense of the tenant. This will inevitably lead to higher rents, which are already among the highest in the developed world. Does greed have no limit this Government is willing to set? Is it so wedded to the interests of international private equity that it would sacrifice entire generations in perpetuity to satisfy its lust for wealth? This Bill is the latest incarnation of a Government that is more interested in turning Dublin into a city for

the rich at the expense of everyone else. What garda - perhaps the one in the Gallery - or nurse or teacher will be able to afford the highest rents in Europe six years from now?

What student or trainee in a graduate programme will be able to live their 20s without flirting with poverty? Through this Bill, the Government is accelerating the breaking of the social contract, pushing people into the high-cost private rental sector, creating precarity rather than security, and incentivising exploitation rather than ensuring there is no floor through which anyone can fall. There is also the critical question of the enforcement of current rules and regulations as well as the new ones. I have numerous reports in my constituency of landlords subverting rules to double or triple rental rates, and with small landlords retaining most of their rights to evict in this Bill, the security of tenure measures may not be sufficient.

I have a word of warning for the Minister. The good people of this country will not stand for the Government's continued failures in housing. Importantly, the Minister's voters in Fianna Fáil will not stand for it either. In door after door in my constituency, I consistently meet parents who are worried for their children and grandchildren, who often have them in their home. Even young parents are worried that the cycle of housing improvement is so long that their little ones will grow into an Ireland that seeks to prey on them rather than nurture them and export them rather than strengthen them. Those parents and grandparents recognise that the Minister is sacrificing their loved ones on an altar of avarice. The thing about those who preside over the betrayal of a generation is that they often meet a similar end themselves.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to get into some detailed points about this Bill, some points that I do not think have been raised yet, including the double blow that is presented here for homeless HAP tenants who are already being hit in many areas with council rent increases. Before that, the basic point which cannot be driven home hard enough is that this is a Bill for rip-off rents. That is the purpose of it. It is not an accidental outcome of it; that is its purpose. The Government strategy, explicitly, is to get rents to rise higher in order to attract more investment. It is a landlord's charter written by a landlord's Government. It is designed to drive up rents even higher than the unbelievably high levels that they are already at. It means that within the next few years, virtually all renters will be paying at least an extra €3,000 a year or an extra €250 a month.

You would think the Government has no idea that we are in the middle of a dire cost-of-living emergency. People cannot afford to pay their rent, heat their homes, put food on the table or buy things for their kids. They already cannot afford to live. That is why People Before Profit, Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats, the left Independents in the Dáil and a broad coalition of disabled person's organisations, trade unions, students' unions and civil society groups are launching the affordable Ireland campaign next month. The key planks of that campaign are to freeze and cap rents and to build public housing. The Government will only take action on the cost-of-living crisis if it is forced, so we need people power to force it.

It seems to me that section 8(e)(ii) of the Bill potentially allows for rent hikes to market rates for existing pre-June 2022 tenants, whose Part 4 tenancy expires and who then enter into a further Part 4 tenancy for another six years. The Minister of State said in his opening speech yesterday that "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." That is supposed to reassure existing tenants that their rents will not shoot up yet, unless they move

voluntarily or involuntarily. Of course, that happens in any case - on average, every three and a half years for most tenants, and every year for students in private rented accommodation. They are even more shafted by this Bill than everyone else.

Another group getting doubly shafted are the HAP tenants and the homeless HAP tenants. Dublin City Council has already hiked rents. Councils across the country have already hiked the rents that they are paying to the council. On top of that, now they are going to be increasing the top-up they have to pay to their landlords. It is a shameful attack on the poorest households in the country. As I understand it, the Minister is saying this does not affect pre-June 2022 Part 4 tenancies. Section 8(e)(ii) provides that it does not apply to "a tenancy ... to which section 5(4) of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2021 applies", which means it does not apply to further Part 4 tenancies of unlimited duration. I cannot see that it states specifically anywhere in the Bill - I look forward to the Minister's reply - that it does not apply to further Part 4 tenancies that are not of unlimited duration; in other words, the situations where the tenants moved in prior to June 2022. If you moved into your home in April 2020 and you are coming to the end of a six-year Part 4 tenancy, which will expire in April 2026, assuming you are not evicted first it will automatically become a further Part 4 six-year tenancy at that point. Where does it say in the Bill that this further Part 4 tenancy is not a new tenancy? Citizens Information states, "After these 6 years, the tenancy ends and a new tenancy can begin." If a further Part 4 tenancy is legally a new tenancy, then section 8(e)(ii) appears to say that a dwelling that was previously rent-controlled for the previous six years - all those rents - will be reset to market rates. Can the Minister specifically answer that question?

The final issue I want to raise is about section 14. It allows for so-called small landlords to carry out a no-fault eviction on grounds of sale if they would use at least 15% of the proceeds to pay off some or all of a debt that they owe which is falling due within nine months of the eviction date. That appears to me to be a massive loophole that will allow buy-to-let landlords to evict tenants on grounds of sale when they are coming to the end of their mortgage term. There is no need for it. They can simply sell in any case, with the tenants *in situ*, without forcing their eviction. The only reason to allow it is to maximise their sale price. There is also nothing to stop a landlord taking on a short-term loan in order to say it is falling due and therefore use this loophole to sell.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Minister and his colleagues across the Government have invested a lot of their political capital in the success of this Bill. We are here to ask whether it will work. At this point, it is extremely hard to express confidence that it will. When taken as a whole, I see a Bill that is looking to satisfy conflicting policy aims simultaneously, and it is hard to see such an endeavour having a successful end. Worse, the Bill is performing a kind of bait and switch when it comes to the private rental sector. The end result of this will certainly be a serious rollback in terms of rent affordability for thousands of people, for singles, for people sharing and for their families. This will have an impact on disposable income for a huge cohort into the longer term, and will drive more families into homelessness. The security of tenure measures would, in isolation, be welcomed. Such measures should have been introduced here ten or 15 years ago to bring Ireland in line with most other European countries. However, in no way can we say that this is an evolution in thinking from the Government parties toward valuing, safeguarding and making viable private renting for people's life cycles in the manner found in countries like Austria, Germany or Denmark.

Leaving aside that such a policy would be incredible coming from either of the Government parties, the arrival of secure tenancy rules in the same instrument that, at a stroke, rolls back the key affordability safeguards shows us that the Government thinks of this as more of an experiment or a gamble. The success of that gamble is fully riding on the ability of large-scale developers and investors to deliver apartments at scale, and those who can afford to live in those apartments be damned, either through purchase or through rental arrangements. There are going to be victims here. There are going to be people and families who experience the hard end of the Government's gamble. They are people who will have to agree to far steeper rents that hit their incomes harder than anything we saw during the inflation crisis. They are people who already have no way out of renting and now will see that only lifeline extinguished. It may be a cohort that the Government parties have judged you can dump on without losing support, but that would be a critical mistake.

I assume the Department has attempted to model the impact of these changes. Maybe in the Minister's sum-up speech he could tell us exactly how long it will take for supply to increase to a level that would result in what would be considered a normal or sustainable rate of rent inflation. That analysis or projection would be really valuable, because that is the fulcrum upon which this entire experiment turns. That honesty to people in terms of what we are expecting, and how long it is going to take for this gamble to work, is important because housing is at the core of how people plan their entire lives.

5 o'clock

It is the literal foundation upon which people are able to plan where they go to work or whether they stay at home to care for children, buy two cars or one, go to college, or even whether they think it is worthwhile to stay in Ireland at all.

Will the Minister of State reassure us safeguards will be put in place to mitigate some of the worst increases that may come about as a result of the market rate reset? Has the Government's model determined the proportion of tenants who will see the steeper ends of the increases? Will additional funding be provided to the local authority cost-rental tenant in situ scheme, which is a measure that has a direct effect in providing an alternative for people? Have measures been put in place to do something to mitigate the short-term pain it is absolutely clear will be endured by many renters as a result of these proposals?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I noted a lot of interest in many of the comments made. Both the Minister, Deputy Browne, and I were listening in. I noted Deputy O'Reilly's comments when she said with glee that her constituency is Fianna Fáil free. I come from a constituency, Cork South-West, where we do not have a single Sinn Féin councillor, Senator or TD. That is because, thankfully-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yet.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Yet.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: -----the people of Cork South-West can see through its empty politics. That is just an answer back on that one.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Okay. The Minister of State should probably stick to the subject, if he can.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Thanks as well-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: You have nothing to say in your legislation, so ramble on there.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: -----for the other comments. I listened with interest because what the Deputies have done is highlight the issues. Rents are too high, we do not have enough supply and we have far too much homelessness. This is something we all know. It is something that this Bill is trying to address. We often hear references to the Housing Agency and its recommendations. What the Housing Agency has asked the Government to do is to ensure more protection for renters, which is what this Bill does through designating the entire country an RPZ, and the necessity to attract more investment in the provision of accommodation. That is what we are looking to do. The Minister has been set an incredibly difficult task but this legislation creates that balance.

I can speak on behalf of my constituents in Cork South-West. Clonakilty, the town I come from, was not in an RPZ. There was a function to be able to reset rents at any rate and there was no restriction on that. Now, there is that restriction. I can tell the Deputies a lot of constituents in Clonakilty, and in those other towns outside RPZs, have greeted this with a sense of relief. That is a fact; I am talking to my constituents as well. We have also seen a positive reaction from investment. I am very confident that what we see in this legislation will lead to an increase in supply and see a levelling off of the rapid rate of rent increases we have seen in this country over the last number of years.

The Private Rental Sector Review, published in 2024, highlighted the need to improve certain aspects of rent regulation. Following the completion of the review, the Housing Agency was requested to undertake a review of RPZs and the Review of Rent Pressure Zones and Consideration of Potential Policy Options for Rent Controls in the Private Rented Sector was published by the agency in June 2025. A key focus of the review was to examine the impact of RPZs on the rental market and to make recommendations on whether rent controls should be removed, modified or amended. The Housing Agency report recommended that the existing system of rent controls be modified with the introduction of a national system of rent controls allowing rental prices to adjust with inflation within a tenancy, and for rent resetting between tenancies to reflect market rents, with enhanced tenancy security measures to protect against economic evictions. The review involved engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders, including investors, representatives of landlord and tenant advocacy groups, academics and the Residential Tenancies Board. It also involved an extensive analysis of domestic and international research on rent regulation. From the review, it is clear there has been meaningful moderation of rents due to the existence of RPZs.

However, tenants outside RPZs did face higher rent increases. Today's Bill, providing for a national rent control, will help all tenants. The review suggested that there is a negative supply impact linked to the 2021 tightening of the RPZ rent controls, including the imposing of a real price cut when inflation exceeds 2%, which correlated with an increase in the supply of homes for sale and a decline of rental registrations. The review also noted international

research on rent control, which suggested that controlled rents deliver a considerable price reduction to sitting tenants. However, they might not significantly improve affordability. Tenants might have faced higher rents upon tenancy commencement in new rental accommodation, with the rent increase restriction priced into the initial rent set. Over time, reduced supply is likely to see higher rents impact on tenant mobility. There is also the risk that landlords will not make the necessary investment in maintenance and refurbishment.

The review also identified that Ireland's current RPZ system appears to be severe for two reasons. First, it sets its rent cap at 2% or the inflation rate, whichever is lower, meaning that rent increases may not keep pace with inflation and, second, it does not allow for a resetting of rents to market rates after a tenancy ends. The linking of rent regulation to a property rather than a tenancy, as is the case with RPZs, is viewed as a more stringent system of rent control. The review highlighted that RPZ reform could incentivise investment and would likely have a positive effect on supply. It also noted other factors, such as interest rates and measures to support viability, which the Government was actively considering during the period of the review. This is why, at its meeting on 10 June 2025, the Government approved new policy measures to provide for enhancement to rent controls and tenancy protections from 1 March 2026.

The stronger tenancy protections will provide further improvements to security of tenure. The rental sector provides a home for a significant proportion of the population and we need to give people more certainty that their tenancy will not be ended. We want to provide more stability and confidence to renters. All landlords will continue to have the option to sell with the tenants in situ at any time. In order to stimulate investment and keep existing landlords in the market, the resetting of rents to market value for new tenancies created on or after 1 March 2026 will be allowed as part of the reform of rent controls. The linking of rent control to a property rather than a tenancy under the current RPZ system of rent control makes investment in rental accommodation less attractive in Ireland. A proportion of tenancies in the State are charging below market rent and, under the current regulatory regime, can never increase rent to market rent. By allowing rent resetting for new tenancies from 1 March 2026, existing and new landlords, who are vital for the sector, will be able to ensure that their investment is viable. Rent resetting cannot apply where the most recent tenancy ended through a no-fault eviction. Also, rent resetting allows landlords to lower rents in the knowledge that the rents could be reset at the start of the next tenancy. Rent resetting will also be allowed after each six-year period of a long-standing tenancy that commences on or after 1 March 2026.

Given the critical need to attract investment in new apartment development for the rental market, rent increases for apartments, subject to both a commencement notice and a certificate of compliance on completion under building control regulations on or after 10 June 2025, will be linked to the inflation rate without the application of a 2% cap. These reforms aim to encourage investment in, and development of, new housing supply, including new rental apartments, to help slow down rent increases and moderate rent levels over time. We already see some evidence of increased confidence in investment in the sector since the announcement of these measures last June.

In line with the commitment in the programme for Government and a recommendation of the Housing Commission, the Bill provides for a rent price register. The RTB's published register will now include the rent amount and other relevant tenancy information, such as floor

area, number of bedrooms and bed spaces, and the BER of the dwelling. The aim is for rent information available through the published register to support landlords to set lawful rents and help prospective tenants to assess the prevailing rents in their area.

The Government has committed to providing a stable and predictable rental sector to attract and retain the private investment needed to meet our housing demand. The impact of the current rent control system on the supply of new homes for rent has informed the development of this Bill. The provisions of the Bill aim to attract more private investment into the Irish rental sector as soon as is possible. Increasing the supply of private rental accommodation is crucial to meet housing demand and improve rent affordability. Rent controls are a key protection while housing demand is greater than housing supply. Investment market reports indicate that very little private investment of scale has gone into the development of new-build homes for the private rental sector since mid-2022. Numerous market and expert reports have all identified the current rent control system as an impediment to the supply of new private rental accommodation.

The Housing Agency's review, the Private Rental Sector Review of 2024, the Department of Finance's report on the flow of finance for residential development of 2024, the Housing Commission, the ESRI, the OECD and the IMF have all identified the current rent control system as an impediment to the supply of new private rental accommodation.

The Government is aware of the difficulties faced by many renters in accessing affordable and suitable rental accommodation in today's constrained market. I believe we all share a common goal of providing quality, affordable accommodation for renters. Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 commits to improving the supply and affordability of rental accommodation and security of tenure. The Government is committed to growing investment in the rental sector. This Bill will help to attract investment and increase the supply and choice of accommodation available for rent.

I again thank Deputies for their contributions and commend the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 to the House. I look forward to progressing through the Remaining Stages of the Bill over the coming weeks.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 11 February 2026.

Cost-of-Living Crisis: Motion

Deputy Seamus Healy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— a cost-of-living crisis exists in this State;

- Budget 2026 was predicated on an inflation rate of 2 per cent, but it is now at 3.2 per cent;
 - prices have increased by 23.5 per cent in the last five years;
 - food prices have increased by 5 per cent in the last year;
 - Irish electricity prices are among the highest in the European Union (EU), 24 per cent higher than the EU average;
 - electricity companies have announced an average increase of 10 per cent;
 - gas prices have almost doubled in the last five years;
 - private house rents have continued to skyrocket, up 4.7 per cent year-on-year and reaching €2,100 per month in Dublin;
 - house prices have increased 8.1 per cent year-on-year;
 - council house rents have increased, including charging extra rent for person's carer's allowance;
 - motor insurance premiums have increased by 17 per cent;
 - toll charges have increased;
 - Local Property Tax has increased;
 - student fees have increased; and
 - childcare fees continue to be at mortgage repayment levels;
- further notes that:
- 11.7 per cent of the population, 629,425 people, are living in poverty, including:
 - 190,108 or 15.3 per cent of children;
 - 106,385 or 13 per cent of over 65s;
 - 69,244 or 1 in 3 of persons with a long-term illness or a disability; and
 - 140,377 workers;
 - 298,000 households are in arrears on electricity bills;
 - 185,000 households are in arrears on gas bills;
 - according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, the withdrawal of the once-off cost of living payments will increase general poverty to 12.6 per cent, child poverty to 15.6 per cent, older persons to 17.6 per cent, and decrease the annual income of the poorest 20 per cent of households by 4.15 per cent;
 - the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) received 260,000 requests for help in 2025, up 6 per cent on 2024; and
 - the SVP received 33,214 energy requests in November 2025 which was the highest ever; and

calls on the Government to:

- stop the price gouging of food and energy companies;
- appoint an agri-food regulator to tackle rip-off food costs;
- introduce price control of food, electricity, gas and fuel costs;
- implement a rent freeze;
- implement a living wage;
- benchmark social welfare increases to the minimum essential standard of living index;
- introduce a weekly cost of disability payment;
- introduce the promised maximum €200 per month child-care cost and commence immediately with the creation of a public child-care service;
- commence the introduction of a free public transport system;
- introduce a second targeted tier of child benefit;
- reinstate energy credits with the immediate payment of a €500 winter payment; and
- introduce a millionaires wealth tax.

There is a cost of living crisis in this State and it did not happen overnight. One's first instinct is to say the Government has lost touch with the daily living and working conditions of Irish people but that is not the case. The cost-of-living crisis that exists today is the result of deliberate Government policy. Governments make choices and this and previous Governments have made choices favouring the rich and powerful in our society to the detriment of low and middle income families. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael together have made these choices for the past ten years at least and they are responsible for the poverty, homelessness, exorbitant rents and crushing financial pressures on families trying to make ends meet on a daily basis.

Prices have increased by 23.5% in the past five years. Food prices have gone through the roof, rising by approximately 5% last year. There is huge price gouging by food companies and the family shop is now costing an additional €3,000 per year over the past few years. We need price controls and a price freeze and we need an agri-food regulator to tackle the rip-off in food costs.

Energy is another area of huge concern. Electricity prices in Ireland are some of the highest in Europe at 24% above the EU average. Gas prices have doubled in the past five years and we are also seeing further electricity price rises. All the main companies have announced price increases in the region of 10%. Some of them are SSE Airtricity, up 9.5% or an additional €150 per year; Bord Gáis Energy up 13.5% or an additional €218 per year; Pinergy is up 9.8% or an additional €199; Energia is up 12.1% or €200; and Flogas electricity is up 7% or €126 extra per year. These prices are hugely impinging on the financial position of ordinary families.

Rents are unaffordable, up by 4.7% last year and house prices have risen by 8.1%. A teacher, garda, nurse or public servant cannot afford to purchase a house now. It is worth quoting the current edition of the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, monthly newsletter, *InTouch*. A Sligo teacher said:

I moved home in 2021, secured a permanent job and began looking to buy a house. I've been careful with savings for several years and have a decent deposit built up, but the price of homes in Sligo has skyrocketed with some one-bed new builds starting at €295k and second-hand homes regularly going for up to €100,000 over the asking price. Every year prices go higher so it becomes more impossible to buy. It seems like buying is now a dream rather than a reality.

Rents have also increased significantly and the residential tenancies Bill we have just been dealing with will increase rents even further from the existing unaffordable rents to absolutely extortionate rents by way of an additional €3,000 to €3,500 per year. Council rents have also increased significantly. The fact carer's allowance is now being included for the purpose of rent determination is an absolute scandal. Carers save the State billions of euro every year - I think the figure is €20 billion - and they save the HSE huge amounts of money, yet a carer who receives a full carer's allowance of €270 per week now pays €54 of that in council rent. That is absolutely unacceptable. The Government should give instructions to local authorities to exclude carer's allowance from determinations of rent.

The next issue that impinges hugely on families is motoring costs, which are a huge burden on families, particularly those living outside the major urban centres where there are, as the Minister of State will be aware, poor public transport facilities. Motoring premiums have increased by 17%. The volume of claims is down by 40%, awards are down by one third and profits are at 13%, which is double the international average. These insurance companies need to be tackled. The list goes on.

What does all this mean for families and society? It means families are being driven into poverty. There are 629,425 adults living in poverty, or 11.7% of the population and that will increase to 12.6% in 2026. There are 190,108 children or 15.3% living in poverty and that will increase to 15.6% in 2026. There are 106,385 people over 65 years of age or 13% living in poverty and that will increase to 17.6% in 2026. These figures were provided by the Parliamentary Budget Office.

Families and households are also under huge pressure from energy with 298,000 families in arrears on their electricity bills and 185,000 in arrears on gas bills. After budget 2026, the annual income of the poorest 20% of households will fall by 4.15%. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, SVP, sees the results of the Government's policy first hand, with 260,000 requests in 2025, up 6% and 33,204 energy requests in 2025, which was the highest number ever.

I move this motion in advance of the launch of the affordable Ireland campaign. This is a campaign of civil society organisations, Opposition political parties, student groups, trade unions and many others.

That group has come together to demand that the Government take real action on the cost-of-living crisis that is impacting households. The start of that campaign is on Saturday, 28 February, here in Dublin with a national protest. That protest will focus on the demand for an emergency winter payment and a cost-of-disability payment. I fully support the campaign and

I call on all organisations, political parties, and the trade union movement to come out in support of it. The fact of the matter is that low- and middle-income families across this country are put to the pin of their collar to survive on a daily basis as a result of this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I acknowledge the awful tragedy that we saw in Dublin city centre this afternoon. I join other Deputies in expressing my horror and shock. From what we have seen, we know there has been one fatality and up to three people seriously injured in this event. Our thoughts are with them, their families, the first responders and those in our city's hospitals who are doing everything they can for them.

I thank Deputy Healy for tabling this motion and for the opportunity to speak on it. With so many competing issues of real national importance, it is critical that we take every chance we have to focus on an issue that cuts across so much and affects almost everyone, but of course impacts on people with the least means the most. The rising cost of living has been one of the most challenging hallmarks of this decade. So many people and families have been left in a deeply precarious situation following the inflation crisis of recent years. I want to use my limited time to focus on two significant areas of real cost pressure for people, which are food and energy, while of course acknowledging that there are many more.

On energy, we have to ask why Irish energy wholesale costs are so much higher than in other European countries. When we look at it, we see that the costs are largely a factor of the kind of fossil fuel that is used. In our case, that is gas. It was the main driver of Irish wholesale electricity costs shooting up in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine and still today accounts for a sizeable proportion of the ultimate household costs. It is clear that, had we not had substantial growth in renewables, even with the grid management costs that come with them, Irish household energy costs would today be far higher. I know that is little comfort to people who are already struggling, but this demonstrates the value in driving further forward to bring renewables online to enhance our ability to withstand global energy shocks that we know will be experienced again in the future.

As the Minister of State knows, 1 March is the date on which a new regime will come in affecting residential tenancies, which we have spent much of the last two hours discussing. Part of that law will increase security of tenure, with six-year tenancies encouraging longer terms in what the law says will be more stable living situations. Is it not now the right time to come forward with additional supports on the energy side, with retrofits for renters? If rent costs are going to be reset and increased to market rates, why not take some measure to make the overall cost of renting cheaper while enhancing our building stock and reducing emissions from the housing sector?

Deputy Healy's motion rightly focuses on the severe impact on households of grocery inflation, which at the end of last year hit its highest level in two years, lasting well beyond the immediate shock of the inflation crisis and persistently driving up costs for families. Last month's consumer price index shows that food prices were up 3.9%, with unprocessed foods up a staggering 5.8%, but, again, prices in Ireland, for a combination of reasons, are higher than they are on the Continent, at almost 110% of the EU average according to Eurostat, the third highest in the European Union. People see this in their shopping baskets, especially with meat, dairy and coffee, but we do not see tailored solutions that recognise the unique

combination of factors that hit Irish consumers. Targeted cost-of-living supports focused on essentials like groceries would go a long way in helping some of the hardest hit families here.

The climate crisis is a giant cost-of-living crisis. The most vulnerable will always be impacted the most. If we do not put in place the help to support people to make choices that break that cycle of dependence on consumer goods and services that are always open to volatile pricing, people will forever be stuck in this doom loop of ever-rising costs. Those are hard choices to make in the present but they make for a far cheaper and healthier future for all.

Speaking of retrofit supports, solar panel grants, electric vehicle grants, sustainable farming supports, childcare supports, and targeted cost-of-living measures, it is all connected, and one smart intervention begets another. These were the guiding principles of our party while in government and it is something we have seen precious little of since. I urge the Minister of State and the Government to look at this approach and to reconsider the consumer pays all approach we have seen adopted in the last year.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputy Seamus Healy for tabling this excellent motion. People Before Profit obviously fully supports it. Next week, though it was supposed to be today but was cancelled because of the orange weather warning, Seamus, People Before Profit, Sinn Féin, other left Independents, the Social Democrats and the Labour Party will be launching the affordable Ireland campaign. That is a campaign that will be launched together with, supported by and involved with a broad coalition of disabled people's organisations, trade unions, students unions like Aontas na Mac Léinn, civil society groups, the Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland, Unite the Union, Postgraduate Workers' Organisation, the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Women's Council, the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, and the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament. What unites us is a determination to make Ireland affordable. We all deserve a country we can afford, not this rip-off republic, and not a society that caters for the wealthy but leaves everyone else struggling to put food on the table and keep the heat and lighting on.

The affordable Ireland campaign has six very simple demands. They are to cut energy costs by introducing energy credits and abolishing standing charges; to cut and control grocery prices; for above-inflation pay, social welfare benefits and pension rises, including finally introducing a living wage; for an emergency payment for disabled people and carers and a permanent cost-of-disability payment; to abolish fees for public services, including college, childcare, health, and general practitioner care; and, finally, to freeze and cap rents and build public housing. We will be on the streets for the first time, as Seamus mentioned, with a focus on the call for an emergency payment for disabled people and carers on Saturday, 28 February, at 1 o'clock in Parnell Square.

The last couple of weeks, or any week that one pays attention to, to be honest, tell us a lesson. This week, we have the rip-off rents Bill. Last week, we had the Social Democrats' motion for an emergency winter payment for disabled people shamefully voted down by the Government. The lesson is that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry lackey Independents who prop them up will not do any of this unless we force them to act. The launch of the affordable Ireland campaign recognises the fact that this right-wing Government will only take action on the cost-of-living crisis if it is forced to do so. Left to their own devices, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the right-wing Independents will do nothing to make Ireland affordable. In fact,

they will do the exact opposite. That is what the rip-off rents Bill is about. It is about deliberately increasing rents even faster than the already unaffordable rents that we have. That is what the attacks on the poorest in society and disabled people in the budget were about. They are making it harder for ordinary working class people to have a decent life. They will hike up rents for council, approved housing body and housing assistance payment tenants, and now for every private tenant too. They will roll out the red carpet for data centres, which means driving up electricity costs for everybody else.

The only way ordinary people's bills are going is up. Further increases to regressive standing charges are planned to fund the expansion of the grid for data centres. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities' price review 6, published before Christmas, allows for charges for householders to go up by 28% and costs for data centres to go down by 20%.

It proves the inextricable connection between the Government abandoning even a verbal commitment to climate action and the legal targets it has signed up to and making ordinary people pay the price for the cost-of-living crisis. Real climate action and cost-of-living action go hand in hand.

It is the same with rents. Ordinary people pay more so that landlords and big business can make more profits. Our loss is their gain. The Government acts like Robin Hood in reverse - stealing from the poor to give to the rich. It is not because it does not have the money. The Government had more than enough money in the budget to give hundreds of millions of euro in tax breaks to landlords, developers, fast food chains and Google, which walked in the front door of the Department of Finance, had a meeting with the Minister for Finance and said it wanted an increase in the research and development tax credit. It was a case of "a benefit of €300 million for us, yes no problem" in the same budget where the Government cut incomes for ordinary people. The Government never has enough. It is always hard choices for ordinary people with never enough to ensure they can afford to live unless, of course, an election is coming and the Government wants to buy people's votes with a few one-off cost-of-living payments. There is an unprecedented budget surplus for the Government but at the same time, the Oxfam wealth report shows the rich in this country are getting richer while the rest are getting poorer. Eleven Irish billionaires have the same wealth as 3.5 million Irish adults. That is obscene and yet the Government refuses to even consider a wealth tax. All of it is enraging, all of it is unfair and all of it is unjust but all of it will continue unless we stop them. That is why we have to mobilise with the affordable Ireland campaign.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I move amendment No. 1:

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

"notes that:

— the Government is acutely aware of, and concerned about, the impact of rising prices on Irish households, and it is also aware of the high cost of energy prices and the wider impact of the cost of doing business for firms, particularly small firms;

— in relation to Irish households, the Government has already taken the following measures;

— €28.9 billion will be spent on social protection in 2026, including over €1.15 billion of new measures targeted to assist the most vulnerable in our society with the cost of living;

— the supports provided in the budget package helps vulnerable households with the cost of energy bills, such as an increase in the Fuel Allowance scheme and extended eligibility to recipients of the Working Family Payment (WFP);

— the increase of €10 in weekly social welfare primary payments is equivalent to approximately 4.1 per cent, and for pensions the increase is about 3.5 per cent, both above the rate of inflation; and

— these increases follow on from the increase in payment rates in Budget 2025 that were also above the rate of inflation;

recognises, with regard to disability:

— that a Strategic Focus Network Summit on the Cost of Disability is being organised by the Department of Social Protection, and will involve disabled people and their advocates, as well as other Government Departments'; and

— a public consultation process on how a cost of disability can best be delivered will be launched shortly;

further notes, a second targeted tier of child benefit is being examined as a possible approach to reduce child poverty, but existing schemes like the Child Support Payment and the WFP are also available to achieve this end;

further notes, in relation to energy prices, that:

— Ireland has the twelfth highest electricity prices among the European Union (EU)-27, when adjusted for purchasing power parity according to Eurostat (H1 2025), and in nominal terms, Ireland ranks fifth for household electricity prices and eighth for gas prices among EU states;

— electricity and gas markets in Ireland are commercial, liberalised, and competitive, the position of successive Governments is that competitive energy markets result in greater choice for consumers and businesses, in terms of suppliers, products and prices, and price setting by electricity suppliers is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned;

— retail prices are influenced by several factors, including wholesale energy prices and supplier hedging, in Ireland, our long-standing reliance on fossil fuels, specifically gas, for electricity generation, has been a driver of higher energy costs, and furthermore, our geographical isolation, dispersed population, fossil fuel dependency and small market scale also influence prices and drive costs;

— the Government has introduced a suite of measures over recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy, including €1,500 in electricity credits to all households through four Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Schemes, at a cost of €3.3 billion, this is in addition to one-off payments to support certain social protection payment recipients; and

— the Government provides support for households through schemes, including, the Fuel Allowance, the Household Benefits Package and the Additional Needs Payment;

affirms that:

— as part of Budget 2026, the Government took action and provided significant supports to enhance energy affordability, including:

— an increase to the Fuel Allowance as well as broadened eligibility for the payment;

— an extension of the reduced Value Added Tax rate of 9 per cent, which is applied to gas and electricity to 2030;

— a continuation of the €400 income tax disregard for certain profits arising from the micro-generation of electricity for a further three years to end 2028; and

— an extension of the Accelerated Capital Allowances scheme for energy efficient equipment for businesses to 2030;

— the Government is committed to taking decisive action to provide warmer, more comfortable homes, as part of our drive to support energy affordability, security, and sustainability, with over 60 per cent of total Government expenditure on residential retrofit over the period 2022-2025 was on homes at risk of energy poverty;

— following approval at Cabinet last week, the Government has published a National Residential Retrofit Plan and an enhanced set of measures to increase the delivery and affordability of home energy upgrades, these measures will continue to make home energy upgrades more accessible and affordable and support more homes to be more sustainable and energy-efficient, reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and lowering energy costs for households;

— a record capital allocation of €640 million has been provided for Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland residential and community energy upgrade schemes this year, and a further €140 million has been provided for the Local Authority Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme;

— the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) continues to have a range of customer protection measures in place including, a moratorium on disconnections for vulnerable customers, protections for those on financial hardship meters, minimum debt repayment periods and promotion of the vulnerable customer register;

— the Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability, and the NEAT Interim Report 2025 was published last November with an Energy Affordability Action Plan to be published in Q3 this year;

— under the auspices of the NEAT, the CRU will lead on the Programme for Government commitment to 'commission an independent review into the speed and level of passthrough from wholesale prices to retail prices, with an additional assessment of the overall price dynamics and an overall focus on the competitiveness of the Irish economy';

— while electricity credits previously played an important role, it should be noted that, despite costing in excess of €3.3 billion, this measure did not permanently reduce the cost of electricity nor are they fiscally sustainable, therefore, the Government has prioritised measures which reduce energy costs in the long-run such as the €3.5 billion investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure as part of the National Development Plan; and

— the range of supports that were included in Budget 2026 are in line with the movement away from one-off measures, towards permanent supports with funding also provided to address structural issues such as retrofit and infrastructure; and

in relation to the cost of doing business, notes that arising from the wider inflationary trends, Government has taken action to address fiscal and regulatory issues, including:

— through the establishment of the Cost of Business Advisory Forum (the Forum), June 2025, and the publication of the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, September 2025;

— both of these actions deliver on the Programme for Government commitments to support small business, enterprise and industries and to develop Government policy which focuses on the economic areas that fall within our domestic sphere of influence;

— the Forum's purpose is to critically examine issues that can lead to higher costs for business in Ireland and review associated regulatory and infrastructural issues that merit a changed approach, at present, there are 24 member organisations who represent a broad section of Ireland's enterprise sector, including, Small and Medium Enterprises and Multinational Corporations, who regularly contribute to the work of the Forum, alongside active engagement and dialogue with a variety of State Agencies, Regulators, and Government Departments;

— the Forum members adopted a comprehensive thematic workplan in June, 2025 and since then have met to consider a series of themes:

- Energy Costs and Security of Supply;
- Insurance Costs;
- Planning and Infrastructural Delivery; and
- Water Services and Wastewater;

— there are a number of remaining meetings scheduled for Q1 2026, and these will focus on legal costs and regulation, reporting and compliance;

— the Forum is in the process of drafting the final report, with an indicative date to present the report to Government in Q1 2026;

— also in August 2025, the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) published an update to its 2023 high-level analysis of the grocery sector in Ireland, this analysis confirms that, while food prices have increased significantly in recent years in Ireland, competition is working effectively in the Irish grocery retail sector, notably, food price increases have generally remained below the EU average, which coincides with increasing competition in Ireland; and

— the grocery retail sector remains a key market for the CCPC and it will continue to monitor and review the sector on a regular basis; and

finally, in relation to the National Minimum Wage:

— since 2020, an increase by 40 per cent, from €10.10 to today's rate of €14.15 an hour, following a €0.65 increase in Budget 2026, which amounts to an increase of 4.8 per cent;

— in 2025, the minimum wage increased by over 6 per cent, following a significant uplift of 12 per cent, or €1.40 in the previous year;

— these increases were and are well ahead of inflation and projected wage growth and have brought about substantial real wage growth for the lowest paid workers in our economy; and

— our current rate of €14.15 an hour means that Ireland has the second highest minimum wage in the EU, second only to Luxembourg, and among the highest in the world, when adjusted for purchasing power standards, we have the fifth highest minimum wage in the EU."

I express my deepest sympathies to those affected today in such a tragic event. My heart goes out to the families affected and those who were seriously injured. I also acknowledge all the first responders who worked at the scene

I am pleased to be here to discuss a Private Members' motion that attempts to address a number of issues to do with the cost of living in Ireland. The Government opposes this motion. I assure the House that the Government is acutely aware of the impact of rising prices and costs on Irish households and businesses. Our proposed amendment to the motion will confirm this.

The areas raised in the motion are complex. We have to make sure that we do not do anything that might harm employment opportunities or have any unintended consequences for investment. I will set out tonight the progress the Government is making in tackling prices and the areas raised in the motion. The proposals in the motion are wide-ranging and extremely diverse cutting across several Departments. It addresses so many areas and issues that I cannot hope to cover them all in any depth this evening but I will do my utmost to address several of them.

At the outset, it is important for me to highlight the performance of the Irish economy over the past few years. The economy has proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of a series of unprecedented shocks from Brexit to the pandemic to the war in Europe. Furthermore, the geopolitical environment has perhaps never been as uncertain and turbulent as it is today. Despite all of this, our economy has continued to grow and thrive with record numbers of people in work - over 2.8 million people went to work this morning - and record rates of labour market activity. Today's labour market numbers confirmed this. The unemployment rate in January of this year stood at 4.7%. Incomes have risen and continue to rise while inflation has fallen and is expected to remain at close to 2% this year.

Nonetheless, several of the issues raised in the motion centre on prices and costs. We fully acknowledge the challenges posed by high inflation and high costs for our consumers and the enterprise sector. I also accept that inflation hits the least well-off the hardest. That is why the Government has been so proactive in introducing cost-of-living packages and attempting to ease burdens on households and businesses. While the annual rate of inflation last year

averaged 2.1%, which is down from a peak rate of 8.1% in 2021, we have seen food prices as a source of inflationary pressure. This is reflecting market conditions, an integrated supply chain and prices for agricultural inputs such as fuel, feed and fertiliser. It is important to note that food price inflation averaged 3.9% in 2025, which is down from 9.8% in 2023.

On the issue of energy costs and prices, it is the case that a suite of measures was introduced in recent years to help households and businesses deal with the rising cost of energy. This included €1,500 in electricity credits to all households through the emergency costs benefit scheme at a cost of €3.3 billion. This universal measure provided valuable on-bill support to nearly 2.3 million households. While previously, electricity credits played an important role, this measure at a cost in excess of €3.3 billion is neither fiscally sustainable nor did it provide long-term benefit. As part of budget 2026, the Government took action and provided significant supports to enhance energy affordability, including an increase to the fuel allowance, as well as broadened eligibility for the payment; an extension of the reduced VAT rate of 9%, which is applied to gas and electricity to 2030; a continuation of the €400 income tax disregard for certain profits arising from the microgeneration of electricity for a further three years to the end of 2028; and an extension of the accelerated capital allowances scheme for energy-efficient equipment for businesses to 2030. The CRU continues to have a range of customer protection measures in place, including a moratorium on disconnections for vulnerable customers, protections for those on financial hardship meters, minimum debt repayment periods and promotion of the vulnerable customer register. The Government also prioritised measures that reduce energy costs in the long run such as the landmark €3.5 billion investment in Ireland's electricity grid infrastructure approved by the Government in July 2025. This represents the largest single investment in the country's electricity network in the history of the State. A record capital allocation of €640 million has been provided for SEAI's residential and community energy upgrade schemes this year. A further record allocation of €340 million has been committed to the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully-funded energy upgrades for low-income homes at risk of energy poverty.

While I have just outlined specific supports that were introduced as part of budget 2026 in response to concerns about energy costs and prices, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the wider social protection elements of this important aspect. This year, the Department of Social Protection will spend €25.9 billion in social welfare expenditure supporting pensioners, carers, people with disabilities, jobseekers and families in every parish across our country. This expenditure will make a real difference to communities across the country. Over €1.15 billion of this sum is for new measures. At the heart of these new measures are across-the-board social welfare increases effective from last month to our pensioners and people of working age with core rates increasing by €10 - a level that more than matches inflation. The increase of €10 in the standard rate is equivalent this year to about 4.1% compared with the CSO's latest annual inflation rate of 2.8% to December. For pensioners, the increase is about 3.5%, which, again, is ahead of inflation. These increases follow on from the increase in payment rates last year that were also above the rate of inflation.

The measures contained in budget 2026 were designed to support the most vulnerable in our society. The budget package included the largest child support payment increase in the history of the State for primary social welfare recipients bringing the total annual value of the child support payment to €3,016 for each child under 12 and €4,056 for each child aged 12 and over. A second targeted tier of child benefit is being examined by the Department of Social

Protection as a possible approach to reduce child poverty but existing schemes like the child support payment and the working family payment are also available to achieve this end. The Department of Social Protection is currently developing a successor strategy to the roadmap for social inclusion, which is the national poverty reduction strategy, for the period from 2026 to 2030.

With regard to the disability sector, I assure the House that improving outcomes for disabled people is a top priority for this Government. Our determination to achieve this is reflected in the key programme for Government commitment to introduce a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. That will be provided through a dedicated disability unit that has been established through the Department of An Taoiseach.

Progress will also be monitored and driven by the Cabinet committee on children, disability and education. We know that addressing the cost of disability is not a question of income support alone. The delivery of, and access to, services are important and key to this.

It is also important to highlight the Government's continuing commitment to fair wages for the lowest paid workers in our economy, and we have seen real progress made by raising the national minimum

wage in recent years by way of substantial increases. Since 2020, the national minimum wage has increased by 40% from €10.10 to today's rate of €14.15 an hour, the second highest in the EU. Over the past number of years, these increases in the minimum wage were well ahead of inflation and have brought about substantial real wage growth for the lowest paid workers in our economy.

With regard to some of the other motions around wealth tax, we do have a number of cases where wealth in Ireland is taxed. There is capital gains tax, capital acquisitions tax, local property tax and certain forms of stamp duty for property and shares for those who are in impacted.

In conclusion, in the short time I had, I tried to highlight some of the areas raised by the Deputies. The Government is making very real progress in addressing the cost of living challenges. We are acutely aware of issues around rising prices on Irish households and our policies are very much focused on the data we have, notwithstanding the series of very challenging external developments.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State listing off the crumbs that were given out by the Government to those who are being crushed by the cost-of-living crisis is utterly meaningless. I thank Deputy Healy for bringing forward this motion, which People Before Profit strongly supports, as it details the absolutely crushing assault on the cost of living for working people, the least well-off, people with disabilities and pensioners.

Prices are up 23% in the past five years. Food prices are up 5% in the past year. Electricity prices are 24% higher in this country than the EU average. Electricity companies announced 10% increases just in the past year. Gas prices have doubled in the past five years. The average rent in Dublin is now €2,100 per month and rising. It is set to rise even further with the Government's residential tenancies rent hike Bill. House prices are up 8.1%. Rents have gone up 40% in the past six years. Motor insurance premiums are up 17%. Toll charges are up.

Local property tax is up. Student fees are up, and childcare fees still continue to be a second mortgage for those who have to pay them. I could go on.

People are being crushed and it is not just us saying it. The Parliamentary Budget Office confirmed that the Government's budget made things worse and that general poverty will increase as a result of the budget. Child poverty will increase to 15%, poverty among the elderly will increase to 17% and the poorest 20% of the population will see their incomes fall. We have record numbers of people contacting the Society of St. Vincent de Paul looking for assistance with the energy bills they cannot pay. Child poverty is at shocking levels with 190,000 children suffering child poverty. Some 298,000 people are in arrears with their electricity bills. I could go on with the horrible list.

That is a litany of what is being done to working people and people with disabilities, who lost, according to their own assessment, €1,400 as a result of the cuts in one-off payments, emergency payments and so on. This is the reason they are going to be on a very angry demonstration on 28 February. Due to the Government's failure to deliver a cost-of-disability payment, they are going to be on the streets demanding the winter payment and demanding a cost-of-disability payment. Incredibly, the Government took €1,400 of them in the budget, which is absolutely shocking.

What is the other side of the coin to these attacks on the vulnerable, the least well-off and working people? It is a profits bonanza. Between 2013 and 2023, corporate profits in this country went up 300%. Tesco profits last year were €185 million, up 54%. SuperValu profits were €134 million last year, which was up on previous years and big dividends were paid out to the shareholders. ESB profits in the first half of 2025 were €424 million, which was up on the previous year that was also a record level of profits. Cairn Homes recorded €150 million in profits, up 32% on the previous year. Glenveagh Homes had €132 million in profits, up 86% on the previous year.

The cost-of-living misery suffered by working people, by pensioners, by those with disabilities and by students is being caused by a Government that is prioritising the profits of people who are actually benefitting from all this. For example, in the budget the Government gave out €300 million extra in just one tax giveaway for research and development, most of which will go to massively profitable multinationals. These are the priorities of this Government. It is to look after the rich, big business and those who make profits and whose incomes are made from dividends, while screwing working people, the least well off, people with disabilities, students and the vulnerable in our society.

That is why we say that we need to mobilise and why the demonstration on 28 February is so important. It is also only the beginning of Affordable Ireland's campaign to mobilise against this Government and to demand that the benefits of the economic growth in this country in terms of housing, food and energy prices, as well as incomes that actually sustain a decent standard of living for people become the priority.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome this motion and thank Deputy Healy for bringing it forward. It is timely. Personal debt is up. Nearly 300,000 households are in arrears with their electricity bills. Profits are up massively, as has been outlined. Private health insurance has gone out through the roof. The motion outlines a number of serious measures that need to be taken.

I want to add the issue of private health insurance. Unfortunately, people, particularly the elderly and those who have health issues, have to take it out. Costs have escalated in recent years. They are not going up once a year, not twice, but three times a year. In the past 12 months, VHI have increased premiums on three occasions. Laya has ramped up prices. All of them have ramped up prices.

One Laois couple, who are 81- and 82-years-old, have seen their policy go up to €4,506.66 per annum. They live on one pension. She is an adult dependant, and it is their only form of income. They have the most basic cover. All they have is the minimum. They are terrified to let it lapse because both have health issues. A sum of €4,500 per annum is not affordable for pensioners who are just on a single State pension. They couple in question are in a very difficult situation. They have to pay rent, heating, electricity, shopping and home repairs. It will really cause financial hardship. There is a copy of their demand, which they shared with me. We are supposed to moving to universal healthcare, under Sláintecare. We have a year or so left to go in this, but we have made snail's pace progress. I accept that Covid-19 held it up for a year or so, but we are still nowhere near where we should be.

We need to get Sláintecare, which is a universal public health system, in place. We are way behind the rest of Europe. Health costs are putting a huge burden, on top of the things outlined here in the past half an hour, on top of households and particularly vulnerable people. We need equal access to treatment regardless of ability to pay. It has to be based on medical needs alone. We are completely out of step and in the Dark Ages compared with the rest of Europe, including countries that are much poorer than us. We need to get that in place and move forward as quickly as possible to it.

I want to mention something in support of one big measure in the motion. I refer to the extra costs of disability. The basic payment is at €232 a week. It is much lower than the poverty threshold, which is deemed to be at €291. There are significant extra costs for people with disabilities. Last year - when I say last year, I refer to the budget of October 2024, when we were on the cusp of an election - there was €400 extra in a cost-of-living payment for disability. There was €300 extra in fuel allowance in one payment alone. The living alone allowance was up €300. Electricity credits were up €200 each time. There was €230 extra on the basic Christmas bonus. Last October, there was no election but there were no increases like this. Zero. They all came and went but the expenses that people have are still the same. In fact, they have actually gone up because of the rate of inflation, particularly for essentials - and this is the key point - like food, heating, electricity, health insurance and health costs, which people should not have to pay.

There are very basic measures called for here, including to implement a rent freeze - the Government is going to do the opposite on 1 March, which is terrible - or implement a living wage. Introducing a cost-of-disability payment is key. Also, we need to speed up the implementation of Sláintecare and get a public health system. Energy credits should be reinstated, particularly for low-income households. The Government should not shy away from taxing the billionaires. The billionaires have the cash. Other countries do it. We need to take a bit of it off them and give it to those people who are at the bottom end. All the statistics show that the gap between those at the bottom and those at the top has widened. We cannot continue going like this. We cannot have a situation like America. We have to have a fairer

society like the rest of Europe. That is what we need here and I ask the Minister of State to withdraw the amendment and support this motion.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I will begin, as others have, by expressing my condolences in regard to the person who lost their life in the awful tragedy, the accident on Talbot Street today. Our thoughts are with the friends and family of the deceased. We wish those who are recovering a speedy recovery in hospital. It was a terrible tragedy this afternoon.

I also thank the Deputies involved in bringing forward this motion because Government has failed to end the rip-off and get prices under control. To make matters worse, it brought forward a budget that left people worse off. It claimed prices were stabilising and things were getting better. That is how it justified abandoning ordinary workers in this year's budget to look after those at the top. That is how it justified pulling cost-of-living supports like energy credits and disability payments. It is how it justified handing out all the tax breaks to investors and developers, giving nothing to workers.

Prices have not levelled off. Inflation is 50% higher than the Government forecast on budget day. Its projections that it built its budget on now look like wishful thinking. We are now seeing prices going up and up, totally out of line with targets and what we see in other European countries. Despite all of this, the Government has dug in its heels and refused to act. It is still turning a blind eye to the fact that people are working every hour God sends them and still cannot keep up. People have been left struggling through the winter months by a Government that refuses to help. Inflation figures do not come close to showing the real pressures people are under. Food price hikes are still racing ahead of general inflation in a way that cannot continue and ordinary workers and families are getting crucified. They are hit hardest because they spend a large share of their wages just trying to put food on the table. Parents trying to keep and feed their families on modest wages are drowning and this Government looks the other way.

Energy prices are completely out of control. Ireland has gone from being one of the cheapest for electricity to being one of the most expensive. Hundreds of thousands of people right now are behind on their energy bills and it seems the Government does not care. More than that are able to barely just keep up and are trying not to fall into arrears. This was all because there was no election. The Government pulled energy credits even though bills were higher this year than they were the year before and more people than ever are struggling but the Government did not care.

Insurance costs are through the roof. Car, home and health insurance - you name it, it has gone up. What else has gone up? Bank profits, developer profits, insurance profits and large supermarket profits. They are all raking it in. Both the International Monetary Fund, IMF, and the European Commission have told us that corporate profits drive inflation but this Government does not want to know. The Government looks at corporations making record profits and gives them bigger tax breaks, all while ordinary people pick up the tab.

The reality is that things are getting worse and people are under more pressure than ever. They are still being crucified by energy bills, food prices, insurance and childcare. The list goes on and on and people at home know it. The Government needs to show some humility and admit that it got this badly wrong. More importantly, it needs to wake up to reality and bring forward a cost-of-living package. Right now, the Government is just refusing to help. It

is not just refusing to help; it is actively making things worse and harder on people. Instead of supporting people, it has made things worse. It is jacking up rents, increasing college fees, hiking taxes on family homes and increasing the cost of home heating oil, petrol and diesel. The list goes on.

Any Government with a serious intent of protecting people from inflation has to do three things. The first is do no harm. It should not make things worse through Government action. Second, Government needs to do its job and tackle price gouging; reform electricity pricing; mandate large supermarkets that operate in Ireland to report their profits; take on the banks and insurance companies; support my legislation that would ensure transparency; cap rents; and stop vulture funds snapping up properties ahead of families. These are just some of the proposals we have put forward and we can give the Government many more. Third, the Government needs to put in place supports. That means bringing forward a cost-of-living package because people should be able to expect that in the face of a cost-of-living crisis, when the Government has the resources in the form of billions of their euro, the Government will step in and help.

I will say it again: the Government should admit that it got it badly wrong and what it needs to urgently do is end the price gouging, get costs under control and, crucially, bring forward a cost-of-living package without delay.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: As others have, I want to express my sincere condolences to those impacted by the serious tragedy on Talbot Street. I also want to say a word to commend the emergency services. They never know what they are going to see when they come into work in the morning but they still turn up, so they deserve all of our thanks.

I want to address some of the remarks made by the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, in his opening statement. Some of this stuff would be funny if it was not so serious. He referenced "sustainable" increases in the minimum wage. Sustainable for who exactly? Sustainable for employers, perhaps, or sustainable for business because it sure as Jesus is not sustainable for workers living on the minimum wage. Their wages are not going up anywhere near as fast as food or energy inflation. In fact, they are running behind just trying frantically to catch up.

The Minister of State also confirmed that this Government has completely abandoned the living wage. It talked a lot about it but then when I thought about it, I asked myself when it was that the Government talked about it. Yes - it was just before the election. The same as all of its pre-election promises, like snow on a ditch, it is gone. There is no living wage for workers. It has been pushed right out, way beyond the term of this Government. In fact, there is arrogance in this Government's claim that it will somehow be re-elected and that at some point, we will get the sunny uplands of the living wage. Nobody is fooled by that, by the way.

6 o'clock

It is very clear in the Minister of State's script, which he diligently read out and every word of which he stuck to, that there will be no living wage. What is the living wage? It is the minimum amount that a person needs to live on. That is the living wage and that is gone. The Government just sanctioned a fairly hefty pay increase for the head of Uisce Éireann. He is nowhere near the living wage and he is still getting an increase. He could not spend in ten lifetimes all the money that he has. He will get a pay increase but people who are on the

minimum wage have to be content with those sustainable increases, as the Government referred to them.

The Minister of State also did not address the unaffordable cost of childcare because, again, that is one of those things those in government say when they are running for election. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon will remember that his party leader could not pass a microphone back in October-November 2024 without reminding people of their commitment to introduce within 100 days of government a plan for €200 per week childcare. What happened to that? Again, all the pre-election promises are gone like snow off a ditch because they are in now and they do not care. We totally understand that. The Government has taken €1,400 off disabled people. Those are not my words; they are the words of disabled people. What was the response of the Government? The Minister, Deputy Calleary, said it was misleading and dangerous - he was very concerned - to suggest that people are choosing between heating and eating. Disabled people came to the audiovisual room - I did not see too many Government representatives there - and told us that there are days when they have to make a very real choice between the groceries and energy they need and the bills they must pay. I hope that when the Minister of State comes to read out his script, he might scribble a bit at the end and express a little bit of shame about that. That is €1,400 the Government took from people who are struggling just to exist. The Government is trying to do the same kind of thing that it did with the students when it jacked up the fees by €500 and then told everyone that somehow that was cut. People are not stupid. They have to manage their own finances. They have to balance their own books. They have to get themselves to the end of the week. They see what the Government is doing. They see you for who you are. They have memories that go back to November 2024 and all of those promises and they see them now gone - absolutely gone.

One in five workers in this State today is classified as being in poverty. That is nothing to be proud of in a State where there are surpluses that run to billions and pay increases available to very well-off CEOs because obviously they have to be shielded from any cost-of-living crisis, but for the people on the front line of the Government's policies, the people who will have to pay those higher rents when it rams its rent hike Bill through, there will be no pay increases for them, no big bonuses, no bonanzas, nothing like that. They will be told to make do and mend. They are gaslit by the Minister for Social Protection telling them their own lived reality is not true. They spoke very clearly. The people with disabilities said it. They are making a choice between heating and eating as a direct result of Government policy. It was hurtful and wrong of the Minister to try to gaslight them because people with disabilities face enough challenges in this State. They have to give 24-hours' notice to use some forms of public transport. It is very hard for them to access employment. It is very tough for them to get out of the house some days. It is near impossible if they do not have the money to power up their mobility devices. They were told it was dangerous for us to repeat what people with disabilities told us. The Government should be ashamed but it will not be.

We see food inflation running at 4%. Again, 4% is just a figure but in real life that is a man standing at the checkout saying to a child, "Put that back, we cannot afford that this week." There is shame in that. These people come into my advice clinics and they tell me they are ashamed because they have to tell their kids that they cannot have something - sometimes it is something fairly basic - and I never, ever fail to remind them that the shame belongs to this Government. The shame is not theirs. They want to be able to provide for their kids. They

work hard, but if they are on the minimum wage, they will not get any closer to the living wage under this Government. It has made it very clear.

Any Government with a serious interest in protecting people from inflation has to do at least these three things. First, it must put supports in place and it must have targeted payments for energy and the basics for people to be able to live. Second, it must tackle price gouging. I heard it from Neale Richmond a couple of years ago. He was bringing in the heads of the supermarkets and he was going to talk tough. Jesus, we are paying an awful lot more than we were. I am probably glad he did not bring them in again because the prices went up almost immediately. The third thing that a Government should do is just not make things worse. Do not jack up the cost of going to college and do not jack up the cost of renting. This Government does not listen, however, and it does not understand that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also add my voice in relation to those who have been injured and offer condolences to the family of the man who has died. I have spoken too many times over the last short period about absolute tragedies. It is obviously disappointing to see this on the streets of Dublin. Too many times have I had to commend those who work in the emergency services. As Deputy O'Reilly said, we do not always think through what they do on a day-by-day basis but, as she says, they always show up and we are very glad they do.

I thank Deputy Healy for doing this but the fact we are putting down Private Members' motions on the cost-of-living crisis in one of the richest states in the world says something. We talk to constituents and constituents come in to us. We hear the conversations in shops or the odd time when people are in bars or anywhere else. It is about the cost of everything and how it has gone through the roof. I do not think the Minister of State will be shocked to hear they are not generally impressed with the actions, or lack of action, of the Government.

I think of those who work in EuroGiant and the particular issues they are facing at the moment. That is 77 stores and 640 workers. We do not know how liquidation and the whole thing will go but they are people who might be facing far worse circumstances than they anticipated. I am thinking of those in my home town of Dundalk who work for EuroGiant. We need to ensure that whatever supports are necessary are done.

Unfortunately, we do not have all the safety nets for all those who fall into worse times. Many others have said how there are a number out there who are in very good circumstances who are constantly looked after, whether that is developers with their tax breaks, those in the highest echelons of semi-State organisations and all those others. There is no cost-of-living crisis for them and there are no worries about increases for those people. That is the problem.

Yesterday, this House went through the disaster the Government is going to impose on an absolutely dysfunctional housing market and housing crisis. In my constituency the average cost of a three-bedroom house rental in County Louth is around €1,966.

People would probably struggle to get that price if they go onto *daft.ie* at the minute. I did it yesterday and I do not intend to go through it again. In Dundalk there were only about 20 properties that were available. What does the Government propose? On 1 March we will have a complete reset for all new tenancies and market rate is what people will be charged. We can just imagine what market rate is in a broken market.

Many speakers for very obvious reasons have brought up a cohort of people who have been abused for many years. I refer to those with disabilities. I again commend Disability Federation Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association and Access for All for driving home the idea that there is a need for an emergency cost-of-disability payment. I am going to repeat what I said previously. In providing one-off payments, the Government accepted there was a need for a cost-of-disability payment because it made it. The other reason I know the Government believes there is a need for a cost-of-disability payment is because there is a review process ongoing at the minute to provide one for next year. The only problem with that is that it is no good for those who have to decide whether to eat or heat.

We all heard from those in the audiovisual room who spoke about the issues over deciding whether to charge their wheelchair and that is before we get into the logistics in relation to travel and the added costs. Even at times when they have free travel, they still have to pay a booking cost because they have to use the Internet when booking within Iarnród Éireann. None of this is good enough and I do not see any solutions.

Deputy O'Reilly stated it explicitly. We have had huge promises from the Government and we have had a huge amount of energy in relation to what was going to be done about the absolutely spiralling cost of groceries, not that anybody outside needs to be told about that. They literally can tell us on a day-to-day basis how the price of milk, rashers or anything has gone through the roof. Beef is a particular issue this week. Let us be clear: there is no solution for the absolutely drastic energy costs.

As said by many, whatever about not improving the circumstances, at least the Government should do no harm; it should not increase the pain. What do we get? We get carbon taxes thrown on those who can least afford them. We have huge energy costs, huge rental costs and huge mortgage costs. We have no cost-of-disability payments. We have no solutions and no cost-of-living package from the Government. There was no difficulty with cost-of-disability payments and cost-of-living payments before an election, but there is a problem with them now. There is a problem for people out there at the minute. We need to see action and we have seen nothing but bluster.

Deputy Ged Nash: I am pleased to have the opportunity to support Deputy Healy's motion. The contents of the motion will not be unfamiliar to those in opposition who have tabled broadly similar motions week in and week out over the last few years. What will not be lost on us either is the nature of the rather routine response that we receive from the Government, as we saw in the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon's, response to the motion earlier on. With respect, I have no doubt that in his response in closing the debate, the Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, may respond in the same vein, telling us how successful the economy is, how well employment is growing and how resilient the Irish economy is. However, the economy exists for the principal reason of servicing the needs of our society. We have a very successful economy objectively. Many of us have played our own role in ensuring that is the case. However, we cannot say with any great certainty that we have a successful society because with a successful economy must come a more equal society. That is the measurement we must use to measure success. The experiences of far too many individuals and families across this country are undeserving of the kind of approach taken by the Government and the credit the Government gives itself for its great, successful economic model and how well the country is

doing because the lived experience for far too many people is very remote from that sort of assessment and that sort of analysis.

One of the measures in the motion refers very clearly to the problem that we have with food prices and the increased cost of groceries, something that has put Irish families to the pin of their collective collars over the last few years, in particular since 2020 and 2021. A number of factors feed into that. As a practical legislator, I have sought time and time again to propose practical solutions to try to get a better understanding of why food costs in Ireland are so high and why the prices charged at the checkouts for everyday products are so high compared with some analogous countries in the European Union. One of the measures I proposed was my own unfair prices Bill, which was published in 2023. The response by the then Minister for enterprise, Simon Coveney, was to head that off at the pass in the middle of a real crisis with grocery price inflation. He said not only that he thought the principles laid out in my legislation were worthy of consideration, but that he would introduce his own legislation in 2023 to compel supermarkets to be clearer on their margins and to publish certain information so we as consumers could make our own minds up as to whether they were gouging. What did we get? We got two reports from the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, one in 2023 and, under pressure, another one in the summer telling us effectively that there is nothing to see here and that there is no issue with competition in the Irish supermarket sector. We have had the CCPC rather extraordinarily saying on the one hand that there is no issue with price gouging but on the other hand that it does not really have sufficient information to completely determine that. It said it anyway. How can anybody possibly say that there is no issue with price gouging, with all that entails, if they do not have the complete information?

My proposed legislation was finally debated on Second Stage last summer. Why has it not been brought to committee to be interrogated further? The Minister in 2023 thought this was a good idea. Since then, I believe from the data I have read that the annual cost of grocery shopping has gone up by about €2,000 but wages have not. Why can we not properly interrogate this? I do not like to conclude this, but it is quite clear that the Government is simply afraid to take on big business and corporate interests as its actions have shown.

We are still waiting for all the powers of the Agri-Food Regulator to be properly commenced. That will actually give the State a very significant weapon to use to ensure greater transparency for primary producers - the farmers, producers, processors and so on that we rely on to purchase food. It will be another important piece of the jigsaw for consumers to figure out who is gouging whom and what the problem is. If we cannot measure the problem, we cannot propose solutions.

Time and again we in the Labour Party have published comprehensive and coherent joined-up proposals to address all of the issues that make this country such an expensive place in which to work, in which to do business for a small business, and in which to live and exist. We need a coherent cost-of-living action plan from this Government but we simply do not get it. Decisions were made in the last budget that really make it very clear what the ideological direction of this Government is.

On the one hand, the poorest and most marginalised in our society, those who depend on the State for their income and people with disabilities require additional cost-of-living payments to ensure they can make ends meet. We have acknowledged over many years that there is an additional cost to having a disability. As Deputy Ó Murchú said earlier, the Government has

more or less admitted there is a problem for people with disabilities who merely exist and do not participate fully in society because of their economic circumstances. The Government has admitted that given that it introduced cost-of-living payments in recent years ahead of the last general election, of course. There is no sign of them now. The Government decided not to do that and instead to provide enormous, unjustified, unwarranted tax breaks for burger barons and big builders, at the expense of those who require cost-of-disability payments and of workers. At the end of January, if you are paid every month and you got a pay increase, which people will receive this year at on average 3% to 4%, you will see that swallowed up because the personal taxation system was not indexed last year. Much if not all of that pay increase will not make it into people's pay packets or bank accounts every week, every second week or every month. Instead it will go to the Exchequer. They are the decisions the Government has made.

The motion refers to the need to introduce a living wage. I established the Low Pay Commission back in 2015 with the sole intention of ensuring that Irish workers would ultimately enjoy a living wage. We have a real problem with in-work poverty, and that problem remains. While we are closer now to achieving a living wage than we were, we are very tardy about it. The Government has not met its own targets for the introduction of a living wage. The longer we wait to introduce a living wage, perversely, the more costs will arise for the Exchequer. We spend an enormous amount of money essentially subsidising low pay and subsidising big corporations that are paying hard-working people poverty wages. That is an outrageous commentary on our priorities as a country. Working people should by definition enjoy a living wage, sufficient income to have a reasonable, modest lifestyle, something that people in a rich economy should be entitled to expect.

Something else we did not do in the budget for this year was index social welfare rates. Most modern, sophisticated economies analogous to Ireland have some form of indexation of social welfare rates and personal taxation rates. I have been a proponent of this for many years. It could fundamentally address some very real problems we have with in-work poverty and standards of living more generally. We in Labour support the motion. We thank Deputy Healy and his colleagues for introducing it and we look forward to voting in favour of it next week.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Deputy Healy for bringing forward this motion. It is timely that we are discussing a cost-of-living Private Member' motion. The Social Democrats have brought forward a number of measures to try to support people with the ever-increasing rise in the cost of just existing, due to the cost of so many things. I want to focus on a number of areas and the first is poverty. We have been hearing for a very long time about the number of children who are living below the poverty line. It is one in five, or 225,000 children in this country who are living below the poverty line. The effects of poverty are lifelong. Poverty affects not only the generation experiencing it but the generation that comes after it. There is absolutely no reason anyone in this country should be identified as living below the poverty line. We are a rich country. There is no need for it and there are solutions, but unfortunately they are not being implemented.

Poverty really does affect children's learning. As my party's education spokesperson, I have spoken so many times about the young people I worked with over the almost 30 years when I was involved in youth work and a school completion programme. It affects their daily life in terms of their learning but also their thriving in society. It is the same for adults. There is a lot

of conversation at the moment about the hot school meals. They were brought in because there are children who are hungry in our schools. They were there before and they are still there. When you are hungry, you cannot learn. The fundamental difficulty with then stigmatising a child who is poor in giving them a meal has always been a difficulty, but the hot school meals have been fantastic in making sure that no one feels stigmatised and every single child gets a hot school meal. The shame of poverty is something else. Only those who experience it can truly describe what it is. The hot school meals programme will make sure that every single child in this country gets a hot school meal, but especially children who are hungry. Not a single child in this country should be hungry at school, whether that is primary or secondary school. I look forward to the scheme being rolled out in secondary schools because there is also a huge need there. Children do not stop being hungry after sixth class. They go on to first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth year and they are still hungry then. I really want to see that programme rolled out to secondary schools. We need to make sure the food that is provided there is nutritious and is something they want to eat. Getting that balance, as anyone who is a parent will know, is also a challenge. We need to work hard on that.

There is the cost of education itself. Voluntary contributions should have their name changed to "not voluntary at all, depending on the school and how much pressure they put on the parent" contributions. Some schools will respect the fact that it is voluntary and will not chase parents for it because what they are looking for are the nice things in the school that maybe the school cannot provide. Unfortunately, however, schools are not able to be funded to the level they want to be. I know there was an increase but there needs to be more. A woman contacted my office recently. It is just before the mock leaving certificate exams; I have a child doing them at the moment. It is a tense time in households. The school her child goes to was badgering her for the fee for the mocks. She did not have the money at all and she said she would have to borrow the money from a family member. The school told her that if she did not get the money in, the child could not sit the mocks. What the heck? I do not want to curse but I am getting close to it. That is a disgrace. Other mechanisms in the school can be used for that; whatever it is, use it. She was not only being badgered about the mock exams, but she was also being badgered about the not-so-voluntary voluntary contribution. This woman was being put under so much pressure. It is not acceptable.

Last week, the Social Democrats had a Private Members' motion about an emergency winter payment for disabled people. As has already been said, the Minister claimed we were gaslighting him and that there was no such thing as choosing between heating and eating. We are not making that up. We are hearing from people in the three agencies involved in getting that motion recognised. This is not made up. People in this country are struggling. I am very thankful to Deputy Healy for bringing this forward. I ask Government Deputies to really look at their constituencies and other constituencies, like mine in Dublin South-Central, where things are not great for everybody, and to identify the things that are really important to people. That is living properly, sustainably, living a good life and not struggling with poverty all of the time.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I echo the other Deputies' thanks to Deputy Healy for bringing forward this motion. It is very well written and comprehensive. It articulates a lot of what is wrong in the country right now and the cost-of-living crisis. I attended a conference late last year, hosted by the European Council on Social Rights, on the cost-of-living crisis. At that conference, I

and many others heard that the bottom 20% of households are the most vulnerable to cost increases. Cost inflation for that cohort in Ireland is at about 5%, nearly twice the rate of annual inflation, far beyond the social protection increases in budget 2026 and one of the highest in Europe.

Core to this question of the cost of living is what the components are. They are energy, food, childcare and housing - the list seems endless. What is not often reported are the extreme levels of costs in Ireland relative to our European peers. We have the highest electricity costs in the EU, the second most expensive food prices in the EU, some of the highest rents and mortgage interest rates in Europe and no public model of childcare. Our exceptionalism in how we rip people off in this country is unparalleled.

What was the Government's response? It was a budget for this year that increases poverty, according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, and leaves disabled people €1,400 worse off than they were last year, according to the Irish Wheelchair Association, driving an exceptional level of need among households. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul reported the highest ever demand for its supports among the impoverished. This is a damning indictment of how this Government has left too many behind.

As my colleague, Deputy Cummins, said last week, the Social Democrats put forward a measure for a modest emergency winter payment for disabled people to help the most vulnerable population in the State with this cost-of-living crisis. We were met not just with resistance from the Government but outright disdain. What this Government is crafting is a society with a tale of two cities - one for those who are doing well, who have benefited from this Government and which caters to developers and special interests and one for everyone else. Everyone else, those who have a different life experiences or do not agree with the Government measures, are tarnished by words from this Government of being "alarmist" or accused of being "dangerous and misleading", as they were last week.

In an age of misinformation and disinformation, this Government has proven itself to be the most adept king of spin. Disabled people are not choosing between heating and the food according to the Government, even when they tell us that they are. Instead, they are, as one disabled person put it, perceived as liars. The Government touts progress in housing while new records in homeless numbers are set every quarter. The Government says it is pumping billions of euro into capital in energy development and yet all offshore wind farms in this country lie idle.

The people of this country are not fools. They know someone is misleading them. They know it is not disabled people, renters, those punished with vulture fund mortgage interest rates, climate activists or us in the Opposition. They know who is doing misleading and they know it is the Government.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Is it happening? I am on the record of the Dáil as saying that I believe the cost of living in this country is going to have an adverse reaction. Today, for the people of Abbeyfeale who have worked in KOSTAL Ireland GmbH, there is the loss of 140 jobs, 95 operators and 45 non-operators. Where has the business gone? It has gone to China. EuroGiant is going into liquidation. It is happening because Ireland is now becoming a place where people are taxed out of existence. Over the past two years, I have been feeling that something is coming, and it is coming. This Government has to do something to help the

working people in this country to have an existence in which they can survive, see a future for their children and in which they want to stay here and not leave these shores. That is what we have to achieve.

KOSTAL Ireland GmbH has been in Abbeyfeale for many years. The people of Abbeyfeale have now lost 140 jobs to China. Last year the company asked for 60 voluntary redundancies, which it got. There were up to 400 people working in KOSTAL Ireland GmbH at one time. If they have lost 140 jobs today and 60 last year, is the writing not on the wall? What is that going to do for the people in Abbeyfeale and the businesses they support in Abbeyfeale and in the surrounding communities in Kerry and Limerick? Even people from my constituency work there. What are we going to say to them this evening?

The price of food in this country has gone up. The price of rent has gone up. The price of fuel at the pumps has gone up. The price of the clothes on our backs has gone up. The cost of heating for houses has gone up. The cost of electricity has gone up. The cost of maintenance of vehicles has gone up. The cost of maintenance of the roads has gone down. There is no maintenance of the roads, so people are damaging their cars even going to work.

Disabled people, including wheelchair users, have seen a reduction of €1,400. Yet, a Department can have an overspend of €1.2 billion on a hospital with no accountability. Some €360,000 was spent on a bike shed and there was no accountability. Another €1.2 million was spent on another security hut. We had the chairperson of Bord Bia in. He brought in beef from Brazil. This affects the farmers of this country who produce the highest quality food, setting the standards for across Europe. What does Europe want to do for a Mercosur deal? Europe wants to bring beef into this country, which contains carcinogens, and where there is no traceability or tagging systems and where there is accessibility to drugs for the animals. None of this is allowed here but they are allowed this. I was at the meeting and it feeds in to this. That person saw nothing wrong with him having his own meat company and being the chair of Bord Bia.

I have been a self-employed contractor all my life. If I was working for the Department building social houses or any other project for the Government, would I be allowed to be the chair of the housing committee? Under legislation, the answer is "No". Yet, he can have a company and sit as the chair of Bord Bia, which is making every food producer in this country meet the highest standards, while he, the watchdog, brings in inferior foods into this country. That is not only a problem for Ireland; it is a problem for Europe.

The cost of living here is off the wall if a person wants to build a house here. We had the pyrite scandal, redress for which the Government has not fully funded yet. The people who caused the pyrite problem here saw a 40% increase in concrete products in this country over five years. In January all concrete products increased in price by another 8%. What did the Government do? It put a 5% levy on all concrete products on top of that to pay for all their mistakes. None of them is held accountable.

In terms of the squeezed middle in this country, if two people in a household are working, they are worse off. They qualify for nothing. Every cent they have goes to keeping their families fed and sometimes they have to do without food themselves and try to put a roof over their heads. Sometimes they are not able to make rent. How are we going to fix this?

Are companies now looking at this country and deciding that it is no longer a viable place to have a business? That is a concern. The Government will always be remembered for turning its back on its own.

These are families who have voted for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for decades and celebrated 100 years. These are the people who walk the roads with them, helped them get to where they are and asked them to deliver for them. Only for social media, they would never have been found out about everything that the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael said to them that they were coming up to do for them, but their Members would vote the opposite way when they come up here. Televisions showed one side of it, but never showed the side of their voting record. That is why the whole system in this country has changed. The people were traditionally Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. One was known as the workers' party and the other was known as the farmers' party. Why does the Government think there were loads of farmers here today? Why does it think the Irish Farmers' Association, IFA, was outside Bord Bia's offices overnight? Why does it think 27,000 people turned up in Athlone? There is a shift. The traditional people who voted for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael no longer believe that they are representing them. All they believe is that the Government is representing their children leaving these shores and representing the people in this country who want everything, but the Government is not looking after the towns and villages that supported it. It is only looking at the balance. It does not look at the community supports that it can deliver for the people who have to work in another town or village. The Government looks at the bottom line which is "They only give so much money to society. They are costing us so much money."

It closed down the banks in every town that they were in because the turnover was not there. That was about the convenience of having them in their area. It was bringing in the footfall to area that supported other businesses. Infrastructure in this country, such as water and sewerage schemes, has been promised in places in Limerick for 46 years. It is infrastructure where we could be building houses for the past 20, 30 or 40 years. Now, we are going to areas and the planning laws say, "Sorry, there is no capacity." What did the Government do? It looked at how much capacity it had. The biggest amount of capacity it had was in the cities. It started to build houses in the cities. What happened then? Supply and demand drove the prices through the roof. Five years ago, a house could be built between €100 and €110 per sq. ft. The same house today is €190 to €200 per sq. foot. The Government had a 13.5% tax five years ago on it. It has doubled its tax take. At the moment, anyone who going for a mortgage they pay tax to qualify for their mortgage. They pay tax where they are working. They pay tax on building their own house. It works out about 40% of their mortgage now is tax based. They are borrowing their mortgages for 20 and 30 years now to pay 40% more in tax and they might have to leave this country after it.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I thank the Deputies for their important contributions to this debate. I acknowledge that they are genuine in bringing concerns about the cost of living to the floor of the House. These are really important issues - emotive but with very real impacts on our people. I am committed, as are all my colleagues across government, to improving living conditions for all. That is what we are doing and what we will continue to do. Fundamentally, our economy is sound and robust. The data shows we are performing very strongly, particularly when it comes to jobs and income. This is further evidenced by today's unemployment numbers. I see

unemployment and incomes as being intrinsically interlinked. The best way out of poverty is through employment. The best way to raise living standards is through employment. I recall the dark days of the 1980s when Ireland was scourged by joblessness, long-term unemployment and emigration. That is not the case today. The latest CSO data points to a record number of persons in work at over 2.8 million people with rising participation and sustained jobs growth. The labour market remains close to full employment with record rates of activity and very strong net inward migration. While the labour market has cooled down, we still expect to see further employment growth this year and in 2027. Forecasts from the Central Bank and the Department of Finance point to solid slowing employment growth in 2026 and 2027, with close to 50,000 jobs added per annum. Ireland's unemployment rate also remains far below the European average as we continue to create jobs at rates that are multiples of our European peers.

The annual rate of inflation was 2.2% in 2025, relative to 2.1% in 2024 and 6.3% in 2023. We are aware of the challenges posed by inflation here and we are monitoring price developments very closely. I note that the Central Bank recently revised up its outlook for inflation in 2026 reflecting pressures on the services and energy sides. My colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, earlier outlined how many of the issues raised here this evening are being addressed through the likes of budget 2026, the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity and other fora. With any decisions, whether that be tax changes or wages, there are trade-offs. We have to make sure we strike the right balance between decisions and actions that are fair and sustainable for our workers and our economy, and ones that will not have significant negative consequences for employers and competitiveness.

I understand the arguments Deputies have put forward on costs and wages. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, earlier outlined the sizeable increases in the national minimum wage over the past few years. Just last month, the minimum wage increased again by 65 cent. This is an increase of 4.8% and is projected to be well ahead of inflation. Our current rate of €14.15 an hour means that Ireland has the second highest minimum wage in the EU, second only to Luxembourg and is among the highest in the world. When adjusted for purchasing power standards, we have the fifth highest minimum wage in the EU. The Low Pay Commission when making its recommendations for a national minimum wage has a statutory obligation to have regard to and report on several factors, such as changes in earnings, income distribution and the likely economic effects of any recommendation. The Government carefully considers the recommendations of the commission, and of course closely monitors labour market developments and cost-of-living concerns. There has to be a balance between a fair and sustainable rate for low paid workers and one that will not have significant negative consequences for employers and competitiveness. I fully expect the national minimum wage to continue to increase over the coming years.

I also listened to contributions on the effects of high energy costs on households. The Government is deeply aware and concerned about the pressures placed on both households and businesses by high energy costs. Providing supports to alleviate this pressure has been a priority for this Government and extensive work has and will continue to be undertaken across government to address these challenges. As outlined earlier, the Government has clearly demonstrated its commitment to supporting households to meet energy costs. It has delivered significant investment in energy infrastructure and energy efficiency measures. The increased

targeted supports provided through budget 2026 confirm our ongoing commitment to support households and businesses to meet energy costs. The budget package provided significant supports to help householders with the cost of heating and other energy bills. The fuel allowance increased by €5 to €38 per week, which is a 15% increase well ahead of inflation. For the first time, families receiving the working family payment qualify for the fuel allowance. This change will benefit an additional 43,000 households across the State. The formation of the energy affordability task force will ensure that a whole-of-government approach is taken to continue to tackle this issue. While the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, has carried out extensive monitoring of the Irish retail energy market before, during and in the aftermath of the energy crisis, it found no evidence of market failure. Recent analysis by the International Energy Agency, IEA, and Nevin Economic Research Institute, NERI, has outlined the importance of progressing the programme for Government's commitment to "commission an independent review into the speed and level of passthrough for wholesale prices to retail prices, with an additional assessment of the overall price dynamics and an overall focus on the competitiveness of the Irish economy." At the request of the Government, the CRU will lead this independent review of the relationship between wholesale and retail energy prices.

That work will be completed in 2026.

If we want to tackle high prices, we need to examine costs to business. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, mentioned a few initiatives the Government is undertaking to address business costs and the measures we brought forward to improve working conditions. In 2024, the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Social Protection published a report examining the impact of such measures as auto-enrolment retirement savings, parent's leave and benefit, statutory sick pay, an additional public holiday, a living wage and remote working. The report highlighted that there will be cost impacts on firms from these measures but with significant differences by sector. In particular, the impacts on the likes of the accommodation, food and retail sectors were highlighted, especially arising from the transition to the living wage.

Reflecting on the findings of that review, a range of measures were brought forward to assist businesses in adjusting to the increased costs as well as more generally to improve the cost competitiveness of firms. The implementation of those measures will improve the cost competitiveness of SMEs. For example, the Low Pay Commission is considering a lower employer PRSI threshold as part of any future minimum wage recommendations. In addition, the application of an enhanced SME test will ensure there is increased consideration of the business cost implications of future Government decisions.

The Government also responded with last year's Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity. In response to international economic developments and in line with another commitment in the programme for Government, the Government expedited the action plan, which was published on 10 September 2025. It reflects a whole-of-government approach to domestic drivers of competitiveness, focusing on areas firmly within our domestic control. The development of the action plan has been informed by extensive consultation across Departments and with external stakeholders. It contains 85 actions for enhancing Ireland's competitiveness and productivity performance, with 26 of them identified as priority actions. The actions are grouped into six thematic areas, including productivity, sustainability and a focus on SMEs. There has been considerable progress in the relatively short time since the

action plan was published last September. Just under half of the actions are due for delivery in 2026. The remaining actions were delivered in 2025 or are scheduled for delivery from 2027 to 2030.

This debate has been very useful. It is also useful - in fact, it is essential at times - to take a step back and look at our economic performance in context. Our economy does not operate in a bubble. We are heavily impacted by international sentiment and developments. Today's unemployment numbers from the CSO are further evidence that we are getting a lot of things right. The fact the unemployment rate remained below 5%, at just 4.7% in January, despite the turbulent external environment, speaks volumes.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Could the Government be any less caring on this issue? It has not put forward a solitary meaningful measure. Let us start with the Minister of State's claim that the best way out of poverty is through employment. That absolutely is no longer the case. There are tens of thousands of workers living in poverty because of the cost of living, including the cost of childcare, housing, electricity and insurance for cars and so on. He cites statistics to show the economy is doing well but we all know we have a problem in Ireland with the leprechaun economics of GNP and GDP. The economy doing well is not a barometer that shows we do not have a high cost of living. That is the reality. The statistics are distorted very much by high earners and those at the top with wealth.

The actions called for in the motion are incredibly reasonable. Stopping price gouging by food and energy companies is something the Government could actively do. Another suggestion is introducing price controls on food, electricity, gas and fuel. When we were all growing up, the State used to own ESB. What was wrong with that? The idea that competition would bring down prices has been proven to be a fallacy. It would be a hugely popular move if the State, rather than letting people be ripped off, took control of electricity, an essential of life, and reduced its price to the lowest possible level. The motion proposes implementing a rent freeze, introducing a living wage, benchmarking social welfare increases to the minimum standard of living index and introducing a weekly cost-of-disability payment. A reduction in childcare costs to €200 per month, as promised in the election but since studiously forgotten, would make such a change in so many workers' lives. Introducing free public transport is something the Government could do that would be hugely beneficial for commuters and for the environment as well. Other proposals in the motion are for a second, targeted tier of child benefit payments and the reinstatement of energy credits.

What we need in this country is a complete shifting of wealth. Ireland has the worst figures in Europe for the share of wealth that goes to capital versus labour. The Government's amendment refers to Ireland being in the middle when we adjust for purchasing power parity. This uses figures that are completely different from the reality. We have the second highest prices in Europe, at 38% above the EU average. Restaurant prices are 29% above average, we are the most expensive for electricity, gas and fuel, housing is 50% more expensive and childcare is 58% dearer than the EU average. We have the most expensive transport and public transport costs. Irish people also have medical costs that do not arise in other European countries, such as when people have to go to the GP because they are sick or their child is ill.

Another aspect to consider is the gendered nature of the cost of living. A total of 22% of female workers, or nearly one in four, are in the lowest-paid employment sectors in our

economy. Women are paying much more and suffering much more because of the cost of living. They would be so in any case because it tends to be women heading up the one-parent families that are the most impoverished in this country. The same arises with disabled people. I am shocked by just how little focus the Government has given to them.

We need the trade union movement in this country to act on this issue. The unions' leadership has been completely silent as the massive cost-of-living crisis has engulfed workers. It is as though that crisis is finished. It is not finished. Just because the Government is no longer giving targeted supports does not mean people are okay. They are not okay. I would like to see the trade union membership fighting for bigger pay increases and taking on and challenging the *status quo* that deems that workers should pay higher costs again and again.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I am shocked by the Government's amendment. In effect, it is saying that everything in the garden is rosy. However, low- and middle-income families know very well that everything in the garden is not rosy. The Government's amendment does not even acknowledge the cost-of-living crisis that exists. It does not acknowledge the huge financial pressures on families. There is no acknowledgement that budget 2026 created higher levels of poverty and took up to €1,400 out of the pockets of the less well off and the disabled. There is no acknowledgement that the Government increased the income tax take from PAYE workers.

I should not have been shocked by the amendment because the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments of the past ten years have pursued policies that support the rich and powerful in our society to the detriment of low- and middle-income families.

7 o'clock

The political choices they have made support corporate landlords, the burger barons and the big developers. That is exactly what has happened. It is noticeable that we do not see, and have not seen, a single Fianna Fáil Deputy in the Chamber. This is a party that claimed at one stage to represent working-class people. Of course, that is long since gone. Fianna Fáil has now become more Fine Gael than Fine Gael itself. There is no more confirmation of that than the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 of the Fianna Fáil Minister, James Browne, which he introduced in the House yesterday. That Bill is written by, for and on behalf of corporate landlords and institutional investors. That Bill will line the pockets of these organisations and will introduce extortionate rents, lock people out of the rental markets and increase homelessness. The Government's policy is very clear. The Minister has said that employment is the way out poverty. There are 140,000 workers living in poverty. They are not my figures; they are Government figures and from the CSO. Contrast that to the huge increases of higher executives announced last week and the huge bonuses to Irish Water executives announced the week before. There is an alternative but, of course, it is one the Government refuses to take. This is a very wealthy country. Budget 2026 projects a surplus of €5.1 billion and over the past three years there has been a surplus of €42.2 billion. The Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund have €20 billion. This Government can well afford to reinstate energy credits and to introduce an emergency winter payment. If that is not enough, there are huge financial moneys available. Twelve Irish billionaires own €46 billion. That exceeds the combined wealth of 66% of the population of this country, some 3.4 million people. Oxfam recommends a wealth tax, and rightly so. That is something the Government should introduce immediately. A wealth tax, even at a very

nominal rate, would raise billions of euro to support low and middle-income families. The Minister's amendment is absolutely shameful and should be withdrawn. At least, the Government should introduce immediately a €500 winter payment for people who are seriously under pressure from energy bills right across the board. I ask the Dáil to support this reasonable and common-sense motion and I ask the Minister of State to withdraw his amendment.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): De réir Bhuan-Ordaithe 85(2), cuirfear an vótáil siar go dtí an am vótála seachtainiúil Dé Céadaoin, 11 Feabhra 2026.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss schools infrastructure in Kildare North.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss an update on settlements with south Kerry CAMHS victims.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss insurance protections for people impacted by flooding.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss provision of special classes for children in County Meath.

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss community engagement and traffic management in relation to the north city arterial watermain works commencing in north Dublin.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the provision of childcare facilities in Cork North-Central.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the allocation of SET and SNA hours for primary schools.

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 Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for additional school infrastructure in Fingal 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 discuss provision of additional accommodation at St. Mochta's National School, Louth.

Deputies Ruth Coppinger, Paul Murphy, Roderic O'Gorman and Marie Sherlock - To discuss the need for legislative change to protect workers during extreme weather events.

Deputy Gillian Toole - The steps being taken by the Department of Health, the Health Service Executive and the national immunisation advisory council to investigate vaccine hesitancy.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Colm Burke, Ruth Coppinger, Paul Murphy, Roderic O'Gorman and Marie Sherlock, and Louis O'Hara have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here this evening. I do not mean this disrespectfully when I say it but I would have appreciated if the Minister for education could have made herself available for this because it is a very serious issue in my constituency. I do not say that in any disrespectful way to the Minister of State. I am grateful he at least is here to hear it.

The Government published its priority list this day last week. That sets out who is on the list and who is not. I represent one of the youngest constituencies, which is also the fastest growing in terms of population, in this State. The need not just for infrastructure now, namely, classrooms to get rid of the prefabs, is very clear but also we need to plan for the future because we have a growing population. That is a good thing and we are very proud of that. Unfortunately, when the Government published its priority list there was not one single school from my constituency on that list. Not one. It has been remarked on by a few of the old backbenchers of destiny, as well as by other TDs, that there does seem to be quite a number of them going to Galway, which I am sure is just a coincidence because that is in the Minister's constituency but we have not had an explanation as to how some schools get on the list and some do not and that is really frustrating. My phone has been hopping. I have met parents in person. I have also received a huge number of emails. As the Minister of State can imagine, when the list comes out and it is on the RTÉ website, the first thing people do is click and go to see where their kid's school is on the list. There was not one on the list. We are scratching our heads. There are plenty of schools in my area that require additional infrastructure. I know we are very short of autism places in Skerries at the moment. I was compiling this list and it is a case of 2b or not 2b. A lot of schools in my area are stuck at stage 2b. They had hoped they would find themselves on this list for priorities and that that would give them the green light. What they fear is that because they are not on the 2026 and 2027 list, that means their school and building that is so desperately needed is now going to be pushed out and will not happen until at least 2028. The Minister of State may be able to address that.

I am specifically raising a number of schools today. St. Teresa's Primary School, Balbriggan, is a fantastic school celebrating 50 years and some of the buildings are that old. There are a lot of prefabs there and they are falling apart. This school is stuck at stage 2b. Gaelscoil Ros Eo and St. Joseph's Secondary School, Rush, have planning permission, a site

and the tender documents are going to be delivered to the Department in a matter of weeks. They are at a very advanced stage. They want to know when they are getting the green light and when there will be a new school. I am sure they are as sick now at all the Government representatives and wannabee representatives who turned up for their photographs and now it appears this is going to be delayed. St. Mary's National School, Oldtown, has 18-year-old Portakabins. It is stuck at stage 2a. Balbriggan Community College is at stage 2b but is also not on the priority list. Likewise, Rush National School is stuck at stage 2b. These schools are all in towns where the population is growing and the schools are already pushed to capacity. The teachers are doing their very best. The principals are tearing their hair out. Then, when the priority list comes out, it can be imagined how people felt when they saw their school was not on it. I am hopeful, given the advanced stage of some of these projects, that they will be able to progress but I would be interested to hear from the Minister of State what the response of the Department is.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. She is right; I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for education.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It gives me an opportunity to set out for the House the position with regard to school infrastructure in Dublin Fingal West on behalf of the Department and the Minister for Education and Youth. I can assure the Deputy that the provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including children and youth people with special educational needs, is an absolute priority for the Minister. When demographic data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools; extending the capacity of a school or schools; or provision of a new school or schools. If additional accommodation is required, the aim is to try to facilitate this as much as possible by way of expansion of existing schools rather than establishing new schools.

The expansion of existing schools is consistent with wider Government objectives under Project Ireland 2040 for an increased emphasis and compact growth.

It should be noted that the underlying demographic profile of preschools and school-aged children residing in the Dublin Fingal West area indicates a declining demand for school places. The number of junior and senior infant pupils is approximately 20% lower than the number of children in fifth and sixth classes, with an additional average reduction of 15% a month in preschool-aged children. The demographic data will continue to be monitored by the Department's forward planning section and is subject to change in line with population trends, particularly those influenced by new housing completions.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Department of Education and Youth has provided €1.79 billion in capital funding for Dublin schools. Over this period, a total of 244 schools have been upgraded either through provisions of new school buildings, large-scale extensions or modular accommodation. There are currently 64 school projects under construction in Dublin. Another 20 school projects will go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027, which form part of the

first tranche of the €7.55 billion national development plan sectoral implementation plan recently announced by the Minister.

This summer, 53 schools are approved to undergo works as part of the summer works scheme climate action plan. Since 2020, a total of 459 special classes have been opened in Dublin, 58 of which were sanctioned for September 2026. The Department is continually planning for and investing in existing and new schools to ensure that every child in the State has access to a school place. With regard to the Dublin Fingal West area, there are a number of active projects at primary level. These projects include St. Molaga's in Balbriggan, St. Michael's Special School in Skerries, Skerries Educate Together National School, Ballyboughal National School and Gaelscoil Bhaile Brigín, which will provide for both mainstream and special education needs.

A number of large-scale school projects have been completed in the past six years, including Lusk Community College. Smaller scale additional school accommodation, ASA, projects were also completed across a number of primary and post-primary schools. There are also another 19 projects at primary and post-primary levels at different stages of architectural planning process for schools across the Dublin Fingal West area.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I will read out the names again because none of the schools I named are on the list. To be brutally frank with the Minister of State, referencing schools that were built previously is not going to help the people in schools that are falling down around them and bursting at the seams. We have a problem in Dublin Fingal West in terms of school capacity. We also have a problem because the teaching staff, pupils and parents are absolutely sick, sore and tired of make-do and mend.

I am going to read out the specific names. I would be most grateful if the Minister of State could get me a direct response as soon as possible on each of these so that I might go back to the parents and the school communities, which are all coming to me because they are understandably distressed. St. Teresa's national school in Balbriggan is stuck at stage 2b. Gaelscoil Ros Eo and St. Joseph's in Rush are at a very advanced stage, have planning permission and a site, and the tender documents are going to go to the Department in a matter of weeks. St. Mary's National School in Oldtown is in 18-year-old prefabs. It is at stage 2a. Balbriggan Community College is at stage 2b, but not on the priority list. Rush National School is also at stage 2b.

These are all in towns where I would be very confident, because I have looked at the data, that they fulfil the demographic requirements. If the demographic requirements are the only requirements that this priority list was based on, I am happy to tell the Minister of State that we more than fulfil that. The Minister of State can ask the master in the Rotunda Hospital and they will tell him that there is population growth in my area. Houses are also being built in my area. The Government is not building anywhere near enough, but they are certainly building in the area. This is needed to future-proof, at some point, but it is also needed now. The schools are in very substandard conditions. There are 18-year-old prefabs in one of those schools. They are mouldy. It is not appropriate for kids to be taught in those conditions. I was going to say "in modern times", but it is not appropriate any time for kids to be in classrooms where there is mould.

Deputy Noel Grealish: The Department uses data from a range of sources, including child benefit data, enrolments and information on new residential developments to plan for school place needs. As has been outlined, there has been a significant investment put into schools infrastructure across the Fingal county area, including in the constituency of Dublin Fingal West. The Department is continuing to plan for an investment in existing and new schools. I can assure the Deputy that the Department will continue to liaise with Fingal County Council in respect of its county development plan and any associated local area plans with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across the county.

Flood Relief Schemes

Deputy Colm Burke: I raise the issue of the Blackpool flood relief scheme. Blackpool has had 15 major floods since 1974. Three of them were in 2010, 2012 and 2013. It was decided in 2013 that a flood relief programme would be developed, and the submission was made in 2018 for the Minister for public expenditure to sign the statutory confirmation. The Minister gave the statutory confirmation. We are now into 2021, and then we had a judicial review. I know full well that the Minister had to deal with that judicial review. Unfortunately, it then went back to the drawing board again where further environmental impact studies were done. They were submitted to the Department of public expenditure. Unfortunately, as I understand it, by the time action was taken, the reports were out of date.

In 2021, the Minister signed off on this flood relief programme. We are now five years later and still have not approved the programme, even though judicial reviews have been submitted. This cannot go on. Blackpool is an old part of Cork city. Yes, there has been development there by Cork City Council and it has put in a lot of apartments and residential development, but the older houses there are at risk at all times. One man was trying to sell his business premises. The sale collapsed on three separate occasions because the people buying it could not get flood protection insurance. Therefore, the banks were not prepared to lend for it. A lot of houses need major refurbishment. It is an old part of the city. A lot of families live there, but there are also businesses that are extremely restricted as regards spending more money because they know they are at risk. If there is further flooding, they will be further damaged, which they will have to carry themselves. This is one case that needs to be prioritised.

We have an additional problem in Blackpool, in that a lot of housing is being built there now on the northern side of the city. As a result of that, there is increased water flow. In fairness to developers, they are doing everything possible to deal with that issue, but overall, you will have a greater water flow into the streams and rivers that flow into Blackpool and the River Bride that comes in and then continues on through an underground tunnel that carries it eventually into the River Lee. We are at risk there. Unless a decision is made about going forward, then the regeneration of Blackpool, which is urgently required, will not occur.

I am asking that priority be given to this project. We have had a lot of discussion about floods over the last two weeks. It is the number one item in the news at the moment because of the fact that heavy rainfall is expected in parts of the country.

Cork was lucky on this occasion in that we did not get heavy rainfall compared to other parts of the country, but our turn will come when that will happen. We will then have a major problem in Blackpool again. I ask that this issue be given priority.

Deputy Noel Grealish: I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers.

The Deputy will be aware that ministerial consent for this scheme was provided in early 2021 but was subsequently overturned by a judicial review challenge taken by a local community group. The Department of public expenditure has sought legal advice and taken measures to ensure the consent process complies with national and EU environmental law in order to account for the issues raised during the judicial review process. On foot of legal advice received by the Department and the recommendations of its retained environmental consultants, the Minister sought supplementary information from the Office of Public Works on the environmental impacts of the scheme. This request was made in February 2022 with the OPW supplying this information to the Minister in October of that year.

Following an examination of the environmental reports and supplementary information provided, and acting on the advice of independent environmental experts, the Minister sought further supplementary information from the OPW in November 2023. The OPW submitted the supplementary information on 17 April 2025 and 25 August 2025. Due to the nature of the information supplied, a further round of public consultation was required in order to inform the confirmation process under the provisions of the Act. A period of consultation was opened on 5 September 2025 and concluded on 10 October 2025. In total, over 1,000 individual submissions were received during this consultation and each submission can be viewed on the Department of public expenditure's website.

The environmental impacts of the scheme are currently being examined by an independent team of consultants. This work is advancing and I expect to receive reports which detail the outcome of these examinations. These reports will form the basis of any decision I may take in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Any updates in this regard will be published on the Department's website.

Deputy Colm Burke: I fully understand that there were over 1,000 submissions. At least 900 of those were in support of the flood relief programme proceeding. It is extremely important because these are residents who are living in Blackpool. They are third and fourth generation people who are living there and now find they are restricted in what they can do with their property. I ask that this issue now be prioritised. In one particular area in the eastern part of the country, the issue has been going on for 25 years. We have already seen about 15 floods in Blackpool since 1974. I do not want this issue to still be going on in five or ten years' time, with the same discussions happening after major flooding of the area, where property is damaged and people suffer further loss.

I fully accept that the Department has to go through procedures. There is the risk at all times of judicial review. I fully understand that but once all the t's are crossed and i's dotted, we should not delay in making a decision on this matter. Even if we go out to a tender process in the morning, it will still take time for work to commence. The best example is the Glanmire flood relief scheme in my constituency, where there were no objections. Substantial flooding occurred there in 2010 and 2012 but the work is almost completed there now, and a huge amount of additional work was done as well to make the place safe for both businesses and residents. That work has been done by the OPW, which has done a very good job there. The reason was there was no objection to the scheme and it was able to progress. Twelve years

from a major flooding event, that scheme is now almost completed. It is important now we give priority to this Blackpool project.

Deputy Noel Grealish: While the delays in the delivery of this scheme will be a source of frustration for those in Blackpool, it is imperative that the consent process progresses in a manner that is compliant with the relevant regulations. In the period since the original consent decision was overturned following the judicial review challenge, the Department has implemented measures to ensure that the process is in compliance with the regulatory framework. This has necessitated the requesting of supplementary information from the OPW in order to ensure that a reasoned conclusion can be reached regarding the anticipated environmental impacts of the proposed scheme. This process has been informed at all stages by expert legal and environmental advice, as appropriate, with a view to ensuring the process is sufficiently robust in the event of any future challenges that may be brought.

I concur with the Deputy on the issue of insurance. There are young couples who are trying to buy a house where there might have been a flood. It is a major issue that has to be addressed. I will bring that issue he raised to the Minister. I came across it in my own constituency as well.

Employment Rights

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are living in an extreme weather event right now in that there has been flooding all over the country. These events are becoming much more normal and routine. What is not normalised are what protections there are for workers. It was very moving to be at a press event organised by Unite last week to hear the parents of Matthew Campbell, an electrician who died in a storm in the North of Ireland. We are seeing the impact on homes but there is also a massive impact on workers. In summary, workers have no rights in law to say no, if their employer presses them to go to work because there is no such thing as climate leave. Workers reported being docked pay, having to take unpaid leave and having to use annual leave. In some cases, according to a Unite survey, a third of people were not able to work from home during the most recent major storm.

This is about a demand. The Government needs to give workers rights - not to ask their employers but rights - to be able to protect themselves in extreme weather events. They should have actual leave that exists and not use their own leave or whatever. It is extremely important that this is built upon.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This is very simple. We need extreme weather legislation to protect workers. We do not have it now and the result is workers' lives and health are put at risk. One worker responded to the Unite survey about how their employer acted during Storm Éowyn stating:

The company were more interested in production than employees' safety. Because there is no clear legislation around extreme weather events, it is left to employers' discretion to do what they want. Unfortunately, employers only concern is profit so they will choose to ignore weather warnings if it suits their agenda.

This is going to be an issue more and more. It is an issue now and will be an issue tomorrow. Tragically, it was an issue for Matthew Campbell, an electrician who was killed in 2018 while working in a forest during Storm Ali. His dad Mark told us at a press event last week that his son would be alive today if legislation like Unite is seeking had been in place then in the North. I hope no more workers have to die on this island before we have workers' rights legislation to protect people from extreme weather events to ensure their employers cannot put their lives at risk in order to maximise their own profits.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Unite the Union for putting the spotlight on the issue of the need for policy and legislation addressing protections for workers in extreme weather events. The one point I will add to that of colleagues is the impact of extreme heat. It is hard to make the case about that tonight of all nights, but we know we will have more incidences of extreme heat in our summers. We know this will impact vulnerable people, the young, the elderly and people with underlying conditions. Some of these will be workers. Some will be workers operating in difficult conditions outdoors and people working in agriculture, maybe in overheated warehouses.

Right now the Department of Health and HSE do not record data on excess deaths from extreme events or prolonged heat events. That is not the Minister of State's Department, but it has to change. If we are not recording these excess deaths, we cannot put in place the measures to protect vulnerable people and workers in times of extreme heat.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter. I acknowledge Unite's concerns and those of the family of the late Matthew Campbell regarding the protection of workers from extreme weather events. These concerns are understandable and the well-being of workers in all conditions must remain a priority. I am satisfied, however, that strong protections already exist in current Irish legislation.

Ensuring that Irish workplaces are healthy and safe is a key priority for me and for our Department. A robust occupational safety and health regulatory framework is in place, which is essential in supporting that priority and the Health and Safety Authority, HSA, plays a vital role in delivering it. Irish law already regulates work carried out in high or low temperatures. Employers are legally required to assess the health and safety risks present in their workplace, including risks from excessive heat, storms or driving for work. Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers must conduct a risk assessment, identify hazards, evaluate the risks they pose and put appropriate measures in place to protect employees. Extremes of temperature are defined as a hazard and must be addressed accordingly.

Although there are no plans at present to introduce paid climate leave for extreme weather events, the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, provides guidelines on employer and employee rights and responsibilities during severe weather. The guidance is available to the public on the WRC website. Any arrangement with regard to the provision of paid leave during extreme weather events is a matter for agreement between the employer and the employee. Some employers provide for such leave as part of their policies and it may be provided for in a contract of employment between the employer and employee.

My Department met officials of Unite to discuss their proposals and offered to facilitate engagement between Unite and the HSA on this matter. I encourage Unite to accept this offer to explore ways to further enhance and amplify messaging regarding extreme weather risks in the workplace.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister of State summed it up. It is a matter for agreement between employers and employees so it is up to individual employers. He also mentioned guidelines. Guidelines are not legislative protection. We also have a large number of migrant workers. We have unorganised workers or non-unionised workers who do not have the power to say "No" to their employers.

I will finish by highlighting what has been done in Spain to show the Minister of State how climate leave might work. Climate leave legislation was passed in Valencia. It provides for four days paid leave if extreme weather makes it impossible to travel to work, with the possibility of this being extended. Four days paid leave are also available if workers need to address needs at their homes as a result of their children not being able to go to school or damage to their home and property. After four days, businesses can declare *force majeure* and get Government assistance. There is an example of it being done.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister of State is satisfied that strong protections already exist. He should look at the evidence. Unite carried out a survey. Is the Minister of State satisfied about the 48% of workers who went to work during Storm Éowyn who said they did not feel safe? Is he satisfied that 53% of those who worked outdoors during the storm felt their employer had not taken all reasonable precautions to make their work safe? These are unionised workers. That means it will be a lot worse for non-unionised workers. If the Government does not give people legal protections, it is leaving them prey for their employers to put pressure on them to make them work in unsafe conditions. We need a legal obligation on employers to have graduated alert-based responses. We need a legal requirement that, where work is required to cease, workers are paid as usual. We need paid climate leave, maximum temperatures at work and recognition of temperature-related illness as occupational disease.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: We can do better than this. Tonight, thousands of people, including me, will get home safely due to the hard work of workers in our public transport companies on an absolutely grim night. We have to recognise that our climate is changing and the employee protections in place at the moment will also have to change.

On the point about the graduated warning system, our approach to closing schools and childcare facilities changed when we introduced that system. We have to look at its impacts on workers, particularly those in the most vulnerable areas.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I reaffirm that worker safety remains a core priority of our Department's ethos.

The existing legislative framework I outlined is strong, comprehensive and designed to ensure employers assess risk and take all necessary steps to protect staff from extreme temperatures and other hazards. While there are currently no plans to introduce paid leave for extreme weather events, guidance is available with regard to employers' and employees' rights

and responsibilities during severe weather events. The HSA has a key role to play in this regard and it provides guidance, oversight and timely communication during these events, ensuring that workplaces are fully informed about their obligations and fully prepared.

I reiterate my Department's offer for further engagement with Unite to facilitate engagement with the HSA. That is where this conversation needs to start, discussing how we can further enhance and amplify messaging and continue to ensure our workplaces are safe during these events.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.37 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 10 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.37 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 10 February 2026.