



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 10 Feabhra 2026

Tuesday, 10 February 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Seventy thousand more households are behind on their electricity bills now than at this time last year. The overall number in electricity arrears now stands at a staggering and record 303,465 households. We have not seen the worst of it yet because the figures for December and January are still to be reported. This is a shocking situation and yet there is not a word from the Taoiseach, only silence. One would never think that households were under such enormous pressure, given the deafening silence from the Taoiseach's Government. People are working every hour they can and still cannot keep up. It is one big, never-ending and exhausting rip-off.

Working households find themselves in this desperate situation because of the Taoiseach's terrible decisions. He was told that withdrawing the energy credits would cause big problems. The regulator told him that even more households would struggle to pay their bills due to rising prices and that arrears would hit record levels, but, incredibly, the Government went ahead and withdrew those credits anyway. I have lost count of the times that I have raised this with the Taoiseach, the pressure that households are under, and the stress that they face to pay rip-off energy bills. What was the Government's big idea, by response? A talking shop, a so-called task force to tackle big energy bills, cobbled together by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, last June. How many times has this crack team met since then? Three. Yes, that is it - three times in eight months. That really takes the biscuit. There is no urgency, no determination and no real care for what people are going through. Families are hammered by incredible, unbearable daily pressure, and the Government's so-called task force, its big solution, is as láthair, sleeping on the job.

While the Government and its task force twiddle their thumbs, households have been hit with price hike after price hike. The big energy companies hiked up their prices one after the other and the Government allowed this to happen. It refused to take on the price-gouging

energy companies. It repeatedly ignored calls to give the regulator more power to get energy costs under control.

The Government then took away energy credits - the one lifeline households had in the face of these rip-off bills. As people struggle to get by, we have a do-nothing, say-nothing Government - doing nothing to tackle the problem and saying nothing about the impact on people's lives. Tá líon níos mó teaghlaigh ná riamh ag streachailt chun billí ródhaora leictreachais a íoc. Tá sé in am don Rialtas seo a jab a dhéanamh agus gníomh a ghlacadh chun deireadh a chur leis an saill fuinnimh. This silence and inaction simply cannot continue.

Only yesterday, we heard how the sky-high prices of groceries have gone up again - the fastest increase in two years. The Government has done nothing to tackle that problem either. People cannot take any more. They are especially sick of working every hour but still not being able to pay their electricity bills. They want the Government to do its job to protect them from price gouging, to tackle relentless price hikes and to end this rip off. Will the Government do its job? Will it reinstate energy credits, which households so desperately need? Will it haul in the energy companies and tell them to stop ripping people off? Will it finally act to give the energy regulator the powers it needs to get energy costs down and to bring this rip off to a stop?

The Taoiseach: Ní aontaím leis an Teachta in aon chor. Tá an-chuid déanta ag an Rialtas ó thaobh na gcostas maireachtála de. Bhí an-chuid laistigh den bhuiséad a bhí againn i mí Dheireadh Fómhair, go háirithe dóibh siúd ar ioncam íseal agus an-chuid cabhair tugtha againn tríd leas sóisialach chun daoine a chosaint agus cóir agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine.

I do not accept the Deputy's overall presentation of the Government's response to what are significant pressures on the people in respect of the cost of living. Of course, that began a number of years ago, particularly coming out of Covid and the war in Ukraine in terms of energy prices. We have now moved from a situation where inflation was 10% to a point where it is significantly below that at 2.6%. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we were looking at 10%. That came down to 5% in 2023, 2.7% in December 2025 and 2.6% in January. That is the overall inflation rate.

In terms of energy, I still disagree with the Deputy that we should retain universal energy credits. I find it difficult to comprehend that a party that comes from where it claims it comes from would argue that millionaires and people on very sizeable incomes should get energy credits and particularly when, in terms of the totality of the cost-of-living payments we had been making in the worst of times during and post-Covid and in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Deputy is saying we keep that €2 billion or €3 billion going on top of the expenditure we have already increased by about 8%. If we took the Deputy's budget proposals, they would add 2.5% to the cost of living at a time when she is complaining about the cost of living. She has form on this. Her last episode in terms of energy policy was a Liz Truss moment and I can recall that. Now she is saying we should keep energy credits.

Employment is very strong. The best protection people have in terms of meeting inflation and cost-of-living pressures are high-quality and good-quality jobs, and making the fuel allowance available to those on lower incomes or those on the working family payment which is what we did in the budget. We increased social protection payments by about €10 per week and made a very big increase in child support payments. Children aged 12 years and over get an extra €16, bringing it to about €78 per week for families in that situation while those with

children aged under 12 get an extra €8, bringing it to €58 per week. These were substantial targeted measures for those on the lowest incomes. I would have thought the Deputy would have favoured that approach yet she wants millionaires and the very well-off to get the benefits from the budget allocation.

The fuel allowance now covers 26% of households - up from 23%. This is a targeted and intelligent way of allocating resources to those who need them most.

We have extended the reduced 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity until the end of 2030. That is a five-to-six-year measure. Home energy upgrades have been hugely invested in, with approximately €558 million allocated. Microgeneration income tax exemption is well provided for. These are embedded measures which will have a medium to longer term impact. It is better to put money into measures that are there for the long haul, as opposed to the Deputy's never-ending short-term knee-jerk reactions to every issue that arises.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach's view is simply wrong. It is neither intelligent nor targeted. As a matter of fact, it strikes me as most unintelligent because 70,000 more households than last year are now in difficulties. They cannot pay their bills. I told the Taoiseach we have hit a record of 303,465 such households. They are not millionaires. They are working households who now cannot pay their bills. I want a long-term solution. The long-term solution is to end the price gouging, end the rip-off by the big energy companies and to give the regulator the powers it needs, but the Taoiseach knows that because I have told him that repeatedly. I will tell him this much: in the here and now I want those households to be able to make their bills. The only way in the short term, in the immediacy of now, that they can do that is by the Taoiseach reinstating the energy credit. That is the reality.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is the intelligent, targeted reality that people are living.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me ask again: will the Taoiseach do the right thing, reinstate these credits and then, of course, take the longer-term measures that so far he has ignored?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Actually, the energy credit would help the vast, vast majority of those who are not in arrears. The Deputy should think about it for a moment. She identified how many people are in arrears. The vast majority of people are not in arrears. People are under pressure; do not get me wrong. The energy credit applies to everybody; it is universal.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I understand the meaning of universal, thank you.

The Taoiseach: That is what she is arguing should be extended to everybody. Surely it would be far better to help those who are in genuine difficulty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government is not doing that.

The Taoiseach: You are not leader yet, Pearse, for God's sake.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are you talking to yourself?

The Taoiseach: You have been making attempts lately but just let me respond to the leader.

(Interruptions)

A Deputy: The Taoiseach must be feeling the pressure.

The Taoiseach: I just want to make the point that we have targeted our measures-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Taoiseach has a half-eye on Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

The Taoiseach: -----to meet those who are in difficulty, and that is the key. Once-off cost-of-living measures are not fiscally sustainable for the next number of years. The €3 billion and €4 billion we allocated for two years, we just cannot keep doing that. We have a strong economy. We have probably one of the best employment positions of any European Union state. We want to preserve that and we also want to support those who need support, and we will, in terms of energy affordability and security.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I raise the case of Seamus Culleton, the Irish citizen and Kilkenny man who has now spent five months imprisoned in an ICE detention camp in Texas. Yesterday, the country was silenced, listening in as Seamus phoned "Liveline" to speak about his ordeal. Last night, I spoke directly to Seamus's sister Caroline and heard more details about the appalling conditions in which he is detained. There are 72 men packed into a single tent, with filth everywhere and a lack of sanitation, violent guards, alleged strangling, three men dead already, and conditions so brutal that detainees are gambling on who will be the next person to take their own life. They are deprived of fresh air. Seamus has seen the sun only a handful of times in his five months there. He calls it a hell and a concentration camp and he fears for his life.

Seamus is a man who has lived in the US for 17 years. He runs a successful business in Boston and married his American wife, Tiffany Smyth, last April. However, he has now spent more than half of his married life behind barbed wire in this camp. Why? Because he was lifted off the streets by ICE on his way to the shops after he had been kept waiting for his green card following long delays. As Caroline said, it is deeply ironic that one arm of the US Government is processing him for permanent residency while the other has locked him in a cage. To describe his testimony as shocking would be an understatement. It appears beyond doubt to breach American commitments under the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

What is the Irish Government doing about this? On his way to Cabinet today, the Taoiseach told the media his officials had contacted Washington.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has said that consular assistance is being offered, yet I understand that no Government Minister has contacted the family directly. This is an Irish citizen about whose plight the Government has known for some time. Reports of his treatment hit the press days ago with Karlin Lillington's piece in *The Irish Times*. The Taoiseach must commit now, on the floor of the Dáil, to pulling out every stop and using every diplomatic lever at his disposal to secure Mr. Culleton's release. There can be no delays and no waiting for St. Patrick's Day.

Unfortunately, Mr. Culleton's is not an isolated case. Parliamentary questions from my Labour Party colleague Deputy Duncan Smith reveal that the number of deportations of Irish citizens from the US has quadrupled in a year. We have all read articles about the detention of innocent people like Donna Hughes-Brown, a grandmother who has lived in the US legally since she was 11 years old. Immigration lawyers in America tell us Irish citizens are watching the news and fearing for their own futures. We do not know if any more Irish citizens have been detained in the same manner as Mr. Culleton. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, says it is fewer than 12. Is it ten? Is it 11? In five weeks, the Taoiseach plans to hand a bowl of shamrock to the man responsible for all this. He plans to offer a symbol of friendship to the man who humiliated Ireland on St. Patrick's Day last year when he snubbed the Taoiseach in favour of a photo op with Conor McGregor. The Taoiseach knows the expression, "With friends like these". What will he do today to ensure the release of Seamus Culleton and to ensure the safety of other Irish citizens being detained by ICE or in fear of being detained by it?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I first became aware it yesterday via the media. That is fine. The Department of foreign affairs became aware of the case in October and had been providing consular assistance to Seamus Culleton and his family via the teams at the consulate general in Austin, the embassy in Washington DC and our consular unit in Dublin.

We have migration law in this country. We have laws. There is legal status in Ireland and there is undocumented status in Ireland. All countries, bar none, have migration laws. We have sought, over the years, to try and regularise the undocumented in America via legislation in Congress on the Hill. Long before President Trump entered the White House, this has been a challenge. Deputy Bacik and everybody else in the House knows that. We came very close a number of years ago with the E-3 visa. At that time, we lost out by one vote on having a number of thousand visas from the Australian visa allocation allocated to Ireland. One vote stymied what would have been a significant breakthrough on that occasion. It has been extraordinarily difficult to get consensus on the Hill in respect of migration for any one specific country because Hispanics and Latinos will all want similar deals. It is either a deal for all or none, and that has been the consistent position in the US for the past decade or so. That makes it particularly difficult in terms of endeavouring to get the Irish who are undocumented in the United States regularised. It is a very traumatic and difficult position for people to be in when it comes to their families and the many who have established homes there and so on. Families in the US are always watching over their shoulders and worried about a knock on the door or their being in a position where they would be deported.

Deportations have been going on for quite a number of years. There is a particularly intensity in the current ICE campaign. Of that, there is no doubt. The Government's position is that we will do everything we can to help Seamus Culleton, but we have to do it in a way that can really help and be effective for him. We cannot promise anything, because we do not control American migration law or practice. However, we can engage. We have engaged and we will continue to engage. We are concerned about the conditions that exist in the place where Seamus Culleton is being held, but we are also anxious for the matter to be resolved in the context of the status issue.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: If I may say, that is a most unsatisfactory response. The Taoiseach has conflated, wrongly in my view, quite a number of issues. Of course countries have migration laws. Of course, the successive Irish Governments have for many years been trying to regularise undocumented Irish citizens in the US.

However, we are talking about an Irish citizen who has been detained in inhumane conditions for five months in the US in breach of international law. That is the issue here. What I have not heard from the Taoiseach is any sense of urgency about securing his release or ensuring that no other Irish citizens are being held in the same conditions. Some may be, but we do not know. There could be as many as 12 apparently.

What I have not heard from the Taoiseach are any words that will offer comfort to families here of Irish citizens in the US, to Seamus's family or, indeed, to others. The Taoiseach is saying that the Government is going to continue using fairly limited diplomatic levers. He is still going to go to the US. Would it not be more appropriate to go to the US on St. Patrick's Day to offer condolences to the mayor of Minneapolis? Because we are seeing ICE killing US citizens on the streets and detaining Irish citizens in breach of due process and in inhumane conditions.

The Taoiseach: There are a number of cases. It could be five to six cases, but they vary in status. The Deputy is implying, wrongly, my approach to this. I would have thought that the prime objective is to secure status. People want to get out of the detention facility. The Deputy knows best.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The objective is to get him out.

A Deputy: It is helping him out of the cage.

The Taoiseach: I would argue that it is status. Let us not do anything that could make that more difficult. That is all I am saying.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Let us not do anything.

The Taoiseach: This cannot be resolved in the public domain. The Deputy should know that. Either we want to genuinely try to help, and I know the Deputy does-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Of course.

The Taoiseach: The issue is status, it seems to me. That is the number one issue that I would like to see dealt with. I cannot promise anything in respect of securing that, but I would have thought it would be the objective for Seamus Culleton. He is married, he has been there for 20 years and he has a business. That is the ultimate objective that we want to achieve.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I am going to read one woman's account of her postnatal care:

At my 6 week post natal check, the consultant who had delivered my baby asked me only about contraception. There were no questions about my mental health, my emotional state, or how I was coping. I left that appointment feeling invisible and unheard. Like I was just a vessel that had to 'get on with things'.

After giving birth, mothers are faced with a countdown. Six weeks of postnatal care. Six-weeks of check-ups. Six weeks, and then you are on your own. Life with a newborn does not become easier after those six weeks. For so many women, it becomes even harder. postnatal depression, anxiety and overwhelm can build up over months. When sleep deprivation accumulates, when your partner goes back to work, when supports fall away and when you start to feel invisible and unheard, everyone expects you to just get on with it. Of course, all of these are immeasurably harder for single parents.

This is the reality that is being highlighted by Aolish Gormley and the Year of Care campaign. Those involved are asking for something very simple, namely for the Government to finally prioritise mothers. There is no strategy for supporting mothers' physical and mental health in their first year after giving birth. With postnatal appointments largely ending after six weeks, mental health supports are inconsistent, inaccessible or entirely absent. Paid leave ends months before many women have physically or psychologically recovered.

The maternity and infant scheme which outlines postnatal care in Ireland has not been updated since 1997. That is 29 years ago. The long-promised review has been endlessly delayed. An entire generation of women have been born, are having children and are going through the same old creaking system as their mothers did. The standard of postnatal care in Ireland is far below what is available in other countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands. Despite the incredible work of midwives and other staff in our maternity services, our system does not represent best practice. It does not embody the reality faced by mothers in 2026 and it does not reflect everything we know about the importance of the first year for mother and child.

What makes this more frustrating is that the Government has already acknowledged so many of the flaws in the system. Many of the solutions are contained in the national maternity strategy, which is gathering dust on a shelf somewhere.

I ask the Taoiseach to follow through and to recognise that birth has a profound impact on women's health and well-being far beyond six weeks, and for the State to finally step up and help mothers through that first difficult year. I am asking him to deliver a mother and baby unit so that getting mental health support does not mean being separated from one's baby. Will the Government produce a strategy to expand physical and mental health supports to mothers for an entire year after birth? We have been waiting on a review of the maternity and infant

scheme for ten years. It is supposed to be ready in quarter 1 of this year. When will the report be published?

The Taoiseach: Without question care for mothers particularly postnatal is absolutely important. Despite what the Deputy said, the Government has made a lot of progress in this area over quite a number of years, in particular the establishment of nine postnatal hubs, giving women access to postnatal care in community settings. Additional funding of €2 million in 2025 will initiate four further hubs which will bring the total network to €13 million. Some €28 million in new development funding has been invested in the national maternity strategy, transforming maternity services for mothers and babies. Over 550 additional full-time staff have been funded across maternity services, including 44 consultants, and 381 nurses and midwives.

In terms of the mental health dimension, the expansion of specialist perinatal mental health services has been prioritised and again funding has been provided for additional posts this year to meet the demand, particularly in the busiest of hospitals. The HSE is reviewing the model of care this year with a view to further expanding services as per the programme for Government. The perinatal mental health service is available in all 19 maternity hospitals nationwide, supporting pregnant women and women with a baby up to one year old with an existing or new mental health challenge. Work is under way to deliver Ireland's first mother-and-baby unit with a site currently being confirmed at St. Vincent's hospital.

There have been a lot of service improvements. Without question we have more to do and we will continue to invest in this area as we have in maternity more generally. There will be a successor to the current national maternity strategy. The current one runs from 2016 to 2026. That is imminent and work is under way on that. The programme for Government commits to the mother-and-baby mental health unit, doubling the number of multidisciplinary teams for pregnant women, increasing the number of perinatal mental health midwife posts, and proactively providing mental health supports through maternity hospitals following trauma events connected to pregnancy and childbirth. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is strongly committed to this.

There are a range of other programmes in the gynaecological and obstetric area where there have been very substantial investments and improvements. That has to also be acknowledged. Significant developments have taken place with postnatal depression and care after pregnancy. We acknowledge clearly the need to do more and are prepared to do more.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Taoiseach. I acknowledge that the postnatal hubs delivered through Sláintecare do excellent work. The point that the care campaign is highlighting is that those services need to be expanded massively to address the mental health gaps in postnatal care. It is clear that it has not been prioritised to the extent that the Taoiseach just laid out. There is evidence of that in fact that is it has not been reviewed in 29 years. I specifically asked about the review of the maternity and infant scheme. It was supposed to be ready in quarter 1 of this year. When will it be ready?

The Taoiseach mentioned the mother and baby unit in his reply. When will that be delivered? Is it planned to have more than one in Ireland? We are far behind other countries like the UK on this. The care campaign is not calling for anything radical. We need our

maternal health care to be evidence based. We need to recognise the immense physical and mental toll giving birth takes on people. We need to expand supports in that regard. We need to expand paid leave to cover the first year of a child's life. We need to modernise the maternity and infant scheme, and to implement the national maternity strategy.

The Taoiseach: The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, are absolutely committed to expanding this. I am not clear about that 29-year reference but I repeat that in terms of mental health, the perinatal mental health service is now available in all 19 maternity hospitals, supporting pregnant women and women with a baby up to one year old. That is the current position. As we discussed this morning, both the Minister and the Minister of State are quite committed to prioritising this even further and also in terms of the mother and baby unit in St. Vincent's Hospital. Again, I see no difficulty in the Government working with the Opposition in this area and working with the campaign in terms of ensuring that we do the best and the optimal for the women and children of Ireland.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, in spite of its intentions, raises concerns as it could have unintended consequences for many people in this country. The part that raises most concerns for the tourism sector is the short-term letting planning part. It is being proposed as part of this new legislation that Airbnb, bed and breakfast and short-term lets will require registration and planning permission. The people who let for the short term, mainly for tourism purposes, have no issue with being registered as all of their work is above board anyhow. However, if they have to get planning permission for short-term letting, that will close down most of the short-term lets in Ireland. I could understand it if this Bill sought these changes for short-term lets in areas with a population of over 20,000 but those in rural communities who let granny flats or let rooms on a short-term basis in houses or sheds should not come under the residential tenancies planning provisions.

I was dealing with two ladies in west Cork last year who were doing Airbnb for decades, letting out approximately ten rooms in two houses. They heard of this new legislation and knew that if they had to get planning permission, assuming they could get it in the first place, it would cost tens of thousands of euro which would make their little tourism businesses non-viable. Last week, I contacted the ladies to tell them that I was raising this issue in the Dáil only to be told they had pulled out of the business as they could not carry on with the indecision and the stress of not knowing if they would be forced down the planning permission route or not. Ten beds have been lost to the surrounds of Courtmacsharry. Tourism beds mean people calling, staying for a few days, eating in local restaurants in Courtmacsharry, Timoleague, Clonakilty and Bandon, having a few pints in the local pubs and using local transport services, all adding to the economy of the local community. This story is not just confined to Courtmacsharry. This also applies to Connemara in Galway, Westport in Mayo, Bundoran in Donegal, Dungarvan in Waterford, New Ross in Wexford, and Kenmare in Kerry. It is the same story the length and breadth of Ireland. This is tourism and it is a decades-old success.

Tourism was down by 8% last year. Has the Government calculated what this will cost the tourism sector? People from all over the world came to rural parts of Ireland to enjoy what we have to offer, which is far more than anywhere in the world. Those in short-term lets are horrified by what is happening. At a packed public meeting that I held in O'Donovan's Hotel in Clonakilty last Friday night, I heard story after story of great short-term let businesses from

Beara to Kinsale and how they sold all that is great about Ireland. All of this looks to be in tatters to them if the Government railroads through this legislation in its current form. Will owners of Airbnb and short-term lets in areas with populations of under 20,000 have to apply for planning permission? The same question applies to bed and breakfast accommodation, short-term holiday lets and the householders providing once-off accommodation at weekends for events like Comórtas Peile na Gaeltachta or local festivals the length and breadth of Ireland. Will they all come under this planning legislation? If so, it will damage our tourism industry in rural coastal communities throughout Ireland, which are still reeling from the complete collapse of the fishing industry and the struggles of our beef industry at this time.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It is an extremely important issue. The ultimate priority, of course, is housing. All of us in this House agreed a long time ago that housing is a priority. Short-term lets, particularly in cities and large towns, have replaced a lot of rental properties for housing. That is the ultimate priority. Cities and large towns provide the best opportunity for short-term letting properties to be returned to the long-term rental market. We had a meeting last evening of party leaders and the Ministers responsible, Deputy James Brown and Deputy Peter Burke, who is initiating the legislation. First, it will be for towns above 20,000. Many people thought it would be 10,000. I thought that Deputy Collins was getting up to welcome that development but anyway-----

Deputy Michael Collins: I will.

The Taoiseach: It is above 20,000 and we are trying to get the balance right between tourism and housing.

It is important to note, there will be an obligation to register. The Bill is the short-term letting and tourism legislation. We published that, as the Deputy knows. We got Cabinet approval. I think it has gone through pre-legislative scrutiny. It will introduce a national register of all short-term let properties to improve oversight and compliance. It also aligns domestic law with the European Union short-term rental regulation, which will be effective from 20 May 2026. There are various criteria. The Minister, Deputy Browne, will then develop a planning statement on short-term letting.

In terms of the planning status I thought the Deputy would have been aware that any variation from residential to commercial and Airbnb - we sought the Attorney General's advice on this - requires planning. That is just the law as it is. We are examining the process of registering so that we would facilitate opportunities for those registering to regularise planning over a particular timeframe. That has to be tied down with a degree of precision. That will happen before the Bill comes to the Dáil. That is all fairly imminent. Those are the factual legal positions. I think we can achieve it. I would not be coming forward with the potential doomsday scenarios the Deputy came forward with. We need to keep calm here and facilitate regularisation, if people have not done that already. A year or two ago, if, bar in the case of home sharing, someone wanted to change the status of a particular house to an Airbnb scenario, by law, as it currently stands, the person would need planning permission to do that.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Taoiseach may say that I am putting forward a doomsday scenario. It is doomsday for these people who have been doing Airbnb for the past five, ten,

20, 30, 40 or 50 years if planning regulations have to come into place. I welcome the statement from the Minister, Deputy Burke, but the planning requirement is still going ahead. That is the very serious concern we all have. That is the part that will ruin existing short-term holiday lets. Independent Ireland has an amendment tomorrow night that would safeguard existing businesses and provide them with certainty if the Government will agree to it. The only opportunity to put this right is through the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 tomorrow night. I am getting emails from Airbnb short-term providers all over Ireland who are up in arms over this. Nowhere else in Europe are existing Airbnb and short-term lets being destroyed. It has been tried by the Scottish Government but it had to row back on the decision. The loss of income in a female dominated industry will be felt the length and breadth of the country if this is to go ahead. At this moment, Fáilte Ireland has registration forms ready on which it quite clearly asks if the person has planning. If this is not removed, it is breathtaking to see that Fáilte Ireland, the very body put in place to build tourism, will be the body at the forefront, with this Government, of destroying tourism, as we know it, forever.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is confusing his Bills.

Deputy Michael Collins: I am not.

The Taoiseach: You are.

Deputy Michael Collins: We have done research on this.

The Taoiseach: The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 has nothing to do with short-term letting.

Deputy Michael Collins: It has.

The Taoiseach: No, it does not. I want to make it clear that the short-term letting Bill will be brought to the House by the Minister, Deputy Burke. We had a meeting of the housing committee yesterday. We dealt with it. The issue in terms of variation is a matter of law as we stand, and that is anywhere, not just in the context of short-term lets. For any premises, permission has to be obtained for a variation of use to commercial. The Deputy knows that because he is a TD and he knows his way around the place in terms of these kinds of issues. Let us not pretend innocence. I would say the Deputy has helped a good few people down through the years to navigate all those kinds of things.

Deputies on our side of the House are very anxious that we go to the 20,000 figure. We got the balance right and we have to bring forward the legislation. What we will endeavour to do is to enable people, as they register, to regularise their planning over a period of time, to give people time. By the way, I know the Deputy is concerned about Courtmacsherry and all of that. Brad Pitt is on his way to Timoleague, apparently. The Airbnbs will be full now for the next couple of days.

Deputy Michael Collins: There will be no room for poor Brad Pitt or anybody else if the Government does not wake up. We have to have a debate in the Chamber on short-term lets. The Taoiseach can ignore me all he likes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the Order of Business, Deputy Collins has a number of guests in the Gallery. They are students from University College Cork's government and politics society. You are very welcome indeed.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 35, I call on the Chief Whip, Deputy Butler, to move the arrangements for this week's business.

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- International Protection Bill 2026 (Second Stage, resumed) (to adjourn on conclusion of the second speaking round, not to exceed 3 hours and 24 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) Bill 2026, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:-

- Statements on the Report of Operation Kenova (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)
- Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Amendments from the Seanad) (to conclude within 1 hour)
- Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 5 hours)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Flood Prevention, selected by Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- International Protection Bill 2026 (Second Stage, resumed) (to conclude after the third speaking round, with any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 18th February, 2026)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021, sponsored by Deputy Sinéad Gibney.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members' business shall be taken following the proceedings on Second Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the resumed proceedings on the Second Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026 shall be interrupted, and stand adjourned on conclusion of the second speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the second-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across); and

(b) members may share time; and

	Gov	SF			
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
				Total	204 mins

3. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) the Statements on the Report of Operation Kenova, shall be taken at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and on the conclusion of the Statements, the sitting shall stand suspended either for one hour or until 4.30 p.m., whichever is the later; and

(c) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026;

2. the Statements on the Report of Operation Kenova shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time;

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
				Total	135 mins

3. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour, and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration; and

4. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 5 hours by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the resumed proceedings on the Second Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the third speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the third-round speeches, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on conclusion of the third-round speeches, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes;

(c) any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday, 18th February, 2026; and

(d) members may share time.

Mins	20	20	20	12	4

	20	12	4	20	12
	4	20	12	4	20

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will start with Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Working households are struggling with price hikes and rip-off bills and no help coming from the Government. People with disabilities in particular have suffered as a result of the Government's budget leaving them €1,400 worse off. The Government refuses to provide a cost-of-disability winter payment. Now, those people are forced to protest outside the Dáil. It is not lost on anyone, by the way, that the Government makes these cruel decisions while hiking up the pay of CEOs. We need a debate and discussion on the Government's very unfair approach to the cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Earlier I spoke with Jacinta Graham, who is the mother of Stephen Loughnane who is the subject of the RTÉ "Prime Time Investigates" programme tonight. He had a brain injury following a car accident and has been in continuous seclusion in Limerick Prison since 2021, then in the Central Mental Hospital and then in Portrane because there is no residential place for him. He is in uninterrupted 24-hour seclusion all of the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I raised his case here with the Taoiseach on 15 September 2021.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy had 30 seconds and he has raised it. I call Deputy Aidan Farrelly.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Can we have time in this House to find out what the Taoiseach and his Government has done for him and people like him in the past five years?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kelly, you are overstepping.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Under Standing Order 35(3), I wish to amend to Thursday's business to include statements on the failed Government election promise regarding €200 per month for childcare. We were told by Deputy Simon Harris that we would see a roadmap within 100 days. The action plan produced before Christmas was really useful in some ways but completely ignored this €200 per month plan. We have announcements with no details

about State-led services and communities around this country continue to go without. I ask that there is time allocated on Thursday for this.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is short notice but a protest has been called tomorrow for 5.30 p.m. outside of the Dáil. I urge people who are angry at this Government's failure to address affordability in rents and the housing crisis to get out and demonstrate against the decision of this Government to ram through the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 and impose a guillotine. There will not be proper scrutiny of it. Most of the public do not understand how far-reaching and detrimental this Bill will be in jacking up rents and a Government that is facilitating landlords driving up rents even further.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have been looking for statements in relation to the fishing industry for quite some time. I know the Government will say we have had them but the bottom line is that a task force was set up nearly two months ago. We have not heard whether it has met? What are the terms of reference? What is it doing? I was at a funeral the other day and I met a fisherman. He said that one day fishing and the quota is filled. They are facing ruination, and we are not doing much about it.

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

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputies for their suggestions. We will have the debate on the International Protection Bill 2026 this afternoon for several hours. Tomorrow, we will have statements on Operation Kenova. We will have the residential tenancies Bill before the House tomorrow for five hours. On Thursday, we will again have the International Protection Bill. We can discuss different statements at the Business Committee meeting on Thursday, which we do every week. The Order of Business stands. I am not accepting the suggestion under Standing Order 35(3).

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

Deputy Alan Kelly: Not agreed.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	

Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Daly, Pa.	
Chambers, Jack.	Devine, Máire.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Clendennen, John.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Collins, Niall.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Connolly, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gannon, Gary.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Martin.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lawless, James.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	

Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghail, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome, on behalf of Deputy Thomas Gould, a further contingent of students from UCC and Trinity College. Everybody in the Gallery is very welcome.

I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald. If you cannot make your point in one minute, you have asked the question in the wrong forum.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure the Taoiseach will take that on advisement.

I return again to the growing concern about the safety of Seamus Culleton, who, as we know, has been held in an ICE detention centre in Texas for the past five months. People were very shocked yesterday to hear him describe the conditions that he is being held in and say that he now fears for his life. I understand his family have only gone public because they felt they were left with no other avenue. Can the Taoiseach tell us specifically what representation has been made on his behalf? Has the Taoiseach raised his case with the US Administration? Can he be precise and tell us how many Irish citizens are caught up in this same nightmare situation?

3 o'clock

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier, I heard of the case yesterday. The Department of foreign affairs has been aware of the case since October and has been engaging with homeland security through the consulate general in Austin and the embassy in Washington. There are further meetings being held today. When I finish Taoiseach's Questions and so on, I will be updated in respect of the matter. I will proceed as I see best in helping Seamus Culleton. We are very concerned about the conditions he is being held in and in terms of his seeking permanent status in the US.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Just two days from now, 14-year-old Joseph Oyekanmi, his two brothers and his mother face deportation from their Dublin home. There is enormous concern in my constituency and in the area of Sandymount, Dundrum and Kilternan, where they have been living, where they have been integrating with the local community and where there has been a huge groundswell of support. Councillor Lettie McCarthy and I have been engaging on this matter. I have already made representations on behalf of the family to the justice Minister. Joseph is a pupil in Gonzaga, which is a school in my constituency. His brother Samuel also attends school there. They are involved with local sports clubs and are both talented athletes. Samuel is doing the leaving certificate. This is a family that are so well integrated. It is absolutely shameful to see them facing deportation. Former professional athlete David Gillick has sought help on their behalf. Five thousand people have signed a petition noting the immense positive contribution this family has already made to their community in Dublin. I appeal to the Taoiseach to enable them to stay here in Ireland, which is the country they have made their home and which they have already made such an important and positive contribution to.

The Taoiseach: I will ask the Minister for justice to review this case.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Thank you.

The Taoiseach: Again, however, it speaks to the issue the Deputy raised earlier in the context of America and migration law. The Deputy has raised two deportation cases today-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I have.

The Taoiseach: -----I mean this sincerely - one in terms of the US implementing its law and the other in terms of Ireland-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are doing the same as Trump.

The Taoiseach: -----implementing its law.

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

The Taoiseach: What is interesting is that the debate moves along the continuum, depending on given situations. I take the Deputy's presentation in very good faith and I will talk to the Minister for justice in respect of it. There were quite a number of cases like this seven or eight years ago. That reversed and the mood changed in Irish society and more generally. There have to be rules for migration. The key issue is that we accelerate the applications for asylum as quickly as we possibly can in order that people are not here for any undue length of time, and that we also accelerate the appeals dimension. However, there has to be a framework governing migration to give everybody-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There has to be humanity-----

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

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Last night's "RTÉ Investigates" made for harrowing viewing. We saw people with severe and enduring mental health difficulties being subjected to degrading treatment and even dying in custody. Such was the tragic case of Ivan Rosney. These vulnerable people require care and compassion, not cold prison cells. Last October, I visited Cork Prison. As a result of what I saw, I started asking questions. At the end of January, figures provided to me showed that 38 people are being held in prison waiting to be transferred to the Central Mental Hospital. That is a 23% increase since November. The average waiting time for a transfer from the prison to hospital is now seven months. For somebody in the midst of a mental health crisis, that is an eternity. At the same time, 50 beds in the Central Mental Hospital are lying idle. Three years after the hospital opened, that is an utter disgrace. The HSE promised to open 18 of those beds last year but just two opened - another broken promise. On top of that, unforgivably, there are 28 vacancies in the hospital. Will the Government immediately fill these vacancies and open the overdue mental health beds?

The Taoiseach: First, welcome all the students from UCC, both those who were here earlier and those who are here now.

An Ceann Comhairle: They would be gone.

The Taoiseach: The study of politics in UCC has always been a very positive and productive endeavour, as I know myself to good effect.

The issue the Deputy raised is very serious. The Central Mental Hospital relocated to the new state-of-the-art purpose-built health facility at Portrane in November 2022. The new facility cost of €240 million, which was a demonstration of moving to a new era in respect of forensic psychiatry. It is now one of the better facilities of its kind in Europe.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Fifty beds.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

An Ceann Comhairle: What is the answer?

The Taoiseach: Please wait, and I will give the answer. We either want a genuine debate or Deputies just want to score points. They should make up their minds.

Some 93 patients had been transferred at that stage, and 114 beds are now open in the Central Mental Hospital. In 2025, we funded the recruitment of 41 additional staff to open a further 18 beds, two of which opened in December. The other 16 will be opened next month.

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

The Taoiseach: That is progress. We want to do more. We want to get to 140 beds.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There were 60 complaints of sexual abuse or misconduct against members of An Garda Síochána in the past three years. There are 18 active investigations. We saw what happened with Margaret Loftus. I raised with the Taoiseach the case of a Scott medal being awarded to former detective Noel McMahon, who was named at the Morris tribunal in connection with all sorts of corruption, who assaulted his wife, Sheenagh, with a firearm and who got her children taken from her by lying and using his position. The Taoiseach said that I had a point, that the man in question should not have got the medal and that he would have had issues with it as well. In a letter I have seen since, however, the Garda Commissioner said in reply to Senator Paul Daly that matters such as those to which I refer cannot be taken into account in the award of the medal and nor can general misconduct where a member's courage and heroism are such that they clearly entitle him or her to the award. In other words, it does not matter what bad deeds people do, how much gender violence they commit, they can still get a medal for bravery.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Does the Taoiseach think that is acceptable? Will he take it up with the Commissioner-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach is to respond now.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----and ask for historic cases like Sheenagh O'Doherty's to be investigated.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach to respond

The Taoiseach: I will discuss this with the Minister for justice. If a garda or any other person is guilty of domestic abuse and violence, that takes away from acts of heroism or courage. There is no doubt. I do not know the specific case or the act of bravery that merited the award of the Scott medal, but it must have been a significant act of bravery and perhaps An Garda Síochána took the view articulated by the Commissioner. However, I think there needs to be a

broader look at that. If a person engages in domestic violence or sexual abuse , it takes away from courageous acts the same person may have undertaken.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Bord Bia Act and governance and professional standards state that there should be no legal impediments or conflicts of interest. It is also stated that compliance is essential in ensuring adherence to the code of practice for the governance of State bodies. Larry Murrin is allowed to be chairperson of Bord Bia, when there is a complete conflict of interest. On the basis of what the Act states, he is involved in insider trading. It is actually cartelling.

The Taoiseach: No, it is not.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is. Would the Taoiseach allow the general secretary of Fine Gael to sit in on a Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party meeting and listen to all the points being made? The Government is allowing Larry Murrin to sit as chairperson where he has access to full access to Bord Bia and to information on suppliers to Bord Bia. That is insider trading under Irish law.

The Taoiseach: That is a serious assertion-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is.

The Taoiseach: -----which should be taken off the record

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: No.

The Taoiseach: That is in breach of Standing Orders. It has to be.

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise. I did not hear it.

The Taoiseach: Insider trading is a criminal act. The Deputy will have to withdraw that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy, if he-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will not withdraw it.

The Taoiseach: Then there is a problem.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is too serious for people here and for all the farming organisations.

An Ceann Comhairle: It will have to be dealt with-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Taoiseach is not willing to deal with it. I asked a question the Taoiseach will not answer.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, sorry.

The Taoiseach: I will deal with the question, but the point I am trying to make is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will deal with that-----

The Taoiseach: On a point of order-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is in the Act.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: -----I do not like having to do this but it seems that Standing Orders-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, we will have to deal with it outside Standing Orders. We will have to have-----

The Taoiseach: It is either a clear breach of Standing Orders or it is not.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have asked the Deputy to withdraw it. I cannot make him do so. The same goes for all Members. The Deputy will have to deal with the consequences of it being on the record.

The Taoiseach: We have had a history in this House, where people-----

An Ceann Comhairle: This is-----

The Taoiseach: Sorry now a second, if I may, through the Chair.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no point, because he will not withdraw it.

The Taoiseach: I am not talking about this case, but when will the House get serious about people's names being undermined and their reputations-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Standing Orders as part of Dáil reform. The Chief Whip is behind the Taoiseach. If he wishes to put something into Standing-----

The Taoiseach: Who? It is in Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is dealt with in a way there, but the Deputy has refused to withdraw it. I asked him to withdraw it.

The Taoiseach: I know that, but I want to make a general point before I go on. It is a point worth making.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Ceann Comhairle said that she did not hear it

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me.

The Taoiseach: It is worth making this point.

An Ceann Comhairle: I did not hear it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I heard it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach heard it, and he is asking the Deputy to withdraw it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Ceann Comhairle should have heard it as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: I was having a conversation with the usher, which should not be the case. The thing is, we are now in a position-----

The Taoiseach: Of course, the Ceann Comhairle is going to refer it to the committee.

An Ceann Comhairle: It will be referred if a complaint is made.

The Taoiseach: All I want to observe is that this has been going on for quite a long time. I am making-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I reiterate that all Members have a responsibility-----

The Taoiseach: There is a casualness and nonchalance that is making a joke of Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a joke by any means. All Members have a responsibility to follow Standing Orders. That is it.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Clonburris strategic development zone, SDZ, in my constituency will provide 11,000 homes when it is completed. The development is well under way. Hundreds of homes have been completed. Thousands are either under construction or planning permission has been granted in respect of them. As part of the SDZ framework, infrastructure, including transport provision, was heralded as a key feature. The community in Clonburris is expanding rapidly. Dublin Mid-West one of the constituencies in the country where the population is growing rapidly. Traffic volumes on the R136, the N4 and the N7 are already characterised by high levels of congestion. We have already discussed the need for and

importance of the DART+ South West project to help to alleviate that congestion. In the interim, however, people living in Clonburris need access to bus stops and specific bus routes.

I have engaged with the National Transport Authority, NTA, on this matter. It is important that we ensure access to new routes for people in Clonburris in order that they will not just be obliged to use routes in Lucan and Clondalkin that are already under pressure. I ask for the Taoiseach's support in the context of engaging with the NTA in respect of this issue.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know he has been particularly strong on the DART+ South West project and the need to have it greenlighted. He has, more or less, been successful in achieving the latter. I will support the Deputy's dialogue with the NTA. I have made the point that, generally speaking, there has been a great deal of negotiation, dialogue and engagement with residential groups across the country, particularly in Dublin and Cork, in respect of BusConnects. This has created a lot of challenges. Given the fact that the NTA is a State agency, there needs to be a constant, robust mechanism for engagement with communities, because some of these proposals are not landing well. Different age cohorts have different responses to how BusConnects manifests itself in the context of, for example, safety and so on. I have made that point to the NTA. It has improved in many areas regarding its consultations with communities. As the services are being rolled out, some communities do not feel they are getting what was envisaged.

Deputy John Clendennen: The tragic deaths of Mary Holt and Tadhg Farrell in an arson attack caused profound shock and concern across the community of Edenderry and beyond before Christmas. As the investigation continues, I have met with many members of the local community who want the opening hours of the Garda station to be extended and increased visibility of gardaí on the ground in the town. Last week, 168 new gardaí were attested. However, just two of these new officers were appointed to the Laois-Offaly division. Both were assigned to Portlaoise Garda station.

I have constructively engaged with the Minister for justice and with the local gardaí. If we are going to apply adequate resources to Edenderry, it cannot result in an adverse impact on other parts of the county or across the division. Will the Taoiseach engage with the Commission in order to ensure that in the context of the next attestation later in the year, Edenderry will be specifically prioritised, particularly in view of the concerns that exist in the town.

The Taoiseach: I agree with the Deputy's condemnation of the horrific murder of Mary Holt and Tadhg Farrell. The savagery involved absolutely numbed people.

We are increasing throughput in Templemore. The Commissioner is taking a position of allocating substantial numbers to given locations. The first tranche was given to Dublin in order to increase visibility in a meaningful way, which happened. Cork and Limerick have now benefited. Instead of putting dribs and drabs of two or three here and there, the bulk have been allocated to the centres. That will happen gradually. There will be three more attestations this year. We have healthy numbers coming through, so we will be in a position to get to Edenderry and Laois-Offaly more generally. The policy in this regard is having an impact where it is being rolled out. However, I fully accept the frustrations of those locations which have not yet received the benefit of the increased number of gardaí being recruited.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: To continue with that theme, as the Taoiseach knows, the report of the Policing and Community Safety Authority report at the end of last year the continuing failure of the Government to address Garda recruitment and retention and rural policing in particular. It identified serious risks to policing performance from staffing shortages due to missed recruitment targets and increasing pressures on gardaí. People I have talked to in rural areas of County Waterford are experiencing the sharpest impact. Too few gardaí are covering large areas. There is limited visibility on the ground. Gardaí have indicated that they the supports or resources to do their jobs. People across County Waterford refer to understaffed stations, empty stations and slow response times. We have had a number of violent incidents, particularly in towns and villages in west Waterford in recent months where response times were just too slow. People do not feel safe in their communities. We need to get to grips with this. People in places like Cappoquin, Clashmore, Tooraneena, Ballymacarbry, Kilmacthomas, Dungarvan and Ardmore tell me that they do not see a garda from one end of the week to the next. When are we going to get real about this and ensure that rural areas have the policing response that they need?

The Taoiseach: Seventeen extra gardaí have been recruited to Waterford since last August. The Minister visited Waterford and Dungarvan Garda stations recently and had good conversations with the chief superintendent, superintendents and gardaí more generally. People are seeing many more gardaí much more often now. The good news is that 215 trainees entered Templemore last Monday. That is the third intake in a row where the numbers have exceeded 200. Those candidates were all recruited from the 2024 and 2025 recruitment campaigns. We are on target. The Government is making progress on significantly increasing the number of gardaí in the force. That will continue.

Deputy John McGuinness: I want to return to the case of Seamus Culleton, whose family hail from Glenmore in County Kilkenny. He has spent 20 years in Boston in the United States. I spoke to his wife, Tiffany, and his sister Caroline yesterday. They are deeply concerned about the length of time for which he has been detained and about the substandard conditions in the detention centre in El Paso. Why was he moved from New York to there? There are emerging financial difficulties because he is not working. Will the Taoiseach and the Minister for foreign affairs intervene immediately at the highest political level in order to get this man released? In November 2025, he was coming up on the last of his green card interviews. Obviously, he could not attend because he was being detained.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy John McGuinness: What consular assistance has been provided from September to date?

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

Deputy John McGuinness: I spoke to John Deasy, who would, maybe, have offered greater assistance.

The Taoiseach: We are concerned about the situation pertaining to Seamus Culleton. We fully accept people's concerns. I heard about the case yesterday. As I said earlier, our officials are engaging. The local consulate general in the US is engaging with ICE officials. We do not have the authority to interfere in the application of law but we do have the capacity to advocate strongly on behalf of our citizens to ensure that they are properly and humanely treated. We are conscious that this happened in the middle of an application for status. We do not want to do anything that would undermine the securing of that status for Seamus Culleton. The Minister and the officials are engaging. They were meeting before I came in. I will have a further update when I leave here and I will see where we take it from there.

Deputy Peter Roche: Tomorrow will be a dignified and respectful protest to University College Hospital in Galway, where people will be campaigning for a dual-pathway system in our emergency department. People who present in emergency departments with acute mental health issues need a different environment in which they can be triaged separately and given a moment to become calm and to have their concerns heard by the appropriate personnel. They are there because they are seeking help and support. They want to meet the people who will support them. I support this concept fully. Where are we at with regard to that plan going forward and a dual-pathway system for those who are acutely challenged by mental health issues?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and for his constant advocacy on in respect of those who have mental health challenges, disorders and illnesses. As he knows, budget 2026 focused on the provision of a crisis resolution response, especially for those who attend acute hospitals out of hours.

I was able to secure the funding, and I want to thank the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, for her work with me on this, for our nine model 4 hospitals and one model 3 hospital, so there are ten hospitals in total where each emergency department out of hours will be provided with four clinical nurse specialists or advanced nurse practitioners who will be able to support the non-consultant hospital doctor on call to deal with that crisis. We are working very hard. There are six hospitals that do not have that additional room capacity with regard to emergency departments to make sure that there is a quiet space there, so I can speak to the Deputy about it offline. The crisis resolution response and the crisis cafés are where we are going.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government has utterly failed to tackle the energy rip-off through inaction, with the national energy affordability task force meeting only three times since Government formation and no action on cutting energy costs while this crisis continues unabated. A total of 360,000 households are at risk of being cut off due to stealth disconnections relating to pay-as-you-go meters while 300,000 people are in arrears and older people are afraid to turn on their lights to cook. Companies are hiking unit costs at contract breaks with seemingly no notifications to customers and the CRU is asleep at the wheel lacking direction from the Government. What is the Government going to do? Is it going to make the CRU deal with this crisis? Unit costs are going up and people are not being told about it in advance. What is the Government going to do about it?

The Taoiseach: I dealt with this issue during Leaders' Questions. In the budget, we brought in specific measures to target those most in need and most under pressure as a result of the cost of living and the elevated level of the cost of living over the past four years, which is easing. Nonetheless prices are still high for people generally. In the budget, we brought in significant measures to deal with that.

In terms of affordability, the CRU and the task force have published their work in respect of this. We will work with the European Union in respect on energy pricing given that the system and model that operates within the EU has impacts here and in terms of our own regulatory framework but that will take time to develop. Regarding the budgetary measures we have taken, we do not agree with universal supports, particularly providing support for those who do not need it, which seems to be Sinn Féin's position.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad there are rumours that the Government is going to dilute the short-term letting in the Bill and to increase the population of towns so that it will apply to towns with populations of over 20,000. However, I believe anybody who has been doing Airbnb for more than seven years is entitled to planning permission because they already have it. There are people who have been doing this for 20 years and more. Whatever the Government is bringing forward should allow the people who have been doing Airbnb to continue doing it as they were. If the Government wants to bring in laws for new people going into Airbnb such that they have to go for planning permission, that is all right but the people that have been at it for years, especially for over seven years, should not have to go for planning permission. They have it by default.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The other thing I want to say to the Taoiseach is that this is very urgent.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It has to be dealt with urgently-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. You have one question, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----in order to let the people continue what they are doing for this season otherwise they will lose this season.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are destroying Questions on Policy or Legislation for everyone. The Taoiseach to respond. Members have one question on Questions on Policy or Legislation.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Cahill has made equally strong representations to me on this issue. He has been in my ear about this now for the past month or two months and has not stopped talking to me about it. The point is the Government decided that towns with a population below 20,000 will not be affected by the short-term letting legislation.

Planning laws were there prior to this legislation. Any variation to commercial use requires planning permission. The Deputy referenced seven years plus. He is on the ball to a certain extent; that is the existing position, which is not changed by anything.

Deputy Mark Wall: Budget 2026 announced an additional 1,717 SNA places, which is a very welcome intervention by Government. However, the reality in my own area of Kildare South is that late last week, Scoil Mhichil Naofa in Athy received notice that it will lose five SNA posts while Patrician Secondary School in Newbridge will lose three. As the Taoiseach can appreciate, this has a devastating impact on the entire school community. We all know the great work SNAs do day in, day out assisting teachers, assisting students and creating a school environment for parents and students alike. Will the Government intervene in these losses? We need SNAs in our schools. SNAs with posts will not know until next September whether or not they will still have a post and are getting calls to go into principals' offices. It is devastating for them all.

The Taoiseach: I do not have specifics in terms of the individual school but the numbers of SNAs have increased exponentially. The budget for special education has increased significantly and somewhat dramatically over the past three years and continues to increase so we need to work this out now as well. I will refer the case to the Minister for Education and Youth but it is not a context of cutbacks or anything like that. We are expanding the budget and we do have to allocate SNAs to children in line with best advice on our side.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Last week, a pregnant horse was literally driven into the ground on the N4. The horse was taking part, or was being made take part, in sulky races on Dollymount Strand. She was with foal. She collapsed on the road and was forced up to continue on that road. She collapsed again and this time, she could not get up. Her abusers kicked her and tried to drag her up but she was unable to get up. My Lovely Horse Rescue went out and rescued this horse and brought her to UCD but, unfortunately, she had to be put to sleep. This is pure animal cruelty plain and simple, so can the Taoiseach tell me what the Government is going to do to stop these horrific things from happening to animals in broad daylight?

The Taoiseach: That was absolutely horrific and I condemn very strongly what happened. Obviously, An Garda Síochána will have to follow up and the relevant authorities will have to pursue those guilty of this horrific crime. I appeal to people who witnessed this to give their evidence to the authorities, so that prosecution can follow.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: At lunchtime, hundreds of retired An Post workers and Eir workers protested outside this House about the fact that even though An Post asked that a 7% increase in their very meagre pension entitlements be approved and signed off on by the Government as far back as October, it still has not happened. For inexplicable reasons, Ministers and the Government are sitting on this when these pensioners, who worked hard all their lives and have been hit with the cost-of-living crisis, have not got the pension increase they were expecting. Can the Taoiseach confirm that the Government is going to sign off on this and that they will get their pension increases?

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Ministers concerned about this. It is never as simple as one issue but nonetheless I will talk to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and the relevant Ministers, so that whatever issues pertain here can be progressed.

Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move

That leave be granted to introduce Bill entitled an Act to improve the efficiency, competitiveness and sustainability of household waste collection services throughout the functional areas of local authorities; to provide for a scheme for the waiver of household waste collection charges on grounds of personal hardship; to enable local authorities to make provision by bye-laws relating to the duty of landlords in respect of the presentation of household waste by their tenants; for these purposes to amend the Waste Management Act 1996; and to provide for related matters.

I am very proud to introduce this Bill today. The Waste Management (Single Household Waste Collection Service) Bill is the culmination of many years of work across constituencies and communities, including my own constituency, that are dealing with scourge of illegal dumping, hazard and a sometimes unreliable waste collection and work with the trade union movement, in particular, the SIPTU-Fórsa campaign "More Power to You", which involves the fight for greater public services. This Bill seeks to do three things. It aims to overhaul the system of waste collection in this country.

The Labour Party wants to move waste collection from a system of competition in the market to competition for the market. We want to recognise that in a cost-of-living crisis the cost of waste disposal is a significant cost for some households, such as those with a member with a disability, caring or on low income. We need to introduce a waiver across every local authority in the country for certain households.

The third aspect of the Bill is crucial and it is the simplest part of the legislation I am proposing. We need to provide for landlord responsibility. The reality is that there are far too many tenanted accommodations across this country where there is no proper waste collection contract in place. The landlord does not take responsibility. The tenants, for a variety of reasons, whether culture, cost or overcrowding, do not take responsibility and we are left with the results on the street. However, it is really important to recognise that it is not just tenants. There are also homeowners in this country who are responsible for illegal dumping. As a starting point, we need to make sure that there is landlord responsibility.

We in the Labour Party believe that we have a dysfunctional system of waste collection, both here in Dublin and across many communities in Ireland. Bin companies are getting to drive by illegally dumped bags or burst bags strewn all over the ground. The onus is on residents to report it and the city council has to come and clean up the mess. Ultimately, we have underinvestment in composting and recycling facilities. We believe waste management is a vital public service. It should be about keeping our streets clean and not making a profit. Ultimately, if we are to see greater investment in shared collection points, more recycling, more

composting and greater control on resources into waste, we need to change how this work is done and who does it.

The context for this Bill is that yet again household this year are facing even greater bin collection costs. Panda, one of the largest providers in the State, has now raised its cost per bin to €14.75, an increase of 43% in just a two-year period. City Bin provides service to approximately 50,000 households across Dublin and Galway. We saw a 26% increase in just two years in its costs. Greyhound last saw an increase in costs, as we understand it, back in 2024, and no doubt we are going to be seeing changes to those costs over the coming weeks.

Two years ago, waste collection companies threatened this Government with price hikes because of the return scheme. They said that because the State was, in effect, taking away a very profitable aspect of their business, which is the collection of recyclable plastics, their bottom line was going to suffer and, ultimately, the householder was going to suffer because of an increased cost imposed by these companies. This is coming home to roost. We are now seeing that happen with householders.

I acknowledge there are additional challenges, such as there no longer being opportunity to export beyond the EU borders. There are increased costs for waste collection companies, but that is why it is absolutely critical that we have a conversation about how and who delivers waste collection and overall waste management within cities, towns, villages and across this country. We also have the added context of very poor performance with regard to recycling rates in certain areas. For many years, we have slapped ourselves on the back and said we are great as our recycling rates in some parts were above the EU average, but when we look at plastics recycling, Ireland is at 28% relative to a target of 50% in 2025. In municipal recycling and bring centres, Ireland is at only 41% relative to a target of 55%. We have to do better.

The introduction of competition across the waste collection system in the early 2000s promised lower prices and a better service. The reality has played out very differently.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [67675/25]

2. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [67676/25]

3. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach which Cabinet committee oversees agriculture; and when it will next meet. [67677/25]

4. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach which Cabinet committee oversees agriculture; and when it will next meet. [69859/25]

5. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Taoiseach which Cabinet committee oversees agriculture; and when it will next meet. [69860/25]

6. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach which Cabinet committee oversees agriculture and when it will meet next. [5806/26]

7. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [5977/26]

8. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [5989/26]

9. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [7331/26]

10. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [7578/26]

11. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [7693/26]

12. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture and the marine will next meet. [7698/26]

13. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [8091/26]

14. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture. [8094/26]

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture. [8097/26]

16. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee that oversees agriculture will next meet. [8197/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, together.

The Government has placed agriculture and rural development at the heart of its work and the programme for Government sets out our ambitions to do more to grow our agrifood sector and see our rural economy and rural communities thrive. Government has mainstreamed agriculture across the Cabinet committee system to ensure that agriculture and rural policy are always factored into wider considerations and Government action. With this in mind, we established the Cabinet committee on water quality, which has been instrumental in our efforts to secure a derogation on the nitrates directive. Likewise, the Cabinet committee on European Union and international affairs has been a forum for closely monitoring CAP developments, other issues to do with agriculture and Europe, and shaping our positions from a negotiating perspective. The Cabinet committee on economy, trade and competitiveness and the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy have also regularly discussed agricultural issues, particularly with regards to fully unlocking the economic potential within rural Ireland. As with all policy areas, agriculture issues are regularly discussed at Cabinet and there is regular cross-departmental engagement on issues that affect agriculture and our farming communities.

Budget 2026 saw €2.3 billion allocated to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. This was an increase of €170 million over the 2025 budget. This Government commitment is showing very strong results. In 2024, agrifood exports were a record €19 billion and estimates for 2025 show even further growth, to €21 billion. This highlights the global orientation and exceptional quality of Irish produce and, when viewed in the context of international trade uncertainty, is all the more impressive.

This success directly benefits Irish farm families. In 2024, the national farm survey showed that average family farm income rose by 89%. The figures for 2025 are not yet finalised, but indications show that it could see a further 30% growth. This is real progress and is the outcome of years of investments by the Government and, above all, by farmers themselves. By way of example, one can look at the success and implementation of the ACRES programme, which is part of Ireland's Common Agricultural Policy strategic plan. This work is relevant to multiple Cabinet committees and will see €1.5 billion allocated, with 60% funding from the Exchequer and 40% from the European Union budget. That will have a huge impact on our rural environment and will deliver an income support for up to 50,000 farm families. The Government will build on this success and the hard work of our farming families to ensure a thriving, resilient and sustainable agrifood sector.

When it comes Ireland's priorities for the next CAP, our position is very clear and remains unchanged. We want a CAP that gives sufficient certainty and stability for farmers, fishers, and rural communities, allows for policy tools tailored to the Irish agrifood system and provides sufficient funding for farmers and rural communities. As the Deputies will be aware, the proposed CAP structure post 2027 seeks to consolidate existing measures into a single policy framework. The Government will be going through the proposals line by line to work towards our CAP priorities and assess the practicality of the Commission's proposed approach, given the associated governance and conditionality requirements. I also note that the European

Parliament has expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed merging of CAP elements with other funding structures and streams.

Ireland will advocate for maximum flexibility, retention of the full toolbox of measures, ring-fenced funding and a CAP framework that supports competitiveness, sustainability and food security. Ireland will play an influential role during our upcoming Presidency, acting as an honest broker in progressing CAP discussions. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, and all of Government will continue to engage actively at European Union level.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: A huge number of rural roads in Carlow-Kilkenny have been absolutely destroyed in the past couple of weeks due to the torrential rainfall and serious flooding in the area. This has resulted in serious potholes and, in many cases, complete disintegration of road surfaces, making them impassable. In some cases, there are potholes so big you could lose a small child in them. I am asking the Taoiseach and the Government to provide additional once-off emergency funding to those counties which have been so desperately affected by the storm.

There are lots of roads that are in brutal condition, some still impassible, and they need complete reconstruction. At the weekend, when driving in places like Drummin, St. Mullins, Spahill, Glynn, Tomduff, Ballyglisheen and Knocksquire, I saw that all of the roads had been seriously damaged. Many of these are local roads with high agricultural volumes but these routes serve as the only route for many rural residents. They are vital for vulnerable residents. They are school bus routes and there are also access requirements for milk lorries and other essential services. Could additional emergency funding be made available separate from the additional funding for roadworks?

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: A huge range of significant issues are putting pressure on farmers. They include bluetongue, the new Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, the Mercosur deal and Bord Bia. Last week, the agriculture committee questioned the Bord Bia chair on Brazilian beef imports. There are very strong views on the issue and farmers are really upset about what they saw happen in the weeks leading up to the committee meeting. Time and again at the meeting, the question came up about discussions and getting people around the table, face to face and talking. Is there some way of getting the various interest groups - the farmer organisations and Bord Bia - around the table to get progress on the current impasse?

Deputy Michael Cahill: I raise the matter of compensation ceilings currently in place for tuberculosis, TB, reactors. I am acutely aware of the emotional and financial impacts of bovine TB on farmers and their families. An outbreak of TB can be soul-destroying. The on-farm market valuation scheme is the principal compensation measure available to farmers who experience a TB outbreak in their herd. The scheme aims to compensate farmers up to the open market value of the animal. The compensation under the on-farm market valuation scheme is payable subject to ceilings. If the actual value of the animal exceeds the ceiling, the farmer is at a loss. I know of families who were left out of pocket, in some cases involving thousands of euro. We must do everything possible to help these farmers and ensure they are adequately compensated. Due to the increased cost of the bovine TB programme in recent years, the Government's focus should now be on reducing the levels of the disease and, if at all possible, eradicating it. This will reduce the impact on Irish farm families and reduce the cost of the

programme, which has risen year on year and stood at over €121 million in 2025. The Government must do everything possible to eradicate this disease.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Taoiseach rightly referred in his response to the massive scale of our food exports. Those food export markets have been hard-earned. There has been massive investment by the State over the decades, and by farmers, in building up a top-class, world-standard food industry. We have animal husbandry and food production to the highest standard. That is why we have been successful in so many markets throughout the world.

As Deputy Moynihan said, there is a very urgent issue to be resolved, that is, the ongoing dispute between farmers and Bord Bia. It must be resolved immediately because we do not want the good standing of our industry worldwide to be damaged in any way.

As the Taoiseach knows, one of the most important things during Ireland's Presidency of the European Union is finalisation of the multi-annual financial framework, MFF. As we all know, the Common Agricultural Policy is essential to ensuring a secure supply of safe food for the citizens of Europe and it is also an essential income support for farmers. That CAP, post 2027, must be properly resourced.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: *Agfood.ie*, a revamped agrifood portal, was launched by the Minister for agriculture at the National Ploughing Championships last September. Dual-factor authentication, which has become a part of that, is proving quite difficult for a number of farmers who have contacted me, namely, farmers with poor phone coverage or those who have given their phone number to a son or a daughter to help them log in to the system. It is a very good system. It helps with compliance announcements, information from the Department, payment information and projected nitrates information. However, it is making the portal more inaccessible for a lot of farmers who have someone else logging into the portal safely. For them to do so, we need to look at other login methods that would make this technology more accessible for those helping farmers.

In regard to the community involvement scheme, CIS, and the local improvement scheme, LIS, funding for those in rural areas is absolutely essential, as the first speaker said. I have lanes in north Tipperary and they are so big, I could lose Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere in the potholes at the moment.

The Taoiseach: Shocking. That is an awful slur on Deputy Cleere.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The issue of generational renewal is critical in the context of the forthcoming CAP negotiations. I know it has been raised in the discussions with Commissioner Hansen. The Taoiseach will be aware that almost 40% of farmers are now aged 65 and over, whereas fewer than 5% are under the age of 35. He will know that Macra na Feirme has been seeking, as an essential part of the next CAP, fully funded succession schemes. I know in my own case that both Wicklow Macra and Wexford Macra are very active on these issues. It is critical, if we are to safeguard rural communities and the future of the traditional family farm, that we have fully funded succession schemes in place under a fully funded CAP. I would like the Taoiseach to give a commitment that this will be a priority in the discussions on the next CAP.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The script the Taoiseach read out has no relation at all to the reality for farmers. If the backbenchers ever manage to overthrow him, I think there is a Booker Prize for fiction in him when he retires.

The Taoiseach: Thanks, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some 1,400 farmers are leaving agriculture on an annual basis, with 8,400 farmers having left since Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael got together back in 2020. Another 5,600 will have disappeared from the land by the time this Government is finished. That is the stark reality facing farmers at the moment. The Mercosur deal is simply going to accelerate that process. Farm incomes will be lower, there will be rural depopulation and the food security of this country will also be threatened. The idea that we have Mr. Murrin importing beef that would likely fail the standards Bord Bia is using to audit farmers across the country is incredible. This week, we in Aontú found out that the Department of education is paying for food under the schools food programme that is coming from Brazil. Is it any wonder there is a collapse in farm incomes and numbers in this country when the Government is acting against the best interests of farmers?

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Government's credibility and its relationship with farmers have been damaged significantly. In regard to its efforts on the Mercosur agreement, it only really opposed it when it was clear the deal would be passed. The Government failed to lobby any MEPs or member states-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputies.

Deputy Paul Lawless: These are the facts. I appreciate that, as a backbencher, Deputy Cleere must be frustrated-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless should ask a question because his time will be up.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----with the direction of Government but the facts are the facts.

In relation to Bord Bia, the Taoiseach's attitude can only be described as smug, lacking understanding and showing an unwillingness to engage with farmers. There is a significant impasse at the moment and the Government's attitude is one of "Hands off, there is nothing to see here" when the reality is that farmers are hurting because Bord Bia pushed them for standards and, meanwhile, its chair is importing beef. How many tonnes of Brazilian beef are coming into this country on an annual basis? How many tonnes of poultry are coming into this country?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Commissioners Hansen and Serafin were here last week. We all had an opportunity to engage with them. We had them in at the EU affairs committee. The fear I have is that they did not rule out the ability, the capacity and, maybe, the willingness to

introduce provisional application of the Mercosur agreement before the European Court of Justice carries out its due diligence of the legality of the deal. Our big fear relates to imports of 100,000 tonnes of Brazilian beef and 180,000 tonnes of poultry that will not be up to the standard of European and, in particular, Irish farming. I want to know what the Government is going to do to make sure there is not provisional application. This is happening in the context of the issue with Larry Murrin. I do not think any of the backbenchers could have been particularly happy with his answers at the agriculture committee. Mr. Murrin has to go. There is an unacceptable conflict of interest and it is doing damage to Irish farming.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I do not know as much about the Mercosur deal as my colleagues in the regional group but the facts are that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the regional independents gave a commitment in the programme for Government to reject the deal in its current form and to work with like-minded governments.

To get back to Dublin, I want to speak about the Clontarf area and the north city arterial main, a major semi-State project. We all saw in *The Irish Times* last week that there is huge confusion because the Baldoyle Road is to be closed for nearly a year. In regard to major projects, what level of information should be guaranteed to public representatives? I went to the open night. I asked if I could take photos of the traffic plans and I was told "No". We held a general election in north Dublin to represent the people and when a TD asks for photos of traffic management, they should be allowed get those drawings.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Marine Institute recently released a report on the devastating impacts of the use of tangle nets on many endangered species in our waters.

This report looked at what was happening in our national park. Incredibly we see tangle nets are killing angel shark which is on the brink of extinction. A consultation was done by the Department of agriculture on a sustainable crayfish management plan in 2021 but I can find no other information about that. There was no follow up and no report seemed to result from that consultation. It is important that we move away from tangle nets but we need to do it and support fishers as we do so. It is important that we start protecting these endangered species. Can the Taoiseach tell me if he knows where that consultation is or will he look into it for me?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett. Excuse me. Deputy Paul Murphy.

The Taoiseach: Indistinguishable.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last week at the public accounts committee we heard that the Department of agriculture last year killed 7,735 badgers. It killed over 60,000 badgers in the course of the past decade even though they are supposedly a protected species. They are first trapped in snares causing internal organ damage, ruptured bladders and disembowelment. Pregnant and lactating badgers are killed leaving their cubs to starve to death. Snaring badgers is banned in Scotland and Wales. Two-thirds of people want it banned here. We are the only country in Europe which funds the large-scale slaughter of badgers. The truth is they are scapegoats for the spread of bovine TB. We have a programme that is killing more and more badgers yet the incidence rate goes up and up. It is over 66% at this stage. The EU refuses to fund this programme any more. It means the public is funding €100 million a year. Will the

Taoiseach commit to end the mass slaughter of badgers? We need to move to 100% vaccination and have implementation of biosecurity measures to actually deal with the problem.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Farmers feel undermined, ignored and taken for granted. They are angry – in fact, they are livid – because the importation of Brazilian beef represents not only an existential threat to their livelihoods but the way Brazilian beef is produced runs completely contrary to the standards to which they are held. The Government's late-in-the-day opposition and lukewarm approach to Mercosur exposed its real attitude to it. The regulations that Irish farmers must adhere to ensure our beef and dairy products are the best in the world, and the fact that Bord Bia benefits directly from this and promotes this message around the world, while at the same time the chair, Larry Murrin, imports Brazilian beef through his private company has destroyed the confidence farmers have in Bord Bia. It has done serious damage to the confidence they have in this Government or whatever is left of it. His evasiveness in his answers at the committee last week might have seemed like a masterclass to people who observe this particular bubble but I think that farmers who are used to speaking plainly and listening saw it for what it was. Will the Taoiseach apply the Whip to his Fianna Fáil councillors who are being lobbied at the moment by the IFA and the ICSA, like in Waterford and Kilmacthomas this evening where the IFA calls councillors in to meet them?

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Deputies for raising the broad spectrum of issues that they have. In response to Deputy 'Chap' Cleere, I have spoken to the Minister for Transport, Darragh O'Brien. Without question, very significant damage has been done to quite a lot of local roads in areas of severe flooding over the past month. I was in Aughtrim recently with Deputy Byrne and saw at first hand the damage done to the roads there. In fact, some of the roads came with the flood. The situation is very serious. The officials who were with the Minister said they are awaiting returns from the councils in respect of an assessment and an estimate of the damage that has been done. I will talk to the Minister again to allocate funding to those roads in the context of the weather damage that has been done. They are waiting on the rough estimates from the councils for the cost of restoring the roads that have been without question damaged as a result of the flooding. I will keep in touch with the Deputy on that and with other Deputies who are concerned.

Deputy Moynihan raised the range of issues that face farmers at the moment. He is correct. I welcome the offer of dialogue from the Minister for agriculture to the farm organisations, the IFA, the ICSA and others, in respect of the Bord Bia issue as well as the full gambit of issues that face farming at the moment. I have been in touch with some of the farming organisations. In my view there is a need for dialogue to chart a way forward for Irish agriculture and farming out of the current controversy that focuses on the core issues. The single biggest issue this year is the CAP. Be under no illusions that when the dust settles on the current row, it will be the CAP. There are other issues but the CAP is the one I am most concerned about now. There is protecting the derogation, blue tongue and the various assurance schemes and the imposition and the burden they represent for farmers. I know Deputy Smith has raised this as well. He was involved in the first ever major food plan. Was it Harvest 2020?

Deputy Brendan Smith: Food Harvest 2020.

The Taoiseach: Food Harvest 2020 was the first major strategic document which set the roadmap for the development of the food industry. I think CAP and the budget are key but also the need to get into a dialogue pathway with the organisations. I would encourage the organisations to respond positively to the correspondence that the Minister issued to them today in respect of those issues. In my view, that cannot happen quickly enough. I will come back to that issue.

Deputy Cahill raised the issue of TB. It is a very significant issue. The Government believes its efforts to tackle the ongoing challenge of bovine TB is having a positive effect. The herd incidence has started to reduce in recent months. In June the Government agreed to introduce additional measures to the bovine TB programme following extensive stakeholder agreement. The bovine TB action plan was launched in September underpinned by scientific research and veterinary expertise. The aim of the action plan is to reset the programme in the context of putting in place measures necessary to tackle the current disease situation. Those measures are targeting both transmission between wildlife and cattle, which does happen, and transmission between cattle. There is a heavy emphasis on vaccination in the action plan. The budget has also been substantially increased to €157 million this year, 2026, to focus on driving down it through the implementation of the measures laid out in the action plan itself. I will talk to the Minister in the context of what Deputy Cahill asked for in terms of whether something can be done about the compensation levels that farmers are getting at the moment and the degree to which a substantial number are out of pocket. Nothing is more devastating than to be told a herd has TB.

I think I dealt with Deputy Smith's issue. Without question, we have a top-class food industry and we have got to protect it. The issue more generally is that the global supply chain is key here. We are not an island on our own. It is complex. If we want to supply markets in Europe, and people are buying our food in Europe, or Middle Eastern or Asian companies or whatever, they too will set terms that will govern the basis on which we sell them food and very often contingency of supply is one of those conditions, so this is not simple and we need to be careful of the message we are sending. So far, we have penetrated markets all over the world - in Asia, America and Europe - because of the quality of our food, including our dairy produce, beef, poultry and fish. We want to maintain that level of high-quality exports.

In response to Deputy O'Meara, I will talk to the Minister about accessibility to new technology. He said the log in method in that authentication process is too difficult and it is causing enormous problems. I will talk to the Minister in respect of this and revert to the Deputy. We will see what we can do on the funding. The funding may be stretched to cover a pothole that would cover Deputy Cleere but we will certainly do our level best to stretch it.

Deputy Byrne raised a key point. We want generational succession to be part of the Common Agricultural Policy. Our concern at the moment is that, as drafted, the seven-year budget is about 20% below what the previous seven-year allocation was.

4 o'clock

That is the issue at the moment and we should be focusing on that collectively with the farming community and Government because people will be quite annoyed if we do not try to improve that somewhat. I am concerned about it from my discussions, last week in particular. We have a lot of work to do on it and we also have to work with other member states to try and

get a higher budget for CAP. That would include within it proposals on farm succession, which is a big issue. It is about certainty and clarity, which is why the derogation was important. Young farmers want certainty. It also the adoption of new technology. I suspect it is a lifestyle issue in that people want a life as well. Farming is a 24-7 occupation with a lot of responsibilities. There is a lot of bureaucracy, obligations and pressure. Therefore, we need to create that roadmap for young people showing that there is a future and viability above all else for young farmers. That will be key.

Deputy Tóibín suggested I would be in line for the Booker Prize. I wish I could ever be as good a writer as to get the Booker Prize.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You are very good at fiction.

The Taoiseach: The facts are that exports of food products have increased exponentially. They have done very well in high-quality markets across the world. Incomes have increased over the last two years. One of issues with farming is that it is cyclical. There have been proposals on taxation. Deputies Tóibín and Paul Lawless are the doomsday couple.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: The language switched dramatically from incredible to terrible, to the world is going to collapse at any moment.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Just listen to farmers.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Listen to your backbenchers.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, it is not a back-and-forth.

The Taoiseach: The point I would make is that it is difficult; it is a challenging world. I think Deputy Lawless said farmers feel ignored. Let us consider ACRES, comprising €1.5 billion, with 60% of that from the Irish Exchequer and 40% from the European Union. Admittedly, some of it is funded by the carbon tax but it provides incomes to 50,000 farmers.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: However, they want to make a living from farming; they do not want social welfare.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy asked the question; he should now wait for the answer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy never mentioned the derogation. We are the only country in European Union that has a derogation from the nitrates directive. We voted against the Mercosur deal but we negotiated for safeguards, just as we will negotiate for an increase in CAP.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There is not an increase in CAP. CAP is reducing.

The Taoiseach: Calm down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: The next CAP has a 20% reduction.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to stop talking.

The Taoiseach: Did the Deputy not hear me saying that? We have to negotiate it up. The only way we can do it is by negotiation, just as we negotiated on Mercosur to get safeguards in place. Our MEPs got safeguards in place, better than they were a year ago, because the likelihood was that if one of the bigger states went for Mercosur, the blocking minority would go.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach's objective-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, stop.

The Taoiseach: The safeguards were very important to get done.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach's objective is to improve the Mercosur-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy asked his question and this is the answer.

The Taoiseach: No one is smug at all about anything. To be frank with the Deputies, the Members of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael know an awful lot more about agriculture than the two of them together.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Taoiseach is not listening to them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Ó Murchú-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: They said it here a few weeks ago.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Lawless-----

The Taoiseach: I want to reply to Deputy Ó Murchú-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If possible.

The Taoiseach: -----who is one of the more consistent Members in the House. He is here consistently every Tuesday, to give him his due. He said that he met the two Commissioners and so did I. One of the issues I had was the issue with the CAP and the need to impress on those Commissioners that the CAP is not where we want it to be in terms of income levels for Irish farmers. My sense of that conversation is that we have some distance to go to get the Common Agricultural Policy limits up. The Commissioners were reticent on other issues, including the issue the Deputy referenced.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The provisional application.

The Taoiseach: They did not say that to me. That is probably a matter higher up the scale.

Deputy Heneghan somehow got the adaptation measures in Clontarf into the agriculture debate.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Flood defences.

The Taoiseach: Flood defences are a serious issue in its own right. I do not know why the Deputy is not allowed to take photos. Of course, he should be allowed to take photos. I presume he took them anyway. I would say he did, given form. I do not know; I will check it. There should be full transparency. Is the Deputy saying the flood scheme is not being allowed? I do not know, but there should be full transparency in these matters. There are significant issues there with flood relief, and there have been for quite some time.

I agree with Deputy Whitmore. I read that report in the media about the tangled nets in our waters. That is not good enough and cannot happen. It will do irreparable damage from a biodiversity point of view. I will talk to the Ministers. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, is concerned about it. I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Badgers.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not there yet, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I am coming to him. The bulk of the plan is on vaccination. The scientific advice is different. The advice is-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: The bulk of it is not vaccination.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has asked his question. Will he please-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Most of it is not vaccination.

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

Deputy Paul Murphy: There were more killed than vaccinated last year.

The Taoiseach: There will be a hell of a lot of vaccination this year. The budget has gone up significantly to €157 million. There will be vaccination and there will also be the wildlife measures because there is transmission. It is not as simple as the Deputy has articulated.

In response to Deputy McGuinness, farmers are not ignored. I just spoke about ACRES, the derogation and the various funding mechanisms we have taken in to support different farmers at different levels. We have been supportive of farmers, from sheep to tillage to sucklers, right across the board. We are not ignoring anything. I mentioned the nitrates directive and so on. The bigger issue for us is we want to continue to export. Sinn Féin opposed the Canada trade deal. We are exporting food to Canada. I do not get the logic of opposing a trade deal that helps Irish farmers.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Mercosur, Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry-----

The Taoiseach: I am talking about CETA at the moment.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I was talking about-----

The Taoiseach: We opposed Mercosur.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, wait for the answer.

The Taoiseach: While I cannot verify it, one of the Commissioners told me last week that a few food producers went out on an EU mission to Mercosur countries, showing that some people will see if they can get opportunities there. On CETA, we did well and the embassy in Ottawa in Canada did a fantastic study on the economic benefits of CETA for Ireland and for the Canada-Ireland trade relationship.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: A couple of thousand-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, it is not a back-and-forth. He should listen to the answer, please.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is Brazilian beef. I referenced it several times in my question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, I am just going to say it once to be clear.

The Taoiseach: No, but the Deputy says we are ignoring-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Taoiseach does not give the Deputy the answer he wants, that is not my problem.

The Taoiseach: Why is he talking about Brazil?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is because I mentioned it in my question.

The Taoiseach: I already told him that we voted against Mercosur.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the way this forum, Taoiseach's Questions, is meant-----

The Taoiseach: We got safeguards in. We are not ignoring farmers. About a month ago, I went to the AGM of the IFA, just before this latest round. There is no sense of ignoring. In fact, it was quite an agreeable, good conversation. I listened, as did the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and the Ministers of State, Deputies Dooley and Healy-Rae. There was no reference to the Bord Bia issue, which may not have surfaced at the time. There was no sense of people being ignored, whatever else the Deputy may say. That kind of language is rubbish. It is just exaggeration.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is now in the realms of waffle. Seventeen minutes-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy McDonald; you did not have a question.

The Taoiseach: It is just throwing out words that mean nothing. There was never any sense that farmers were being ignored by this Government, nor could there have been.

Cabinet Committees

17. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [67844/25]

18. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [69864/25]

19. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [69876/25]

20. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [69877/25]

21. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [74523/25]

22. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [3640/26]

23. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [4033/26]

24. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will meet next. [5807/26]

25. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [5974/26]

26. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [6068/26]

27. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on children and education will next meet. [7579/26]

28. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on children and education will next meet. [7699/26]

29. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [8093/26]

30. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Cabinet committee on children and education. [8095/26]

31. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the Cabinet committee on children and education. [8098/26]

32. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [8270/26]

33. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [9560/26]

34. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [9922/26]

35. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [9944/26]

36. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [9959/26]

37. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [9962/26]

38. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [10027/26]

39. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [10029/26]

40. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [10089/26]

41. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on children and education will next meet. [10095/26]

An Ceann Comhairle: As there are over 14 Deputies, we will take a minute at a time and see where we end up.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 to 41, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on children and education oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments in the area of children and education. It receives detailed reports on identified policy areas such as child poverty and well-being, and education. The membership of the Cabinet committee on children and education comprises the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Health and others. I will not go through the full list; there are quite a number of Ministers on it.

The programme for Government contains many important commitments intended to improve the lives of all children and especially those children who need our help most. These commitments include setting an ambitious child poverty target; progressively increasing the child-support payment; expanding eligibility for the fuel allowance to families in receipt of the working family payment; and exploring a targeted child benefit payment. The Cabinet committee meets quarterly and met for the third time in December. It will next meet in the first part of 2026.

The Government's vision for education is to deliver a world-class education system which breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve their full potential. That is why we remain committed to building on the work of the DEIS programme, which, since 2006, has been operating to tackle educational disadvantage.

Budget 2026 moved towards permanent targeted payments to support the most vulnerable. A €320 million social welfare package for children includes the largest increase ever in the child support payment, increased income thresholds for the working family payment and the extension of fuel allowance to those on the working family payment.

Increases in prices and wages have widened the gap between people reliant on social welfare and the average income in society. In recent years, as a result, the Government has invested to

protect low-income families with children. Since 2020, the weekly child support payment has increased by 95% for children aged 12 and over and by 61% for children under 12. This exceeds the growth in average wages of 28% and exceeds the rate of increase of many other permanent social welfare payments.

Other new or enhanced allocations in budget 2026 to address child poverty through the provision of services include an additional €5.14 million for Equal Start, which is a 30% increase on last year; an additional €16.5 million - a €48 million full-year cost - to the Department of education to implement a new DEIS strategy and the new DEIS plus scheme; a 22% increase of €7.3 million for youth justice supports; €3.2 million of funding to expand and strengthen the national network of family resource centres, with the addition of ten new centres bringing the national total to 136; and an expansion of the income thresholds for the national childcare scheme.

Given the growing demand for many children's services, "Breaking the Cycle: New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being", our third report on child poverty spending in the annual budget, highlights new and additional spending in that area. Analysis from the ESRI shows that the permanent measures taken in budget 2026 are progressive and prioritise protecting the incomes of the poorest families.

On disabilities and children, we have established a dedicated Cabinet committee on disability. The work of this committee is progressing important initiatives to respond to the needs and well-being of children. There was a record allocation of €3 billion for special education provision in 2026, including funding for 1,700 additional SNAs and 860 additional teachers for special education. We are also establishing the new education therapy service as an additional support for children with special educational needs. It is intended to commence in special schools, with roll-out over time to special classes and mainstream schools. Recruitment is advancing and it is anticipated that the service will commence in 45 special schools at a later stage in the 2025-26 school year. Significant investments in disability services are also being delivered, particularly in the children's disability network teams, CDNTs. I will leave it at that because I am conscious that a number of Deputies want to get back in.

An Ceann Comhairle: Actually, we only have eight minutes left. We will begin with Deputy O'Meara. I suggest 30 seconds but it is rather pointless.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Is mór an trua é nach bhfuil níos mó daoine líofa as Gaeilge sa tír seo, go háirithe i dTiobraid Árann. It is well recognised that immersion in the language is the best way to attain fluency. That is why last summer I asked the Minister for education to look at introducing a mandatory Gaeltacht course for all students studying Gaeilge at leaving certificate level. Another important version of immersion in a language is Irish-medium education but that is not possible at second level in Tipperary because we do not have a Gaelcholáiste. In 2024 and 2025 statistics showed that 23% of parents would send their children to a Gaelcholáiste if one was available locally. At primary level in Tipperary, 4.6% of students are in a Gaelscoil. This rises to 5.2% in south Tipperary but the national average is 6.8%, so Tipperary is well below that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: At second level, it is 0% in all of Tipperary as we do not have a Gaelcholáiste.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy John Connolly.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: We are dead last in the national rankings. I ask that we would look at introducing a Gaelcholáiste in Tipperary.

Deputy John Connolly: I very much welcome the formal announcing of the national therapy service in education involving the placement of occupational therapists and speech therapists in special schools. I particularly welcome its introduction in two schools in Galway, Ábalta Special School and St. Joseph's Special School in Newcastle. I also welcome the announcement of 301 new classes for children with additional needs in the mainstream setting. However, the lists that we get do not define the category of class and I am concerned that we are not opening up enough classes for children with developmental language disorder, DLD. These are classes that children attend for two years and then they return to their own mainstream class or school. We need more of these classes. Early intervention is important in this area.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I recognise that progress has been made in the last 12 months in relation to the cost of childcare, with the expansion of the national childcare scheme subsidies, improvements to core funding and a lowering of the maximum cap on fees. This has brought weekly costs for childcare to around €200 for families who are paying the highest rates. Many of my constituents in Meath West have told me that there has been good progress in the downward trajectory of their childcare bills. About 15% more families availed of subsidies in Meath last year, so the changes are working but we still have a significant way to go to turn €200 per week into €200 per month.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Will the committee specifically address the high number of child protection and welfare cases awaiting the allocation of a social worker in the Louth and Meath areas? Tusla's multi-service performance data continuously outlines that these are some of the worst areas of the country in terms of children not being allocated a social worker. I ask the Government to take action to reduce the numbers of unallocated cases, improve timely intervention and support the most vulnerable children in County Louth.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I want to speak about Gaelscoil Mhíchíl Cíosóg in Ennis, County Clare. It is a fabulous school with 451 pupils.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry, which Gaelscoil?

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Gaelscoil Mhíchíl Cíosóg. Michael Cusack primary school. It is a scoil lánGhaelach. There were 452 pupils enrolled last September and 480 are projected for next year. This school was designed for eight teachers. It has prefabs. It is a fabulous school with lovely education going on. I was there yesterday and got a tour of the school. Curtains have to be pulled so that one class can be taught alongside learning support. School meals are

being prepared in an area where an autism class being taught. It is quite chaotic. The school has planning permission for a new build project and has gone through all of the statutory phases. It kills the school to think that it will not get that new build of seven new mainstream classrooms, autism classes, SET support rooms-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you Deputy.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: ----for the next few years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I ask that this be put back on the agenda because the current *status quo* cannot continue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú will be the last participant before the Taoiseach responds.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have had the really tragic cases of Kyran Durnin-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is really unfair, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is not fair.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----Oisín Reddin, Daniel Aruebose, Vadym Davydenko-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Do you understand the format, Deputy Coppinger?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You can extend.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We also have the issues raised by the child law project and the terrible case of a serious assault of a ten-year-old girl in Citywest. While we have heard from Tusla that it is reorientating and we know that there are legislative changes on the way, a big issue remains. Mr. Gerry Hone, the national director of services and integration for Tusla, appeared before an Oireachtas committee recently and said that we are missing or we need 300 more social workers and 100 more social care workers.

An Ceann Comhairle: The point is made, thank you. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: He told me afterwards that at least 500 foster carers are needed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Ceann Comhairle, can I raise a point of order?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is not fair.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We do not have sufficient capacity.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Can I raise a point of order?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On a point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Just before you raise a point of order, I do not have the remit in this case to extend Taoiseach's Questions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We get all of the Government backbenchers but not the Opposition at large, a Cheann Comhairle-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle-----

An Ceann Comhairle: How are-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can I raise my point of order?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: ----which is the strategy. That is the strategy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Point of order-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: You speak about 30 times a week; would you go away out of that.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Take it to Dáil reform, please.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I have a point of order, Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Sorry, but you said you would take my point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, there is no point of order.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can all of you stop shouting over me? I was making a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no point of order, Deputy. The Taoiseach is going to respond.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is completely unfair.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to talk about Tullow, Callan and Borris. I want to talk about all of those schools.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond. Deputy, please resume your seat.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can you take my point of order?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, there is no point of order. The clock is the clock. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: You said you would take a point of order.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is completely unfair.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please resume your seat. I understand. I said to take it to Dáil reform.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You could extend it.

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It has been extended before.

The Taoiseach: Once.

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, it is incorrect-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach went way over in his answers.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Respect the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Only the backbenchers have been heard and no Opposition.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I am not going to get to you one way or the other, unless you want me to extend by 20 minutes.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: You have five times more speaking time than we do.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You cut Taoiseach's Questions and now it is being cut for the second slot.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are only running down the clock on everybody, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Show respect for the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Ceann Comhairle should allow me make a point of order and then I will sit down.

The Taoiseach: Ba mhaith liom-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are being disruptive. Please resume your seat. Please.

The Taoiseach: Ba mhaith liom-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why will you not let me make a point of order? It is not right to just ignore what we are saying.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not a point of order. Please resume your seat.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is a point of order. You could have just let me make it and then answered it.

The Taoiseach: Ba mhaith liom a rá leis an Teachta O'Meara go bhfuil ionadh orm-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach can talk for 15 minutes over his time-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy, do not be so disruptive.

The Taoiseach: ----- nach bhfuil Gaelcholáiste dara leibhéal i dTiobraid Árann. B'fhéidir go mbeidh seans againn teagmháil a dhéanamh leis an ETB chun clár de shaghas éigin a chur i bhfeidhm ionas go mbeidh, diaidh ar ndiaidh, Gaelcholáiste againn. De ghnáth, tá Gaelcholáiste i mbeagnach gach aon chontae anois. There are Gaelcholáistí in most areas now. There is at least one in many counties across the country, so I am surprised. Perhaps the ETB might be in a position to work with the Department or with local interests and schools, particularly the Gaelscoileanna, to see if consensus can be arrived at in respect of a Gaelcholáiste that would be centrally located and could be availed of by those who want to pursue second level through the medium of Irish.

Beidh mise sásta tacú a thabairt le tioscnamh den chineál sin.

On Deputy John Connolly's issue, the national therapy service is commencing. We want to roll it out to the remainder of the special schools. That is important. It is a significant

development. We made this a red-line issue in the most recent general election. I agree 100% on the developmental language disorders. I brought in the first of those classes back in the late 1990s. They are game-changers in how they can facilitate children to deal with language challenges at an early age in order that they can transition back into mainstream education. It is one of the better outcomes I have seen with children down through the years. I will talk to the Minister of State with responsibility for special education in relation to that.

Deputy Dempsey referred to cost of childcare. We can do more and we have to do more to meet the commitment in the programme for Government. In the forthcoming budget, we will examine that issue to see what more we can do. We hope to have earlier discussions with Deputies on the next budget. We are conscious that the European Presidency is coming our way, so we need to talk about these things a bit earlier than usual.

I will pursue the issue Deputy McGreehan raised in respect of unallocated social workers for children in the Louth-Meath area with Tusla. The Deputy stated that the situation there is out of kilter with the rest of the country in the context of the numbers that remain unallocated. That is a concern. At some stage, we need to look at how people are deployed as well. Numbers generally seem to be increasing and caseloads are increasing. That is across a range of professional service engagement.

Maidir leis an Teachta Crowe agus Gaelscoil Mhíchíl Ciosóg, beidh me ag caint leis an Aire faoi thionscadail tógála sa Roinn. I will talk to the Minister about school buildings. We have a lot of challenges.

Deputy Ó Murchú also referred to social workers. We have had a lot of cases. I fully take on board what the Deputy is saying. We need to look at allocating more social workers and at the best way to deploy them.

International Protection Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this legislation. I support the overall objectives and the thrust of the Bill, namely providing a fair, sustainable and more efficient system that is consistent with how these laws are operating and will operate across the European Union. I support efforts to provide clearer and shorter timelines in respect of asylum decisions. The Bill will put in place a new framework to manage migration and asylum for the long term and ensure that Ireland's policy aligns with other EU countries.

While reform in this area is much needed and overdue and while a more efficient decision-making system is a positive goal, there are some aspects of the legislation which require further scrutiny. In particular, I am concerned about the clause that prevents adults who are beneficiaries of protection from seeking family reunification for a period of three years following the granting of such protection. While I recognise that the current system is under significant strain and requires reform, it is essential that we find a balance between improving efficiency and upholding the rights of applicants and, in line with our own history, that we take a humane approach to this issue. It is an incredibly sensitive issue for many people. Many aspects of this Bill are positive, but we have to look at that three-year limit. There must be a

balance between bringing our own laws into line with those of our EU counterparts and recognising that some of the most vulnerable people who would be beneficiaries of protection deserve our support. I see one year as a fair limit for spousal reunification, recognising that having a family member here gives a person the ability to integrate and find work and provides a vital social connection when they are here.

Last year, 153 spouses were granted permission to come to Ireland under family reunification arrangements for holders of international protection. To place this in context, more than 123,000 people entered Ireland in the same period, so that is just 0.12% of that total. However, their presence plays a crucial part in helping those who get protection restore a sense of normality and security in their lives when they are here.

The Minister stated that he has an open mind in the context of amending the family reunification provisions on Committee Stage. I will be writing to him in that regard. I look forward to further engaging with him as the Bill progresses.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. The International Protection Bill 2026 is the legislative vehicle for Ireland's wholesale opt-in to the EU migration and asylum pact, and that is its fundamental flaw. Sinn Féin has been clear that the major part of this pact is not in Ireland's interests. It undermines Irish sovereignty, hands critical powers relating to migration and asylum to the European Union and directly impedes our ability to make decisions based on our own unique circumstances. We are an island nation. We are not in the Schengen Area, but we are part of a common travel area, CTA, with a state outside the EU. Our challenges, from managing the CTA to our housing crisis and stretched public services, are specific to us. Yet, this Government has signed up to a one-size-fits-all EU system, ignoring the unanimous cross-party recommendation of the Oireachtas committee on justice to reconsider opting out of the major part of the pact. This is a profound failure of political judgment.

Let us be clear about what this Bill does. It ties us into rigid EU timelines and procedures that our system, by the Government's own admission, is not ready to meet yet. We have a protection system already in crisis, with massive backlogs, appeals, delays and unenforced deportation orders. The Government's staffing projections reveal a gaping hole between what is needed and what is in place. Failure to meet these new EU deadlines will not just mean continued dysfunction, it will expose the Irish State to daily infringement fines from Europe. We are signing a blank cheque with taxpayers' money.

This Bill risks outsourcing elements of our independent foreign policy. It should be for the Irish Government to decide, based on our principles of neutrality and human rights, from which conflicts we offer sanctuary. We cannot allow those decisions to be indirectly shaped by the foreign policy priorities of larger EU states. The Bill and this Government are blind to the fact that the civil legal aid system and Tusla are a breaking point. This Bill will place unbearable new demands on them. We have seen the tragic vulnerability of unaccompanied minors disappearing from safe care. To proceed without fixing these foundations in the first instance is irresponsible and dangerous.

Let us address what this Bill distracts from, namely the real Government-made crises in our system. These include the profiteering from State accommodation contracts where a small number of private operators make millions while communities are left without support, the

scandalous planning of exemptions that ignore local capacity and the lack of a coherent, funded integration strategy that builds social cohesion from the ground up. That is where the focus of attention should be, but of course it is not.

Sinn Féin supported two aspects of the EU pact, the asylum and immigration management regulation and Eurodac. We did so because they are practical and help to determine the responsible member state for an application and provide a vital fingerprint database to combat trafficking and manage returns, for want of a more humane term. Our engagement should have ended with picking measures that serve Ireland's needs. Instead, the Government has voluntarily surrendered our flexibility and ignored the safeguard of Protocol 21, which is precisely designed to protect our sovereignty in areas like this. It has tied the hands of future Irish Governments in dealing bilaterally with Britain on CTA matters.

We need an international protection system that is fair, efficient and enforced. It should be one that commands public confidence. This Bill does not deliver that. It legislates for a rushed adoption of an EU framework that does not fit Ireland, overseen by a Government that has not prepared for the consequences. We do not fix a broken system by layering on more unattainable obligations from Brussels.

We fix it by addressing the profiteering, enforcing the rules, investing in integration and making sovereign decisions in the best interests of the Irish people. I urge Deputies to reject this Bill.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ní réiteach atá sa Bhille seo, ach géilleadh ar ár bhflaitheas. Trí glacadh go hiomlán le comhaontú imirce agus tearmainn an Aontais Eorpaigh, tá neamhaird déanta ag an Rialtas ar fhírinne an tsaoil sa Stát seo, is í sin ná nach bhfuil muid mar chuid den limistéar Schengen; tá Teorann againn leis an dTuaisceart; agus tá comhlimistéar taistil againn leis an mBreatain.

Tá Sinn Féin soiléir gur chóir go ndéanfaí na cinntí faoin inimirce i mBaile Átha Cliath, seachas sa Bhruiséal. Ní féidir linn tacú le creatlach a chuirfidh srianta ar rialtais eile amach anseo agus a dhéanann neamhaird ar bhuairt a léirigh an coiste um dhlí agus ceart san Oireachtais d'aon ghuth. Tá spriocdhátaí daingne socraithe ag an Aontas Eorpach agus, gan a dhóthain foirne nó tacaíochtaí dlí againn lena gcur i bhfeidhm, táimid ag tarraingt fineálacha gan stad orainn féin as na sáruithe a bheidh le teacht.

Tacaíonn muid le comhoibriú praiticiúil, ar nós Eurodac don ghrinnfhiosrú, ach diúltaíonn muid roimh smacht a chaitheamh amú. Teastaíonn córas ó Éirinn atá cothrom agus éifeachtach, córas atá múnlaíthe ag muintir na hÉireann go háirithe.

This Bill is not about fixing a broken system. It is not about fixing what is broken in Ireland's international protection system. It is about locking the State into a framework that will shape migration and asylum policy for years to come with serious interventions and implications for sovereignty, capacity, fairness and public confidence. At its core, this legislation gives effect to the Government's decision to opt into the EU migration and asylum pact. Sinn Féin has been clear and consistent. The vast majority of that pact is not in Ireland's interests. Our position is straightforward. Decisions on migration and international protection should be made in Ireland by an Irish Government accountable to the Irish people and shaped by our own circumstances and responsibilities. What is most disappointing - and frankly most

telling - is that this Government ignored a unanimous, cross-party recommendation of the Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. After detailed pre-legislative scrutiny, that committee explicitly recommended that the Government reconsider opting into the majority of the EU migration and asylum pact. It was unanimous, cross-party and clear but the Government brushed it aside. Why bother with scrutiny if Ministers have already decided the outcome? It is also disgraceful that the Minister is not allowing the proper scrutiny of this Bill where the justice committee was also very clear that it wanted to do scrutiny of this Bill on Committee Stage in the committee. The Government is now scheduling this Bill before the Dáil next week. Second Stage of this Bill is to conclude on Thursday afternoon but the amendments for Committee Stage have to put in by Thursday morning. It shows the Government for what it is.

Ireland has a legal right under Protocol 21 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to opt-in or opt-out of measures in the area of freedom, security and justice on a case-by-case basis. That flexibility was central to securing public consent for the Treaty of Lisbon. People voted on the understanding that Ireland would retain control over sensitive areas like migration, asylum and justice. This Government chose not to use that flexibility. Instead, it signed Ireland up wholesale to a pact that transfers decision-making power away from this State and into EU-level mechanisms even where those mechanisms are ill-suited to Ireland's position. That is a political choice; it is the wrong choice.

Ireland is not a typical EU member state. We are not part of Schengen. We share a common travel area with a state outside the European Union. We have a land border with a non-EU jurisdiction. Yet officials acknowledged at the committee that there was no meaningful consideration of the common travel area when opting into this pact, despite repeated Government claims that most applicants arrive via that route. That is extraordinary. By tying Ireland fully into the EU system, the Government reduces the flexibility of future Irish Governments to respond pragmatically, including bilaterally with Britain, to changing migration patterns. It ties the hands of the Irish State and it does so unnecessarily.

Even setting sovereignty concerns aside, which we do not, there is a more immediate problem. The State is not ready for this. The justice committee heard directly that failure to meet pact obligations could expose Ireland to infringement proceedings and significant daily fines. Yet officials could not say how much the State may be liable for. For 15,000 applications, staffing projections rise to over 1,500 people. For 18,000 applications, it is nearly 1,800 people. In mid-2025, there were fewer than 1,000 staff across the relevant bodies with vacancy rates already above 10%. We already have excessive delays. Decisions are already taking far too long and appeals even longer still. Now the Government proposes rigid EU-mandated deadlines without the staffing, infrastructure, or legal supports required to ensure fairness. That is how a system collapses. That is how states end up with fines for failures that were entirely predictable.

We do not need the EU pact to fix the issues in the Irish international protection system. There are glaring problems that the Minister has failed to address. He has been in the job now for over a year and despite the headlines, he has very little to show for it. Decisions are taking too long. The median processing time was 15 months in quarter 3 of last year. Appeals are taking longer still. The latest figure we have showed that processing times are over 16 months. That is the longest they have been in four years. We are going backwards not forwards. This

means that it is now taking two and half years from beginning to end to process an application. Let me spell it out because it is an important point. We did not need to sign up to the EU pact to sort out the delays in processing applications. We do not need and did not need the pact to fix the delays in the appeals system. We definitely do not need the pact to stop the wild profiteering. Those failures fall at the Minister's feet and the feet of this Government.

The committee also raised serious concerns about the impact of this legislation on Tusla and the civil legal aid system. Both are already stretched and at breaking point. Tusla is responsible for some of the most vulnerable children in the State, including unaccompanied minors. Children have gone missing from care. There are known risks of trafficking and exploitation. Yet this Bill piles new obligations onto Tusla without addressing those failures. The same applies to legal aid. Accelerated procedures mean nothing if people cannot access timely, effective legal advice. Speed without fairness is not efficiency. It is injustice.

Let me be clear. Sinn Féin did not oppose everything in the EU pact. We supported the asylum and migration management regulation because it allows Ireland to return applicants to the member state where they should be properly processed. We supported Eurodac because we believe that access to fingerprint data assists with vetting, child protection, tackling trafficking and enforcing decisions. Those measures serve Ireland's interests. What we opposed - and continue to oppose - are measures that undermine Irish sovereignty, impose rigid procedures and fail to account for Ireland's realities. Protocol 21 exists precisely so Ireland can make those distinctions. This Government chose not to.

One of the clearest symptoms of failure in the current system is the way IPAS accommodation has been imposed on communities without planning, assessment or engagement. New centres should only be located in areas properly resourced to accommodate them, not in communities that are already struggling. Site selection needs to be based on a pre-assessment of community capacity, including access to GPs, school places, transport and existing levels of disadvantage. At the same time, we cannot ignore the scale of profiteering that has been allowed to exist under this Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government. It is eye watering. An estimated €1.2 billion of taxpayers' money was spent on IPAS accommodation in 2025 alone. Bed-per-night rates are skyrocketing. They are up 68% in two years. A small number of private operators under this Government are making millions while communities are left in the dark and services are being overwhelmed. The Comptroller and Auditor General has been scathing in relation to this. The profiteering in this sector needs to come to an end and come to an end very quickly.

Ireland needs a migration and international protection system. We need one that is fair, efficient, humane and, crucially, enforced. However, this Bill does not deliver that. Instead, it locks Ireland into a pact that undermines sovereignty, ignores our unique circumstances, overestimates State capacity and risks repeating the very failures that brought the system into crisis.

Sinn Féin believes Ireland can do better by making decisions in this House, planning properly, supporting integration and enforcing rules fairly. For those reasons, we cannot support the Bill.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Every state requires a functioning internal protection system. Being fit for purpose requires such systems to fit a number of criteria. It is regrettable that the Minister is not only failing on every front in this regard but his approach in this Bill is, in effect, an

abdication of his responsibility. Nothing is more indicative of this than his response to my party colleague Deputy Carthy in the earlier part of this debate two weeks ago. When speaking on the asylum and migration pact, the Minister said: "[I]t would not be legally possible to seek to opt out even if this was the democratic wish of the Houses of the Oireachtas."

There are parts of the pact it makes sense for Ireland to opt in to, such as Eurodac and screening, for example, which are perfectly sensible. However, the vast majority of the pact will not solve the issues we face. If a legal requirement solved Government failures, we would not have the scandalous backlog it is overseeing in terms of assessment of needs. If a legal requirement would address the incompetence of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, I would propose there be such a requirement regarding the number of members of An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. The fact is the Government wantonly breaks the law and engages in what I call "lawfare" against families, including, in one scandalous instance, compiling dossiers on those simply seeking to vindicate the rights of their children.

Aside from the measures Sinn Féin has outlined we would support, the pact offers nothing the Government could not simply choose to do while retaining flexibility. Instead, it is choosing to tie the hands of future governments and expose Ireland to fines when it inevitably fails to meet the pact requirements. The Minister will say, as he said to Deputy Carthy, that there is nothing he can do. In fact, he has chosen to have no choice. All the while, his party leader, the Taoiseach, has a new-found passion for sovereignty while discussing gutting the neutrality protection provided by the triple lock. There is no talk of sovereignty from Fianna Fáil while ceding sovereignty to Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, investor courts. There is no talk of sovereignty from the benches opposite when the Government uses the European Union as an excuse as to why it refuses to economically sanction Israel for genocide. Yet, we hear talk of sovereignty from the Government today when it is choosing, needlessly and basely, to abdicate that sovereignty to Europe in respect of international protection. The only explanation I can see is that the Minister thinks it will hereafter be a politically convenient excuse to blame Europe for the farce of his own making.

The adoption of the pact by way of this Bill will not in itself address issues in terms of capacity or quality of accommodation, the standard of which has failed for decades to meet the threshold of human dignity. It will not address the delays in decision-making or the lack of enforcement should a person be deemed not to be entitled to international protection. It will not address concerns as to the impact the measures will have on the civil legal aid scheme or on Tusla, which is already stretched to breaking point. It will do none of that. These are all measures the Government could have taken but did not. They are things it could do now without legislating for the pact but it is not doing so.

This Bill is not the solution to the problems faced by our international protection system. It is the Minister throwing in the towel and saying he is not up to the job. It will, however, do one job. It will give Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael a handy scapegoat for ongoing failures. It will do so at the expense of the Irish taxpayer and Irish sovereignty, and that is utterly shameful.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I speak on this Bill on behalf of my colleague Deputy Kelly. There are a number of points that really need to be emphasised in this debate. One is that the Government is not doing enough to present the case for inward migration. It is a fact that this country is dependent on migration and many sectors of our economy are held together by

migrant workers, including the care, hospitality and tourism sectors. I am not just talking about people on work visas or student visa; I refer also to asylum seekers. Contrary to what some people in certain quarters would have us believe, asylum seekers come to this country to seek sanctuary but also to work and contribute. The State makes it quite difficult for them to do so but they make a valid contribution and that contribution needs to be acknowledged more than it is. People who come here seeking asylum want a better life. They are fleeing war, famine and persecution. They come here for safety but they also want to be able to give their family a better life and to contribute to the communities in which we all live.

I have no issue in principle with reforming our immigration framework. In fact, the Labour Party was the first party to put forward, in 2023, a comprehensive policy paper on immigration reform. Leaving aside the issues we have with what the Government is proposing in the Bill, which I will come to presently, I have a huge problem with the performative politics we have seen from the Minister, including tweeting about deportation flights. I have a huge problem with the performative politics from the Tánaiste in making inaccurate statements in relation to housing and immigration. I have a massive problem with the performative politics we have seen from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Independent Members in government. There has been no attempt by the Government to present the positive case for migration and very little attempt to combat the misinformation and, in some cases, the outright lies from people who have sought to cause division within communities in recent years. There are real consequences to their actions. We are seeing migrant care workers having racist abuse roared at them on the street. Last year, in Tallaght, if my memory serves, an Indian who was barely in the country a week was beaten to a pulp and had his clothes ripped off him.

We all want to see a more efficient immigration system in which decisions are made quickly and clearly. The changes the Government is proposing in this Bill are not palatable to the Labour Party from a human rights perspective. I actually would have more confidence in these provisions if they were being proposed in a sincere way to improve the system and if the Government were simultaneously driving home hard the point that immigration is fundamentally a good thing, is a sign of a well-functioning economy and country, that we need immigrants and that they are welcome here. The Government has not done that. Instead, we have a situation where arguments being made that are fundamentally racist are being legitimised. The Government is trying out a performative tough-on-immigration stance and is undermining human rights in the process. We have seen how successive UK governments, whether Tory or now, shamefully, Labour, have gone down this road. It does not work because no matter how far to the right a government goes in this regard, it will never be enough for some people.

My concern is that the Bill goes further than the EU migration pact, with which we had issues in the first instance, because the Government wants to further constrain the rights of migrants. I do not dispute that our immigration system should be rules based. It should be efficient and clear but it also must uphold fundamental human rights. Rather than vindicating those rights, the Bill seems more intent on constraining them. My colleague Deputy Ahern spoke the previous day about the issues with the term "legal counselling".

We have not had any clarity from the Minister in the interim on what that term means. It remains undefined and we do not know who will provide it. On the face of it, it seems it will be little more than a one-way information-providing session given to asylum applicants who

will then be left to go through the application process by themselves with little or no guidance. The migration pact makes effective legal assistance a requirement. The Government could and should have used the term "legal advice" but it has actively and deliberately chosen not to do so. It is very easy to imagine a scenario where the absence of proper legal advice leads to errors in applications and sees genuine asylum seekers fleeing war and persecution fail in their applications or be denied specialist care. Perhaps that is the aim - I do not know - but it represents an absolute failure in the obligations we have towards migrants. I know how important legal advice is for people seeking asylum here, both in trying to navigate the system and in vindicating their rights. I know the Minister also understands, in his professional capacity, how important that is. For that reason, I cannot conclude anything other than that this is an attempt to reduce the number of successful applicants. It is not about ensuring the human rights of migrants are upheld. It is not about creating a faster, more efficient and fairer system. We would welcome a Bill that did that. However, this Bill seems to be more of an effort from us to sidestep our obligations, an attempt at performative politics by a Government that is trying to appear as if it is tough on immigration.

There are a load of other issues I could raise with this Bill. I touched on how it will increase the criminalisation of international protection applicants and the issues in that regard, but I could also raise issues around unaccompanied children, the powers vested in the Minister, safeguarding, the chief inspectorate, the appeals process, detention and vulnerability assessments. There is so much more I could raise.

I know the Minister has indicated that a raft of amendments will be tabled. They have not been tabled yet, however, so it is difficult for us to properly scrutinise these issues. This is very much an incomplete Bill. It is half-baked, notwithstanding that we are only on Second Stage. I hope the Minister's amendments will provide a greater degree of clarity and compassion. Ultimately, I hope the version of the Bill that passes is very different from the one before us.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Sorca Clarke: We move to a Government slot. I call Deputy Dolan.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the International Protection Bill 2026. Fianna Fáil welcomes this debate because we believe it is vital and important. We fundamentally believe in the right to claim asylum. That principle is not optional. It is a cornerstone of international law and a test of our values as a country. Equally, we are committed to a fair but firm system, one that respects the dignity of those who genuinely need protection while also safeguarding the integrity of our borders and the credibility of our immigration and asylum system. If public confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of the system is lost, we risk undermining the very protections that exist for those who need them most.

This Bill matters because it is a reset. It is the most comprehensive reform of international protection law in the history of the State. It will replace the International Protection Act 2015. It is vital. At the crux of this, a system that is too slow is unfair to everyone. It does not serve applicants who are granted protection because they can spend years stuck in limbo, unable to properly integrate, plan and build a stable future. It does not serve the State because long delays place huge pressure on accommodation capacity, health services, educational services and community infrastructure. It does not serve local communities because the longer a system

drags on, the more it fuels frustration, misinformation and fear, and it creates an environment in which bad actors can exploit legitimate public concerns. This is not good for Ireland and it is not good for genuine refugees either. The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been clear that our current system can be more efficient, faster and less costly. That is what this Bill is designed to achieve.

The Bill also ensures Ireland has a sustainable and credible system in line with the EU migration and asylum pact. The pact is designed to upgrade the common European asylum system so that there is a consistent, fair, sustainable and efficient asylum procedure across the EU, not just in ordinary times but also in periods of migratory pressure and crisis. Ireland has opted in to key elements of the pact. That was the right decision because a common system across the EU ensures applicants are treated the same in every member state. That matters. It reduces the incentive for people to move from one EU state to another, reduces secondary movement and ensures responsibility is shared more fairly. Crucially, it ensures Ireland is not isolated in how we manage migration and asylum because this is not a challenge any one country can solve alone.

It is important to highlight what this Bill does. It ensures speed, structure and fairness. This Bill is not about closing the door to asylum; it is about creating a system that works. It introduces major reforms in four key areas. It introduces, first, a streamlined decision-making process; second, a streamlined returns process; third, a new border procedure with strict time limits; and, fourth, new institutional structures, including a new appeals body and an independent inspectorate. This is a rules-based reform. That is the central point. It is about moving from a system that is slow and inconsistent to one that is rules-based, predictable and efficient.

One of the most important reforms in the Bill is the strengthening of screening procedures. Part 2 provides for the taking of biometric data and the screening of applicants, including the designation of screening centres, the screening process, and preliminary health and vulnerability checks. This is not about suspicion; it is about the basics of a functioning system. The State has a right and an obligation to know who is in the country, to verify identity and nationality and to ensure there are checks against relevant databases, where necessary. Screening is envisaged as a one-stop shop, a practical system to carry out checks, register and lodge applications and determine the appropriate procedure. It also includes preliminary health and vulnerability checks. That is vital because a humane system must identify those who need healthcare, those who are vulnerable, those who may be children and those who need special supports. This is not only good administration; it is a human rights issue as well.

The Bill also provides for applicants to receive an international protection applicant card. That is a sensible and necessary reform. It allows applicants to identify themselves to national authorities and to access their rights for the duration of the procedure. It brings order, clarity and structure, and it reduces the confusion that can arise in communities and services when people have no consistent documentation.

Another key reform in this Bill is the restructuring of decision-making at first instance and on appeal. Under the Bill, officers of the Minister will directly make decisions on international protection applications. However, most significantly, a negative decision will be issued as one decision, including a decision that an applicant does not qualify for refugee status, a decision that the applicant is not eligible for subsidiary protection and a return decision under Part 9.

For the first time in Irish legislation, a return decision will be issued together with the decision rejecting an international protection application. This is a major change. It is essential because one of the greatest weaknesses in our current system is that refusal does not automatically translate into an effective and timely return process, and that creates a gap between law and reality. When there is a gap between law and reality the public loses confidence and the system becomes vulnerable to abuse. This Bill closes that gap.

This Bill introduces a new asylum border procedure. This is one of the most discussed and necessary reforms. The asylum border procedure sets a 12-week time limit for first-instance and appeal decisions in appropriate cases. It applies to applicants from countries with an EU recognition rate of 20% or less, applicants who intentionally mislead authorities, applicants who destroy documents to prevent identity verification or applicants deemed a national security risk.

5 o'clock

The aim is clear: to issue decisions to the quickest possible time to those less likely to have an entitlement to international protection. That is not unfair; that is common sense. It is aligned with how many EU member states already operate - ending the endless delays. Similarly, the Bill provides for an accelerated examination procedure, with a three-month time limit. This is essential to end the long backlogs that have built up over time. I want to emphasise that speed is not the enemy of fairness. In fact, in many cases, speed is a requirement of fairness because long delays damage applicants, damage communities and damage the credibility of the State.

The Bill also establishes a new second instance body, the tribunal for asylum and returns appeals, TARA. This body will replace the existing IPAT for new applications from June 2026 onwards. The Bill also provides for fewer oral hearings in appeals, unless an oral hearing is necessary for a full and fair examination. This is another important reform because oral hearings are resource intensive. They are time-consuming and can contribute to delay but the Bill ensures that fair procedures are maintained. Appeals will still be available, and the appeals officer will still have the power to decide that an oral hearing is necessary. Again, the balance is correct - efficiency without undermining due process.

A major strength of this Bill is that it does not simply create faster procedures, it also creates stronger oversight. Part 12 establishes a new, independent monitoring mechanism, through the Office of Chief Inspector of Asylum Border Procedures. This office will monitor compliance with EU and international law, including the EU charter of fundamental rights, during screening and during the border procedure. It will investigate allegations of breaches. That is crucial. If we are going to have faster procedures, we must also have strong, independent safeguards. That is what separates a rules-based, fair system from one that can drift into injustice.

I also welcome the provisions relating to age assessments and the involvement of Tusla. The Bill provides for multidisciplinary age assessments where there is doubt as to whether an applicant is a minor. This is a difficult area but it must be dealt with in a structured and lawful way because the stakes are enormous. Children must be protected, and the system must be protected from misuse. The Bill's approach, developed through engagement between the Department of children and Tusla, is the correct approach. Part 13 provides for the appointment of representatives for unaccompanied minors, with further amendments planned on Committee

Stage to clarify which arm of the State will be responsible. I believe this is essential. Vulnerable children cannot be expected to navigate these procedures alone.

The Bill also strengthens voluntary return. That matters because voluntary return is often the most practical, cost-effective and humane way to implement return decisions. It provides an incentive. If a person opts for voluntary return and complies fully, the return decision and entry ban can be revoked. That is sensible. It helps achieve the objective of returns without creating unnecessary enforcement costs or confrontation. Restoring credibility and integrity has to be at the core of this Bill. We have to speak honestly about returns. A system without returns is not a functioning asylum system. If a person has exhausted his or her claim and does not qualify for protection, the State must be able to implement the decision. Otherwise, the entire system becomes meaningless. The Bill mandates that return decisions be issued alongside negative decisions. It also includes a carve-out to ensure that returns cannot happen where they would be unlawful, including where refoulement risks arise. That is an important safeguard. This is not about breaching international obligations; it is about enforcing them properly.

I also welcome the fact that the Minister intends to bring forward on Committee Stage amendments on key areas, including legal counselling, legal advice and legal aid, reception conditions, including accommodation allocation, restrictions of movement, detention and labour market access, representatives for unaccompanied minors, security appeals, data sharing and consultation with the Data Protection Commissioner. This is how legislation should be done. It is not a closed process; it is a serious reform, improved through scrutiny and debate.

I want to say this clearly. This Bill does not undermine Ireland's commitment to asylum; it strengthens it. The only way we protect the right to asylum is by ensuring the system is fair, efficient, credible and sustainable. A slow system has no compassion for anybody. A chaotic system is not humane. A system without returns is not a system at all. This Bill is a reset. It streamlines decisions, strengthens screening, creates faster timelines, reforms appeals, improves returns and introduces independent oversight. It protects applicants, communities and the integrity of the State. For those reasons, I support the International Protection Bill 2026 and wish the Minister all the best with the amendments.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Over the past number of years, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed to effectively manage the international protection system. We have seen decisions and appeals taking too long, profiteering from IPAS accommodation providers and a wider loss of confidence from the public that the Government can manage the system. Through this International Protection Bill today, we see that the Government's new strategy on migration is to hand powers over to the EU in the hope that it can avoid blame for its own failures. For an international protection system to work, the public must have confidence that the rules of the system are followed and enforced. This includes all stages in how applications are processed, in granting leave to remain where the case for asylum has been proven, and in enforcing deportations where that is the outcome of the process.

Sinn Féin has been clear that migration must be managed in the best interests of the people of Ireland, taking into account our needs in terms of workers for key sectors such as health, capacity of public services and a humanitarian response to those fleeing war and persecution. The Government's decision to sign up to all aspects of the EU asylum and migration pact is not

the way to fix the international protection system, nor is it in Ireland's best interest. This sentiment was also reflected in the report from the justice committee's pre-legislative scrutiny of the International Protection Bill. This report recommended that the Government reconsider opting out of the majority of the EU migration and asylum pact. Officials from the Minister's Department acknowledged that they were unsure how much the State will be liable to pay in infringement proceedings for our inability to meet the requirements of the pact. Even the Minister has indicated that a number of amendments will need to be brought forward by him on Committee Stage on many critical aspects of this Bill.

It is the case that the Government has decided to plough on with a deeply flawed Bill that will need wholesale changes. This approach is reflective of the wider mismanagement of the international protection system. For example, last year we saw the Comptroller and Auditor General's review into IPAS providers set out the staggering profiteering and cost over-runs that are taking place within the IPAS system. The report outlined evidence of private operators overcharging for the provision of accommodation, including companies charging for beds that were not provided and charging VAT in circumstances where accommodation is exempt from VAT. The focus of the Government should be on ending this abuse of taxpayers' money and getting our own house in order rather than binding ourselves to EU regulations in this area that will make us liable to EU infringement proceedings.

There are clear flaws within the International Protection Bill. Many Members across this Chamber have outlined these flaws, yet the Minister continues to push this Bill through. The Government had the option to only enter the aspects of the EU migration pact which made sense for Ireland. However, it has instead decided to sign up to the full pact, against the recommendations of the justice committee. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed for many years to bring order to our international protection system. I fear that this will continue to be the case for the years ahead.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on the Bill before us today. As I start, I acknowledge that we all speak on important issues like this from a place of bias. Personal experience, our values and our world views all incorporate much of what we say on these issues. I spent a great deal of time as a youth worker working in direct provision settings with children and young people. While I speak about this issue, I am speaking about it with those children and young people in mind, people whom I came to know and care so much about.

The first question I will put to the Minister is: why does the principle of the best interest of the child not underpin this Bill? In fact, all the provisions for the best interests of the child in the EU pact have not been transposed into this Bill. Why not? I am happy to give way if the Minister would like to answer that now.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): The Minister will have his opportunity to respond.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Bill has not put any children's rights safeguarding measures in place whatsoever. It does not speak about children first or rights. It speaks of detention in the

same breath as talking about the best interests of the child. The Bill legislates for the detention of children.

Section 24 specifically relates to the detention of children in the screening procedure. Section 24(10) states that if a parent of a child is not co-operating, the parent will be detained and Tusla will be notified. For what purpose will Tusla be notified? This is not clearly established in the Bill and, from a child protection perspective, merits immediate attention and amendment. Section 24(12) allows for the detention of an unaccompanied minor "in exceptional circumstances and as a measure of last resort". What are these exceptional circumstances? Who decides whether the threshold has reached last resort territory? There is no clarity here and, despite the risk of imposing lifelong harm on children by detaining them, the Bill leaves a breadth of scope that is concerning. Where will children be detained? The Bill might tell us where children will not be detained - in locations such as prisons, detention schools or Garda stations - but it does not tell us where they will be detained. Why not? The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has said that detaining a child is never in their best interests. This Bill allows so much scope for this to occur without knowing who the decision maker is, the destination for such detention, the level of care provided and by whom, and for how long. Who else would be subjected to this?

Legal counselling is not defined in this Bill. This is one of the many concerns held by the Children's Rights Alliance. What legal advice and representation will be provided to children and young people seeking international protection? The EU pact sets out the minimum standards for states to have in place but stops short of precluding states from going beyond that, including legal aid. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has said this Bill goes further than what is required in the pact in restricting the rights of applicants but not as far as the pact allows in protecting their rights.

I began by highlighting that our words, values, emotions and bias all influence what we say here today. It is all back to our moral compass and mine reminds me very steadfastly that legislating for the detention of children and young people who have done nothing wrong is just downright wrong. To do so in this Bill with so much ambiguity is reprehensible.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The International Protection Bill in its current form represents a profound shift in how the State treats people seeking refuge and asylum in this country. It does so in a way that weakens safeguards, compresses procedures and expands coercive powers without building the healthcare and protection capacity that even the existing system lacks. Human rights' organisations have warned that the Bill risks prioritising speed over fairness, deterrents over protection and administrative convenience over medical and psychological concerns of real significance. What is presented as reform is in fact a model that accelerates decision-making while stripping out the very protections that could make those decisions safe, lawful and humane. This is not about marginal technical defects. It is about whether Ireland is preparing to legislate for a faster system without first ensuring that people who have fled war, torture, trafficking or other forms of persecution can access basic healthcare, trauma-informed assessment and continuity of treatment. On that test, this Bill falls badly short.

The Bill significantly expands mandatory medical, vulnerability and fitness assessments but does so in a system that already cannot meet existing need. During pre-legislative scrutiny, the joint committee on justice unanimously adopted a series of recommendations on healthcare

provision for international protection applicants. Not one of those recommendations appears in this Bill. They were not debated and rejected; they were simply left out. Safetynet Primary Care, a medical charity providing care to marginalised communities, was the only front-line healthcare provider to give evidence to the committee. In 2024 alone, Safetynet screened more than 1,300 international protection applicants and delivered almost 4,000 GP consultations, so its evidence is grounded in daily clinical reality, not theory.

On healthcare after deportation orders, once a deportation order issues, people immediately lose access to their medical card and their right to work. The period before removal can last months or even years and, during that time, people lose access to essential medication, such as insulin, psychiatric medication, epilepsy medication and HIV treatment. Safetynet gave a concrete example of a man diagnosed with schizophrenia who lost access to medication. His psychological state deteriorated severely and he spent four months in inpatient mental health care at a cost of over €100,000. Four months of medication would have cost around €400. Abrupt discontinuation of psychiatric medication is dangerous and can be profoundly destabilising for the person affected, yet this Bill does nothing to prevent scenarios like this.

Short-notice transfers routinely interrupt chemotherapy, maternity care, disability supports and specialist treatment. People are moved with little or no notice and there is no certainty that care will continue at the destination. Along with many other omissions, ambiguities and cruelties, the Bill contains no protections for healthcare continuity during transfers - none. The Bill shortens key decision-making timelines to three and six months but provides no additional capacity for the specialist medico-legal reports required for survivors of torture under the Istanbul Protocol. At present, people are already waiting many months and, in some cases, more than a year for these assessments. Under the new accelerated system, it will be virtually impossible for survivors to secure a compliant report before their first-instance decision is made. That creates a real risk of people being wrongly refused protection.

On detention, the Bill expands detention powers but includes no enforceable healthcare standards. There is no guarantee of access to mental health professionals, no requirement for trauma-informed care, no assurance of medication continuity and no medical exemption from detention. Ireland still has no national preventive mechanism under the optional protocol to the convention against torture. Detention without healthcare standards is not just bad policy and immoral. There are clear legal pitfalls to this.

On vulnerability assessments, the Bill relies heavily on preliminary checks at screening but does not require ongoing or repeat assessments. We know that vulnerability is not static. Trauma, pregnancy, disability and mental health needs often emerge later. Psychological states can change over time. Expert bodies have warned repeatedly that preliminary checks cannot replace proper continuing assessments but the Bill ignores that reality.

On fitness to interview, trauma survivors can be prone to dissociation, can avoid disclosure because of fear or shame and can present inconsistently due to their psychological state, yet the Bill does not require that fitness-to-interview decisions be made by clinicians with specialist trauma expertise. That means people can be pushed through interviews they are not psychologically able to participate in, thereby undermining the reliability of the entire process.

The Bill creates duties the State is not resourced to meet. It accelerates timelines while hollowing out care. That does not save money; it creates crises, litigation and long-term harm.

This is not about adding luxury services to our international protection system. It is about ensuring basic medical and psychological care in a system that already costs over €1 billion a year and still fails people egregiously. If the Government is serious about reform, it should start by reinstating the healthcare provisions the justice committee unanimously agreed on. Leaving them out is not efficiency. It is negligence.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: In the late 19th century, a young man left his native east Clare and climbed aboard a ship bound for the United States. When he arrived, he was unvetted and of military age but met no restrictions to his entry. He went on to become a butcher at Macy's in New York city and was naturalised as a citizen in Manhattan in 1899 at the age of 34. A copy of that certificate hangs in my office. That man was my great-grandfather. He returned in the early 1900s and bought and built the farm in Limerick where my father was born and grew up. In this context, I cannot stand here in good conscience and tell the Minister that the restrictive turn he and the Government have taken on immigration is to the benefit of the State, the people who live here or the people who want to come here.

This Bill has many shortcomings, many of which we do not even know about. Many of the core tenets and policies of this Bill have not yet been published, which is an extraordinary situation for a Minister for justice to introduce. Such a practice reduces legislative scrutiny and proper accountability by the Oireachtas and is highly concerning. Core policy choices that have been deliberately left out of the Bill as published include family reunification, reception conditions, key detention safeguards and age assessment standards. All were raised in the pre-legislative scrutiny phase and many were in the general scheme. They are now being parked for later amendment. The term "legal counselling" is mentioned in the Bill and is never defined. There is no clarity about who will provide it, what qualifications will be required or what standards will apply. Importantly, if this legal counselling is incorrect, it will be far more difficult to reach the correct decision later.

Second Stage of the legislative process in this House is about the principles of the legislation. Committee Stage is not designed to introduce entirely new substantive measures that affect liberty, family life and core access to justice. That means the entire legislative process is being sidelined today in an effort to force backbench Government TDs to approve the principles of a system that affect fundamental rights and liberties and issues of natural justice without seeing the protections that make it lawful. I do not see how any qualified barrister or solicitor in this House could possibly countenance such a vote, without also saying that legal principles, jurisprudence and their constitutional obligations do not matter. That this House, the primary legislative body in the country, which is full of lawyers, would pass a Bill it does not know the principles of, knowing it is likely stripping people coming to this country of their constitutional and natural rights - you could not make it up.

This House is being given days to inspect a Bill with few basic definitions, which the Department has had years to create. A Bill that affects fundamental rights without adequate consideration is a level of Executive overreach I thought I would not see in this House and I am gravely concerned by it.

Let me clear, if you are an immigrant or not, you will find me and my party in your corner. If you are languishing in emergency accommodation, your childhood bedroom, an extortionate and precarious rental situation or on a hospital trolley or if you are in need of disability care or

have been plunged into poverty by this Government and every one preceding it, whether you are an immigrant, your parent is or you have lost count of how many generations were born in this land, you will find an ally in me and my party. Human rights are for all of us. They are a commitment to our shared humanity. They recognise we all get hungry, we all need a warm bed, we all seek to breathe free in a country where we can be our best selves and part of a society that supports and celebrates us. Human rights are sacrosanct.

Finally, I raise the case of the family of Ms Oyekanmi who travelled to Ireland from South Africa three years ago with her three children in a well founded belief that she would meet the test for asylum but has now been served with a deportation order. Judging by the numerous emails I have received from our constituents - their neighbours in Dublin Bay South - this family has had a positive impact and their departure will be a significant loss to their community. If indeed the Government believes the asylum process has been operating too slowly, it is only right to acknowledge it by giving that family permission to remain.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The starting point has to be numbers because the political debate has become completely detached from reality. Last year, Ireland granted family reunification to just 669 relatives of people with international protection status. That is the full scale of what we are talking about. These are not people who arrived yesterday or who have bypassed the system. These are people who have already met one of the highest legal bars in the State. They have been formally recognised as refugees after a rigorous process that often takes years. Yet, instead of supporting integration at that point, the Minister is signalling a policy that would deliberately delay family reunification for up to three years, potentially with a layer of additional financial requirements on top.

That delay is not neutral. It is not administrative. It is a choice to prolong family separations long after the State has accepted a person cannot safely return home. It is also important to say clearly that this policy does not address any of the real pressures in the system. Preventing a few hundred people from reuniting with close family members does nothing to solve accommodation shortages, reduce processing blockages or improve reception conditions. What it does is target a marginal group of people, precisely because it is small and its members dispersed and it is politically convenient to do so. That is why this feels like performative cruelty rather than a serious migration policy.

Family reunification is one of the strongest predictors of successful integration. People who are reunited with their families are more likely to work, settle and participate in their communities and more likely to rebuild their lives after trauma. Prolonged family separation has the opposite effect. It deepens isolation, worsens mental health, delays language acquisition and employment and keeps people in a state of permanent uncertainty. Being separated from one's family has to be utterly hard. From a human perspective, being separated from those you love because the computer says "No" must be absolutely devastating to every element. I am speaking as a mother. Being separated from children because I am in a different country seeking safety, whatever cruelty I would have experienced to get here, is ongoing cruelty after I have arrived. It is also worth stating clearly that many families seeking reunification are children or young people and when siblings or parents are prevented from joining family members here, it is the child who bears the emotional cost.

None of this is required by the EU asylum and migration pact. The pact sets minimum standards. It does not oblige Ireland to impose waiting periods, financial thresholds or additional barriers on recognised refugees. This is not about compliance. It is about political signalling and the signal being sent is that, even after the State accepts people as refugees, even after they have proven their case, their right to family life remains conditional and fragile. That approach undermines integration. It undermines trust in the system and undermines Ireland's long-standing commitment to human rights. The Minister should be honest this. If the numbers are small and the impact on the system is negligible, the only remaining explanation is that this policy exists to look tough, rather than to work well. In that case, the right thing to do would be simply to drop it.

There is an additional serious consequence, which has received far too little attention, for unaccompanied minors. A three year waiting period effectively operates as a denial of family reunification altogether. Children who arrive in Ireland at 15 or 16 years of age and are recognised as refugees will then be told they must wait for three years before applying to be reunited with their families and will likely age out of the system before the waiting period expires. Once that happens, they will lose access to child specific protections that apply to unaccompanied minors. What was a right attached to childhood becomes a discretionary adult immigration process. In practical terms, it means a child could do everything right by engaging with the system and complying with every requirement and still be permanently prevented from being reunited with parents or siblings because of an arbitrary waiting period. That is not an unintended side effect. It is a foreseeable outcome of the proposed policy. A policy that operates in this way will not only delay family life for children; it will deny it altogether. If we are serious about protecting children, we cannot design a system where the clock will be used to quietly strip them of their rights.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister will know the views of Sinn Féin about this legislation, as articulated by our spokesperson, Deputy Carthy. We are particularly concerned that Tusla and the various Departments under the Government's direction do not have the resources to meet the requirements laid out. That is the fundamental concern. However, I will talk practically about my experience in Donegal in recent years and the mistakes made by those who came before the Minister.

There was always a challenge with asylum seekers and the direct provision system, with people languishing for years. I previously chaired the petitions committee and we were asked by the children's ombudsman and the Ombudsman to look at the need for their oversight of the direct provision system. We visited direct provision centres across the State. We met asylum seekers. The length of time they were waiting for a decision and languishing in these centres was unacceptable.

I am glad to say that the Ombudsman for Children had oversight after that, as did the Ombudsman. I am sorry that the Ombudsman for Children does not have oversight, as I understand it, of the temporary emergency centres dotted across the State, including in my county.

I will talk directly about our experience. What we have seen is that there is the challenge of supporting Ukrainian refugees, which people all across County Donegal did. What then emerged was the challenge of a large upsurge in asylum seekers coming to Ireland. It appears

that the approach of the previous Government to that was that wherever there was a hotel that was not doing too well commercially or wherever there were opportunistic developers who could locate empty buildings or who maybe had buildings of their own, it was in these places that asylum seekers were located. There was no thought about where the most fitting communities, best health facilities, best primary care and best education facilities were. None of that was taken into consideration. It was utterly unfair to the asylum seekers involved and to the communities that were expected to host them. Indeed, public representatives were learning about it after the fact. The bus would come in, the asylum seekers would be located and then we would be informed that a contract had been signed. It was absolutely appalling, and it happened again and again.

In Donegal, we are dealing with our own humanitarian crisis relating to defective concrete blocks, which has affected thousands of private and public houses, commercial buildings, public buildings, schools and crèches. All of these places are falling apart and we have reached the point where we cannot provide housing for the families in the country who have to be relocated. No consideration whatsoever was given to that. Wherever a hotel or a building was available, that was where asylum seekers were located. That was completely unfair and unjust. They would be stuck in the middle of nowhere sometimes, with no resources, no supports, nothing whatsoever. That had been the Government's strategy for the past number of years. When people reacted angrily to that in communities, it was totally unfair to say that they are racist and unreasonable. That was not what was happening. We were watching people becoming millionaires. In some instances, these were individuals whose businesses had failed and who were bankrupt. They suddenly became millionaires overnight. People can see it. That is the injustice and context. I want the Minister to hear that from Donegal. The previous Government got it badly wrong. Do not repeat the mistakes it made.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This Bill has been introduced in line with the trend that we are seeing internationally where there has been an attack on the rights of migrants, immigrants of all kinds and, in particular, asylum seekers and refugees. Last year, 4,700 deportation orders were issued by this State, which was an increase of 96% on the previous year. The number almost doubled. TDs from many different parties in here jumping up and down about deportations last year. Fifty of those deportation orders were for people from Palestine and Sudan, which we all know are areas where massive genocides are taking place.

Since entering office, the Minister has employed this tough man image whereby he will virtue signal to people on the far right or people who have racist views that he is getting tough on immigration, including with his chartered flights and now with this Bill. That is part of a wider fear-mongering campaign that is being undertaken by the Government and that has a significant effect on the consciousness of people. The ESRI has found that people overestimate the foreign-born population and severely overestimate the number of asylum seekers here. They also underestimate the number of immigrants coming here for work by a shocking 30%. This means that when people see someone of colour or from a migrant background, they assume they are not legal or are either an asylum seeker or refugee. That is borne out by research the ESRI has done.

This is the State's attempt to blame a small minority of refugees for things like the housing crisis. Recently, the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, stated it much more vocally and publicly than would have been the case heretofore when he made a comment to the effect that a

significant number of people in emergency accommodation have no right to housing in this country. I would not call it a dog whistle, because it was fairly blatant. Asylum seekers generally are abhorrently treated. Four hundred refugees were told in December that there was no accommodation for them, and they were basically forced to live on the streets in a climate where racism and hostility are rife and in circumstances where the far right in this country is growing.

Immigrants in general, people who have migrated into this country who are working here, are also badly treated in the sense that they show up disproportionately in the homeless figures or are at risk of poverty compared with Irish people. I see that in my constituency, where many of those being evicted are migrants, people who have been working and living here for a long time but who do not have the same support systems and are stuck in the private rented sector. This Bill is meant to clamp down on asylum seeking. It has been introduced when the number of asylum seekers decreased hugely from 2024 to 2025. There were only 669 successful requests for family reunification in 2025. That is less than 1% of all immigration.

The key things to highlight in this Bill that are really dangerous, at a time when the case of an Irish person being held in an ICE detention centre has been highlighted, which is obviously horrific, is that our Government is moving in a similar direction. We have not set up ICE detention centres and we have not got ICE on the street, but there are some trends emerging. For example, under this Bill, people making applications for asylum will need to show up to so-called screening centres where their applications will be screened. They will fill out the forms there and so on. Failure to do so under this Bill will allow gardaí to arrest and detain them. Refugees could be imprisoned and detained for not showing up. They might not know that they were supposed to show up. There could be all sorts of reasons for them not showing up. This is similar to what is happening in the US. They can also be detained if there is a fear that they will abscond after a decision against them staying in the country being made, and they can be detained without a warrant too.

Sections of this Bill allow gardaí to search a person without a warrant and to detain them. This power also applies to children, which is the most horrific part of it, where the gardaí believe they need to determine their identity. As a result, we could see children being detained. We have also seen children who may have been born in Ireland being deported. Third parties will not be allowed to interfere in the duties of the officers undertaking these acts. If, therefore, people are taken away - and as we have seen in the US - nobody can inquire about them or go to assist them.

The Bill limits the power of applicants to appeal decisions. There is a limit of a week to put in an appeal and there are no more guaranteed oral hearings. It will be up to the tribunal. It has been noted that age assessment under the Bill is not defined or explicitly laid out. This leads to much ambiguity about how assessments should be undertaken.

The Minister is being given a wide range of powers. In the International Protection Act 2015, the chief international protection officer is independent in the performance of his or her functions. In the Bill, the equivalent of the international protection officer is simply the determining authority, which is defined as the Minister. The Minister can decide if an NGO can give information to an applicant, can direct the appeals body to prioritise an appeal and can remove the chief inspector if this is deemed to be in the interests of the Government or national

security. The Bill will also include provisions to prevent those given refugee status from applying for family reunification for three years.

This Bill has been heavily criticised by multiple NGOs. They have noted that it gives huge powers to gardaí to detain people, including the ability to arrest those who have been given deportation orders by the State, without a warrant.

This Bill is meant, in no uncertain terms, to give the Garda and the State extra powers around immigration similar to those being used in the US. It treats all people, including children, exercising their right to seek asylum with suspicion.

Deputy Seamus Healy: This Bill involves an erosion of migrants' rights and a shift towards deterrence. It is rushed legislation that is deeply flawed. We are being told by the Government that there is going to be a raft of amendments. As a result, we cannot scrutinise the Bill properly. The Bill leans towards the far right and racist lobby that is opposed to all migration, be it legal or illegal or whether it relates to IPAS centres, students with education visas or workers with employment permits. Those in question are on record on this issue.

Key equality safeguards are either unclear or are absent from the Bill. It does not define what is meant by legal counselling or clarify who will provide that counselling. Neither is it clear if international protection applicants are going to be entitled to legal advice and representation at all stages of the process. For instance, can legal counselling be provided by non-legal professionals? Surely not. The suggestion about group counselling is neither practical nor legal. The key question is whether there will be legal advice for individuals. Who will conduct the assessments and what qualifications will they have? What does the phrase "suitable medical means of assessing age" mean and how effective and independent will the independent monitoring mechanism be? It appears that the Government may remove the chief inspector "in the best interests of the State". That is very broad and, I would suggest, open to abuse.

I refer in particular to the question of family reunification. We all need our families around us. Everyone who comes to live and work in Ireland deserves to have their family with them. However, thousands of people are being forced to live apart from their families for years on end. The new Government policy in this regard makes the situation even worse. People who come to Ireland to work are doing essential jobs such as: looking after older people; picking, packing and cooking food; working in hospitality services; driving buses; building houses; working as nurses and doctors; and staffing our hospitals. They have been recruited to work here because we cannot fill those positions ourselves. These people are being denied their basic right to have their family with them because they do not earn enough money or because of the types of jobs they have. Relationships are being torn apart, families are missing milestones, people are missing out on being parents and children are missing out on having their parents for support and guidance.

Research shows that long-term delays in family reunion impact negatively on a series of issues like wages, education and language acquisition and can lead to long-term household poverty. The OECD's International Migration Outlook 2019 had a focus on the impact of family reunion on integration. It reported that spouses who arrive with some delay earn significantly lower wages after ten or more years in the host country. This report also outlines the negative effect of the absence of a spouse or partner on health and well-being. The

integration of migrant children also depends on how quickly they can join their family. Outcomes are strongly affected by long delays. The same OECD report highlights that children of preschool age have better outcomes as adults than children who arrive at school age. It is, therefore, imperative that we move away from short-term thinking and ensure that family reunification takes place. Family reunification should be available immediately, particularly in cases where the individual is resident in Ireland on full-time basis, is in employment and is paying their taxes. This is a very important issue that goes to the core of the whole situation where we have significant numbers of non-Irish workers working in our services.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Donald Trump is scapegoating people such as asylum seekers and migrants to deflect anger away from the failure of people like him and the billionaires he represents to address the cost-of-living crisis. He is scapegoating vulnerable immigrants, people seeking asylum or those who are undocumented, including Irish people, in the most horrendous way. We have seen the consequences of that now with Seamus Culleton being treated in what he described as a modern-day concentration camp. That is what Trump is about. This Government is leaning into that stuff. What it is doing is not as absolutely blatant and obscene as what he is doing, but it is leaning into it and the human consequences are appalling, just as they are for Seamus Culleton. The latter is working in the United States. He was not documented, so he probably did not have everything that was necessary for him to be deemed fully legal. However, he is contributing and wants to continue to contribute to American society. We are all rightly appalled that he should be treated in this way because we understand that he is going to contribute in the same way that as millions of other Irish people who have to the countries all over the world to which they have migrated.

People then say that too many of these people are coming to Ireland. The hypocrisy and double standards are appalling, and the human consequences are terrible. I raised the case of Bilal Butt here earlier this year. Bilal has been living and working here. He has two children who were born here and who have lived here all their lives. He was locked up for 50 days pending deportation. This is a man who is contributing to our society. There is no value for him or his children in deporting him. I warned at the time his case arose that his health was in danger. I have written to the Minister, who sitting there looking at his phone, three times about Bilal.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am taking a note of what the Deputy is saying.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have still not received a response to the communications I sent to him about Bilal. His family were worried that he was going to have a heart attack. He did have a heart attack and was in ICU. Thankfully, he is out of prison.

This is a man who is working. His employer wants him to continue to work. He is contributing. There is nothing good about deporting him or deporting another family I have also been asked to mention. Deputy Bacik mentioned them earlier. This is the family of Titilayo Oluwakemi Oyekanmi and her three sons Samuel, Joseph and Genesis. She was training as a healthcare worker, had a QQI level 5 in healthcare and hoped to work as a care assistant. One of her sons was just about to do his leaving certificate. They have been packed up to be deported and thrown out of the country. This is just brutal stuff; it echoes what Trump is doing. It leans into all that stuff. We heard statements from the former Minister of Finance.

who left to join the World Bank, to the effect that there are too many immigrants in Ireland and so on. That is just leaning into both the stuff to which I refer and the toxic agenda of the far right.

The truth about immigrants coming to this country is that the number of asylum applicants is tiny. It was down to 13,000 last year and 18,000 the year before. It is a tiny proportion of the number of people coming into the country in the first place, which was 149,000 in 2024. It is a very small number. Michael Taffe, in a very good article I would encourage people to read on the perverse logic of the Government's immigration policy, details how every serious study that has been done anywhere in the world shows that the benefits of inward immigration far outweigh the negatives in any country, as was the case with the Irish going abroad. This is true here and it is true everywhere. The economic benefit of people coming into a country is multiples of any of the costs involved. This should be obvious when we look at the contribution immigrants to this country are making to our health services, construction, hospitality and to retail. This country would not be able to function without immigrants.

We are facing labour and skills shortages in every single area of Irish society and these are people who want to contribute to our society. We have Government bodies saying how the ageing population in this country and lack of young people is becoming a massive problem because the working population is declining as a proportion of the overall population, and I am on the Committee on Budgetary Oversight which is studying this. We are getting older so we need immigrants in order to sustain the working population to be able to pay for pensions and all of the other things we need. It makes no sense to be leaning into this stuff and suggesting that immigrants or asylum seekers are somehow causing a problem. This is a Government essentially trying to deflect attention away from its failure to address the housing crisis or indeed its culpability for that crisis in the first place.

When we look at the numbers, we have 149,000 in inward immigration. As I said, there were 13,000 applications for asylum. Do Members know how many tourists came here in 2024? There were 6 million. Is anybody running around saying we have to stop the tourists coming in because they are such a problem? No, because we all recognise they bring economic benefits even if they also rely on the infrastructure and so on. That exact argument applies to a far smaller number of people seeking asylum or to immigrants coming into this country. We should stop the scapegoating and leaning into the far right and the toxic politics of Trump.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: This Bill is designed to legislate for Ireland's decision to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact. We all know every country requires a functioning international protection system that is rules-based, fair, efficient and enforced. We are all very aware of the problems in the international protection system in Ireland, and the EU migration pact does nothing to support or take into account Ireland's unique position as an EU member state that is part of the common travel area with a state outside of the EU.

Communities are up in arms when it comes to the lack of information on where an IPAS centre is going to be located. The Government's community engagement team allows misinformation, disinformation and concerns to grow within good communities. The Government gave a welcome commitment not to use the only hotel in a town. When these hotels are used for accommodation, it takes away local employment. These hotels are the only available accommodation in areas, which makes them important for local tourism in

communities, as they support local restaurants, factories which have investors visiting, small shops and businesses. I welcome the previous commitment given to not use the only hotel in Oldcastle, a commitment I got on a number of occasions from the Minister and his Department. I thank him for his engagement on that.

I understand that implementing the comprehensive accommodation strategy for international protection applicants is ongoing. However, loopholes that the Government and IPAS accommodation providers may use need to be looked at to protect the only hotel in towns and villages across Ireland. When loopholes are used, it creates uncertainty in communities. IPAS accommodation providers are making millions off the State by using these loopholes. Section 5 has been used to seek planning exemption for IPAS accommodation. These planning exemptions should be scrapped. Instead, there should be maximum engagement with communities to stop misinformation and fear being spread in good communities with good people.

Sinn Féin has been clear from the outset that signing up to the EU asylum and migration pact is not in Ireland's interest. This move undermines Ireland's sovereignty and hands over more power to the EU to make unsustainable decisions for Ireland. Offers of accommodation should not be decided without consultation with communities and elected representatives and in areas with no services, GPs, school places, etc.

Very often we see the concerns of communities disregarded and that should not be the case. Massive profiteering continues and the decision by Government to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact in its entirety is a mistake. Our position in Sinn Féin is clear. We recognise the contributions of many who come here but also recognise the challenges that communities face with public services and housing. Very good points were raised by our Sinn Féin Deputies during the pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill. Profiteering in the provision of accommodation must be ended. Accommodation providers have abused the system in place. They have proceeded with works on sites without relevant permissions and contracts, leading to local authorities having to put huge resources into enforcement proceedings, which is often hindered as they are getting conflicting information from the potential accommodation provider and Government Departments.

I cannot understand why the Government is so determined to sign up to the pact and then face fines for not meeting targets that we all know it is going to miss, as the target set out by the EU in the pact are unsustainable. If the Government plans to move towards State-led accommodation, this Bill in its current format will put a strain on Ireland's capabilities to do that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Aontú believes that we, as a people, should do our best to try to provide help to those who are fleeing war and violence. We believe there are many people in Ireland who are migrants who are making a valuable contribution to our country and our society. They are essential in many sectors and this country would not function properly only for those individuals. We also believe that when a person is here legally, they should be treated with respect, and that the colour of a person's skin is of no more significance than the colour of their eyes.

Six years ago we in Aontú called for a respectful conversation about the issue of immigration in this country. We were slammed by every single other political party in the Dáil

at the time. Every party accused us of damaging the cohesion of the country. We stated that if we do not have a respectful conversation in this country, the conversation is not going to disappear. It will simply get pushed underground to the ne'er-do-wells who will use people's concerns for their own negative benefit. That is exactly what has happened over the past six years. The inability of the political establishment to reflect the concerns of Irish citizens across the country has pushed hundreds of thousands of individuals into the ecosystem of some of the most extreme people in Irish society. This was a major mistake by this Government.

As it happens, we have seen that Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin have flipped on this issue in the past couple of years. I welcome that. Sinn Féin flipped in large part because it was run from the doors in its working class heartlands across this country on this particular issue. However, there are still four other political parties in this Chamber who do not think we even have the right to have a debate. With People Before Profit, any individual action taken by the Minister to ameliorate some of the difficulties here led to name calling, association with Trump, and looking to show this individual as an extreme individual. Do not shut down democratic debate. It was incredible that for four years the vast majority of people in all polling companies' polls were saying they wanted a stricter immigration system, and one political party, the smallest in Leinster House, Aontú, was the only one actually articulating that view. That is quite an incredible situation to happen. There is a political bubble where people are not able to listen to the people they are meant to represent and who are caught up in a peer pressure in which they do not have the backbone to be able to speak with their own intellect and moral compasses.

Look at what happened over that period of time. I put in a parliamentary question to the previous Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, approximately four years ago, asking where most people were registering for asylum in this country. That parliamentary question showed 85% registered at the International Protection Office in Mount Street. I scratched my head wondering why people were registering for asylum in Mount Street when they were coming through ports and airports.

6 o'clock

When I went back to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, at the time and asked where the people applying for asylum in Mount Street were coming from, she said she did not know. It is incredible that an individual who was being well paid - €180,000 a year - to do a job did not even have the curiosity to find out where people applying for asylum in Ireland were coming from. Six months later, I asked again where people were coming from and whether the Minister was asking the question as to where they are coming from. She said they were not asking them where they were coming from. That is an incredible situation.

Six months later, I put in another question. The Minister admitted then that she was asking the question but at that stage, she said the information was not being collated in a fashion that would enable her to give us that information. It took three years of questioning for the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to admit that 85% of the population coming into the country were coming from Britain through the North of Ireland. It is an incredible situation.

The EU migration pact, which we are discussing today, does not fix that problem. A person can fly from Liverpool into Belfast currently without a passport and without seeking asylum. There is obviously never going to be a border between North and South. It is impossible, it is

not wanted and it would not be able to function. The logical conclusion is to put in an Irish Sea border for the movement of people. People said the unionists would not accept it. Unionists have accepted an Irish Sea border for the movement of goods. They were forced to do so under the Windsor Framework. Our engagement with British politicians has highlighted to them that there is a flow of migrants from the South into the North and Britain. It is in London's and Ireland's best interests, as good neighbours, to have a good fence to be able to understand where people are moving. If people want to come from Britain to Ireland, North or South, they should apply for asylum at the airport or port they land at on the island of Ireland. It is the only way to manage the movement of people in Ireland.

I submitted parliamentary questions asking how many people were coming to Ireland without passports or travel documents. The Government stated that in 2023, 5,000 people landed in Dublin Airport without a passport or travel document. That is an incredible situation. People who had to get on a flight in another European country simply did not have their document available when they landed. I asked how many people were being deported and was informed that only about 5% of the individuals subject to deportation orders had their deportations enforced. I asked how many were deported in another fashion and the Minister said that some of those people were being deported voluntarily. When I asked how many the Minister was sure had left, she said she did not know and that there were no exit checks. We do not check if people leave the country or not. I asked the Minister why there are no exit checks and she said it is because we have a Border with the North of Ireland. We cannot have exit checks in Ireland if we have an open Border between North and South.

We asked how many people were failing in the application process. At that time, about 30% of people were failing their first application. We realised there was something wrong and the Government was not being strict enough with regard to its tests for those applications. We were proved right because 80% of people who apply are now failing their first application. There has been a massive jump from about 30% to 80% in two or three years. What happened? Was it the case that we had a different cohort of people coming to this country or was it that the Government was simply not testing properly in relation to the people coming into the country three or four years ago? Is it the case that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is testing properly, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, was not?

We had a situation where tens of thousands of people were coming into the country and spending years having their applications processed. We had to pay for their accommodation. Some 80% of those applications were going to fail, but we can take that figure down to 60% because some of those who appeal have the initial failure overturned. Some 60% of the people who spent years in accommodation in Ireland were not asylum seekers but we were paying €1.2 billion for their accommodation. That is an incredible situation for any Government to allow over that period of time. The Government sent out a message that if you come to Ireland, you can apply and it will take years for your application to be processed. If your application fails, you can apply for appeal and it will take years for your appeal to be processed. If you fail the appeal, you can get a judicial review, and it will take years for your judicial review to be processed. If you fail at the judicial review, you get a deportation order, which will never be implemented. This incredible and dysfunctional situation created by the Government costs billions of euro, creates turmoil across the country and nobody is ever held to account for it.

We have had a significant increase in the number of people coming into the country claiming asylum. The figure has been in or around 18,000 per year for many years. In terms of work permits, the figure is about 40,000 per year and in terms of student visas, there are about 60,000 people coming in every year. There is also a significant number of people coming in from Ukraine. If you increase the population of the country by the population of Galway city on an annual basis and you do not build the infrastructure of Galway city on an annual basis, you are going to create problems. Galway has a university, a university hospital, dozens of schools and tens of thousands of houses. If you do not keep up with that population increase in terms of infrastructure, you are going to create stresses and strains, albeit not among middle-class and wealthy people who will be able to provide for themselves. The people who will compete for the scarce resources will typically be the working-class people across the country. That is why the stresses and strains of the Government's policies have mostly been seen in working-class places over the past while.

It is important that I say this. The Government is responsible for the housing crisis, without a shadow of a doubt. There is nobody else responsible for it. However, if you restrict and have a static supply of houses and raise the demand at the same time, you will increase the price of houses and rents and make houses less available to people. It is maths, economics and physics. You cannot hold supply static, raise demand and expect there to be houses for everybody and house prices or rents to remain low.

In regard to IPAS, that situation is an incredible one. The Government set fires in many towns and villages in the country. It would not even talk to local communities. There were communities with hotels in one part of the town and another hotel in another part of the town. The Government took one without talking to the community, which would have been happy if the Government had gone for the other. That created stresses and strains and significantly reduced the tourist market. In some counties, 10% of all hotel beds were taken up by IPAS. This approach made millionaires of people, cost €1.2 billion on an annual basis and got rid of planning. If I want to build a little house for my granny at the back of my house so she can live safely beside me, I have to go through planning. Why is planning good? It makes sure the local authority applies the law and it gives local people an influence over the development of society. The Government deleted planning. Aontú will bring a planning Bill to the Dáil next week, which will seek to reintroduce planning for IPAS in the future.

Another issue is that the Government does not know the identity of everybody coming into the country. It is important to say that. The Government gives the impression that it does know but it does not. I know of numerous examples of the Government putting adults into Tusla accommodation for children. Whereas Garda vetting is needed to place an adult near a child, the Government has put adults into Tusla accommodation for children. We have also seen in recent court cases that some asylum seekers have presented with multiple and often contradictory identities. Some have different names, dates of birth and countries of origin.

Where laws have existed, the Government has not implemented them. The Minister has the right to remove migrants, even European migrants, if they break the law and are criminals. Answers to parliamentary questions I submitted show there has been a static low number of criminals removed from this country over the past number of years. There has been a little change from the Minister recently, which I welcome, but for most of those five years, that figure was static. The Minister also has the right to remove people who are not earning a living

here. If people who come here have never had a job, he can remove them and send them back to another European country. That has not been done, in the main. There are hundreds of examples of European citizens living in Ireland who are dependent on social welfare and not earning a living, and Jozef Puška was a prime example of that. He did not work in this country from 2017 until the year he murdered Ashling Murphy.

There has been a big change in Ireland. According to the 2022 census, 20% of the population, or 1 million people, were born outside of this country.

That is a significant number. We are moving now to having 25% - we are at just under 25% - of the population of the State born outside of the country. Nobody ever speaks about that fact. It is a very high figure and it will make it difficult to have a sustainable society into the future. The European average is 13.9%, in the US it is 15% and in Britain it is 16%. We are at around 23% at the moment. This is a radical change.

A Labour Party representative spoke positively in the Chamber about the contribution migrants make in Ireland. Nobody is arguing that fact. There is not one person in the country who does not say there are hundreds of thousands of migrants who are contributing with value to our society. That is an effort to frame this discussion in a way that nobody else is framing it. It is an effort to frame it as people being either pro-migration or anti-migration. That is not the discussion that is happening in households across the country. People are talking about the volume, the rate and the numbers in respect of this issue. It is important that people understand that. We have many migrants in our party, Aontú. We put many of them up for election and many of them have said they disagree with the Government's policies over the last while. They want restrictions on the numbers of people who come into the country. They want that figure to be lowered and I think they are right. We have to lower those figures if we are going to have a sustainable situation in this country into the future.

It was mentioned that we need these workers, and we do, but we also need to look at what is happening with the birth rate. In 2009, there were 75,000 births here. Last year, there were 55,000 births. If this trend continues, we are all going to be working until we are 85 and pensions are going to be reduced. There will be no balance in the demographics to be able to fund society in the future. We will have to work on that issue at some stage.

The European migration pact outsources key decisions to Brussels. It reduces the ability to take sovereign democratic decisions in Ireland. It locks us into policies and decisions that will be made by other countries in their interests. It is a massive transfer of sovereignty. We do not know what the future holds but if we can self-determine, at least we can control the costs and the numbers in future. If we hand away sovereignty, decisions will be made in Brussels and we will not be able to determine our future contributions in relation to this matter.

A question came up during an earlier debate on the Bill, which the Minister may be able to answer. Will the Council of Europe be able to change the parameters of the EU migration pact in future? Will decisions on the numbers that countries should take and contributions they will have to make in future be taken by the Council of Europe on the basis of a qualified majority vote? If so, we are stuffed because that is a blank cheque. We know exactly what it means if we hand over to the European Union the power to fine Ireland. Look at the situation with greenhouse gases. We are hurtling towards binding 2030 targets for emissions, with hundreds of millions of euro of fines. We handed over qualified majority voting on the Mercosur deal

and a decision on our beef industry was taken on the basis of German, French and Italian interests. This is another example showing that when you hand over power from this House to Brussels, decisions are not always made in our best interests. The Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, has said that he does not believe in the old-fashioned idea of sovereignty. The current Fianna Fáil leadership is millions of miles away from the revolutionary generation of Fianna Fáilers who fought for independence in this country.

There are major costs wrapped up in what we are looking at. None of the positive elements of the EU migration pact could have been entered into voluntarily by us without signing up for the pact as a whole. There is nothing about the timelines, the numbers or the reforms the Minister is making that could not have been achieved based on the democratic will of this country and without having to hand away sovereignty. Let us remember that, nine times out of ten, the decision you will make for yourself will be better than the decision your neighbour will make for you. The same applies to countries. We still have a generation that is suffering from the massive cost of the banking bailout, when 1% of the European population was made to pay 44% of the cost of the banking bailout because Europe worked in its best interest and against our interests.

Aontú will oppose the Bill and push back against it. We will look for a migration system in this country that is compassionate and fair but is far stricter than what we have seen so far.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Signing up to the EU asylum and migration pact is not in Ireland's interest. What the Government is essentially doing is handing over control of decisions on migration to the European Union. Sinn Féin has always been of the opinion that Ireland, not Europe, should be the one that makes decisions on these important issues. That is why we oppose the majority of measures in this pact. The reality is that our asylum and international protection system has been a complete and utter mess for decades. We have seen families left waiting in limbo for years for their applications to be processed. This is totally unfair, especially on children. We need a fair system in which rules are applied equally and those applying for asylum and local communities are treated with respect.

To address our IPAS system, I represent Dublin Bay North where the former Crown Paints site in Coolock was to be used for IPAS accommodation. Coolock is an area that has been ignored by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments for decades. An abandoned paint factory in a community abandoned by Government is not a suitable place for an IPAS centre. The only reason it was considered was that private interests saw an opportunity to make a quick profit out of it. The planning exemption for IPAS centres needs to be ended and we need to see proper engagement with our communities.

As a TD for the area, I can tell the Minister that trying to get answers from the Department on what was happening with Crown Paints was like trying to get blood out of a stone. There was one meeting of elected representatives at which many concerns were raised. There were promises of more meetings but those meetings never happened. If we, as local representatives, were frustrated trying to get answers, just imagine how that wider community felt. My party president, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, met residents' groups, community groups and local clubs on the situation. She addressed the then Taoiseach and called for respectful dialogue and engagement with our community. That did not happen.

The community of Coolock is getting on with it now but this Government needs to learn lessons from how the situation in Coolock was handled. We need a proper strategy for the location of these centres and for the integration of those who seek refuge here. We need to end the ability of private companies to make millions in profits off the back of Ireland's shambles of an asylum system.

Debate adjourned.

Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Máire Devine: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Hello to all the activists and supporters in the Gallery this evening as well as those who cannot be here. I thank them for all their support in helping us prepare for this important proposed legislation. Céad míle fáilte.

My heart goes out to all those who have been victimised by sexualised AI deepfakes. I know this Bill cannot repair the tremendous harm done to them but I hope it can help prevent future harm. Most of all, gabhaim buíochas le Jackie Fox for supporting this amendment to the law named after her treasured daughter Coco. Today, aptly, is international Safer Internet Day and this year its theme explores the impact of artificial intelligence, a fitting way to honour Coco's memory. Tomorrow's vote on Sinn Féin's Bill will demonstrate whether the Government truly aspires to the zero-tolerance in Ireland of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Most of us have posted pictures of our children or grandchildren on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram or the dreaded X. Imagine someone gets their hands on a photo of a kid and via an AI tool digitally strips away their clothes creating a sexual image, all to feed their own revolting fantasies or to sell to the dark web. This is happening now and it is called nudification. No matter how innocuous the image is, it can be turned into child sexual abuse material without the person ever knowing it. When a child image is used in this way, the child is not only victimised but can be traumatised for life. Nearly 40% of children aged eight to 12 use these platforms. The most common age to start using social media is 13.

Grok is a generative AI tool from the company owned by the bizarre millionaire, soon to be trillionaire, Elon Musk. Grok's image generation tool was used widely by people to generate explicit sexual content. A simple prompt "undress her" generates these. It generates millions of sexualised images over a very short period. We know over 11 days there were roughly 3 million, 99% of them of women and children. Women experience the Internet differently from men. From cyberbullying and harassment to co-ordinated attacks meant to silence women, the digital world can be especially hard for women. Here on our island women standing for recent elections were bullied and sexualised with AI deepfakes designed to damage reputations and self-esteem. Deepfakes, though untrue, still communicate something of a person's body, behaviour or character. They shape how others see them. Part of the dark motivation is exertion of power over a woman to shame her, to subjugate her and to silence her. Many perpetrators of this intensely misogynistic cyberbullying only find images sexy when they are non-consensual. I want people to think about that; it is so dark and twisted.

Our Bill seeks to: explicitly criminalise the creation of sexualised AI deepfakes; increase the statute of limitations for the summary offences to allow victims plenty of time to come forward to An Garda to thoroughly investigate it; and increase the maximum penalties upon conviction to better reflect the heinous nature of these digital crimes.

In the week since Grok's nudification functionality was switched on, numerous Government TDs and Ministers have rightly expressed outrage and demanded this issue be taken seriously. Now is the chance to prove ourselves. Let us work together and let us do it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Molaim mo chomrádaí, an Teachta Máire Devine, as a cuid oibre ar an mBille seo. Despite lots of rhetoric and good intentions, the fact is the Government has been far too slow to address what is now apparent as a clear gap in the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020. I welcome that the Government has indicated that it will not be opposing this Bill. I look forward to working on a cross-party basis to ensure that we deliver this legislation in a timely manner.

As has been outlined Coco's Law was designed to protect people from the recording, distribution and publication of intimate images without consent. However, there is an ambiguity over whether the Act covers the creation of non-consensual intimate images generated through artificial intelligence. The current Act references images that purport to be intimate images but it does not explicitly state that generating intimate images of an adult is illegal. The Grok nudification scandal exposed this loophole that should never have been allowed to remain open. Grok, X's nudification tool as it is now being described, allowed users to upload photos or videos of real people and have their clothing digitally removed. The vast majority of the sexualised AI images produced were of women and children. This should have prompted immediate action. The Government could have brought forward an immediate short and targeted amendment to close this loophole. I know there is a suggestion as to whether or not the law actually covers this. I make the point that if this was clear in law, then we would not need a minister to sit down with the companies involved. If the Minister or I were suspected of breaking the law, a Minister does not come to our house to discuss it; the appropriate powers hold us to account.

We now need to ensure that we make a move. Sinn Féin is prepared to work constructively and quickly to fix this problem but we need to see a sense of urgency from Government. Sinn Féin seeks to amend Coco's Law to explicitly criminalise the generation of non-consensual intimate images and videos and to increase the maximum penalties for those convicted. It is a straightforward but, in my view, absolutely necessary step. We are asking for all TDs to support this at every stage. If technical amendments are needed and if Government points out what it believes they are, we will be quite happy to work with it on Committee Stage. What matters now is that we work with together to fix this law without delay.

The legislation, of course, is only one part of the response. The other is accountability for the social media companies and platforms that enable or ignore this behaviour, and indeed profit from it. There is a sense that these platforms believe they are above the law. We saw the refusal of representatives of X to appear before the Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport. These companies have to be held accountable by Coimisiún na Meán and if Coimisiún na Meán does not have the powers to hold these

companies to account, then we have to give it the powers because the full weight of the law must be brought to bear on platforms that flout their obligations.

We also need to ensure that the Garda, particularly the divisional protective service units, has the personnel and the resources required to investigate and prosecute offences involving the recording, creation, distribution or the publication of non-consensual, intimate images. We have heard and we all should listen to the voices of victims and survivors about the important role that the divisional protective laws have played. We need to ensure that they are properly resourced and staffed.

A review of Coco's Law in 2024 showed that between 2021 and 2023, some 100 cases were prosecuted by the DPP but in the same period, almost 1,500 victim reports were made. That shows us that there is a significant gap between reports and prosecutions. It shows that while the law has acted as a deterrent, as I believe it has, it is still not delivering adequate justice for many victims. We also know that for far too many victims and survivors, the judicial process is too slow and in many cases is actually retraumatising them. The Justice Indicators Report published by the Law Society last week makes it clear that chronic delays in our court system are denying people timely access to justice.

The Minister and I know that there are many priorities across his Department and many areas of work that we need to address. However, I would contend very strongly that this is one of the areas where we can work together and actually deliver a solution fairly quickly. That is why I commend this Bill to the House. I welcome that Government is not opposing it. I assume that means we will have unanimous support here. Let us take this to Committee Stage, iron out whatever creases may be there and actually get this Bill into law as quickly as possible.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I thank Deputies Devine and Carthy for this very important and timely Bill. Speedy action on this is required now; not next year, not after another review, but now. During the period from 29 December 2025 through to 9 January 2026, Grok is estimated to have generated approximately 3 million sexualised images, including 23,000 that appear to depict children. Let us be absolutely clear on this, these are children. The question that must be asked is very simple: why did the Government not act immediately on this? According to Children's Health Ireland, CHI, these tools pose significant risks to children and young people, including psychological distress, loss of dignity, coercion and long-term trauma. This is real, live harm being inflicted right now. This erosion of basic societal norms cannot be tolerated. It strikes at the dignity, safety and fundamental rights of women, men and children and it needs to be sorted now.

Violence against women remains pervasive in Ireland and the digital space now plays a central role in enabling and amplifying that violence. AI has become a new weapon of abuse, humiliation and control. Perpetrators of digital domestic abuse, sexual violence and gender-based violence must not be allowed to evade accountability or to hide behind a veil of anonymity because of weak or inadequate rules imposed on platforms and digital service providers. Every day that the Government delays, these images remain available. Every hour of inaction compounds that harm and every failure to legislate sends a dangerous message that protection does not matter. The generation of non-consensual intimate images and videos through AI must be criminalised.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The very fact that we are here tonight having this debate sickens me to my stomach. It really does. The fact that somebody in a tech company somewhere sat down and thought it would be a great idea to create a tool that will strip clothes off women and children, and to have that tool circulated online for profit makes me want to physically vomit. I do not understand that mentality. I do not know anybody who understands it because that mentality has no place in our society - none whatsoever. The companies that facilitate the circulation of these images need to be held to account. Those whose images are abused in such a way need to know that the justice system is on their side. We need to ensure that our legislation is robust enough, that justice will be served and the circulators of these images will be held to account.

This Bill is very straightforward. The use of AI nudification tools and deepfake technologies to strip women and girls of their clothes needs to stop. There can be no ambiguity in this regard. This is wrong. We need to put an end to it. The fact that this loophole exists and that the Government knew it was there but has not acted to date is shameful. However, the Minister now has the opportunity to ensure that the State protects those who find themselves in this position and holds those responsible to account. I ask the Minister to fix this law, ensure that nobody else ends up in this situation and make it clear that in Ireland digital abuse is abuse and will be treated as such.

Deputy Ann Graves: Violence against women in Ireland is a massive problem and the digital and social media spaces have a central role in amplifying this violence. The sharing of non-consensual photos or the recording of images is absolutely wrong on all levels and is rightfully criminalised under the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, or Coco's Law. Unfortunately, however, the use of AI to generate deepfakes or non-consensual intimate images is not criminalised. This Government has been too slow to bring forward legislation to address what is clearly a loophole in the Act. The Government's failure to introduce relevant legislation has become clear in recent months, particularly following the Grok nudification scandal.

This Sinn Féin Bill will amend Coco's Law by making three straightforward changes. It will explicitly criminalise the non-consensual creation or generation of intimate images and videos through the use of AI. It will extend the statute of limitations from two to five years for summary offences and it will increase the maximum penalties upon conviction. These legislative changes are supported by Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Ireland, the Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy Institute and Éist, as well as by Jackie Fox, the mother Nicole Fox Fenlon, for whom Coco's Law is named. If this Government had acted promptly to introduce legislation, it would have received co-operation from the Opposition. Instead, it chose to sit on its hands and do nothing. Meanwhile, non-consensual images were generated and lives have been destroyed. In the absence of Government legislation, I ask the Minister, on behalf of the women of Ireland, to ensure that his party supports the Bill brought forward tonight.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The actions taken in recent weeks by some individuals regarding Grok AI were deplorable and a response from this House is absolutely necessary. This Bill will address the lacuna that exists within current legislation to cover the generation of intimate images through the use of AI.

Zero tolerance should mean that where new issues or threats arise or are identified, action is taken in a timely manner. This is straightforward legislation and I commend my party colleagues, Deputies Carthy and Devine, for bringing it forward. I also commend the Government for not opposing it. These events also highlight a broader issue in terms of our response. Our approach to the regulation of AI cannot simply be responsive or reactionary. We should not be waiting until harm is done before we see intervention or regulation. This legislation shows that when we are united, we can take appropriate action and do so at a pace that is comparable with the threat.

There are many issues of domestic and gender-based violence on which we are largely agreed action needs to be taken. Sinn Féin remains committed to working with the Government and Opposition parties on matters such as the establishment of a register of domestic abusers and the provision of refuge spaces in every county. These are just two of the issues that we can work on together. Let us all try to bring an enhanced pace of action to those pressing matters on which we are agreed.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Gabhaim buíochas le mo chomrádaithe, na Teachtaí Devine agus Carthy, as ucht an Bille seo a chur os ár gcomhair. Cuirim fáilte roimh na cuairteoirí atá sa Ghailearaí. The Grok scandal has been the stuff of nightmares, showing us what a dystopian, misogynistic hellscape the Internet can be, its owners conniving villains willing to sit back and even relish the most degrading acts against women and children. Our do-nothing Government sat on its hands and watched it all unfold while continuing to pander to the tech overlords. Intimate image abuse is widespread. It disproportionately affects women and needs to be removed, root and branch. Part of that means that our Government needs to finally grow up and stand up to the platforms that are facilitating these egregious harms once and for all.

Another part of the response has to be banning the creation of deepfake intimate images. As it stands, there is an ambiguity in Coco's Law regarding the generation of sexualised AI imagery. The amending Bill before us tonight addresses this gap and would ensure that victims have recourse to the criminal justice system. To date, they have been left to suffer the consequences in silence. The consequences of this despicable offence should not be underestimated. We are talking here about people's lives being destroyed. We must not downplay cyber violence because it takes place in a digital environment and behind a supposed veil of anonymity. Our approach must be unequivocal and agile, reflecting the changing technological situation and our understanding of the harm caused. In keeping with the gravity of this offence, our amending legislation provides for increased maximum penalties upon conviction. Sinn Féin is bringing forward this legislation because the Government has failed to act in a timely manner. We have to act now to protect the women and children of Ireland. We need a step change from Government when it comes to online safety and supporting this legislation would be a strong first step in that direction.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I want to start by thanking Deputies Devine and Carthy for introducing this important Bill. As has been indicated, the Bill seeks to amend Coco's Law by criminalising the generation of non-consensual intimate images and videos, and also by increasing the maximum penalties on conviction. At present, it is a criminal offence to generate images provided they are then

distributed and-or published. I know that the Bill has been introduced in the context of recent public concerns and considerable political debate arising from the launching by X, on Christmas Day 2025, of a feature powered by Grok to allow editing of images. This feature was used at scale to create harmful and illegal content, in particular the nudification of people, including children. I want the House to know that the Government and I share the widespread revulsion at the fact that platforms have allowed the non-consensual nudification of images, primarily of women and children. We also need to recognise that aiding and abetting an indictable serious offence is a criminal offence itself. There is a very strong view that X itself has committed a criminal offence by aiding and abetting the commission of an offence under Coco's Law.

Earlier today I brought a memorandum to Government seeking approval not to oppose this Bill and I can confirm that this was endorsed by Cabinet. As the evidence available indicates the generation of non-consensual intimate images disproportionately targets women and children, the policy intention underpinning the Bill aligns with the Government's commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which is a priority for me and the Government. Consequently, I will not be opposing the Bill on Second Stage. While there is a comprehensive range of legislation already in place in Ireland to combat these types of harmful digital practices, which I will speak about shortly, I have been examining the extent of the current established legal framework with the Attorney General to ensure it is sufficiently robust to protect people from digital harms like these. Therefore, on the basis of this ongoing review I will not be opposing the Bill on this Stage.

I also believe it is fitting that we will be discussing the generation of intimate images using AI tools this evening as today is Safer Internet Day. We know that the use of AI to generate offensive material or to abuse or harass any individual is unacceptable. It represents a very serious violation of privacy and dignity. It promotes a culture of objectification, particularly of women, and disrespect. It is an issue the Government is taking very seriously and is taking concrete steps to address. I welcome the debate today as I am keen to ensure that there are no gaps in the legislation and that the current established legal framework is sufficiently robust to protect people from digital harms.

In this context, I would like to give a brief overview of the legislation that already exists in our legal system which is of relevance to today's debate. As has been mentioned, Coco's Law, the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, was enacted in 2020. It creates a serious offence of distribution or publication of an intimate image without consent with intent to cause harm to the victim, attracting a maximum penalty of up to seven years' imprisonment. It is also an offence to threaten to distribute or publish such an image. The Act also provides for a strict liability offence, with a lower penalty, for engaging in the recording, distribution or publication of an intimate image without consent, with no requirement to prove an intention to cause harm.

I would like to add at this point that the definition of an intimate image under the 2020 Act is intentionally broad to include any visual representation of a person. Therefore, it will include an AI-generated image of a person. This will also include intimate images which have been altered or doctored prior to their distribution or publication, more commonly referred to as deepfakes. I want to highlight that the Attorney General has confirmed this is indeed the case.

The second piece of legislation relevant to the debate this evening is the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998. It is framed so that no distinction can be made between AI-generated material and other child sexual abuse material. The production and distribution of child sexual abuse material attracts a sentence of up to 14 years' imprisonment. The creation of an image, whether or not AI tools are used to do so, that shows a child, whether an actual child or one created by AI, engaging in sexually explicit activity or that shows, for a sexual purpose, their genitals or anal region is a serious offence under the Act. It is a criminal offence at present to generate an image of a child. That is relevant in the context of the legislation being proposed this evening by Deputy Devine.

Under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission is responsible for the oversight of very large online platforms. These platforms are required to assess and mitigate risks that their services may create in relation to the proliferation of illegal content online and the protection of fundamental rights, including protection for minors. The Artificial Intelligence Act introduces legal requirements that aim to ensure a high level of protection of health, safety and fundamental rights against the harmful effects of AI systems in the European Union. Under the AI Act, certain AI practices are prohibited, and certain AI systems and uses of AI by providers and deployers are subject to legal requirements in terms of governance, transparency and responses to risks and incidents. The specific use of AI by deployers is subject to the EU AI Act. A key objective of the regulation is to protect against harmful effects of AI systems in the European Union in terms of health, safety and fundamental rights. While initial phases of the Act, including setting out rules for prohibited AI practices, are now in effect, the provisions to enable surveillance, penalties and enforcement will come into effect in August 2026 and there will be formal regulatory mechanisms available to the relevant surveillance authorities to engage with individual companies

There is also the EU violence against women directive. To a large extent, this has already been transposed into Irish law but any further transpositions will be done.

It is also important to look at the other consequences in respect of this legislation. I believe that this Bill is well intentioned and I support the general objective but it is my duty to point out some concerns I have in relation to the proposed increased penalties. Without question, it is very important to criminalise harmful behaviours in society to protect citizens and deter wrongdoing. However, it is equally important that criminal laws are fair, proportionate and justly enforced. It would be highly unusual if a five-year prison sentence were to be imposed on a person for creating an intimate image that is never spoken about and is never shared with anyone, including the victim, as could be the case under this Bill. An issue of concern that I would ask Deputies Devine and Carthy to address is that under the Bill as drafted at present, if an individual in the confines of their home decided that they wanted to use an artificial mechanism to create a nude image of me on their computer and then they deleted it - they probably laughed at it - and never sent it anywhere else, under this legislation that person would find themselves having committed an offence which could expose them to a sentence of up to five years imprisonment.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It would; that is the point.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It would. The Attorney General has advised that the proposed increase in the penalty would be a disproportionate penalty for an offence where there is no

requirement to prove any criminal intent. The reason we introduced Coco's Law was because images were being created and recorded and then being published and distributed. This was clearly very damaging and upsetting for the individuals concerned. We need to look at the fact that all that is being done by this Act is that the generation of the image would be a criminal offence and there would be no requirement for it to have been distributed it onwards. Such a significant penalty for an offence where there is no requirement to prove any intention to commit a criminal offence could be problematic in the context of Article 38 of the Constitution. As I have said, the Government is taking the issue of online safety very seriously and I have listened with interest to what colleagues have said.

I will turn now to the concrete steps that the Government has taken to address the use of Grok. As I indicated earlier, under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission is responsible for oversight. On 26 January 2026 the Commission decided to launch a formal investigation under the Digital Services Act into X and its Grok AI tool. The Government welcomes this decision, and I want to highlight that Coimisiún na Meán is formally involved with the European Commission in this investigation and was instrumental in the work leading up to its launch. In addition, and as suggested by the AI advisory council, the Government is exploring amendments to the Artificial Intelligence Act to expand the list of prohibited AI practices. A lot of work is being done in this area. As I said, I welcome the Bill being introduced by Deputy Devine. I will give it serious consideration and I will work with the Opposition on it.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Those who are opposed to regulatory restrictions on the creation and generation of sexualised AI images argue that this an affront to free speech and freedom of expression. It is not. It is not a freedom to use without consent someone's image to generate sexualised images. It is not freedom to ask an AI tool to show a picture of somebody and to have the picture modified to remove the clothing from the image of their body. That is sexual. That is harassment. Often those who cry about free speech were not so loud or mostly were extremely quiet when it came to section 31 of the Broadcasting Act banning members of my party from the airwaves. One party member was not allowed to talk about mushrooms on a farming programme. Larry O'Toole could not speak on behalf of striking workers. I was 27 years old before I heard a member of my party being allowed to speak on national TV or radio. When we in Sinn Féin talk about these issues, we know the impact of restricting free speech and we oppose it. However, we will not allow the exploitation, bullying and the crass sexual objectification of people who provided no permission for either users or big tech companies to use their images in such a brutal way.

Five years ago this month, Coco's Law entered into force. It was and is a good and necessary piece of legislation in the ongoing battle against the distribution and publication of intimate images without consent. Within its first two years, there were 100 prosecutions under the law. While a significant gap remains between the number of reports to *hotline.ie* and the number of prosecutions, criminalisation of non-consensual recording or distribution of intimate images was and remains necessary. However, there is a lack of clarity as to whether the legislation covers the generation or creation of intimate images through AI. Our Bill seeks to provide clarity on that.

We have an obligation to prevent another generation of women and girls from experiencing misogyny and gender-based violence. While this amendment to Coco's Law will not solve all

these ills, it will go some way towards protecting people from the frankly disgusting abuse of AI tools and their use in creating unwanted and unauthorised sexual images.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I welcome this Bill. I commend my colleagues on bringing it forward. Until the latest social media controversy arose, I and many others would have thought that we had sufficient legislation to tackle social media companies propagating nudification AI. The Government has been too slow to act. That is why this Bill is necessary and welcome. Last week, TikTok, Meta and Google were before the media committee to discuss the regulation of online platforms and supports to improve online safety and participation. X was invited but refused to attend. All three companies' attendees' opening statements made assertions that their priorities were online safety, data protection and child and user welfare. They also stated that they could remove reported posts within hours during the hearing. In recent hearings on online safety, experts gave detailed testimonies on how the social media platforms were failing in their responsibilities. There was a stark disparity in what the social media companies' representatives were saying happens when complaints are made to the lived reality of people and the testimonies given by guests at the previous hearings. They are not facing up to the problems on their platforms. If they do not make actionable changes to their approaches to online safety, then the full extent of the law should be brought to bear on online platforms and service providers who try to flout the rules. This amendment to Coco's Law will help with that.

Coimisiún na Meán also needs to step up and use all the tools given to it to tackle social media companies. It is not doing that. The Online Safety and Media Regulation Act gives it the power under Irish law to issue a penalty or fine of €20 million or 10% of turnover if social media companies fail to protect children and the public from harmful, illegal content. Instead, it has stepped aside for the European Commission to conclude its formal investigation into X under the EU Digital Services Act, saying that it is associated with this investigation, and it is ready to play its part. Legislation is only useful if it is in force. Behind every damning statistic that has prompted this Bill are the lived realities of victims of abuse. Some of them are here in the Gallery this evening. For them, not only does this Bill need to be passed but it needs to be enforced.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome this very straightforward amendment to Coco's Law. It makes it very clear that the crime of recording or distributing non-consensual intimate images of a person also extends to images and videos created by AI. Over recent months, we have seen an explosion in the use of AI technology distributing sexual abuse material, particularly of women and children. The use of AI bots to abuse people online is completely unacceptable. This has to be stopped. The way we do this is by bringing this Bill forward and putting it in place. We also need to ensure that gardaí have the resources to make sure that those who are breaking the law are held to account. We heard last month from the gardaí that they are investigating around 200 cases of sexual abuse material from the Grok AI tool alone. That is an enormous amount of work, especially when one considers that the overwhelming majority of these accounts posting this material online are anonymous. On top of investigating those who are directly creating the images, we need to see these companies that are flouting the law held to account. If we do not begin to tackle this behaviour and if guardrails are not put in place to prevent this sort of abuse, then they have to face serious crimes and the possibility of a criminal investigation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I commend Deputies Carthy and Devine on this important amendment. It is welcome that the Government is not opposing this. The Minister and I both know that sometimes that does not mean the Government is supporting it either. I would like to see it supported. I welcome the visitors in the Gallery. Tá sé mícheart rogha duine éigin a thógáil agus é a athrú gan cead an duine. Níl sé ceart nó cóir é sin a dhéanamh do dhuine. It is regrettable that intimate image abuse is increasing. The harm is increasing. The scope is increasing. The way that images are being manipulated is becoming even more pervasive. The charge that has been levelled against the Government is that it is too beholden to big tech to take any real action. The only way that charge can be answered effectively is by the Government taking real action.

In his opening remarks the Minister said "that platforms have allowed the non-consensual nudification of images". Platforms have been allowed and that has to stop. Platforms have been facilitated because that is how it has happened. This has to stop. The generation of these images dehumanises not only women but mostly women. It is dehumanising, degrading and disgusting. This amendment to Coco's Law is designed to stamp it out once and for all. We need to get serious about this. We need to ensure not just that the Government does not oppose the legislation but it supports it, implements it and enforces it.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Mo bhuíochas leis na Teachtaí Devine agus Carthy as ucht an Bhille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. Cuirim fáilte roimh na daoine atá sa Ghailearaí. There is an urgent need to update Coco's Law. Coco's Law was and still is an important piece of legislation that rightly prosecutes those who share intimate images online or otherwise. Technology moves very quickly. The recent explosion of deep fake sexual images being created on social media platforms, such as X, has shocked many. Elsewhere in Europe, they have been quick to move. Just last week, French prosecutors raided the offices of X as part of their investigation into allegations of spreading child sexual abuse images. In England, the data privacy regulator has opened formal investigations into X's chatbot. We must keep pace.

I am quite flabbergasted after the Minister's speech. I am glad there are so many women in my party. Despite his protestations, I have not heard about the gardaí knocking anybody's door down for producing these images. The nonchalant way he was going on there was absolutely disgraceful.

Our Bill must amend Coco's Law to criminalise non-consensual intimate images and videos made through the use of AI. It must also increase the maximum penalties of those convicted. It will address the grey area of current legislation. However, this is only one part of the response. Holding the social media companies to account is the other part. This is something that this Government should have done long ago. It should certainly have done this since Christmas. The full extent of the law must be brought to bear on online platforms and service providers that try to flout the rules. The fines must be imposed and, crucially, recovered in full.

7 o'clock

As noted by the Teachta who was sitting beside me earlier, the Government has done nothing to ensure that these fines are paid. It has stood idly by in respect of this matter. We should be following the example of the French and ensuring that social media companies are fully held to account. The Government has been sitting on its hands for long enough. We need swift and decisive action to criminalise the distribution of AI images, increase maximum penalties upon

conviction and ensure social media companies are held accountable for their complicity in this vile crime against women and children.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I propose to share time with Deputy Lawlor. This Bill is very similar to, if not a mirror copy of, the Bill I published. It even has the same name, but we will not worry about that. The most important thing is that legislation is brought in one way or the other. I could not care less whether it is brought forward by my party, Sinn Féin or the Government.

The most important element of the Bill is its timing. We do not have time to wait. The Labour Party has the longest track record on this issue. My colleague and former Deputy Brendan Howlin was the instigator of Coco's Law, which, I acknowledge, was taken on and brought in by the Government. We identified a loophole in the legislation some time ago in that AI-generated images are not covered. As well as addressing that, we must invert responsibility for what is happening. Big-tech e-commerce companies could not care less about fines. They build them into their business planning. The only thing that will work is making them criminally liable where what we are discussing happens. It is the only thing that will work. I would love to see the EU dealing with this issue quickly but I do not believe it possible that it will do so. We cannot wait for it act. The European Commission has confirmed that there is no reason whatsoever that Ireland cannot act to deal with this issue. I did not think that needed to be confirmed but it has been.

The legislation, in whatever form it takes, must deal with AI- and computer-generated images and ensure that the law is inverted such that these companies have to adhere to Irish law rather than us having to chase them. At the media committee, of which I am Cathaoirleach, we heard Gráinne Seoige's story. It was horrendous. In that situation, people have to go to An Garda Síochána and identify the person distributing these vile images. Then gardaí have to go to the person and try to get his or her phone. If people have to go to court for a court order, the judge, having weighed up the question in terms of proportionality, may decide the phone cannot be given over in view of everything else that is on it. All of this happens, and the process goes on endlessly.

I have seen the correspondence to and from the big-tech company in the case I mentioned. I know what happened with An Garda Síochána and that it was not the fault of its members. We need to change the law in order that these companies are criminally liable where they allow their e-commerce platform to be used to create and-or distribute AI- or computer-generated images. We also need to deal with platforms like WhatsApp in respect of the sharing of these images. We must ensure we protect our children and all our citizens. It is absolutely incumbent on us to do so.

When we challenged representatives of TikTok who appeared before the committee about what was going on, the response is one that will live with me forever. The representative said the company's goal is "minimising harm". The goal is not to prevent harm but to minimise it. As the father of a 15-year-old girl and a 14-year-old boy, that scared me. These companies should not be minimising harm but 100% preventing or stopping it.

I have used the example of the process whereby pharmaceutical drugs are brought into the State to help people when they are ill. The drugs are analysed and go through a regulatory process overseen by the Health Products Regulatory Authority. We would not allow a drug

into this country that would deliberately harm people or minimise the harm to them. We would not allow that scenario. Why are we allowing it in this instance? Is it because the whole virus of social media has gone so far and is so controlling? Is it because the companies are based here and we are dependent on their taxes? What is more important? Our duty as TDs in this House is to do two things: first, uphold the Constitution; and, second, legislate for what is right to protect our people. We are not doing the latter when it comes to this issue unless we bring in legislation to address it.

As other committee members in attendance here know, Meta and TikTok refused point-blank to tell us the number of accounts registered to people aged under 16. However, this goes beyond the whole debate on whether we should ban social media for under-16s. How can we trust these companies when they will not even give us basic information like that? How can we ensure they are held accountable rather than our having to chase them? We cannot wait until the European Union catches up, which I do not believe it will do. Ireland will assume the European Presidency later this year. I accept the bona fides of the Minister and the Government on this matter. This is not an Opposition versus Government issue. It is about what is right and what can be done in a timely fashion.

We must bring in legislation to deal with this matter. I am absolutely convinced of that, having dealt with the issue intimately for months. We cannot allow what is going on to keep infecting the citizens, children and adults, who are badly affected by it. We need to legislate to ensure the companies are accountable to us and we do not have to continue to chase them.

Deputy George Lawlor: The core purpose of this amending legislation is twofold. It seeks, first, to explicitly prohibit the creation of non-consensual intimate or otherwise harmful imagery and, second, to extend the period during which proceedings may be initiated, thereby ensuring victims are not denied justice due to the often slow discovery of online offences. Coco's Law, the 2020 Act brought through the House by my predecessor in Wexford, Brendan Howlin, working with the inspirational Jackie Fox, already criminalises the distribution of intimate images without consent and addresses a large range of harmful online communications.

Unfortunately, however, gaps remain. One of the most significant is the absence of a clear stand-alone offence of the creation of non-consensual intimate imagery. As technology advances, individual facilitators such as Elon Musk and others, and, indeed, the deviants in our towns, villages, neighbourhoods and households, can fabricate intimate images using very accessible editing tools or AI-based systems, even where no original image exists. This form of abuse can be as damaging as the sharing of real images, yet the current legislation does not fully capture the act of creation itself. This amending legislation would close that loophole by making it an offence to produce, alter or manipulate imagery depicting a person in an intimate or compromising context without his or her consent regardless of whether the image is subsequently shared. We often hear of these images being used to mentally torture or coercively control.

The second major reform, extending the timeframe for initiating proceedings, responds to the reality that victims often only discover these harmful images and content long after they are created or circulated. Online material can be hidden, shared anonymously or stored on private platforms, making timely detection often difficult.

The existing six-month window for summary offences can therefore be unreasonably restrictive. By lengthening this period, this amendment would give An Garda Síochána and prosecutors greater flexibility to act, and it would acknowledge the unique challenges posed by digital evidence, delayed reporting and the emotional trauma many victims face before coming forward. Together, these changes would modernise the 2020 Act, reinforce the State's commitment to protecting individuals from digital exploitation and ensure the law keeps pace with emerging forms of online harm. They would also send a clear societal message that the creation of non-consensual intimate imagery is a serious violation of personal autonomy and that victims deserve adequate time and legal support to pursue justice. The perpetrators of these heinous, devious and cowardly crimes should have, and will have, no place to hide.

To the victims I say that what they have endured is not a small thing. Having their image or even a fabricated version of them used without their consent is a profound violation of dignity and trust. None of that is their fault. The harm lies entirely with those who chose to misuse technology and exploit their privacy. They deserve to hear that clearly. The victims are not alone in this experience even though it may have felt that way. Many people suffer in silence because shame and fear convince them they have no voice. However, their voices matter. Their stories matter. The emotional weight of discovering that an intimate or harmful image has been created without their consent can and has been overwhelming, and it is completely valid to feel anger, frustration and, sometimes, even grief. This is not a journey they should have to walk without support.

As legislators, we have a responsibility to ensure the law keeps pace with the reality of digital harm. As we all know, technology moves and evolves quickly and so must the protections that safeguard the rights of the people affected. We in this House must be committed to strengthening the law so that the creation of these images is treated with the seriousness it deserves. We simply have to work to ensure that victims are not denied justice simply because these offences often come to light after they occur. Victims must know they will not be left behind. Their experiences must shape stronger protections, clearer accountability and a legal system that recognises the depth of the harm they have faced.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill and Deputies Carthy and Devine for the work they have put into it. I also welcome to the Gallery those people who are visiting to listen to this debate. I thank the Government for not opposing this Bill. I welcome that but it is, of course, the very least we can ask. This is a Bill that makes sense. We know Coco's Law has worked over the last number of years. This simple amendment will allow it to keep pace and add some other fixes around access to justice, which are also very important. Essentially, it builds on good law by keeping it up to pace. The Social Democrats will also be introducing legislation that looks at the copyright angle of this area and will allow people to copyright their own personal identity. At the moment, that copyright only extends to commercial activities like singing. What we want to put forward is a copyright law that will protect people's likeness, features, voices and bodies. It is legislation that is being pursued in Denmark and we believe it is another way we can respond to the crisis in which we now find ourselves.

Let us recap on that crisis and what has happened with Grok over the last number of months. An unsafe product, a nudification app, was unleashed on the market. That is the marketing terminology but the legal terminology is image-based sexual abuse, IBSA, and child sexual

abuse material, CSAM. That is what this product has done. What we have seen in response from governments and regulators across the globe, including our own, is absolutely shocking. We have seen outcry and hand-wringing. I read a headline today that Coimisiún na Meán is horrified. Investigations are under way by An Garda Síochána. The European Commission is investigating the risk element. What is not happening is any meaningful results for those people who have been harmed by this product. We have had geoblocking from Grok itself, which is, first of all, too little and far too late, but is also something that anybody with VPN can get around in a minute so it is not actually doing anything. The nudification app still works. People can still abuse through image-based sexual abuse and child sexual abuse material.

Other jurisdictions have gone further. We have seen the X offices in Paris raided by the French Government, which I welcome. As Deputy Cairns said in the House a couple of weeks ago, if we had a warehouse on Pearse Street alongside the X offices here which was producing CSAM and IBSA at the same level as it is being produced online, it would have been shut down and prosecutions would have been brought forward. However, because it is on the Internet, we do not see that same response. We do not see anything that actually deals with the crimes that are being committed and with the regulatory transgressions being committed by these companies.

What is the harm that people are experiencing? It is devastating to the people who are experiencing this child sexual abuse material and image-based sexual abuse. It is a violation of their rights, dignity, privacy and autonomy. It has an immediate effect on people but it is not instantaneous because it will stay with them, follow them around, affect their mental health and their life in ways we cannot even imagine unless we are victims of this crime.

I also wish to speak to something that is under-reported, namely, the societal impact of this. Not only is this a product of the misogynistic society we are in but it is something which also fuels it. We are seeing, for example, reports that younger female teachers in schools across Ireland are increasingly experiencing misogyny from their young students. This is exactly the kind of tool and behaviour which fuels younger members of our society into thinking that it is okay to objectify and demean women, and to dehumanise them in this way. It is exactly this behaviour that fuels the epidemic of sexual and gender-based violence which we know is such a problem in this world. Yet, what do we do? We see our governments wringing their hands and, again, talking about how bad it is. Not even that; we had one Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, blame the user. He does not even go as far as blaming the tech platforms.

Deepfakes are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to online harms. This is the other thing I want to speak to. This is one area which is hugely problematic, has rightly caused huge consternation in society and has provoked reactions from across this House, the media and society. This legislation is to be commended as it seeks to address a specific piece of it but even if we fix this, it will not deal with the core issue, which is big tech. We need to deal with online platforms, e-commerce, or whatever we want to call them, and the way in which the online harms that are proliferating on these companies' websites are reaching into the lives of every single individual in society and that governments and regulators across the globe have no control and no ability to hold them to account. We get messages that either the regulatory and legal framework does not exist for them to do that, that when the framework does exist it is too hard to enforce, or that when they want to enforce it, it is not working and the companies do not pay heed to fines or whatever else. None of this is good enough. I do not care if it is

about jobs, tax, or whatever it is; the Government needs to step up because these companies are running rings around it. Every day people are paying the price. Everybody is paying the price. The worst part of all this is that these are technologies, particularly AI, which could bring so much amazing benefit to society. Unfortunately, the more we see products like this unleashed on society, and we will see more and more of them, that trust will be eroded and AI as a tool will be completely undermined. We will start to see the inequality divide online increase further, as people pay to access tools that they can trust and will work for them, while everybody else just gets to dive around in the cesspit that is the Internet.

Today is Safer Internet Day, the theme of which is "AI Aware: Safe, Smart, and in Control". There was an event in the Department of justice to mark the day, at which members of a youth panel spoke to the issue. While that sort of activity is to be welcomed, I do not know how the Government can stand over celebrating Safer Internet Day when it cannot even deal with a safe Internet.

It cannot hold big tech to account and actually provide a safe Internet. I am crystal-clear on exactly what this Government needs to do to deal with big tech. Our Government needs to grow a pair. It needs to regulate, enforce, prosecute and make the Internet safer. I welcome this Bill and commend it but we need so much more from the Government.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I acknowledge Sinn Féin for bringing forward this welcome Bill. I will support it because it responds to a harm that is no longer hypothetical and no longer something we can say the law has time to catch up with. Only today, Ireland's Online Safety Commissioner said she was "horrified" by what she saw when testing the AI system Grok. She was horrified that it could generate sexualised, degrading images of people who never consented and never could consent. That is not a campaign group talking. This is the State's own regulator warning us that the technology is already ahead of the law that is supposed to protect us from it.

Coco's Law was landmark legislation. It mattered. It helped victims, but it was written for a world where abuse followed an image that already existed. What we are dealing with now is different. We are dealing with abuse that begins with a fabrication. A person does not need to take to take a photo, access your phone or deceive you into trust. They simply need your face. That changes everything. The harm is the same. The shame they seek to impose upon a victim is the same. The fear is the same. The consequences remain the same - jobs potentially lost and relationships potentially damaged. People are still silenced but the scale, speed and accessibility of the abuse has exploded. This Bill matters because it names that reality very clearly. It says that an intimate image is not just something captured by a camera. It can be digitally generated, it can be artificial, and it can and will destroy someone's life. It also does something important and overdue. It treats the act of generating this material without consent as part of the wrongdoing, not just from the moment it is shared. This is essential if we want prevention, rather than permanent clean-up after the damage is done.

The Bill extends the time limits for bringing cases forward. That matters too. Victims do not report in a neat legal timeframe; they report when they are safe enough, strong enough or when the threat finally becomes unbearable. The law should reflect that reality, not punish people for surviving it. I want to say this clearly. Online abuse is not just an unfortunate side-effect of public life; it is a deliberate tactic. It is gendered, sexualised and designed to intimidate

people out of participation. If we keep telling people, especially women and minorities, that this is just the cost of being visible, we are complicit in the narrowing of who gets to speak and lead. Ireland hosts many of these platforms that profit from this content travelling fast and far. We cannot keep outsourcing responsibility while victims are left chasing take-downs that come too late and often not at all.

The Social Democrats will support this Bill but I legislation alone is not enough. We need Garda capacity, fast, enforceable take-down systems and real consequences for those facilitating this abuse at scale. France has recently shown us the way in that regard. When our Online Safety Commissioner tells us she is horrified by what these tools can already do, the response of Dáil Éireann cannot be just caution or delay. The Bill is a necessary step. I acknowledge those who brought it forward. I hope the State will enact it at great speed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will share time with Deputy Healy.

I agree that AI is opening up a new frontier for misogyny and abuse. I also raise tonight that the image-based sexual abuse laws we have are not being implemented. I am very concerned about the institutions that we have and how they deal with non-consensual imagery being shared, particularly institutions that deal with young people. I will highlight this by starting with the case of a medical student in UCD who, in mid-2025, had a nude, bruised and unconscious image of herself shared and circulated to a significant number of UCD staff email addresses. This image was procured after she was raped by a student, a rape that she chose not to report - most women and victims do not report. The picture showed her bruised and undressed. I will not be too graphic, but I want to bring home the levels of misogyny that we have in our society. A finger was pointing toward her vagina. She was clearly unconscious or asleep.

The image was first shared in that email but subsequently, due to the inaction of UCD school of medicine and the leadership of UCD in general, it was shared on a WhatsApp group of students. I could not even repeat in the Dáil the comments that accompanied it. I felt nauseated after reading them. I will say, however, that there were further rape threats and further threats to use objects to violently rape this person. This person was told she should take her own life. She was called all sorts of names and comments were made about her appearance and so on.

My issue is this. It was horrific that this happened. I cannot blame UCD for the circulation of that image in the first instance, but I can blame it when it was subsequently shared on two further occasions. The first time was to the email addresses. The university contacted An Garda Síochána but did not make any contact with this young woman for about a week or a week and a half. That is absolutely outrageous. It also never had a proper meeting with the victim of this image-based sexual abuse. Students who received this image subsequently were not warned. There was no huge meeting to explain the dire consequences of sharing image-based sexual abuse. No information was provided to students about safeguarding or risk assessment.

In November 2025, the image was circulated to student group chats, accompanied by violent and misogynistic threats. In January 2026, it was circulated to a group of medical students at St. Vincent's. This has to be registered because UCD is the biggest university in this State. It has tens of thousands of students in its charge. It does not seem to have due regard for safeguarding in respect of image-based sexual abuse or how to react. There was no compassion

or real sympathy shown to the victim in this case by the school of medicine either. It is unbelievable that trainee doctors are circulating images like this, but that is unfortunately where we are.

The student who was raped in this incident and did not report the rape experienced further repercussions in her own life arising from that rape, which I will go into at another time. Again, those were never dealt with with any sense of compassion by UCD. I have written to UCD school of medicine and management about this and the lack of culture. Apart from the meeting with some class representatives, the way the victim put it to me was that they have had more warnings about littering the library than about the consequences of resharing images like this. On one occasion, the university newspaper was threatened if it took up the story. I am particularly concerned about what the safeguarding policies are. Safeguarding policies seem to be just about harassment. If someone is being harassed, they can contact the university but in this case the person does not know who is harassing them. The Garda has not been able to find the original source of this image due to the clever use of technology. Our institutions are way behind. Never mind AI, they are way behind with laws that have been in place for a number of years.

The head of UCD should meet this victim, as I think the Minister of State would agree, to discuss the consequences. She does not want anything like this to happen to any student again. Clearly, UCD is not learning any lessons if it is not willing to do that. I should also add that this student has suffered incredibly from the original rape, which she did not want to report because she knew she would probably not be believed. This sort of reaction by the UCD authorities does not bode well for anybody who wants to come forward in these situations.

I felt it was important to raise that on the floor of the Dáil. If our universities do not have proper safeguards in place to deal with the sharing of images of students in these situations, what hope is there for us? Will the Minister of State take this up with the head of UCD and ask her to meet with this woman - I would be happy to meet with UCD - who is certainly the victim in this case?

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. I thank the Sinn Féin Deputies for bringing it forward. I welcome the Bill. It is important legislation, although it is short, that is vital for the protection of the public, both adults and children, to stop the creation and distribution of intimate images without consent. Unfortunately, there are gaps in the principal Act of 2020. This legislation deals with that by creating a stand-alone offence of the creation of non-consensual intimate images.

This is an area where there must be no room for confusion, loopholes or grey areas. It is an area that must be dealt with and legislated for urgently. What we are dealing with here is, of course, a crime and a violation of individuals on the basis of image-based sexual abuse and child sexual abuse material. As I said, this is important legislation. It clarifies the original Act, creates the stand-alone offence and increases the time limit within which a case can be taken. That is very important because on very many occasions there can be long delays in information coming forward, so the extension of that time is vitally important. The increase in penalties is also very significant and welcome. This is very important legislation that I urge the Government to accept. I know it is not opposing the Bill but what we need is urgent action to implement the proposals in it.

I will also refer to the whole question of access by minors aged under 16 to social media. As we know, Australia was the world's first country to ban social media access for under-16s. That ban came into force in December 2025. Other countries, such as Spain, France, Denmark, Greece and Portugal, either have or are introducing similar bans of their own. In fact, the Spanish Prime Minister said, and I agree with him, that children must be protected from what he calls "the digital Wild West". Minors in Ireland have unsupervised access to a space they were never meant to navigate and are exposed to violence, manipulation, abuse, addiction, pornography and much more. Early access to social media is linked to risks, including cyberbullying, mental health issues, depression, anxiety and exposure to harmful content.

The Government must introduce legislation in this area to include State-enforced regulation to prevent access by under-16s to social media and require platforms to introduce technology-verified identity systems to prevent that access. Self-reported age is simply not good enough any more. Most platforms formally require people to be over the age of 13 but there is effectively no enforcement of that. The platforms will strenuously object to these proposals but they are of vital importance.

The owners of these tech companies are part of an elite group of billionaires. Nine of the ten top social media companies in the world are owned by six billionaires and eight of the top ten AI companies are billionaire-run. These billionaires use their extreme concentration of wealth to shape laws to influence the media, technology, taxation and public policy in their favour. These companies must be faced down for the protection of children. We must not be laggards in this area, waiting and waiting for the EU to act. As I said, other countries in the EU, such as Spain, France, Denmark, Greece and Portugal, have gone on their own. We must do the same and we must do it quickly.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Bille seo inniu. It addresses one of the most insidious frontiers of crime in modern Ireland. For years, we watched technology outpace our laws but today it is outpacing our own sense of human dignity. We are living in an era where nudification has become a service and predators do not even need a camera to destroy a life. All they need is an algorithm.

We stood in this Chamber and spoke about Coco's Law as landmark legislation, and it was, but technology is moving fast and the Government's system is moving too slow for it. Today, we are witnessing the rise of a new industry of misery - AI-generated deepfakes. Right now, a predator can take the face of a young girl from social media, run it through a nudification app, generate pornographic material of her and, because this image is technically a computer-generated image, the Government's current laws are not able to keep up. Rather, they ask whether it is an intimate image or a real person. While the Government's law debates the definitions, real persons get destroyed.

This Bill asserts a vital truth; any of these materials are real harm. We must criminalise the actual creation of these images from the outset. We know that *hotline.ie* received 1,500 reports of intimate image abuse last year and only a fraction of these ever resulted in a conviction. Gardaí are fighting a digital war with their hands tied behind their back. Under the current two-year statute limits, the clock often expires before a tech company in California, or even Dublin, responds to a data request. Agencies such as the Data Protection Commission and Coimisiún na Meán need more than laws. They need the power and resources to enforce those

laws, including the ability to fine companies into compliance. It is estimated that 6,700 sexually abusive images are produced by AI every single hour, 99% of which target women and children. *Hotline.ie* reported a 166% increase last year in computer-generated or computer-altered child abuse materials.

Last week, the Oireachtas committee was treated very shoddily by major tech companies. X refused to appear. Others refused to give information about how many children are using their services and have admitted to refusing to building in the necessary safety to the design. Grok is not alone in the production of this material. Merlio AI, Soulgen, nudify-online, undress AI, DreamGF, deepnude.cc, Promptchan AI and Candy.ai all facilitate nudification tools. One video generation tool, owned by the Chinese giant Alibaba, allows for this material to be created. It allows anybody to upload an image and do anything they like with that image. ByteDance, which is a parent company of TikTok, offers an unmoderated video generation tool as well.

Six years ago, Aontú introduced a Bill looking for the banning of the provision of hardcore pornography to children. When we raised it, the Government turned its face against it, even though there is massive evidence that children are being distorted by this material and are being led to assaults in relation to it. We need to make sure that we look at the whole swathe of Internet content that is having significant negative effects on the minds of our young children.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Did we ever think we would see the day where we would see imagery like this? When we grew up in our day, and a lot of people here grew up at the same time, if we had a row at school or outside, it did not follow us home.

The problem we have with the social media is that it follows you everywhere. Whether you are dead or not, it follows you. Whether it is AI-generated this or AI-generated that, it is all down to algorithms. People want to know how many likes they got here and there.

People always ask me about social media. I am on social media but I never answer anyone on social media. If people do not have the common sense or the know-how to pick up the phone and contact me, I will not talk to a phone that has algorithms and all the rest of it. I use it for good to help people but a lot of companies are using it for their own benefit. We do not know who is talking any more. People might see something coming from the States but no one knows if it is real any more. They do not know who is talking. It can have the Minister of State where he is now and have him doing something he is not physically able to do. The younger generation does not know any different. They see something on social media and they think it is true. No matter how false it is, they think it is true.

Why not have legislation that provides that if something is generated by AI or anything else, it must be clearly marked across the top that it has been AI-generated and if it is not marked, the liability is on the platforms. Producers of food or anything else in this country have to label their products as theirs, so why not label stuff as generated by AI, regardless of whether someone else is using their stuff. Accountability has to go right back to the people who allow it, the platforms. It should be marked. There should be accountability. How many lives have been ruined and taken because of false images being posted and mistruths being told? People look at it and then it is yesterday's news, with no accountability.

The Government has to get off its backside on this and get out in front of it. It has to make sure this is stopped for our children's lives, our friends' lives, our neighbours' lives and for everyone's life. They have to be protected. AI can be brilliant for certain things when it is used within the parameters for which it is meant to be used but when it is taken outside those parameters and used for harm or to hurt somebody, we cannot stand idly by. We need to have a branding system so people, including the next generation, can see that something is only AI-generated. We need a branding system that shows stuff like this and brings the portfolio back to the person and company that put it out in the first place.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: How long do I have?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): You have three and a half minutes.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this Bill to the House. It is an important, detailed and well put together Bill. The senior Minister referred quite heavily in his speech to Coco's Law. More than 12 months ago, I wrote to the Minister about expanding Coco's Law on behalf of a young gentleman who lost his life in the River Lee in Cork - he was 33 years old - Luke Hyde. I asked him to bring in an addition, known as Luke's Law. This young man drowned in the River Lee while hundreds of people videoed him in difficulty. They videoed the final moments of his life. On three occasions, I have written to the Minister of State's Department and to the senior Minister, requesting he meet the Hyde family. I have received an acknowledgement that my letter was received. I have never received an appointment or a possible opening for him to meet and talk to this family. This heartbroken mother still sees images of her child occasionally arrive on TikTok. She opens her phone, Facebook or whatever and sees images of Luke in his final moments of distress. No one is willing to talk about that. I have asked the Minister of State and the Minister to bring in a Luke's Law to address that situation. It ties in a lot with the things being discussed tonight, nudification and the atrocities that are happening in what is the digital wild west, without a doubt, to women and particularly to children.

Paedophile rings have become incredibly sophisticated. That is the reality. They have embraced technology far more than most of us ever have. They are now scanning the globe, generating these types of images and sharing them on various platforms on the dark web, on Telegram and on various other communication networks and they have become very sophisticated. The problem is that we are not able to catch up. For some reason, criminal activity and those who are generating money from this and those involved in gratification from looking at young children are far more sophisticated and are running rings around the Irish Government, European governments and the rest.

I do not know whether this legislation will make much difference. I say that because we are dealing with people in Singapore, China and Taiwan and groups in Silicon Valley. How far does it span? The entire world has to be working on this. The entire networks have to be working on it.

Deputy O'Donoghue made a valid point about branding AI images. The other thing we have to address - penalising people is mentioned in the legislation and bringing them-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome this legislation that updates Coco's Law, which made it an offence to share or threaten to share intimate images without consent. Much has changed in recent years. At the time, the legislation did not explicitly criminalise the generation of a sexualised image of someone without consent, the creation of deep fake images, the manipulation of existing images to make them sexual, or - and this is a fundamental part of the Bill - the production of harmful images, even if they are never shared. I have to ask why anyone would produce an image if not to share it. It is then there possibly as a coercive threat, which goes back to the fundamental reason for Coco's Law, which criminalises threatening as well as doing it.

The creation should be banned, if it is possible to enforce, because AI has made these types of abuse dramatically easier. Deep fakes can be created from a single photograph. Child abuse imagery can be created without a real child being present and there are nudified versions of ordinary photographs. The second part of the Bill, which I welcome, changes the time for bringing a case from two to five years. Victims often discover the abuse long after it happens, so that is crucial.

We need to be able to get at the individuals who are creating and disseminating the images and, as others have said, go after the companies. They are getting away too easily in Ireland and relatively easily in the European Union. We have to do it collectively as a federation of states. We have to stand up to these companies, whether they are in China, the US or anywhere else in the world.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank Deputies Devine and Carthy for raising this issue. I also extend my appreciation to all the other speakers who contributed to the debate this evening. It was interesting to listen to so many points on which there was broad agreement in this House. It is not that usual to hear that.

As mentioned, online safety is a priority for the Government and the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and I have it at the heart of what we believe is important in what we are doing. It will also be a priority during our EU Presidency. The European Commission has a key role to play in this area. It is important to ensure we work together with other member states. As the Minister, and indeed the previous Deputy, indicated, a momentum is being developed to prohibit at European level the types of AI systems that enable the generation of child sexual abuse material and non-consensual intimate content of people. It is important that we drive this at EU level because we need to drive it at that scale.

A significant body of existing legislation provides the foundation of Ireland's online safety framework, including the regulation of social media. Coimisiún na Meán, as Ireland's online safety media regulator, is at the heart of that framework. Under the framework, it is for the regulated platforms to demonstrate they have the correct safety measures in place to prevent illegal or harmful content being shown. The EU AI Act complements the protections provided for in the Digital Services Act, by introducing stronger governance for AI that is developed or deployed within the European Union.

These provisions will introduce transparency requirements such that AI-generated images must be clearly labelled, as has been mentioned, as being made by AI.

The Government is in the process of implementing domestic legislation to give full effect to the EU AI Act in Ireland. The main supervision and enforcement provisions will come into effect in August, as the Minister mentioned. These provide a formal regulatory mechanism for relevant surveillance authorities to engage with individual companies specifically on the development, provision and deployment of AI systems.

I reiterate that the harmful digital practices being debated disproportionately target women and children. So many of the contributors tonight made that point and it should be made by everybody who speaks on this matter.

In such circumstances, the zero-tolerance strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is extremely relevant. Cuan is engaging with partners and stakeholders on research relating to the harmful effects of violent pornography and its links to violence against women and children in order to develop an evidence-based pornography literacy strategy spanning public awareness and education. This includes co-ordination with the Department of Education and Youth, ongoing work to provide prevention, consent and healthy relationships education through our schools and other youth settings and the implementation of the framework for ending sexual violence and harassment in higher education.

I reiterate that I am committed to keeping all legislation under review, as is the Minister. Technology is evolving rapidly, and criminal law must keep up. I have made it clear in the many contributions that I have made on this topic that one of the problems that we face in democracies is trying to keep pace with the speed at which things change. The ability of companies to instigate and commercialise products is effectively faster than most democracies can respond to them through legislation. What we are doing here this evening is important. I will consider whatever legislative amendments are required arising out of this debate.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: We have seen a flood of deepfake sexual images generated by AI, often depicting children. As we know, Coco's Law criminalised the non-consensual recording or distribution of intimate images. However, it remains unclear whether the 2020 Act covers the creation of such images. It is important that the law keeps up with technology. In that context, the Government has been moving at snail's pace in many ways. We in Sinn Féin have three straightforward amendments to Coco's Law. One is to explicitly criminalise the non-consensual creation and generation of intimate images and videos using AI. The second is to extend the Statute of Limitations from two years to five for summary offences. The third is to increase the maximum penalties upon conviction.

Government inaction has left a clear gap in the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020. The recent Grok nudification scandal shows the consequences. A total of 85% of generated images were sexualised and during the Christmas period, an estimated 3 million sexualised images were produced, including 23,000 that appear to depict children. AI and big tech are really destroying the minds of a generation of children. That is quite shocking. We must do everything we can to stop it.

In my constituency of Wicklow-Wexford, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence continues to rise. Sexual assaults rose by 44% in Wicklow and 120% in Wexford over the past

two decades, so we need zero tolerance for violence against men, women and children, which is often related to such imagery. We must also ensure that An Garda Síochána has the personnel and resources to hold offenders to account and to ensure that social media companies face the full force of the law.

This Bill will criminalise the non-consensual creation of intimate images through AI and strengthen penalties. We call on all TDs to support it.

Deputy Martin Kenny: As the Minister of State knows, the purpose of the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences (Amendment) Bill is to try to ensure that we can avoid situations where individuals are taking advantage of technology. He mentioned that technology is moving so fast it is hard to keep up with it. That is certainly the point. He also made a valid point to the effect that the victims are primarily women and children, which means that the perpetrators are primarily men. That is something else that has to be considered in respect of this. For many years, social media, which is really antisocial media, has allowed the development of pornography and the spread and normalisation of hateful and harmful abuse. An element of that has been happening for some time and no checks have been put in place. So many people online are anonymous. We do not know who they are and there is no way of finding out who is behind all of this. The tech companies will not tell us who they are either. These companies have a responsibility. If they can say they are only facilitating what is happening, then the minimum they can do is identify those they are facilitating. At present, they do not do that to any great extent.

The purpose of the legislation is to deal with this relatively new phenomenon whereby the technology that is used has the capacity to visually undress and sexualise children and women, and use that as a weapon. This is about a power imbalance. All of these things are about power. It is about people who think that they have the power to humiliate and degrade others and that this enrich and lift them up. It is about time that we stepped in firmly, not just here in Ireland but globally, to ensure that we prevent any more of this from happening.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The Bill before the House is plain and simple. It amends what is known as Coco's Law. The purpose of the Bill is to clear up a grey area of whether the 2020 Act explicitly covers the creation of intimate images. However, it fails to state that the generation or creation of deepfake sexual images of adults is illegal. This must be remedied immediately. We witnessed the Grok controversy in December and January. Researchers estimated that 6,700 sexually suggestive nudified images were created hourly. These mainly depicted women, children and young girls and represent a violation of sacrosanct human rights. As if that was not bad enough, after a huge backlash, instead of removing such a base tool, X hid Grok behind a paywall rather removing it.

The French have taken action, along with the UK's Ofcom, and have launched an investigation and raided X offices, citing violations of the digital safety Act. X and similar platforms must be constrained from allowing the creation of nudified images of women, children and young girls. Many countries are now calling for the removal of tools that can facilitate the latter. The Government must act. I would like to see action similar to that in France and the UK being taken here. That is why Deputies Máire Devine and Matt Carthy and Sinn Féin put this Bill forward.

Coco's Law is a deterrent but needs strengthening. A review of the Act in 2024 stated that 100 cases were prosecuted by the Director of Public Prosecutions between 2021 and 2023. However, more than 1,500 victim reports were made in the same period. This is why we are asking that the Bill be accepted and that Coco's Law be strengthened in order to criminalise non-consensual intimate images and increase the maximum penalties on conviction. I welcome the fact that the Minister is not opposing the Bill.

Deputy Máire Devine: I thank all those who contributed. I also thank the stakeholders involved. We have come a long way from Bebo. That is a flashback. The Minister mentioned that the Attorney General thinks the existing definition is okay. The stakeholders and victims feel it is not, but that is for us to work out at the committee. We can discuss the matter, listen to people's opinions and come to a conclusion on the matter in a fairly urgent manner. This is urgent; we cannot allow what is happening to continue because it will just multiply. I describe it as being like a virus that gallops through people. In the past few weeks and months, it has galloped through all our little minds in the context of what we are watching or are being subjected to. As has been stated, 99% of the images involved relate to women and children.

The core issue here is the violation of the privacy and dignity of women and children by creating sexualised depictions of those who cannot and do not consent. There are Irish people involved in what is happening, but it could take two years for the Garda to even get to look at images that supposedly exist. By the time that happens, victims will have had to put up with, live with and dodge the existence of such images for years.

8 o'clock

Technology is enabling non-consensual harm. In that context, the burden should not fall on the victims to fight back alone. That is why we are here. Stronger safeguards, clearer laws and responsible and accountable AI design are not optional; they are urgent needs to preserve social cohesion. The rise of misogyny and sexual assault is deeply concerning. We all need to be very concerned about that. Apparently, there has been a 43% increase in sexual offences, according to statistics issued by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre at the weekend. This virus is infecting minds and warping them, especially the minds of our youth because they do not know any different. It is abhorrent and we as leaders must be diligent. We need to stand firm, be proactive, be parents and educate our young people.

We are not going to rely on the technology giants, which appear to have a preference for, allegiance to and maybe a love for robots as opposed to humanity. They make them a priority. Their only concern is profit and their moral compasses are largely lost. Ultimately, these mega-corporations must be held to account. We must pass robust legislation that can be used to deal with the task at hand. We need to stand together. It is imperative that we do so because we all agree that it needs fixing and fixing fast. We must stand up to these tech giants that are undermining democracies and humanity worldwide. They are also undermining how we are with each other worldwide. There is a lot of hate out there and a lot of toxic nastiness that, as one of my colleagues said, would make you want to vomit at times. I voice my solidarity again with all those people in the Public Gallery who have worked really hard and who are not going to stop. They are going to gallop through this virus and we are going to stop it whatever way we can. I look forward to engaging with the committee on this.

Question agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 8.02 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 8.08 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 8.02 p.m. and resumed at 8.08 p.m.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Insurance Coverage

156. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure that flood insurance is extended to the approximately 290,000 buildings in the State that have limited or no flood insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10449/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This question relates to flood insurance. We have seen floods destroy homes, communities and businesses alike. The Central Bank's figures show that 290,000 buildings in the State are at risk of flooding and that the owners struggle to access flood insurance. Almost 100% of those have either limited cover or no cover at all. This does not even include properties at risk from coastal flooding. What actions is the Government taking to make sure that flood insurance will be available to everyone who needs it?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I acknowledge the serious damage caused by recent flooding events and their impact on families, communities and businesses across Ireland. The Government remains committed to protecting Ireland's current and future generations by investing in climate adaptation measures to manage the impacts of extreme weather. Accordingly, €1.3 billion has been committed to the delivery of flood relief schemes over the lifetime of the national development plan, NDP, to 2030. This will protect approximately 23,000 properties across various communities from river and coastal flood risk.

In terms of flood insurance, the Central Bank of Ireland has undertaken extensive research into the nature and scale of the flood protection gap in Ireland. It found that one in 20 buildings - approximately 5% - has limited access to flood insurance and that 54% of this gap is concentrated in Dublin, Cork, Louth, Clare and Kildare.

It found that one in 20 buildings, approximately 5%, have limited access to flood insurance and that 54% of this gap is concentrated in Dublin, Cork, Louth, Clare and Kildare. However, our recent experiences demonstrate that the impacts of flooding are not solely limited to those counties. The report notes that no single solution exists to address the flood protection gap.

Building on the work carried out by the Central Bank, the Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025 to 2029 includes four specific actions on flood and climate protection. With respect to action 17 of the action plan, the Department of Finance is currently engaging with multiple stakeholders on the development of a long-term strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance to consider potential solutions specific to Ireland to increase the availability and

affordability of flood insurance. An update will shortly be provided to the Cabinet sub-committee on insurance reform. My officials will also continue to monitor developments at EU and international level and assess flood insurance matters, including through participation in the OPW and the Insurance Ireland working group. These matters remain a priority for the Government and efforts continue to be made to encourage a responsive approach from the industry.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Lack of access to insurance can affect communities and businesses in a very real way. The Minister of State mentioned the Central Bank report. In 2024, it reported as follows: "The occurrence of a severe flood could leave households and businesses with high levels of uninsured losses, impairing economic recovery from a flood event". It concluded that there is "a serious risk of complacency". Everything the Minister has said is more of the same complacency. Indeed, when the Tánaiste, who is seated beside him, was Minister ten years ago he talked about flood insurance. Ten years on, nothing has happened. We have the same situation over and over again.

The Minister of State is talking about more high-level reports, meetings and so on. Right now, we have a situation where private insurance companies pick and choose who they will extend flood insurance to. We do not allow that to happen with health insurance companies. We do not say they are allowed to only pick people who are healthy, young and all of that, but we let flood insurers get away with this. What is the Government going to do? We can roll back the tapes ten years. In fairness to the Tánaiste, when he was the Minister responsible for the OPW, he said we needed to deal with this issue. However, ten years on we are still not dealing with it and there are still no solutions. When is the complacency going to end?

Deputy Robert Troy: EU legislation, the Solvency II directive, states that neither the Central Bank nor the Minister for Finance can compel insurance companies to provide insurance cover. The last action plan on insurance reform delivered but gaps remain, and we acknowledge that. That is why we published a new action plan on insurance last summer. We acknowledge that State intervention is needed. That is why there are four actions in the action plan targeting this area. One of those actions, a priority action, is to develop a long-term strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance. That will bring together the Central Bank, the insurance industry, the Department of Finance and the OPW. The insurance industry has already established a flooding task force and we expect proposals in the next month, which will feed into our Department's stakeholder forum, which will also take place next month. The forum will bring together the Central Bank, insurance industry, Department of Finance and OPW to bring about a proposal to address this gap in the market.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The problem is that we have been hearing the same thing for the past ten years regarding task forces, multi-agency groups and the rest. That is all fine. We have to do some of that work to get the results and ideas. However, the Minister of State talks about his plans delivering but ten years on, they have not delivered for these households. Thousands of houses and businesses across the State have no insurance and are at risk of flooding. That is the problem here. The Government does not have a concrete plan.

Last year, when we raised this issue, Fine Gael went away and met with the CEOs of insurance companies and told them they should improve the level of cover for areas with

demountable flood defences. Let us park demountable flood defences, however, because only 4,500 people use them in the first instance. The vast majority, 250,000 people, do not use them. The reality is the insurance companies have not done anything on this issue. If private insurance companies are unwilling to provide insurance cover, the State needs to address that. Across the European Union, there is a recognition and acceptance that the State needs to step in where the sector fails. Is the Government going to deal with this issue and does it have a potential State-supported scheme on the table?

Deputy Robert Troy: The Government is dealing with this issue. That is why it is a number one priority in the action plan that was launched last year. The flood protection gap in this country is one of the lowest in the European Union. Under 5% of people cannot get access to flood insurance. I acknowledge that is of cold comfort to that 5%, but in terms of coverage from a European Union perspective, we have one of the lowest gaps in the EU. We are meeting with the industry and it has established a flood task force. The proposals are imminent, which will feed into the group that has been established by the Government, consisting of the OPW, the Department of Finance and the Central Bank. While I acknowledge there are people who cannot get access to flood insurance, this Government has not left them uncompensated. They have received funding through the humanitarian fund which is supported by the Government. I acknowledge there is a gap in the flood insurance market but that gap has been supported through Irish Red Cross funding put in place following every flooding incident. The most recent Red Cross funding put in place resulted in an increase in the funding paid to businesses that suffered flood damage.

Regional Aid

157. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to confirm the date on which the expanded living cities initiative will be formally introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10467/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: I raise with the Tánaiste the extension of the living cities initiative to five regional towns, including two in my constituency, Drogheda and Dundalk. When he has the opportunity he might state exactly when the initiative will go live for the new areas provided for under the Finance Act.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Nash for raising this issue, which he has raised on a number of occasions. As the Deputy and the House are aware, the living city initiative is a targeted measure aimed at specific areas in need of regeneration. It offers either income or corporation tax relief for qualifying expenditure incurred in the refurbishment and conversion of qualifying residential and commercial buildings located in what we call special regeneration areas, currently in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kilkenny, Limerick and Waterford. Budget 2026 announced a number of enhancements to the living city initiative to strengthen the scheme, including extending it to the end of 2030 and that it will be available to residential properties built before 1975 instead of 1915. Also, if work is carried out by an enterprise, the maximum relief available will be increased from €200,000 to €300,000.

It was also announced, to get to the nub of the Deputy's question, that the scheme would be extended to five regional centres, as set out in the national planning framework, namely, Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo. The cities and towns in which the special regeneration areas may be located are not specified in primary legislation. Instead, the existing areas were designated following consultation with the relevant city councils and an independent review by a third-party adviser. We are repeating that process for the new areas.

I am pleased to say my Department has very recently received the draft special regeneration area maps for each of the five towns from the relevant local authorities. I acknowledge the speed at which the local authorities moved, which is really important. An independent review of the draft maps will now be undertaken to ensure the maps' consistency with the criteria for the special regeneration area. My officials are currently working on appointing an expert for that review. Upon the satisfactory conclusion of that review, it will fall to me to designate the special regeneration areas by an order. I anticipate that the areas will be designated by the end of March. It will then be a matter for the local authorities to implement the scheme. My expectation, based on engagement, is that all of the new special regeneration areas will be open by June at the latest. I look forward to keeping the Deputy up to date on that.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Tánaiste. We can all agree that vacancy and dereliction are a scourge in communities up and down the country. There is a particularly pronounced problem in my hometown of Drogheda. The Tánaiste will be aware of the extent of the problem in the historic core town centre of what is a very historic town, with some very significant buildings from an architectural and heritage point of view. Louth County Council did an analysis last year of the inner town centre area and identified approximately 58 vacant and derelict buildings. In fact, 46 of those are now in the area the council proposes the special regeneration area should service in the context of this scheme.

Close to 600 applications have been made since the inception of the scheme a number of years ago. There is a real job of work to be done by the Department of Finance and Revenue Commissioners to ensure the newly expanded and enhanced scheme is accessible and people understand how they might use the scheme and how it might benefit them individually and the towns we represent.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree and I want to pick up on that point around the local authorities. Although I am quick enough to criticise various local authorities on various occasions, I want to acknowledge the speed at which Louth County Council and the councils for the other three areas moved. That shows, as Deputy Nash said, the scourge that dereliction and vacancy are, and in a housing emergency. We are all aligned on the need for this and I am pleased that we should be in a position to designate the special regeneration areas by the end of March and get these schemes open for applications, I hope, by June.

That point about the low uptake of the existing scheme is fair. Some of it is related to publicising the scheme and getting the word out there. I will certainly reflect on how we can do more of that with the local authorities. In regard to some of the changes we have made around the over-the-shop criteria, 1915 was probably too restrictive and we are moving it to 1975. We are also providing the certainty that it will be in place until 2030 and, coupled with the five additional towns, I hope it will make a real difference. We will obviously all need to monitor this. I know the Deputy's county is the only one that has two towns in the scheme,

Drogheda and Dundalk. I have been in Drogheda and I know the challenge of dereliction. I think this will make a big difference.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is one weapon in our armoury. There is no doubt about that but we need to take a varied approach to this. Another initiative, which was announced in the budget last year, was the transitioning of the derelict sites levy to a derelict sites tax. By definition, the responsibility for the collection of that tax will be given to the Revenue Commissioners. I have been campaigning for that for years; it makes sense. I always made the point that business owners who can afford to allow a building to become vacant and derelict must be quite wealthy because owners need to sweat every single asset they have to make sure their business is successful. Sometimes the only language that people understand is the brown envelope with the harp on it containing a tax demand. It is important we introduce that as quickly as possible.

I am a bit confounded as to why it will take so long to introduce the tax, or transition from the levy to the tax. We have a very sophisticated system in Revenue. We could set up a very complex wage subsidy scheme practically overnight thanks to the expertise of officials in Revenue, the Department of Finance and elsewhere, with the support of IBEC, ICTU and so on. I am confounded as to why the derelict sites tax will take so long to introduce.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is right that the living cities initiative is just one tool. That is fair. The derelict sites tax will be another. It is my intention to update the Government in March on the policy direction in relation to that. We are working closely on it. There are meetings, at least weekly, between my Department, the Department of housing at official level. It is, as the Deputy knows, my intention to legislate for that tax in the next budget. We have not decided on the rate yet but it will be no lower than the current rate. There is an argument to be had around whether it should be higher but we will return to that.

I accept this is a big body of work so I am not apportioning any kind of blame or responsibility. I think Revenue will be able to do this quite quickly. The challenge will be when it is ready to be done in terms of what is dereliction and the consistent application of dereliction. When you move, as the Deputy knows, from a levy to a tax, it has to be applied formally. I am very open to having a conversation about how quickly it can be done but it will involve a lot of work on the part of the local authorities as well as Revenue. Revenue is good at collecting tax but we have to have absolute clarity on the maps, dereliction, what is a tax and how that is applied in Louth and Wicklow on a consistent basis.

Housing Provision

158. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the total number of homes and total value of homes that have been bulk purchased each year, and subject to the higher rate of stamp duty, since the higher rate was introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10450/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This Government, Fine Gael in particular, has a long history of welcoming in the vulture funds to snap up Irish homes. Only because of rightful public anger at vulture funds bulk-purchasing homes a number of years ago under the nose of ordinary workers and families have we seen any pressure put on, and action by, the Government. The

Minister committed that this practice would end. Has it ended or is it still going on? If it is still going on, how many family homes were bulk-purchased by vulture funds last year and in previous years?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question. As he will be aware, the standard rates of stamp duty currently applying on the acquisition of residential property are 1% on values up to €1 million, 2% on values exceeding €1 million and 6% on any balance above €1.5 million. However, in May 2021, a higher stamp duty rate was introduced with the aim of disincentivising investment funds from buying up large numbers of completed houses, usually with the intention of placing them on the rental market. The rate that initially applied was 10% but this was subsequently increased to 15% in budget 2025. The higher stamp duty rate is charged on the acquisition of individual houses, where a person acquires at least ten such properties during any 12-month period.

Complementing the higher stamp duty since 2021 are section 28 guidelines for planning authorities, which aim to prevent multiple units being sold to single buyers. Revenue has provided me with the following provisional data regarding the number of residential properties subject to the higher rate and the total approximate value of those homes. In 2021, 189 properties were subject to the higher rate, with a value of €47.9 million. In 2022, 454 properties were subject to the higher rate, with a total of €177.5 million. In 2023, 675 properties were subject to the higher rate, with a total value of €266.1 million. In 2024, that fell to 396 properties, with a value of €156 million. In 2025, that reduced to 293 properties, with a total value of around €88.3 million.

The provisional data, therefore, indicate that the combination of the two measures is now having the desired effect, with the number of house acquisitions subject to the higher stamp duty rate falling each between 2022 and 2025, inclusive. It is also important to state something that is not stated, namely, that the Central Statistics Office, CSO, data now show that institutional buyers are also net sellers of homes. In 2024, they sold more houses than they bought.

We will continue to monitor these trends to continue to ensure the trend is downward, as it has been for the past three years, and to ensure these measures are having the desired impact. I will keep this under review on an annual basis.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Under review.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is what we do in the budget.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister promised us he was going to end this practice. He has just told the House that nearly 300 family homes were bought up by vulture funds last year, and he is going to keep it "under review". Under his watch, the Government is sitting by and allowing vulture funds to buy up family homes, a practice he promised over and over again that he would end. A total of 293 homes that should have been bought by ordinary workers and families last year were snapped up by corporate landlords and vulture funds. What happened to the Minister claiming he was going to stop all of this? When he was Taoiseach, he wrote to the finance Minister saying not enough was being done to stop the bulk-purchasing

of homes. He argued that bulk-purchasing of homes needed for first-time buyers could not be tolerated. It appears now that he has tolerated 293 of them being bulk-purchased last year.

The measures are not enough. The measures were in place all of last year. What is the Minister going to do, or is this, again, just something Simon says? I would ban vulture funds bulk-purchasing homes. It should be stopped. It is immoral. There is a crisis that the Government parties have created and the Minister is now facilitating vulture funds to snap up hundreds of homes every single year, and we are supposed to have cold comfort that the trends are going down.

Deputy Simon Harris: Here is what we actually did. The Governments I have been part of, first, introduced a higher rate of stamp duty. Second, the Government I led when I was Taoiseach and wrote that letter increased that rate of stamp duty from 10% to 15%. Each year, as a result of taking those measures, the number of homes being acquired has fallen. It fell in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, and it is expected to fall in 2026. What I am now telling the House, based on CSO data, not my view of the world, is that we are now seeing these institutional buyers becoming net sellers of homes. They are now selling more homes in Ireland than they are buying. The policy effects, coupled with the planning guidelines, are having an impact. Of course, a Minister for Finance will say they will keep these issues under review because, as the Deputy knows, we review all of these measures each year in the annual budget. We moved from 10% to 15%. I think Deputy Doherty would have advocated for moving to a higher rate than the 10%. That was required and since we made that move, we have seen the positive impact, and we will continue to monitor this very closely. The broader issue in relation to housing, housing supply and this Government's commitment is something I will have to debate when I have more time on the clock.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The stamp duty measure was introduced back in 2021. Does the Minister know that vulture funds purchased more homes last year than they did in 2021? He said the trend is going down every year. That is not true; the figure actually increased in 2022. The 293 homes purchased are homes that people are queuing for and want to have as their family home, their forever home, and vulture funds are buying them up because they have unlimited means. The Minister can splice and dice this any way he likes. He promised he was going to end this practice, which can be ended. Stop tinkering about the edges, and ban it. Stop imposing taxation on vulture funds because they have unlimited means. Does the Minister know why? It is because he provided them with a sweetheart deal. They do not pay any tax on rental income, the €3,000 they rent out the properties for. This is why they can pay the Government's tax. We cannot get away from the fact that hundreds of properties that should be available to families to start off their own homes are being snapped up by vulture funds.

Ban the practice. Stop tinkering around the edges. I hear the Tánaiste is not even considering any other policy bar reviews. The facts speak for themselves.

Deputy Simon Harris: The policy every Minister for Finance undertakes is to review all taxation measures in the context of a budget. That is what we will do this year, as we do each year. We have already shown that we have a willingness to act and to take further policy measures to make sure the intervention was having more of the required effect.

The Deputy calls them "vulture funds" because that is a loaded term. We need private investment in the housing market. That is not just my view; it is the view of the Housing Commission. We need people to come into this country and invest because we also need rental properties in this country. Houses are required for the rental market. As of the last census, there were 330,000 units in the private rental sector, of which 62% were outside Dublin. We need to make sure we also have a rental supply. I have talked and the Governments I have been in – this Government and the last Government – have talked about using the taxation system to disincentivise the practice and to collect more revenue for the State where the practice was carried out. We have never suggested that there is not a role for private investment in relation to housing supply. That might be a point on which we differ but it is a point which the Housing Commission also recognises.

Financial Services

159. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the action he is taking to protect the rights of mortgage holders whose mortgages were sold to non-bank lenders after the crash; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10058/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I want to ask about families who have had their mortgages sold to vulture funds. This has caused an incredible amount of stress and anxiety to people all over the country. These people are supposed to have the same rights as anyone else under the code of conduct on mortgage arrears, but this has not been the real lived experience of many people. What is the Government doing to ensure these mortgage holders' rights are protected?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for this important question. There is a wide range of measures in place to protect mortgage holders through the consumer protection framework, but it is an issue on which we must always remain vigilant. I am pleased to see that arrears over 90 days are now at their lowest levels since 2009, at 3.4% of all private dwelling house accounts. We all welcome that after the horrific period people went through after the financial crash in this country. We need to remain vigilant. We have a framework that requires all regulated entities to be transparent and fair in their dealings with borrowers. It ensures that borrowers are protected from the beginning to the end of the mortgage life cycle. The same protections apply to mortgage holders regardless of the regulated entity with which they are dealing, whether it is a bank, retail credit firm or credit servicing firm. If there is any deviation from that, I would welcome examples and would point out that there may be recourse to the likes of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

All credit servicing firms are required to be authorised and supervised by the Central Bank of Ireland. They are subject to all relevant regulatory requirements and financial services legislation. These include the Central Bank of Ireland's consumer protection code and the code of conduct on mortgage arrears. The consumer protection code is the cornerstone of the Irish financial consumer protection framework. It requires regulated firms to meet minimum standards of care towards their customers and to ensure regulated firms operate to protect their customers' best interests. A revised and enhanced version of this code will come into effect next month, which will include enhanced provisions in relation to mortgage providers. For example, mortgage providers are currently required to issue a notification to customers either

annually to variable-rate mortgage holders or at the maturity of fixed rates. The notification sets out a summary of alternative mortgage products available from that provider. Under the revised code, recognising the role that switching can play in an effectively functioning mortgage market, mortgage lenders will be required to include within these notifications a personalised euro savings estimate alongside each alternative mortgage refinancing option presented. Lenders will also be required to provide a specific reminder to customers concerning mortgage refinancing options. The code of conduct on mortgage arrears requires regulated firms to have a transparent process in place for dealing with borrowers in, or at risk of, mortgage arrears.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I am not sure that the Tánaiste understands the extent of the problem. I thank him for the answer he has given. The code of conduct on mortgage arrears is not being enforced. People go through absolute hell when their mortgage is sold on. The Tánaiste asked for an example and I will give him one. I spoke recently to a person who had their mortgage sold through the State-engineered Project Glas, despite the fact that according to Central Bank rules her mortgage was actually sustainable – it was in positive equity. It has since been sold again even though repayments were being made. She has faced serious data breaches, wrongful receivership and long regulatory delays. She has not even been able to find out if the latest vulture fund has lawful title to her home. She is now facing a repossession order and potential homelessness. I am asking the Tánaiste what he is actually doing about this. It is fine to have all these procedures in place but they are not being enforced and people are going to hell as they try to have the protections that should be applying to them applied.

Deputy Simon Harris: As I said at the outset, we must always remain vigilant in this area. I am putting the facts and the law on the record of the House in terms of the obligation on all regulated entities that should be consistent regardless of the entity. Of course if there are any examples - the Deputy has given me one - they should be pursued fully. While I am not getting involved in individual mortgages, I am very happy to discuss the broader issue and, indeed, any examples the Deputy wishes to give me with the Central Bank as well. The Deputy has asked what actions have been taken. We are seeing further enhancements in relation to the code coming into place next month. I am very sorry to hear about the very difficult case the Deputy has rightly highlighted this evening. We have very clear standards that are expected to be followed in relation to all mortgage holders, regardless of which bank or entity holds their mortgage. Any breaches of those standards should be pursued rigorously with the authorities. I am very happy to discuss that further with the Central Bank and pursue that example.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The person who contacted me recently told me of how the cumulative impact has been devastating. She has lived for over a decade under constant stress and uncertainty with profound effects on her mental health and physical health, her family life and her ability to live with dignity in later life. She is now facing the risk of imminent homelessness. She has tried to go through the regulatory process. She has been on to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman and so on. Having worked in an area related to this one, she has an ability to try to advocate for herself that a lot of people would not have, and she has still found it impossible. The reality for people is that they have experienced multiple breaches of regulations but every time they try to fight that, it is extremely difficult for them. They are faced with punitive interest rates that often mean they have effectively paid

off the capital on their home and the normal interest rate but they are still stuck in a perpetual mortgage. I am asking the Tánaiste what he is going to do to address this.

Deputy Simon Harris: I genuinely do not wish to be argumentative about this because the case the Deputy highlighted is clearly one that is causing his constituent or the person who contacted him extreme pain and anguish. However, my genuine belief from my engagement with officials and with the Central Bank - this is a broader point around the enforceability of the protections that are already there - is that the protections that are there are robust and are meant to apply without fear or favour to all regulated entities. I take very seriously any entity that does not follow those standards because they are the laws of our land. They are the structures we have in place. I do not have the benefit of the information the Deputy has. While I will not get involved on an individual mortgage, I am very happy to take that as an example and discuss it directly with the Central Bank and revert to the Deputy if he wishes to send it on to me.

Cost of Living Issues

160. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will bring forward a cost-of-living package, considering inflation is far higher than projected on budget day, at 2.8%, and given the findings of the ESRI that the budget has resulted in income losses for the average household; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10451/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Inflation is 50% higher than what the Government had forecast. It claimed prices were stabilising and that was the basis for the Government pulling the cost-of-living supports in the budget. The ESRI said that the budget resulted in income losses for the average Irish household. Will the Tánaiste accept he got this badly wrong? Will he bring forward a cost-of-living package that so many families desperately require giving the prices that are being charged to them in different guises, whether shopping, insurance or many other examples?

Deputy Simon Harris: As the Deputy and people across the country will be aware, the Government has provided significant support to households and businesses to try to help to absorb the worst impact of rising prices on households and businesses over the last four years. Analysis from my Department confirms that lower income households gained the most from measures introduced in budget 2026. The analysis also shows that people with the lowest incomes fare the best, with gains in the bottom two cohorts of 4.9% and 3.8% respectively.

The targeted nature of the package is also evident in supports provided to households with children. Over previous budgets, governments provided supports to give relief to the most vulnerable in the face of extraordinary shocks. At the same time, we avoided a scenario whereby fiscal policy would have served to add inflationary pressures in our economy. I know this is a hard thing to say when people are under pressure, but the Government can have an inflationary effect which can inadvertently make things more challenging in relation to the cost of living.

That is always a balance one has to try to strike. Full employment can never be taken for granted, as it sometimes is in political debate. The budget measures were calibrated to protect

jobs, maintain our competitiveness and keep our public finances safe while allowing for increased capital investment.

The budget moved away from the one-off packages of previous budgets, as we said we would do, in favour of more targeted and permanent measures that will provide greater certainty to people. However, recognising that energy prices remain elevated, we extended the reduced VAT rate on gas and electricity bills until 2030. We also extended the rent tax credit and mortgage interest relief to further support households.

Headline inflation averaged just over 2% in 2025. I am, of course, conscious that the rate reached around 3% in the autumn of 2025, as the Deputy alluded to. The Department is clear this increase reflected a base effect, meaning that very low figures were recorded in the same period a year earlier. Inflation is now moderating. We see this in the figures for both December and January. This reflects, in part, the unwinding of the base effects. This is in line with my Department's expectations and we expect further moderation as the year progresses. The ESRI and Central Bank published revised forecasts for inflation in December of between 2% and 2.25% for 2026.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The latest increases in food prices expose the Government's bogus justification for ripping away the cost-of-living supports. The ESRI was very clear: lower-income households felt worse off as a result of the budget. We can argue over and back all the time but the lived experience is very clear. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald stood here earlier today and outlined that 70,000 more households cannot pay their electricity bills than the same time a year ago. This is not us saying it, but the CRU. These are families. They could not fit into Croke Park and the Aviva together. That is just the additional number of people in the past year who cannot pay for their electricity. Whatever the Minister might say, suggesting the Government is doing this, that and all the rest, 70,000 more people are worse off. Those are the bare facts of it.

Market researchers tell us that food inflation is 6.8% and the CSO tells us it is 4%. Five large supermarkets control 90% of the market. The Government refuses to stand up to these vested interests over prices that are out of control. The Government is not ending the rip-off or getting prices under control and all it has done is withdraw the supports. Does the Minister accept the reality of all of these figures and recognise that the State has to intervene and support those individuals in a cost-of-living package that the Government wrongly decided to withdraw at the wrong time?

Deputy Simon Harris: We did take interventions in the budget to support people. In this Dáil we did not provide energy credits to anybody, but we did take a decision to bring in a range of targeted measures for those most in need. There is a legitimate debate on how best to do that and we have that debate back and forth across the floor. However, we introduced a social protection package of over €1 billion. We increased weekly payments to 1.5 million people, including our pensioners, carers and people with disabilities. These payments have been increased by more than €50 over the past number of years. We increased the domiciliary care allowance. We have the largest ever increase in the child support payment. To help working families, which we rightly talk a lot about in this House, we saw a large increase the threshold for the working family payment. We saw large increases in eligibility for fuel allowance. The minimum wage also increased. Next month, we will expand the fuel allowance

for families receiving working family payment. Later this year we will introduce the largest ever increase in income disregards for carer's allowance. We will pay the carer's support grant. We are expanding the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance for preschool children. I accept the cost-of-living challenge is real; I do not doubt that. However, I disagree and push back on the idea that we did not take actions to try to assist.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I accept the Government did all those things; that is a statement of fact. However, if the Minister thinks that people are not worse off this year than they were last year, he is living in a bubble and that is the problem here. The facts are clear. As I said, energy is just one example where 303,000 people cannot pay their bills and that is only electricity. Another 170,000-plus cannot pay their gas bills. Prices are going through the roof. The Minister talked about how the Government had put up rates. It is also putting up rents with the rent-hike Bill. Electricity bills have gone up. The Government put up college fees. It has put up taxes on petrol and diesel. It put up the tax on the family home. It is planning to increase taxes on home heating oil. Insurance premiums are up. Car insurance is up. Home insurance is up. Health insurance is up. Public liability insurance is up. The Government has completely failed to be true to the promise it gave in the election campaign to reduce childcare costs. It abandoned workers when it promised them it would provide them tax cut, but instead it was developers who got the multimillion euro tax cut. The Government based all this on inflation rates that are now 50% higher than it had projected in the budget. It has got this wrong. People are struggling and people are suffering. A cost-of-living package is desperately needed. The Minister and his colleagues need to get out of the bubble they are in and recognise where ordinary people are at.

Deputy Simon Harris: We are not in any sort of bubble. The Deputy may have his political differences with me, but the economists in the Department of Finance stand over the projections. The ESRI and the Central Bank projections, published in December are there for him to see. I have outlined, as was outlined to me, the base effect. We expect inflation to further moderate as the year goes on. The Deputy has a list of things he thinks we should have done and we also have a list of things we did. Budgets are about trying to get the balance right. Wages are also up. The State pension is also up. Carer's allowance is up. Employment is up. Inflation is falling. The number of people buying their first home is up. The number of homes being built is also up. We intend to build on that in the time ahead because this was the first budget of five. While different people will have different views, we took decisions to lower the cost base for the hospitality sector. We took the decision to try to stimulate apartment building. Let us see and we will debate that in time. I believe that is a good thing to have done; the Deputy has a different view. We also took the decision to invest significantly in public services, including an extra €618 million in disability services. The Deputy knows my views on the progress I believe we can make on personal income tax to help working families in the time ahead.

Insurance Industry

161. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the measures being considered by his Department to ensure that flood insurance cover is made more accessible to households at risk of flooding, or those that have previously been flooded; the

further engagement his Department has had with insurance providers in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10351/26]

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I would like to acknowledge the severe impact the recent storm has had on families, communities and businesses across Ireland. In doing so, I also acknowledge the work of our emergency services, our local authorities, the Civil Defence and the very many organisations and individuals who worked tirelessly for their communities over the past few weeks. It is also important to state that the Minister for enterprise, Deputy Burke, and the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, moved quickly to open the enhanced emergency humanitarian flooding support for impacted businesses, and emergency response payment scheme, to help businesses and homes to get back on their feet.

As I outlined in my earlier reply, insurance reform, including increasing the affordability of and accessibility to insurance, including flood insurance, remains a key priority for the Government. The Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025-2029 includes specific actions on flood and climate protection.

My Department is currently engaging with multiple stakeholders on the development of a long-term strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance, to consider potential solutions specific to Ireland to increase the availability and affordability of flood insurance. An update on this work and the other specific actions in the plan will be provided at the upcoming Cabinet sub-group on insurance reform.

This work will build on the extensive research undertaken by the Central Bank of Ireland into the nature and scale of the flood protection gap in Ireland, which identified that approximately 5% of buildings in Ireland that have limited access to flood insurance.

We know that flood insurance alone cannot address the totality of the flood protection gap, which is why the Government remains focused on the development of a sustainable, planned and risk-based approach to managing flooding. We are investing in climate adaptation measures to manage the impacts of extreme weather, to protect Ireland's present and future generations.

A total of €1.3 billion has been committed to the delivery of flood relief schemes over the lifetime of the national development plan to 2030. This will protect approximately 23,000 properties across various communities from river and coastal flood risk.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I know he is acutely aware of the impact of damage caused by flooding and the lack of insurance cover thereafter. My constituency of Cork East, particularly Castlemartyr, Killeagh, Mogeely, Middleton, Rathcormac and Whitegate, suffered extensive flood damage caused by Storm Babet in October 2023. Flood relief schemes and protection measures are progressing but they remain years away from completion. An individual property protection scheme to provide flood protection barriers has also been established but again the roll-out has been slow.

Insurance payouts appear to be minimal in the aftermath of storms. I know of one man whose entire fleet of cars was destroyed but he was only paid roughly 10% of the value of his policy, leaving him with only the legal route to pursue his losses. Others will not be insured again

having received a payout. These are real people with real stories. In the absence of flood schemes insurance protection gaps in flood prone areas have developed. I ask the Minister of State to do all he can to ensure constant engagement with the insurance industry and relevant stakeholders.

I would also like to be associated with the Minister of State's words of praise for all of the emergency services.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy McCarthy for making those very clear and valid points this evening. The Tánaiste has just reminded me that the Cabinet committee on climate is meeting in the morning and one of the items on the agenda is consideration of what interim measures can be introduced in advance of permanent flood defences going in to particular areas. We need to speed up mitigation measures in areas such as those mentioned by the Deputy.

I reiterate in relation to the action plan on insurance reform that there are ten priority actions, one of which is in the area of delivering flood insurance to fill the gap that is there. Taking a long-term, strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance will involve building on the work that has already been undertaken by the Central Bank, as well as working with the insurance industry, the Department of Finance and the OPW to design a scheme that will be fit for purpose for Ireland.

The insurance industry has already established a flooding task force. I met a member of that task force earlier today who informed me that it will have proposals for consideration by Government in the next number of weeks. Work is well under way in terms of addressing the flood insurance gap that currently exists.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his positive response. As a result of a lack of flood insurance, residents are fearful of further damage to their homes or businesses whenever bad weather is forecast. Has the possibility of a flood insurance cover scheme to underwrite flood risk been explored? Similar reassurance schemes exist in other jurisdictions such as Flood Re in the UK. Is the Minister of State of the opinion that such a scheme could be implemented here?

My home town of Fermoy has had flood protection, thank God, since 2012, which is working very successfully. However there are some commercial businesses that still cannot get insurance, even though the town is flood protected.

Again, I thank the Minister of State for his response.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Deputy mentioned particular areas where flood defences have been put in place but flood insurance cover remains problematic. That is a big concern because the Government has invested tens of millions of euro in permanent flood defence mechanisms but the insurance companies have not responded adequately. I met the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, earlier today and am due to meet with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, next week to discuss ensuring that outstanding service level agreements that are in place are adhered to in order to give insurance companies confidence to come in and provide insurance where the State has made the necessary investment.

The Deputy also mentioned Flood Re, a scheme that is in operation in the UK. The Department of Finance explored that scheme back in 2016 but at that time it was felt that it was not a good fit for Ireland. However, in the context of the new action plan on insurance reform, the Department is re-evaluating that scheme, as well as looking at other international models to see how they can feed into the work that is ongoing here from an Irish perspective. The Central Bank, the Department of Finance, the OPW and the insurance companies, through Insurance Ireland, are coming together in March to examine what options we can look at implementing from an Irish perspective that will fit our model here.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Fiscal Policy

162. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will ensure the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, is fully divested from all companies, directly and indirectly, involved in illegally occupied Palestinian territories; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10053/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, still has investments in companies operating in the illegally occupied Palestinian territories. Over €6 million of our money remained invested in six companies identified on the UN database at the end of 2024. This is an arm of our State actively profiting from companies working on illegally occupied land. Will the Tánaiste ensure that the ISIF fully divests from companies operating in illegally occupied Palestinian territories?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for the question. In replying I want to restate the Government's clear opposition, which is also the clear opposition of this House, to illegal Israeli settlements, which are contrary to international law and damaging to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East. Ireland has not been found wanting in its support of the Palestinian people and has taken practical steps at national, EU and international levels. We have been a clear and leading voice on this. Ireland's financial support to the people in Palestine since January 2023 will amount to €144 million by the end of this year, following a recent announcement of additional funding made by the Minister for foreign affairs, Deputy McEntee.

The Deputy refers to the ISIF and to the UN Human Rights Council database, which identifies businesses involved in specific activities in the occupied Palestinian territories. This UN database was first issued in 2020, updated in June 2023 and most recently updated in September 2025.

It is important to say from the outset that ISIF has complete independence in implementing its investment strategy under the law of the land, namely, the National Treasury Management Agency Acts, through an investment committee that reports to the NTMA's board. However, in 2024 ISIF took an investment decision to divest from six companies, all of which remain on the updated UN database, with a total value at the time of the divestment decision of approximately €2.95 million. The six companies are known and I am happy to provide them to the Deputy but in the interests of time, I will not name them now. The NTMA also divested

from directly held sovereign bond holdings within the global portfolio across Egypt, Israel, and Jordan in July 2025. It is important to state the companies in question operate all over the world and ISIF's investment in them represents a very small proportion of its overall investments. This is, truthfully, some of the challenge. These are companies that are global and that operate right throughout the world. Unfortunately it is also true to say that divestment from these companies does not mean that they would stop maintaining their presence in the occupied Palestinian territories.

As I have outlined already, ISIF has, to date, completed several divestment programmes and has also excluded investments from the fund. Exclusion is used on a limited basis, reflecting exclusions mandated by legislation including the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018 and the Cluster Munitions and Anti-Personnel Mines Act 2008, among others.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The issue here is that there should not be a single cent of Irish public money invested in companies operating illegally in the occupied territories of Palestine. I do not believe there is any public support for our money being used in that way. What is clearly needed is an absolutely full divestment by the ISIF - which invests public money - from companies operating in the occupied territories. I am calling for full divestment. Will the Tánaiste also call for that? Will he call for a full divestment by the ISIF from any companies operating illegally in the occupied territories in breach of international law? Will he join me in calling for that?

Deputy Simon Harris: I have a specific legal role and responsibility. The NTMA, and the ISIF in particular, has complete independence in implementing its investment strategy under the NTMA Act and I am respectful of that. However, I did recently meet with officials from the NTMA and I was assured that ISIF will continue to monitor its holdings. It does not comment on individual investments but I have outlined the views that I know are shared in this House.

I will make two points to the Deputy on this. The first is that it is my understanding that ISIF exposure to companies involved in specified activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, as listed on the UN database, account for about 0.16% of its global portfolio. The fund has taken a number of decisions already to divest. The second point, and this is just a statement of the obvious, is that we are operating in a world where there are such large, global companies that have vast presences across the world. They may have a very small presence in a territory that we believe is absolutely illegally occupied but they are massive, global companies and that is a complicating factor.

The independence of the NTMA and the ISIF has to be respected. I met with them recently and conveyed my views in relation to this. It represents only 0.16% of its global portfolio.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I am not clear whether the Tánaiste is actually justifying the current situation. Is he justifying it or making excuses for it?

9 o'clock

Not a single cent of our money should be invested in companies operating in illegally occupied territories in Palestine. The Tánaiste knows this and I know this. The public do not

want their money invested there. I am making an easy ask to the Tánaiste. I am not asking him to direct the strategic investment fund. I understand that, because of its independence, he cannot do so. However, he can publicly give his view and call on it to divest fully. There is nothing in law to stop him doing that. The Tánaiste is able to give his opinion on that and call for it. I ask him to make a stand now and call on the fund to divest in full from any companies in breach of international law in the Palestinian territories. Will the Tánaiste join me in making that call?

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not in any way doubt the Deputy's bona fides and I fully respect his sincerity. I do not believe that I can go further than I have. I have made it clear that the ISIF has already taken a number of decisions to divest from companies and directly from sovereign bond holdings. It continues to monitor this. The fund's level of exposure in this area is 0.16% and has been declining. The fund continues to keep this under review. I want to see a situation where we do not have occupied Palestinian territories but where we have a two-state solution. That is the position of the Irish Government.

Tax Reliefs

163. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance for an update on the programme for Government commitment to consider tax measures to encourage gym membership. [9526/26]

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Given the rate of osteoporosis in Ireland and the problem with regard to fragility fractures, I would be grateful for an update on the commitments in the programme for Government to consider tax measures to encourage gym membership to allow for strength and resistance training.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Byrne for raising this issue. I acknowledge that it is not the first time he has raised it with me, despite my short time in this current role. I acknowledge the presence of this issue in the programme for Government. This question provides me with an opportunity to outline the significant investment that the Government has made in this area. The Government has now invested well over €1 billion in sports infrastructure and development in Ireland since 2018. It is worth putting that figure on the record. The return on that investment in community participation, inclusion, integration, and physical and mental well-being is enormous and it is probably not even possible to fully quantify all of those benefits. The allocation for the sports programme in the budget of 2026 is over €290 million, meaning an increase of just under €60 million, or 26%. This clearly exceeds the national sports policy commitment to double Government funding in sport by 2027 compared to 2018 levels. Our sincerity, bona fides and credibility in terms of investment in sport and physical and mental exercise and well-being are there for all to see. The programme for Government says that we will consider measures in conjunction with my Department to encourage gym membership and active participation in sport and exercise.

The tax code already provides for a number of fitness-based measures, including the cycle to work scheme and the accelerated capital allowance scheme for child care facilities, but also for fitness centres, which encourages employers to develop fitness centres on site for their

employees. Furthermore, the private gym sector already receives tax-based public support through the reduced rate of 9% VAT on its membership fees. It is estimated that this reduced rate saves private gym operators and gym members around €32 million per year. An exemption from income tax and corporation tax also applies for the income of certain bodies established for the purposes of the promotion of athletic or amateur games or sports where it can be shown to the satisfaction of Revenue that such income is applied solely for these for these purposes. Any income received and availing of the relief by the sports body must be used for the purpose of promoting the game or the sport. The Finance Act 2024 provided new measures in relation to sports bodies and their donors in terms of being able to elect for tax relief.

Officials in my Department considered potential tax measures to support gym membership as part of the annual tax strategy group process last year in chapter 10 of the paper, "Income Tax: Tax Strategy Group - 25/01", which is available on the Department's website. This will be kept under review in the context of future budgets.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I acknowledge and am very enthusiastic about the enormous investment that we have made in sport, but this is really about measures to increase strength, resistance training and flexibility. We know that about 250,000 people have osteoporosis in Ireland - approximately 20% of women and 6.2% of men aged over 50. Annually, we see in the order of 32,000 fragility fractures, basically because of lack of strength. The estimated cost of that to our health service is €464 million annually, not to mention the pain to the individuals concerned. Given our ageing population and the challenges here, this could rise to a €1 billion within the next decade.

We need to have sufficient resistance and strength training among all of our population. There is a very clear commitment in the programme for Government to develop that. We need to look at examples in other countries like Canada and Singapore that have done this. We need to be able to build up that strength and resistance training because in the long term it is a saving on our health budget.

Deputy Simon Harris: I instinctively agree. I do not mean to be pedantic but the programme for Government says we will consider measures. I take very seriously the programme for Government and we should continue to consider these measures as well. We had it looked at last year in the tax strategy group paper, which is published. The paper said it was not possible to estimate the exact cost of an income tax relief. It said that, conservatively, the measure would have an additional Exchequer cost of the order of €65 million, or if applied to all sports club memberships, about €147 million. There were some concerns about the dead weight in tax, which is there for all to read. I will not waste the time of the House with it now. However, we will keep this under review, and I take the Deputy's point about osteoporosis and the specific health benefits of resistance training.

We have some income tax supports already. I have outlined the VAT and benefit-in-kind measures. There are also a number of other tax and direct expenditure measures. To make long story short, though, I will give consideration to this when the tax strategy papers are compiled again this year. I am happy to engage with the Deputy in advance of the next budget.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Tánaiste and I look forward to engaging further on it. I know he is serious about this. However, I always wonder when "dead weight" is mentioned by the dead hand of the Department of Finance.

Deputy Simon Harris: That hurt.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: If I have a fragility fracture, I can get a tax relief on my healthcare expenses, I can get tax relief on my nursing home expenses, and I can get tax relief if I go to a physiotherapist, an osteopath or a chiropractor, but if I decide to join to join the gym in order to be able to build my resistance, I will not get tax relief. There is a long-term financial saving on the health side.

I have made this case often before. We need to think about the Department of Health not as a Department of sickness and illness. We have to look at ways of ensuring that as we live longer - one of the big successes of this country is the fact that we are now living to an average age of 83 - we can ensure that we live healthily in old age. Part of that is through strength and resistance training, which gym membership offers.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Just to follow on from that question about tax measures to encourage gym membership, I ask that when the review is being done at the end of the year, tax measures for families be looked at. We see young families stuck on their phones. I have two teenagers and a young adult and this year we have got a family gym membership. It is great to be able to go to the gym together. In fairness, our local gym is a testament to the money that was invested in our local sports club, in that it has allowed that facility to be there. Perhaps for parents with very young children, that tax incentive could be given for gyms. It could also be given to leisure centres so that our young children could start learning how to swim, which is a vital life skill. I ask for a tax incentive to be there for families in that regard to set in train that really good habit from a very young age and to keep families being active together and away from their phones.

Deputy Simon Harris: I had to be very disciplined in this role in relation to tax and tax commitments in the advance of the last budget and in advance of the next budget, given that it is the month of February. We will consider all of these matters and the compelling cases that are made. The tax strategy group paper is worth reading in relation to this. After reading and considering it, I wonder whether there could be a further tweaking, development or evolution of the policy points that Deputy Byrne is trying to advance.

Regarding Deputy Callaghan's point, we have to get young people off their phones, off social media and back out exercising, socialising, engaging and making eye contact with one another again. I hope that the House can unite around measures to get people off their phones and back moving again.

I take that point about the extra cost faced by families. I would point out as regards gym membership that we already have the reduced VAT rate of 9%, which is worth around €32 million per annum, be that to the gym operators or being passed on in membership fees. Of course, how we support families with the costs of trying to live healthily is the point that is uniting both Deputies and certainly something that we will keep under review.

Insurance Industry

164. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he has reconsidered flood insurance-reinsurance models in light of recent flooding events across the country and if he will make a statement on the matter [10059/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: In June of last year, I asked the Taoiseach for a Government policy on a flood reinsurance scheme. He said that insurance companies have to do more. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, corresponded with me on the issue. I thank him very much for that. Essentially, he said a State-backed scheme was impossible in a market like Ireland. Imagine my surprise to read his announcement for businesses and not residential properties last week in the *Business Post* saying: "It's fair to say that it will require State backing". Will the Minister of State establish the Department's position on flood reinsurance schemes?

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter again. I acknowledge that he has engaged with me on this on a number of occasions. I reiterate my earlier acknowledgement regarding the serious damage caused by the recent flood events and the impact they have had on families, communities and businesses across Ireland. As previously stated, insurance reform, including increasing the affordability and accessibility of insurance, including for flood insurance, remains a key priority for the Government. Building on the work carried out by the Central Bank, the Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025-2029 includes four specific actions on flood and climate protection. With respect to action 17 of the action plan, the Department of Finance is currently engaging with multiple stakeholders on the development of a long-term strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance to consider potential solutions specific to Ireland to increase the availability and affordability of flood insurance. An update on this work will be provided at the next Cabinet subgroup on insurance reform.

This work builds on the extensive research undertaken by the Central Bank of Ireland into the nature and scale of the flood protection gap in Ireland, which I mentioned earlier identified a flood insurance protection gap of approximately 5% of buildings in Ireland that have limited access to flood insurance. Flood insurance alone cannot address the totality of the flood protection gap and current Government policy remains focused on the development of a sustainable, planned and risk-based approach to managing flooding. As such, the Government remains committed to protecting Ireland's present and future generations by investing in climate adaption measures to manage the impacts of extreme weather. Accordingly, €1.3 billion has been committed to the delivery of flood relief schemes over the lifetime of the national development plan to 2030. This will protect approximately 23,000 properties across various communities from river and coastal flood risk. My officials will continue to monitor developments at EU and international level and assess flood insurance matters, including through participation in the OPW and Insurance Ireland working group. These matters remain a priority for this Government and efforts continue to be made to encourage a responsive approach from the insurance industry.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. With respect, I am not asking about flood defences. I am asking about the reinsurance scheme and a State-backed reinsurance

scheme. The article I referenced stated: "Businesses and homeowners within certain pockets of Dublin, such as along the River Dodder, where several flood defence schemes have been developed in recent years, remain unable to obtain insurance." This is a real issue.

In the letter the Minister of State sent to me last year, he said:

In terms of the provision of flood insurance, please be aware that this is a commercial matter for insurance companies based on an assessment of the risks they are willing to accept. Government cannot interfere with the provision or pricing of insurance or direct as to what cover is provided as reinforced by the EU framework for insurance solvency II directive.

Apparently, the State can after all get involved in reinsurance schemes. From the outset, I had issues with the Government's position because the solvency II directive allows for general price controls. Many other countries have done it. Consorcio de Compensación de Seguros in Spain, Caisse Centrale de Réassurance, CCR, state insurance providers in France and even VHI here in Ireland are exempt from the directive. Is it Government evasion and a lack of ambition at play here and not regulatory constraints?

Deputy Robert Troy: With due respect, flood defence measures are an important part-----

Deputy Eoin Hayes: They are not working in my constituency.

Deputy Robert Troy: -----of providing protection for households and businesses. Speaking to any of the unfortunate householder or businesses in areas where the schemes have been held up for a myriad of reasons over the past number of years, they eagerly await the roll-out of the flood defence mechanisms. It is fair to say that in many constituencies, such as in Athlone in my own constituency, where permanent flood defence measures have been introduced, they have brought a real sense of confidence and reassurance to people who have previously been affected by flooding.

It is unfortunate that heretofore the insurance companies have not recognised in a meaningful way State investment in permanent flood defence mechanisms. That is why I met with my colleague, Minister of State, Deputy Moran and I am due to meet with my colleague, Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, next week in relation to outstanding issues with a service level agreement to ensure insurance companies step up to the plate in relation to areas where flood defences have been erected. I will come back in the next reply regarding areas where there are no flood prevention mechanisms in place.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The residents of Sandymount, Ringsend, Merrion and coastal communities across Dublin cannot afford another disaster and delayed action from the Government. A *Financial Times* article from last year and University of Galway's studies have noted that Ireland's coastal cities face huge risks during future storms. Sandymount would have been submerged in approximately 5 m in Storm Éowyn if a high tide occurred at the time. It is time for reinsurance models that include not just businesses but also people's homes to protect people's lives as well as their livelihoods. It is time the Government stopped using the excuses of EU regulation or the insurance companies not doing enough or flood defences having to take care of the risk and get on with the responsibility of protection for the coastal communities that need it in terms of reinsurance schemes. People know what climate change

means. It was mostly riverside communities affected in recent weeks, but coastal communities know that they will face some of the most extreme challenges in the future. Will the Minister of State illuminate whether his comments to the *Business Post* were accurate, whether the Government is considering a State-backed scheme and whether that is something that it will be delivering over the coming weeks and months?

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: In terms of the reinsurance schemes, it is important when we are considering about flood insurance that we also consider thatch insurance. I have a constituent in Carlow who was flooded but does not have insurance for flooding. As he lives in a thatched house, he also does not have insurance for fire. I ask that when we are considering reinsurance that we might consider that too.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: To reinforce what Deputy Hayes said, we have had this issue in Clontarf. The River Wad flooded in 2023. The city council got on with a scheme - the protection of the Wad phase 2 funded by the OPW. Work is more and less complete. It successively went into operation just before Storm Chandra, but there is a big question mark as to whether the insurers will come to the table and start insuring those areas again with the works done. I endorse what Deputy Hayes said. I encourage the Minister of State to proceed with this.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The Minister of State is entirely correct in that the best insurance is where we have the necessary flood protection and indeed coastal protection schemes. In some of the communities near where I live, such as Arklow, Aughrim and Enniscorthy, recently we have witnessed the dramatic impacts of floods. I wish to focus on Bunclody where they had floods for the first time in 60 years where people did have insurance, particularly along Ryland Road, on some of the properties. Now those businesses and homes do not expect to be able to get it into the future. I am certainly open in terms of the suggestion that has been made to exploring until we can guarantee that those flood protection schemes are put in place that we can guarantee those homeowners and business owners some degree of security until the necessary protections are in place.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputies for raising their points.

I do not know whether Deputy Byrne was present earlier when I mentioned that the Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy is meeting tomorrow to examine what immediate measures can be taken to protect areas where there is a longer lead-in for permanent flood defence measures to be introduced.

In relation to Deputy Callaghan's points on the thatched issue, that is something I am acutely aware of. It is a very niche part of the market. I have been in London meeting insurance companies to explore the possibility of seeing what level of appetite they might have in this regard. I have also met the representative body in relation to the thatched industry. I am happy to engage with the Deputy further in that regard.

In relation to the main question, there is an acknowledgement that an intervention is needed. That is why it is one of the priority actions in the action plan for insurance reform. There are ten priority actions. This is one of the priority actions to develop a long-term strategic approach

for the provision of flood insurance. That will require working with the Central Bank, insurance industry, Department of Finance and OPW. Today, I met with a representative of the insurance industry who sits on its flooding task force.

I expect a proposal to come from the task force within a number of weeks. It might be in a month or so. The Government will explore that proposal and look at what support we can put in place to ensure flood insurance is something people can expect in the not too distant future. To clarify my remarks in the *Business Post*, such support will not be exclusively for businesses. Any scheme we look to introduce would be inclusive in supporting both residents and businesses.

Insurance Industry

165. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance for an update on the action plan on insurance reform; and the progress made under the priority actions contained within the plan. [9531/26]

Deputy Shay Brennan: I seek an update on the Government's action plan on insurance reform. This issue continues to be raised with many of us by households, community groups and business still facing very high premiums and, in some cases, finding it difficult to get cover at all. I would like to know where the action plan currently stands, what progress has been made to date and, in particular, whether the priority actions identified within the plan are being implemented.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Government is progressing the commitments in the programme for Government to further reform the insurance sector in Ireland and ensure transparency, affordability and availability of insurance for all consumers. Significant progress was achieved through the 2020 action plan for insurance reform. Key measures delivered included the introduction of the personal injuries guidelines, legal reforms to rebalance the duty of care and the establishment of the office to promote competition in the insurance market. Those actions helped to create a more competitive market and have supported new entrants into the Irish insurance sector.

The Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025-2029, published in July 2025, is comprised of 26 actions being led across a number of Departments, ten of which are priority actions. Of those priority actions, transparency in the insurance sector is a key priority, with a transparency code for the insurance industry well advanced and to be published in the coming weeks. The code will require insurers to provide simple, understandable explanations of how premiums are formed, what mitigating actions may be available to customers and what broader factors influence pricing. It will also ensure consumers can directly receive additional information, upon request, to better understand the factors impacting their premium.

Work is ongoing in the office to promote competition in the insurance market to enhance competition. Meetings have taken place with insurers to address capacity issues. The office has established a speciality forum to explore the speciality insurance sector and examine how Ireland can be effectively positioned and promoted as a leading jurisdiction for speciality insurance business.

My Department is also working closely with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel to the Government to progress the right-to-be-forgotten legislation to ensure fair access for cancer survivors to financial services, specifically mortgage protection insurance, and to allow the Bill to progress in the coming weeks.

The Government is firmly committed to addressing the cost and availability of insurance through implementing the reforms set out in the programme for Government and the Action Plan for Insurance Reform 2025-2029.

Deputy Shay Brennan: The action plan was pledged as the answer to years of rising premiums and uncertainty for households and businesses. However, as I am sure he acknowledges, my colleagues and I continue to hear from people who have not yet seen any meaningful reduction in their insurance costs despite the reforms that have been announced. Will he set out how the Department is tracking the implementation of the reforms and measuring the impact they are having in practice on insurance customers?

Deputy Robert Troy: We have seen an increase in car insurance in the past 12 months but that came on the back of reductions over the previous number of years. The previous action plan delivered savings in the motor insurance industry in particular. I acknowledge that some of those gains have started to be eroded. That is why there was a need to introduce a further action plan to continue to build on the progress of its predecessor.

The Central Bank collates insurance data on an annual basis, which it makes available. That is how we can track what progress is being made in terms of how insurance premiums were decreasing for a number of years but, sadly, have increased in the past 12 to 18 months. Were it not for some of the actions introduced by the previous action plan, we would have seen significant increases in recent years as a result of market conditions.

Deputy Shay Brennan: While not directly included in the action plan, I have a question about the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025, particularly the right-to-be-forgotten provision for cancer survivors seeking mortgage protection insurance, as alluded to by the Minister of State. Will he confirm that mortgage providers will embrace that provision? Has there been any dialogue, input or feedback from them in this regard?

Deputy Robert Troy: To be fair to the insurance industry, and we quite frequently stand to criticise it, providers introduced a voluntary code of practice in this area back in December 2023. It was on the back of that voluntary code that we were able to see the difference the right to be forgotten makes to cancer survivors. We have brought forward provisions in the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025 to put that voluntary code on a statutory basis. It is my intention to bring the Bill to Committee Stage within the next couple of months at the very outside. It will make a very real and meaningful difference to people who have survived cancer diagnoses and come out the other side by ensuring they are able to get on with their life and avail of a mortgage. I do not have the figures to hand but in the 12- to 18-month period after the introduction of the voluntary code, something in the region of 1,200 people benefited. It is a really significant improvement and I hope to be in a position to bring the Bill to Committee Stage within the next two months.

Tax Code

166. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will amend inheritance tax thresholds for individuals who have no children of their own and would like to leave an inheritance to a niece or nephew; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9956/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Will the Tánaiste consider amending the inheritance tax thresholds for individuals who have no children and would like to leave an inheritance to a niece or nephew?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am aware of the group that is doing very good advocacy work on this issue. I look forward to meeting and engaging with it shortly.

Capital acquisitions tax, CAT, applies to both gifts and inheritances and is charged at a rate of 33%. For CAT purposes, the relationship between the person giving a gift or inheritance and the person who receives it determines the maximum amount, known as the group threshold, below which CAT does not arise. The group thresholds were most recently increased in budget 2025. The group A threshold, which in general applies where the beneficiary is a child of the disposer, increased to €400,000 from €335,000. The group B threshold increased to €40,000 from €32,500. This threshold applies where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, niece, nephew or lineal ancestor or lineal descendant of the disposer. The group C threshold increased to €20,000 from €16,250, with this threshold applying in all other cases. These increases amounted to an increase of 19.4% for group A, while the groups B and C thresholds increased by 23%.

My officials examined CAT as part of last year's annual tax strategy group exercise. The resultant papers outlined the tax policy considerations for the Government and the options available to it in forming last year's budget. Published in advance of the budget, they are the best means of considering issues such as inheritance tax in an analytical and transparent way. The tax strategy group is not a decision-making body - that is a matter for the Government and this House - and the papers produced by my Department are simply a list of options and issues to be considered in the budgetary process. What the group did very well was examine a number of cost modelling exercises, including proposals to amend the group B threshold parameters, as the Deputy and many others have raised in the House. There is a significant cost associated with further changes to the group thresholds. That is not necessarily a reason to make or not make them but it is something we must factor into our considerations. I recognise the burden of capital taxation and will continue to review these matters alongside my officials. We will consider any further changes in the context of the next budget.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste for his answer.

We know - and the Tánaiste knows better than anyone - that over the last number of years Fine Gael has been at the forefront of a changing Ireland where alternative family structures are welcomed and where people do not feel the pressure to conform to what was once the traditional idea of a family. Fine Gael values personal liberty and it is clearly reflected in the broad liberalisation of Irish attitudes. However, while societal attitudes can naturally evolve

over time, laws do not evolve of their own accord. They need political will to bring them up to date. I believe the current inheritance tax is reflective of a different Ireland from the Ireland we live in today. The most recent census data show there are almost 400,000 families without children in Ireland. Therefore, if an individual wishes to leave an inheritance to someone outside their immediate family, as has been mentioned, they are only tax exempt to the first €40,000 of that inheritance while couples in group A benefit from an exemption of ten times that much. With that in mind, how does the Tánaiste intend to work towards bringing our tax system in line with social attitudes and support new family structures by increasing the inheritance tax thresholds for childless individuals?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am, as Deputy Callaghan will know, very aware of the burden that capital taxation places on people, and it is our party's position as well. Whether it is families or farmers, the burden of capital taxation is real. That is why in budget 2025 we as a Government took a decision to increase the thresholds. We increased threshold A, B and C. I certainly do not rule out over the lifetime of this Government further moves in this area. In fact, I commit to keeping these issues under review. That is the first point I would make. Second, I take the Deputy's point very much about the changing face of Ireland, diversity and composition of families. That is all absolutely true. I will be truthful that any significant changes in what we call threshold B does come at a significant cost. It is again not a reason why we do or do not do these things; it is just something we all need to consider in the context of the budget. Third, we should continue to look at what other countries are doing in this area and international comparisons because I am sure other countries are grappling with this issue. Finally, I take the point that there can sometimes be relatives who also have a caring role, perhaps a nephew or a niece who has been caring. That is something I hear a lot. I do not mean that they are just a nephew or a niece because that is a very important familial relationship but in addition to that they may have been in a long-term caring role too. There are a number of issues to unpack here. That is why I want to meet the advocacy groups and ask the tax strategy group to continue to consider all of these issues in advance of the budget.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste. I like that response and that well-thought-out way of looking at it from the carer's point of view. I am heartened to hear that tax measures as a whole will be reviewed in the course of this Government. I point out, perhaps again, that for many people across Ireland, factors other than choice determine whether or not they have children. If these people own properties and should they wish to pass them on to their close relatives, the low exemption thresholds mean they will be burdening those relatives with large tax bills. Oftentimes, what happens then, as we all know, a family home that people would like to keep in the family needs to be sold. That is against the wishes of the person who has left it and those of the person who is inheriting it. Furthermore, as the Tánaiste is aware, these thresholds last throughout a person's lifetime. This means that if an uncle gives a gift of over €3,000 to their niece or nephew during their lifetime, it is deducted once again from the recipient's inheritance tax threshold at the end of life. With this in mind, would it be possible to amend the rules so that there is a greater exemption for gifts that are given during a person's life?

Deputy Paula Butterly: I absolutely concur with everything Deputy Callaghan has said. She rightly mentioned that families come in many shapes and forms and different sizes. I am

very conscious that we link everything to our blood relatives. The time has come that when we are reviewing all the categories we have to consider those members of our families - because essentially, they can be very much considered as family - and perhaps consider a nominated heir rather than a straightforward A, B, C category and trying to slot them into a particular blood tie or familial relationship. While we are considering those, we consider those who care for us, family friends or whoever it is, and allow the person who has worked so hard to accumulate their house and assets during their lifetime to decide who should be the correct person to inherit those assets and properties.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I have pressed the Tánaiste on this before, as I have done his predecessor. I reiterate the fact that asset values are rising and have been steadily rising over many years. This applies particularly to the family home. At the same time, families are smaller and, as my colleagues are saying, it is not always a direct inheritance from a parent to child. Sometimes, it goes elsewhere in the family or even outside the family. In light of the fact that prices and incomes are rising, I stress that there is absolutely no inflationary-based response in the thresholds. I seek the Tánaiste's commitment that he will address this and look to reform the inheritance tax categories in budget 2027.

Deputy Simon Harris: Gabhaim buíochas le Deputies Butterly, Brennan and Callaghan. It is really good that we tease through and discuss this issue. We have various views on this and different parties have different commitments in their manifestos in relation to this. We have a programme for Government now. We need to work our way through all of this. I have to be honest with the House. Every year over the next four budgets there will be a pot and resource, subject to the economy continuing to be run well, that will be available for tax decisions, and there will be competing demands and views as to what best to do. There is personal income tax, capital tax and a whole variety of different issues. We will tease our way through that. However, over the course of those four budgets, we can achieve quite a lot together too. That is why I am committing to keeping capital taxation and the burden of capital taxation under review. To help the conversation perhaps, I will put some figures on the record. If we were to increase, for example, the group A thresholds to €500,000 from the existing €400,000, the cost of that is €86.6 million. If we were to bring everyone on threshold B into threshold A, in other words, up to €400,000, the cost of that is around €305 million. These are all budget ready reckoners as opposed to my views. Of course, there are costs associated with all of these but I take that point about families changing, care changing and the empowerment of individuals, and I will give further consideration to this in the time ahead.

Insurance Coverage

167. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance whether any engagement has occurred with the insurance sector following recent severe weather events, including Storm Bram and Storm Chandra; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9545/26]

Deputy Shay Brennan: Has any engagement by the Department occurred with the insurance sector following recent severe weather events, including both Storm Bram and Storm Chandra? These storms have caused real damage and anxiety for many households that are now trying to

cope with the aftermath. Could the Minister of State outline what specific engagement has taken place to date and how the insurance sector is responding to these interactions?

Deputy Robert Troy: First, I would like to acknowledge the serious damage caused by recent storm events, and the impact they have had on families, communities and businesses. In the aftermath of Storm Bram and Storm Chandra, I engaged with Insurance Ireland, the representative body for the Irish insurance industry, regarding the insurance sector's response to claims and reiterated the Government's expectations that insurance companies should treat policyholders fairly and expediently in the context of claims relating to Storm Bram. Insurance companies actively track storm events to ensure adequate readiness and resource allocation. For both storm events, Insurance Ireland advised that in advance of each storm, the insurance companies took preparatory measures such as informing the public on their websites and social media platforms and activating surge plans in anticipation of the increased call volumes. The insurance companies were well prepared and were actively assisting their policyholders. For the most recent storm, Storm Chandra, Insurance Ireland has advised my officials that it is too early to quantify the overall cost of damage arising from the storm. Clean-up and assessment work is ongoing, and a clearer picture will emerge over the coming weeks. Insurers have resources in place and are on hand to support any homeowners or business owners who have unfortunately experienced flood or storm-related damage. Claims teams and emergency assistance services are fully operational and insurers are actively monitoring claims as they come in. Insurance Ireland's insurance information service has also been available to assist members of the public who may need additional support or help navigating the claims process. My Department will continue to engage with Insurance Ireland concerning the recent storms to ensure insurers remain focused on processing claims fairly and efficiently and on working closely with service providers to expedite assessments and repairs. These matters remain a priority for this Government and efforts continue to be made to progress a responsive approach from the insurance industry.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I thank the Minister of State. As more claims are processed, households now fear that making a valid flood claim could lead to exclusion from further insurance cover or sharp premium hikes, which compound their vulnerability to future weather events.

I met many of these households and families over the last few days and weeks in Dublin Rathdown, which was particularly hit by the recent Storm Chandra. These families understand the sector's challenges, but they need protection against being priced out or dropped entirely. Will the Minister of State confirm specifically whether his engagement with insurers includes commitments to prevent households from being excluded from future policies due to a single flood claim? Will any measures or guidelines be introduced to safeguard their ongoing insurability?

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy. I will need to ask the insurance industry about that specific question he raised regarding how a previous flood claim may exclude people from future cover. I cannot quantify if that has happened in the past, and, if so, in how many instances. I will undertake to get that information and relay it to the Deputy. It is a problem. We mentioned in previous replies that approximately 5% of buildings are excluded from flood

insurance because of previous floods or because they have been identified in a flood risk map as potentially flooding in future. That is why one of the priority actions in the action plan for insurance reform is a commitment to develop a long-term strategic approach to the provision of flood insurance. My Department is working with the OPW, the insurance industry and the Central Bank to bring forward a proposal. I met with a representative of the insurance industry flood task force, and they have given a commitment that they will bring forward a proposal from the insurance industry within the next number of weeks, at which stage we will review it within the Department, working with the Central Bank and the OPW.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I appreciate the Minister of State's and the Department's proactive interaction with the insurance industry. Will he confirm whether his Department's engagements with the insurance industry have included discussions about the role insurers could play in preventing future flooding? In particular, has he explored the possibility of insurance companies contributing in some way to resilience measures such as funding local flood prevention works, supporting community level defences, or even co-operating on schemes that reduce the risks for households and businesses to prevent reoccurrence?

Deputy Robert Troy: I would love to think that the insurance companies would help with flood prevention mechanisms, but I do not think that is realistic. The challenge and the frustration of Government, and I made this point in reply to a previous question, is that insurance companies have not responded positively where the Government has expended large sums of money installing permanent flood defence mechanisms and where policyholders in those areas are still finding it difficult to obtain insurance. I met the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, on this issue today. I am meeting the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, on this issue next week to see how we can bring about the relevant changes that are needed to ensure insurance companies come to the table and respect and acknowledge the fact that this State has expended tens of millions of euro putting in permanent flood defence barriers and, at the same time, they are not willing to take on the risk in those areas. That is something we need to look at, but that stakeholder group will be convening next month to explore the proposals from the insurance industry in relation to flood insurance into the future.

Tax Code

168. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his views on amending the ETF deemed disposal rule to encourage retail investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10082/26]

175. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if his Department will reconsider the current 38% exit tax on unrealised gains for ETFs, which is discouraging prudent saving; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10056/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Tá Ceist Uimh. 168 á tógáil le Ceist Uimh. 175. Níl go leor ama againn ach chun an cheist a chur agus an freagra a fháil ón Aire.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 168 and 175 together.

I thank Deputies Ó Muirí and Neville for their questions. The starting point for this conversation has to be that we live in a country where we have a high level of savings on deposits and we need to support people who are seeking greater returns on their hard-earned savings. Work is continuing on the development of a roadmap for the taxation of retail investment. We announced in budget 2026 that this work was under way. I expect to receive proposals shortly and I hope to be in a position then to bring this roadmap to Government. It will set out an approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to further support retail investment while obtaining the necessary and important anti-avoidance protections in a proportionate manner.

The Government and I are very clear: retail investment needs to be encouraged. It is set out in the programme for Government. It is consistent with our work at an EU level on the savings and investment union, in which I expect us to take a leadership role during our Presidency of the EU Council as well. There is a complexity to all of this in how we tax ETFs, the rate of exit tax and the application of deemed disposal, and we need to work our way through this. An ETF is an investment fund that is traded in a regulated stock exchange. There is no separate taxation regime specifically for ETFs. ETFs, being collective investment funds, generally come within the regimes set out in the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 for such funds.

I look forward to and want to engage with Deputies Ó Muirí and Neville on this. While it is complex from a taxation point of view, we need to get it right. Detailed consideration will be given to ensure any changes in this area achieve an appropriate balance between supporting retail investment and maintaining appropriate anti-avoidance protections. If we get it right, it can be a democratisation of wealth in many ways, where the squeezed middle can start participating in a savings and investment account structure that gives them a much greater return than what they are saving in a deposit account.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): 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 Pat Buckley - To discuss the need for Gaelscoil Choráin, Youghal, County Cork to be included in the DEIS urban band 1 programme.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the impact of the new PSO contract for flights between Donegal and Dublin.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the review of the Garda vetting process and planned measures for simplification.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss implementing the agreed pension payment increases to retired staff of Eir and An Post.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the importance of the N20-M20 motorway project for the Munster region.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the allocation of SET and SNA hours for primary schools.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the new requirement to provide passport ID for travel between Ireland and the UK.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss professional language interpretation in judicial settings.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss school building projects in County Cork.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for increased resources for An Garda Síochána in the mid-west.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the provision of special education classes across Galway East.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the provision of school accommodation at St. Mochta's National School, Louth village.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss special needs classes at Ballyduff National School.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the additional accommodation project at a Coláiste De Lacy, Ashbourne, County Meath.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the housing aid for older people grant and the provision of new boilers.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss sanctioned ASD classes in Dublin North-West.

The matters raised by Deputies Louis O'Hara, Pat Buckley, Conor Sheehan, John Paul O'Shea and Pat the Cope Gallagher have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Every child is entitled to an education and an appropriate school place. Sadly, many children are being denied this right across County Galway and the State. Children are being left in unsuitable places, not having their needs met and being denied equal opportunities and the chance to realise their full potential. I have been contacted by many parents and schools in relation to the urgent need for increased provision of special school places and special classes locally. I welcome the recent announcements of special classes in places like Clarin College in Athenry, Cummer National School, Corrandrum National School and Killeeneen National School, but there is clear demand for additional classes across Galway East.

There are a huge number of areas and schools. Every corner of the county needs increased provision. I will give a couple of examples. In Esker National School, a number of children there have applied for a special class place. Having a class in that school would enable them to remain in their locality. The Minister of State visited that school not too long ago. He knows

the needs that are there, the pressure they are under and the difference this and any other additional supports that can be forthcoming to that school would make, as was discussed during that visit. In St. Vincent's in Coolarne, there is demand in the local area. The school has the appropriate space and facilities to provide inclusive education. It has been engaging on this for a number of years.

I also met with Ability West recently. One of the key issues for it and the families it works with is the provision of special class places and places in special schools. For example, St. Oliver's Special School in Tuam is totally oversubscribed. Many children are not getting the places they need. Again, the Minister of State has been at that school and is aware of the pressure they are under.

I also raise the 1 October deadline for letters of eligibility. This has left in limbo hundreds of children who missed that deadline. They cannot be considered for a special class or special school place because they do not have this letter of eligibility from the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. I have come across a situation locally where the child's professionals and his existing school have all stated that his current school place does not meet his complex needs, yet he cannot be considered for an alternative place. I have raised this situation with the Minister of State's office. These kinds of situations are desperately unfair on these children and their families because they are being left in limbo. It needs to be sorted urgently.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I understand fully the need for specialised provision of education across Galway. The Deputy is quite right. I did visit St. Oliver's and Esker National School recently.

I know the points he made in relation to St. Vincent's and the work being done by Ability West. The Deputy also raised an issue here, even though I did not directly respond to it, in relation to equine therapy and the equine centre. I understand that and welcome his interest in it.

I will give a small bit of context and then deal with a number of the issues. In County Galway, there are 180 special classes that are now operating providing capacity for over 1,080 students. This includes 12 new special classes for the 2025-26 school year. In addition, 16 new special schools have been established around the country over the last while. Seven of these schools are in County Galway and are educating 352 students with more complex educational needs. These schools are supported by the Department and the NCSE, National Council for Special Education. The NCSE has a clear picture of local demand for special class places for 2026-27 and is reviewing the information. As the Deputy quite rightly outlined, we have a number of announcements in relation to County Galway. I thank the school authorities, the patrons and the management of the schools for their engagement with the NCSE and our Department in relation to this.

The NCSE and ourselves will be working very closely with families either before or after 1 October. To be very clear, 1 October was the deadline we brought forward this year. In 2025, the notification date was 1 February. We very much felt this time last year that we were too late within the school year to have identified the children that would have special educational needs at both special classes and special schools. After my appointment this time last year, one of the first decisions we made was to bring in the new 1 October deadline, so that we would

have sight of the challenges we have earlier in the school year. That has brought huge benefit to us in terms of the numbers and forward planning. Like previous governments, we have been berated in relation to forward planning but we are doing a huge amount of forward planning. There has been engagement by both the Department and the NCSE with the patron bodies and school authorities right through the summer and beyond. A number of families have come to the NCSE post 1 October. I assure the Deputy we will be working very closely with all families to make sure we can provide the best possible place for them in the 2026-27 school year.

The responsibility for that role is something that I take extremely seriously. In my engagement right across the country over the last 12 months, we have visited many schools, as the Deputy outlined. Many of them are looking for additional classes but many have additional classes and are doing amazing work in relation to this. The Minister, Deputy Hildegarde Naughton, and her predecessor, Deputy Helen McEntee, and I have worked extremely closely to ensure we are doing the right thing for children and their families. We have engaged with all Deputies right across the House in making sure the concerns they have, quite rightly, in representing families are brought to our attention. We will try to find a resolution between the NCSE, the Department and ourselves.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: There are a number of areas across east Galway, including the ones I mentioned, where there is significant demand and the schools are ready to accommodate those classes. As much as possible, we need to see delivery on the ground. Parents want certainty around what will be available in their local area. As I said, there is huge demand. It is absolutely critical that adequate places are provided. Far too many children are not being provided with the appropriate place for their needs. Again, I urge the Government to resolve the issue of eligibility letters. Our spokesperson, Deputy Darren O'Rourke, has been working on this and raising it tirelessly because parents need certainty for next September. Children should not be locked out of an appropriate school place because of an arbitrary deadline of 1 October. The Minister of State mentioned that further information will be provided on this, but when is the question parents have and are coming to me with. They need certainty on this urgently.

For children who are in mainstream schools, it is absolutely vital that appropriate SNA and special education teaching, SET, support is in place. I will give two examples. I recently visited Cahergal National School. In recent years, the number of students has increased from 86 to 124, yet the school's support teaching hours have actually decreased from 38 to 37. All the school staff there work exceptionally hard but they need appropriate teaching hours to be able to properly support their pupils, especially those who need a little extra support. Similarly, Castlehackett National School's recent review of SNA hours was unsuccessful. Again, this is a fantastic school but it is a constant struggle for the teachers and SNAs to support children in the school and meet their needs when they do not receive adequate resources. I ask that these specific cases are looked into also, as well as ensuring we have adequate provision of special class places across the county.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I reassure the Deputy that the NCSE, the Department and ourselves meet on a weekly basis. We have 300 extra classes - 301 to be specific - sanctioned this year for the 2026-27 school year. That is four months earlier than it was previously because, as I outlined, we want to ensure that we have certainty and give information earlier to

families. That is very welcome but we also have to work through a number of tranches of special classes to be announced over the next number of weeks. I assure the Deputy we are looking at notifications prior to 1 October. I explained why we brought 1 October forward in the summer and I thank the Deputy's party for welcoming it because it gave a sense we were going to have better planning. I reassure him that we will be working with those notifications both prior to and after 1 October to make sure we have the best possible supports in place.

There is a huge demand for special education teachers, support teachers and SNAs within the system. We have almost 25,000 SNAs working within educational services at the moment. We need to make sure that students who need specialised education are getting the best possible supports. I genuinely believe that the State will now put in the proper supports while they are of schoolgoing age. Last week, we announced education therapy services for 45 special schools. The intention and decision taken by the Government was that that would be rolled out to special classes and on to mainstream schools to ensure that children who have additional educational needs get the best possible supports at school time. This is because it will serve not just the students and their families but society well into the future.

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. As a Sinn Féin TD representing Cork East, and in line with my party's strong focus on tackling inequality and investing in disadvantaged communities, I ask for his active support in progressing fair DEIS provisions for students in Youghal who are experiencing persistent socioeconomic disadvantage. The Youghal urban area is home to 7,075 people: 5,276 adults and 1,799 children. The sociodemographic profile of the town shows that significant populations within the town experience varying degrees of disadvantage.

In January 2023, the board of management of Gaelscoil Choráin submitted a comprehensive, evidence-based submission to the Department of education seeking consideration under DEIS urban band 1. The submission was grounded in objective data, including the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, the Youghal community profile and Barnardos documentation, all of which demonstrated entrenched and persistent disadvantage in the school community. That same month, An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, visited Gaelscoil Choráin and other schools in Youghal and witnessed at first hand the scale of complexity of disadvantage affecting students and families and acknowledged the significant challenges facing schools across the town. In June 2023, the Department of education refused DEIS urban band 1 status to the school. However, critically, the correspondence acknowledged the challenges faced by Gaelscoil Choráin and stated the submission would contribute to future work examining the allocation of resources to tackle educational disadvantage, including through a review process informed by updated deprivation data and the OECD analysis.

10 o'clock

Since 2023, the socio-economic circumstances affecting this community have not improved. On the contrary, the concentration of need in the school has intensified. Gaelscoil Choráin serves a school community located in a designated revitalising areas by planning, investment and development, RAPID, town where disadvantage is persistent, cumulative and well documented. Independent and objective data sources, including the Pobal HP deprivation

index, the Youghal community profile and the Barnardos document, clearly demonstrate a concentration of socio-economic disadvantage that significantly impacts students' educational, social and emotional well-being. Without the DEIS urban band 1 supports, this school is structurally constrained in its ability to deliver equitable educational outcomes for students experiencing sustained socio-economic disadvantage. Schools serving communities with comparable profiles benefit from reduced class sizes, targeted staffing supports and integrated DEIS interventions. These students do not, despite the clear evidence of need.

I am speaking on behalf of the principal of the school. The Minister of State heard about these situations from the previous speaker and other TDs as well. There is more than one school in my area of east Cork that is struggling without assistance. Principals in many schools in my area are reaching out. I met the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, and we were promised at private meetings additional classes for people with autism and special needs and additional SNAs, and told that if the school principals asked for them, they got them. At the time, I told the Minister I knew of six principals where those supports were not forthcoming.

I will stick to this school under Topical Issue Matters. I appeal to the Minister of State in his position - I again thank him for his presence tonight - to try to push for this, take it on board and progress it because we are all here to help people.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the Gaelscoil in Youghal. This falls under the remit of my senior Minister, Deputy Naughton, so I am taking it on her behalf. Educational disadvantage is a key priority for the Minister, the rest of the Government and me. The DEIS programme is a key policy initiative for addressing concentrated disadvantage at school level. Supplementing universal supports, the DEIS programme provides a fair and targeted way to address concentrated educational disadvantage that promotes equity and meets the needs of children and young people. Currently, the DEIS programme supports almost 1,200 primary and post-primary schools, reaching almost 260,000 students, with an annual investment of over €180 million. Budget 2026 allocates an additional €16.5 million, rising to €48 million in 2027, to support the implementation of a new DEIS strategy and to introduce the DEIS plus scheme, which will commence this year.

Schools that were included in the expansion of the programme in 2022 were those with the highest concentration of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, as identified through the refined DEIS identification model. Schools were not required to apply for inclusion in the DEIS programme. The model was applied equitably to all schools - I will come back to that in a few moments - including those already in the DEIS programme to ensure that they were in the band that best addressed their level of disadvantage. Urban primary schools with the highest levels of disadvantage were assigned to urban band 1. DEIS urban band 2 schools also face significant need and receive a broad range of supports, including reduced pupil-teacher ratios, additional school grants, access to the home school community liaison scheme, the school completion programme, literacy and numeracy initiatives and targeted attendance and retention measures.

The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is committed to tackling educational disadvantage in all schools to ensure all children can reach their full potential. To this end, a new ten-year DEIS strategy to 2035 will be published in the coming weeks. The new strategy will introduce

innovative solutions to address educational disadvantage and to continue to address the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Any future changes to the identification model and overall allocation of resources will be considered within the context of the new DEIS strategy. The new strategy will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of children at risk of educational disadvantage, developing more innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage, and working towards a more flexible system of supports to ensure that schools receive the right level of support at the right time.

The Deputy mentioned Youghal. There were strict criteria for getting DEIS status. We understand the importance of DEIS status. The Deputy made the case for the Gaelscoil in Youghal. I will take it on board and take it back. A huge amount of work by the Minister and the Department has gone into the new strategy to make sure it comes forward and I welcome it. It will be announced in the coming weeks. The Deputy can rest assured that I will take on board the points he made about the Gaelscoil and feed them back to the Department.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. Sometimes, it is hard to comment on individual cases. Going back to this school, it is three years on. The Minister of State spoke about the urban bands 1 and 2. I understand that the Department has to be fair and tick all the boxes. It is similar to what we have been dealing with in terms flooding with tranches 1 and 2.

The Minister of State mentioned the right level of support and, in fairness to this school in Youghal, it has made a strong case. It has been three years and nothing has changed. Thankfully, the population is growing despite being in a rural area, the lack of public transport and so on, which is a different issue. From dealing with the individual representing the school, I know these people are passionate. It is not about them getting a pat on the back; it is about doing the right things for those who need it.

As the Minister of State said, the right level of support is needed. I thank him for the response. It would be remiss of me if I did not say I will probably follow this up with a formal letter to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, because I know she is passionate about it and when people are new to their roles, it can be difficult at times. We have all often said that we do not come here to get a pat on the back. We come to do the right thing. That is what it is all about.

I understand there is the ten-year strategy, but everyone has an emergency. It is urgent, and after three years of full engagement and the Taoiseach coming to see it first hand, surely that first-hand experience would give it a better advantage.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I will certainly pass on the comments to the Minister. She brings a wealth of experience because she served in the role I am in now quite recently so has a good understanding and has hit the ground running on these issues.

It is not right. We are putting forward a programme and there is huge commitment by the Government. A total of €180 million is being put into this matter currently and more money will be pumped into it again this year and again in 2027. That shows that the Government, including the Minister, and the Department of education understand the positive benefits of DEIS for school communities and, more importantly, how it has helped students and given them the best possible chance in life. I constantly say it. We have done this continuously in

Ireland. One thing we can be exceptionally proud of is the education system we have developed over 100 years. It has served us extremely well. The more investment we can put into education - the Deputy mentioned this in relation to special classes, but into all education, whether it is in disadvantaged areas or whatever - the better. It is a great leveller in terms of giving people the best possible chance.

The DEIS programme looks at making sure pupils stay in school and get the best possible outcomes from school. That may be difficult in some circumstances but we will work with the Deputy. If the Deputy puts in the full details, we will respond accordingly. There is just one thing. The Deputy mentioned Youghal being rural. Where I come from at the other side of the county, in a particularly rural part of the world, I would nearly call Youghal a city. That being said, I will continue to work with the Deputy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: They would be very glad to hear that. I thank the Minister of State.

Regulatory Bodies

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle as an gceist seo a roghnú and I thank the Minister of State for being here. The lack of a regulatory framework and national standards for professional interpretation in judicial but also medical settings is an issue of huge concern in this country following the judgement by the Court of Appeal in the case of Director of Public Prosecutions *v.* HM and BO, which quashed the conviction of a married couple who were convicted of female genital mutilation, as the court found evidence of inaccuracies and distortions in the interpretation of the appellant's testimony, including the mistranslation of key legal and medical terms, omission of critical information, confusion of pronouns, and distortion of questions and answers which affected the jury's ability to accurately assess the appellant's credibility and reliability.

Government needs to take action to deal with the lack of training and testing of legal interpreters in this country. Interpreters should have a high level of proficiency in English and in another language. However, the ability to speak two languages is not enough. They also need to master legal terminology in both languages and to be familiar with regional variations of vocabulary and idioms. In addition, they require excellent short-term memory along with consecutive and whispered simultaneous interpreting skills. Further, interpreters must also be able to preserve the register used by the speaker. Interpreters also need to understand ethical principles applicable to legal and to medical interpretation. This is a specialised role that requires significant training and competence, but there is no accredited training for legal interpreters in Ireland. They are not tested to establish their competence and there is no national standards framework or professional code of ethics. That means in practice that anyone who can speak two languages can work as an interpreter in the courts, healthcare settings and other public institutions.

Without reliable interpreting services, language barriers can hinder everything from healthcare and education to legal processes and community integration. We need a strong legislative framework that underpins and regulates this crucial provision. It is not only necessary but fundamental to promoting equity and inclusion. We can look at the differential to Irish Sign Language because that got official recognition through the Irish Sign Language

Act 2017, unlike spoken language interpreting, so there is a differential because this mandates public bodies to provide accredited ISL interpreters. The lack of a professional framework for spoken interpretation creates significant clinical and patient safety risks in medical settings when medical consultations rely on untrained staff or family members. There are also risks in education as schools often lack a formal policy or budget for this and frequently rely on children and friends to translate for parents.

This issue has been raised for decades. In 2008, the then Minister of State with responsibility for integration, Conor Lenihan, published a report, *Developing Quality, Cost Effective Interpreting and Translation Services in Ireland*. The report addressed the lack of regulation in Ireland's translation and interpreting sectors and there were a number of recommendations, including a whole-of-government approach, setting national standards, requiring specific qualifications, and establishing a central register of accredited interpreters. To date, no such centralised regulatory body or mandatory national register has been fully established across all public services. Nearly two decades after that, many of the original problems, such as the use of unqualified interpreters, persist in the legal, asylum and healthcare systems. There are examples in other jurisdictions where this has been done effectively, such as Italy and Sweden. All of the evidence and research tells us that this needs to be regulated.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): On behalf of the Minister for justice, I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is important to state that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has no role in individual court proceedings, nor can he intervene in operational matters that fall under the remit of courts, including the processes by which translation and interpretation services are provided.

Management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions under the Courts Service Act 1998 and the Constitution. In relation to introducing State-accredited training, the Minister is advised that the Courts Service, like many other public service bodies, has a contract for interpretation services under the interpretation service procurement framework set up by the Office of Government Procurement. The Minister is further advised that this contract requires the contracted company to ensure that interpreters possess the qualifications and competence appropriate to the tasks for which they are employed. The contract agreed under the central procurement framework sets the standards for interpreters supplied to the Courts Service.

Ireland has opted into EU Directive 2010/64/EU. Article 5 states that Member States are required to take concrete measures to ensure the quality of the interpretation and translation services. However, the article does not mandate member states to establish a register. The Minister has been advised that there are no plans at present to create such a register. Where the court of its own motion, or on application by any of the parties to the hearing, considers that the interpretation being provided is not of such a quality as to ensure that the person before it can effectively exercise his or her right to a fair trial, it may direct that the interpreter be replaced.

The Minister has been advised by the Courts Service that on the rare occasion where an issue arises, defendants, with their legal representatives, can and do have the entitlement to inform the court that a defendant cannot follow proceedings because of the quality of

interpretation. Where this arises, proceedings are adjourned until another interpreter is found. The right to fair procedures is a central tenet of our criminal justice system. Ireland opted into the EU directive on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings and it was subsequently transposed into Irish law. This was done via two statutory instruments, one relating to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings, which relates to the arrangements to be put in place by the Courts Service in respect of the conduct of court proceedings and the second which relates to interpretation and translation for persons in custody in Garda Síochána stations.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I am disappointed by that response. The Minister of State referred to a directive of the European Parliament that compels member states to take concrete measures to ensure interpretation and translation provided meets the necessary quality standards. I have presented an example of where that did not happen. There is a line in the directive that member states must endeavour to establish registers of interpreters and translators. This is something that is best practice, which professional linguists and people such as Professor Mary Phelan in DCU have been calling for for decades. We need to move away from the concept that any bilingual person can be a competent interpreter. We need to move away from outsourcing because there is an issue with quality control. We need to have accredited, university-level courses for legal interpreters. We need a regulatory body and a register. We need for longer trials to have two competent interpreters. The UK has a new qualifications framework and a contract for spoken language services that was tendered in autumn 2024. We need to follow suit.

It is not just me who is saying this. People who are experts in in this field are saying it because we need to develop a framework for formal accreditation and a national register for spoken language interpreters in healthcare and judicial settings. There have been examples where people have gone into hospital and people have used Google Translate. It primarily concerns migrant healthcare. There is a report with recommendations. They just need to be implemented.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Deputy makes his point very well in a very sound, fair and reasonable fashion but I remind him that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has no role in individual court proceedings. As I have previously noted, Article 5 of EU Directive 2010/64/EU requires member states to take concrete measures to ensure the quality of interpretation and translation services. A 2018 European Commission report on the implementation of the directive did not flag any issues of concern regarding Ireland's approach to same and no open infringement proceedings are under way in this regard.

All procurement by the Courts Service is governed by EU directives on procurement that set out rules and procedures designed to ensure equal treatment, mutual recognition, proportionality and transparency in the awarding of public contracts. Procurement decisions must in all respects be fair and equitable and ensure value for money. The Courts Service must be able to justify decisions made and actions taken. In all cases, the Office of Government Procurement public procurement guidelines for goods and services, which set out the rules and best practice on the various stages of the procurement process, must be followed by all staff.

I reiterate that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has no role in individual court proceedings, including the processes by which translation and interpretation services are

provided. On my behalf and that of the Minister, I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter.

Road Projects

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I welcome the opportunity to speak this evening on the importance of the N20-M20 motorway project for the Munster region and the urgent need to accelerate progress on its business case, the final design and planning during 2026. For far too long, the N20 corridor between Cork and Limerick has been recognised as one of the most congested, dangerous and inadequate national routes in the country. It is a road that no longer meets the needs of modern Ireland and certainly does not meet the needs of a growing and ambitious Munster region. Every day, thousands of commuters, families, students and businesses depend on this route. They experience long delays, unpredictable journey times and unacceptable safety risks. Communities along the route continue to bear the burden of heavy traffic passing through their towns and villages. This is not sustainable or fair.

The delivery of the N20-M20 motorway represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform connectivity between the two largest cities outside of Dublin. It will strengthen the economic links between Cork and Limerick, support balanced regional development and help to unlock the full potential of the Atlantic economic corridor. This project is not just about building a road. It is about building opportunities, creating jobs during construction, attracting inward investment, supporting indigenous enterprise and ensuring that our region can compete nationally and internationally. For rural villages like Ballyhea and New Twopothouse and towns across north Cork such as Charleville, Buttevant and Mallow, improved connectivity will mean better access to education, healthcare, employment and public services. It will mean safer roads, reduced emissions from congestion and improved quality of life.

We have seen progress in recent years, and that progress must continue, but now we must move from project design to planning and delivery. This year must be the decisive year for this project. I am calling for a clear and accelerated timeline for the completion of the business case, the final design and the statutory planning process. These stages are essential but they must not become obstacles that bring about unnecessary delays. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, in partnership with the Department of Transport and local authorities, must be resourced and empowered to progress this project at pace. We need certainty, transparency and accountability regarding these timelines.

Equally, meaningful engagement with landowners, communities and stakeholders must remain at the heart of this process. Progress must be made in a way that is fair, respectful and environmentally responsible. The people of Munster, businesses, farmers, landowners, commuters and families have waited long enough. We cannot afford another five years of reports, reviews and revisions while congestion worsens and opportunities are lost. This Government has rightly committed itself to balanced regional development. The N20-M20 motorway is essential to delivering on that commitment. If we are serious about strengthening regional cities, supporting rural Ireland and easing pressure on the greater Dublin area, we must be serious about delivering this project. I urge the Minister and the Department to make the N20-M20 a top strategic priority in 2026, to set out a clear road map to construction and to provide the funding and the leadership necessary to bring this to fruition. Munster deserves

modern, safe and reliable infrastructure. Our people deserve better connectivity, our businesses deserve certainty and our region deserves the opportunity to thrive.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): The Deputy is dead right. I thank him for his ongoing support and advocacy concerning the importance of the N20-M20 as a county councillor, as leader of the council and as a new Teachta Dála. He illustrated very clearly here the strategic importance of the road. He is 100% correct. I speak as a Cork person when I say that people have waited far too long. It is the piece that we are missing in our region for a variety of reasons, including safety and economic sustainability. I thank the Deputy for his very thought-provoking address tonight here to the House about this strategically important route, which is a priority for the Government.

The proposed project aims to enhance regional accessibility by improving the network connecting the cities of Cork and Limerick but also by improving connections to west Cork and Kerry along with that piece the Deputy spoke about, namely, balanced regional growth, especially in north Cork. The N20-M20 Cork to Limerick project will provide not just better connectivity between the second and third largest cities in the State. The Deputy outlined that towns such as Buttevant, Croom, Charleville, Mallow, Blarney, New Twopothouse and Ballyhea will benefit but it will also address safety and the deficiency on the existing road and will deliver active travel infrastructure along the corridor along with the better opportunities we all want.

The N20-M20 road corridor options were progressed by TII with public transport alternatives and rail as comparators. Following this appraisal, TII announced the preferred solution on 20 March 2022. The preferred solution involves building a dual carriageway or motorway along the existing N20 corridor between Cork and Limerick and would use 30% to 40% of the current N20. In the course of arriving at the preferred solution, the project team looked at rail options and highlighted the provision of improved services on the existing rail network as a means of enhancing public transport between Cork and Limerick. The design team is currently engaged in the design and environmental evaluation phase of the project. This will include selecting the type of road in addition to the preparation of the scheme's business case, which is required under the infrastructure guidelines.

In June 2024, a briefing took place for public representatives as part of the project team's ongoing engagement process. In considering various options in relation to the delivery of this project, the project team is currently recommending that the scheme should be tolled. However, no final decision has been taken in this regard. The introduction of tolling would be subject to compliance with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and further statutory approvals. A further project update on 16 June 2025 provided further details, particularly regarding the refined requirements relating to land take. The scheme's preliminary business case is expected to be submitted to the Department of Transport in the second half of this year. Subject to Government approval as is required under the infrastructure guidelines, the submission of the statutory documents for the project to An Coimisiún Pleanála would follow thereafter. TII allocated €4.5 million to Limerick City and County Council to progress the scheme during 2025. Allocations for 2026 will be announced in the near future.

I assure the Deputy that I am, as he is, very supportive of this particular project and recognise its importance as we have said, for a variety of reasons, but most importantly from a safety,

economic and sustainability point of view. This road needs to be connected. It is that piece that is missing in the connectivity of our country and as two Cork Members and representatives, we understand fully what could happen when this new road is built in terms of the new life it will breathe. The people of that area deserve for this road to be delivered expeditiously. I thank the Deputy for his ongoing work and support and for being a long-time champion of the road.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State for his kind words relating to this project. It is a very detailed project and there is a lot of money involved, but I welcome the fact that in his response, he said the scheme preliminary business case is expected to be submitted to the Department of Transport in the second half of this year. This is very welcome news. We need to keep this momentum going, and subject to Government approval, which I am sure will come as is required under the infrastructure guidelines, the submission of the statutory documents for the project will be forwarded to An Coimisiún Pleanála. I thank the Minister of State very sincerely for his response.

As two Cork TDs in this area, we met the representatives of Cork Development Forum recently in Leinster House, and the Cork Chamber of Commerce. There is huge backing to finally proceed to get that infrastructure project between Cork and Limerick together. It is very important and poignant that today further infrastructure announcements were made by Government to move the delivery of infrastructure more quickly. That is very much where the N20-M20 project is at. I hope this project will fit into this Bill. Like the lengthy duplicative processes, the project will undergo a streamlined, time-bound internal review by the Department of public expenditure. The kind of practical reform the Government wants to see is when infrastructure is ready to go, the system should help it to move and not hold it back if at all possible. I thank the Minister of State for his comments on the project. It is important that we collectively, as Corkonians but also as Government representatives, move forward and match the words with actions to ensure that this N20-M20 project motorway moves decisively from aspiration to reality.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is right that it is time to move from aspiration to delivery. That is why the Tánaiste was very clear about the need for the development of expeditious projects to be progressed, with the whole issue around infrastructure development and the need for a specific department of infrastructure. The Deputy and I really listened to the Cork Development Forum and the chamber of commerce and other business interests and a variety of interests relating to the N20-M20 project. It is included in the NDP and received, as he knows, significant funding in 2024. This year's funding allocation is due shortly and it will receive money.

The proposed project is critically important in terms of connectivity, not just from a Cork-Limerick perspective but also from the perspective of other regional towns as we have articulated and outlined. It is important to outline to the House that approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funding was provided last year to TII in line with the NDP and Government policy, and TII sought to allocate national roads funding to local authorities in a manner that seeks to deliver in protecting existing rural projects and major projects that are to be progressed or are in or near construction, such as that we were talking about in terms of pre-construction, but also in the context of new roads.

The N20-M20 is one we need to see delivered. We have seen the benefit in our own county in the Baile Bhuirne-Macroon bypass, in the importance of the Dunkettle interchange upgrade, and we need to see more happening in terms of the N40 where we have gridlock every day. We need the Atlantic economic corridor to be developed so that we can improve the offerings of jobs in west Cork, north Cork and dare I say it, Kerry as well. This is about ensuring the N20-M20 is built. People have waited long enough. The potential to reduce road fatalities and accidents is there for all to see from a safety point of view. I look forward to working with all Members, but in particular Deputy O'Shea, to deliver the project on behalf of the Government.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.35 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 11 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.35 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 February 2026.