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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 12 Feabhra 2026

Thursday, 12 February 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Revised Estimates for Public Services 2026 - Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2026: Votes 27 - International Co-operation and Vote 28 - Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Question No. 1 taken with Written Answers.

Public Expenditure Policy

2. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to outline the accountability measures in the accelerating infrastructure action plan; the way he intends to implement and enforce them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11340/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: The accelerating infrastructure task force action plan was published towards the end of last year. Key to that plan is the accountability measures referenced in it and how they are implemented. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, might take the opportunity to put on the record of the House the details around accountability measures in that plan and how he intends to enforce and implement them.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): In drafting the accelerating infrastructure report, there was extensive engagement with ministerial and official level colleagues to ensure clear ownership of actions and the expectations for delivery of these actions.

On publication, Departments were required to set out how they will implement the series of actions under their remit and ensure individuals know what they are accountable for. My Department will be managing the monitoring and reporting on delivery of the actions in the report and action plan, which will be led by my infrastructure division. It details 30 headline actions for delivery by quarter and sets out target outputs and outcomes to be achieved. All lead Departments have been engaged with over January and this month to provide an update on the delivery of quarter 4 of 2025 and quarter 1 of 2026 actions and the relevant structural changes within their sectors to aid the delivery of the 30 actions. All actions required for delivery in 2025 have been completed as of January 2026. Some of the key deliverables include the publication of the national development plan review in 2025 and the subsequent publication of all national development plan sectoral plans.

As committed to in the programme for Government and the accelerating infrastructure task force, a step-change in investment for the energy, water and transport sectors has been approved. The sectoral plans detail over 200 specific projects that are being prioritised, with a particular focus on those projects going to tender or construction within 2026 and 2027. This is with the specific aim of providing certainty to the construction on the pipeline.

With regard to the Government's consultation on the scale of fees for environmental judicial reviews by the Department of climate, we will publish the consultation on fees for environmental legal costs, which will, in effect, limit the cost the State pays in environmental judicial reviews. We have had the first meeting of new joint utilities and transport clearing house, which will ensure shared understanding and collaboration between the utilities and transport sectors and greater co-operation in infrastructure delivery. I chaired the first meeting at which there was a wider discussion about its terms of reference and work plan over the coming weeks and months.

The Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, also brought heads of Bill to Government to place the judicial review process on a statutory footing, which were published on 6 January 2026. These give a wider indication of some what is being implemented. At this point, there are no significant indicators for actions that are off track, and good progress is noted for actions required for delivery in quarters 1 and 2 of 2026. I will go into the wider piece in my second contribution.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Minister will be aware that we in the Labour Party gave the action plan a fair wind. We did so because of the absolute dire situation this country faces in terms of infrastructure development, most notably in housing. The kind of economic development we all want to see simply will not happen if we do not address the key concerns we all have around housing provision, renewable energy, transport links and improving connectivity around the country. Will the Minister put on the record, in terms of the accountability measures outlined in the plan, any legislative interventions that might be required this year? For example, I notice there is a heavy emphasis on accountability for regulatory bodies and different agencies that will be responsible for implementing the plan. Are there any key legislative interventions that will be made this year to make that happen and ensure accountability really is at the heart of this, rather than having mere words peppered throughout this report?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The task force is continuing to ensure we have challenge meetings and continued oversight of delivery. We have a Cabinet committee on infrastructure and the

critical infrastructure Bill, and we will bring the scheme to the Government in the coming weeks. That will place clear obligations around the prioritisation of infrastructure across regulatory bodies and agencies when it comes to trying to speed up infrastructure delivery across the State.

I have also said in my role in terms of sanctioning respective Departments and agencies that co-operation and delivery of infrastructure is something that will be central to wider requests that are received through the year and the budgetary process. The accountability structure is there in terms of Cabinet committees and the utilisation of the wider sanctioning position I have. The critical infrastructure Bill will prioritise infrastructure delivery and place obligations on those involved in the infrastructure lifecycle around what they are expected to do and in what time. All of that will yield improved delivery and better accountability as through the year.

Deputy Ged Nash: We will be watching this very closely. The reason we gave the report a fair wind was because of the dire situation with infrastructure in the country. According to the IMF and others, our infrastructure is about one third behind comparable countries. Accountability is key because that has been one of the significant missing pieces. The problem is that if it is everyone's responsibility, it is nobody's responsibility.

Ultimately, the Minister will be chairing the task force. My understanding, from re-reading the report yesterday, is that where issues around delays occur, the infrastructure division of the Department will deal with them but they could potentially be escalated to the task force and subsequently to the Cabinet subcommittee.

Mention was made of sanctioning Departments and agencies that are not performing, for example. It would have been a perverse situation if this kind of process were in place in recent years, given that we have had the Department of housing overpromising and under-delivering for years. We could have a situation in the annual budget round and the Estimates process, where the Department of housing, in the context of what the Minister is seeking to do here, could essentially be sanctioned with a reduction in its budget for not performing. Are financial penalties for under-delivering Departments the kind of thing we are talking about in this regard?

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are variety of mechanisms in that regard. It is about trying to drive compliance. There are obviously sanctions and requests received relating to staffing. For example, if a particular agency is not delivering in line with what we have set out in the infrastructure report, a request for additional staffing might be a consideration or how we restructure or reform a particular agency if it is not contributing to wider delivery. That is an example of it.

If things are escalated and we do not see delivery and change, then sanction plays a role in terms of driving progress and reforming. We cannot allow drift to occur. I acknowledge support of the Deputy and indeed that of many in the Opposition who wish to co-operate with this. It is fundamental for the wider future and long-term progress of the economy that we drive better delivery and reform. These are pragmatic steps that will make a difference. They have a good evidence base. Accountability is key and that is why the majority of the actions sit within my Department and the infrastructure division, so that we can drive that co-ordination piece over the next number of months.

Flood Relief Schemes

3. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to give an update on flood relief schemes; and on the underspend within the allocation to the National Flood Forecasting Warning Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11569/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Minister of State, Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran, provide an honest update on flood relief schemes across the State? As we know, the catchment-based flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, report, which carried out an evaluation of the entire State, identified 150 schemes. This was announced back in 2018 with huge fanfare. A total of 150 new schemes were going to be delivered. I note the Government keeps referring to schemes that have been delivered, including schemes that were delivered when I was a teenager. I do not want that information. I want to know how many of those 150 new schemes have been delivered to date.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): To identify communities that are at risk from significant flood events, the OPW completed the largest study of flood risk ever undertaken by the State in 2018. The OPW catchment-based flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme was undertaken by engineers and consultants on behalf of the OPW, working in partnership with the local authorities. The CFRAM programme studied 80% of Ireland's primary flood risk and identified solutions that can protect over 95% of those at risk. A series of 29 flood risk management plans were launched in May 2018, providing the evidence base for required flood relief schemes. These plans are available on www.floodinfo.ie.

The Government has committed €715 million to the delivery of these flood relief schemes under the National Development Plan 2026-2030. Since 2018, as part of a phased approach to scheme delivery, the funding has allowed the OPW to treble the number of flood relief schemes at design, planning or construction stage to some 100 schemes. Today, work to protect 80% of all at-risk properties nationally is completed or under way. The first tranche of new schemes identified in the flood risk management plans includes some 60 schemes that were prioritised, along with schemes already under way. The prioritisation of the first tranche of schemes was based on three criteria, namely, scale of projects, capacity to deliver the national development programme and the maximisation of return for investment in respect of property numbers.

Flood relief schemes are complex, multi-annual civil engineering projects and take some 11 years to deliver, which include bringing a scheme through development, planning, design, procurement and construction. The current position with regard to flood relief schemes is as follows: the OPW has invested some €580 million in 56 completed schemes that are providing protection to some 13,580 properties.

9 o'clock

The economic benefit to the State from loss avoided is estimated to be in the region of €2 billion. There are currently ten relief schemes that will protect over 2,800 properties on completion.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have a serious problem here. I note that the Minister of State mentioned the 13,500 properties that are protected but the Dáil was told the same number of properties were protected in 2023. The fact is that we have not protected a single additional property since. The numbers have not changed in the past couple of years. According to the Government's website, I think 143 or 144 schemes were identified eight years ago and still have not been completed. I know that nothing can be done overnight and the Government continues to reach to judicial reviews and all the rest but large numbers of those schemes have not even gone to design stage, let alone planning stage. There is a serious issue with the delivery of schemes within the State.

The other part of the question related to the allocation for the national flood forecasting and warning service between 2020 and 2024. We are ten years on and this still has not been delivered. I heard the Minister, Deputy Chambers, talk about allocations and all the rest. We are ten years on and still do not have a system in place. There are serious problems within the Department.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I will bring the Deputy back to 2018, when I took up this role in the OPW. The first task I had was to travel the country. Many local authorities would not sign up to catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM. It was a master plan for delivering flood defence for the whole country. Having achieved that in the first couple of months in my role, I then had to go and get investment. With the Minister at the time, Paschal Donohoe, I fought tooth and nail to get €1 billion. That was the start of delivering schemes, in my eyes, for the people of the country.

The master plan set out the areas that are hugely affected by flooding in the Deputy's area, my area and every other area in the country. The Government then backed that with money. We now have ten schemes at various different stages. Some are very close to completion. More schemes are being developed every day.

Since I returned to this position, I have changed the criteria for the minor works scheme. The budget has increased from €750,000 to €2 million. I brought about changes to give the local authorities staff to try to drive on these schemes. I have changed how we deliver these schemes through the minor works system. The schemes are an important part of delivering.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I appreciate what the Minister of State is saying. I also appreciate that the Minister of State was not in office during the eight years I am talking about. However, his Cabinet colleagues were. We lost a lot of time when no schemes were delivered. That is the problem. In 2024, three schemes were supposed to be delivered but none were.

I want to go back to the national flood forecasting and warning service. Less than €6 million of the nearly €20 million allocated has been delivered. As I said, this is a project that has been going on for ten years now. The Government agreed to establish the national flood forecasting and warning service. In the meantime, only one stage of the plan has been delivered, meaning we are currently stuck with an out-of-date and inaccurate warning system that does not even take ground conditions into account. Communities have been failed by the Government's lethargic approach to delivering a comprehensive and modern flood forecasting and warning service.

I know the Minister of State was not in government during this period but his colleague, the Minister, was. He was on national radio talking about allocations and all the rest. The people who were flooded do not give a rat's about that. I will not say what I was going to say. They want the Government to deliver. They cannot understand. This was to be announced ten years ago. Money is not being provided. The delivery of this service is not there. It is not good enough.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy said that no schemes have been delivered. Ongoing work is being done on schemes. We are protecting communities. We are giving the resources to local authorities to drive on the schemes. The Deputy knows that. I have worked with local authorities to push on schemes.

With regard to the national forecasting and warning service, I understand that the unspent money the Deputy is referring to relates to the flood forecasting centre in Met Éireann and, as such, would be a matter for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Separately, the OPW made a once-off contribution of €871,000 to Met Éireann to support the establishment of the flood forecasting centre in Met Éireann. This funding supported the set-up costs of staffing, ICT, accommodation and procurement of relevant studies, services and expertise to develop hydrological models and staff capacity. The final element of the contribution was paid to Met Éireann in November 2023. The money may have been sent back but work is still going on to provide and bring this service that the people of Ireland want.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has been ten years and we do not have it.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: We, in government, are fully committed to delivering that service. My job, as Minister of State, is to protect communities and that is what I set out to do. I continue to work to do that.

Departmental Funding

4. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for a progress report on the capital grant funding provided to Dublin Zoo in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10737/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to ask about capital grant funding of €2.8 million that was given to Dublin Zoo by the OPW in 2025. That is part of a ten-year programme so there will be more funding in subsequent years. There is no scrutiny of Dublin Zoo. Who is going to monitor how this money is spent and what it is spent on? The zoo can also raise funds from the public through charity appeals and charging people at the gates. Wild Lights is an abomination that is very bad for animals. Who is going to monitor this money?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Dublin Zoo, along with Fota Wildlife Park, submitted proposals in 2021 seeking State support for ten-year capital development programmes. Following the Government's approval, the OPW provides capital grants to both organisations. These grants are funded through the OPW's annual Estimates. The funding is in recognition

of the specific financial impact of Covid-19 and the need for continued investment in their infrastructure.

In 2025, the OPW provided a capital grant of €2.8 million to Dublin Zoo to support a range of priority capital projects, aligned with Dublin Zoo's master plan for 2021 to 2031. The projects which received funding in 2025 included: refurbishment of the 130-year-old South American house; conservation works to the old cottage; infrastructure and sustainability improvements; upgrades to selected play areas; and enhanced education and visitor experience.

All funding is paid in line with public governance standards, including the relevant circulars. The funding is reported in the annual accounts of the Zoological Society of Ireland. The OPW has no day-to-day involvement in the operation of Dublin Zoo.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is my problem. It has been consistently raised on the floor of the Dáil that nobody is properly inspecting Dublin Zoo in an independent way. The Minister of State talked about the South American house and play areas. The director also had his house renovated during that Covid period while making appeals to the public for funds.

My issue is animal welfare. There is a dog-fighter working as an elephant consultant in Dublin Zoo. The chimps are obese and agoraphobic. They are afraid to go outside and are pushed out for the public. They have nothing to do. It is extremely bad for animals to be in confined spaces. One former zookeeper who I met - there have been whistle-blowers about the zoo - told me they were sent to Smyth's Toys Superstore to buy a few toys to keep the chimps occupied. Some €100 was spent to buy a doll and stuff like that. The chimps are heavily medicated.

An elephant report was sent to the Department of agriculture but there has been no response on the confinement of the elephants and the climate not being suitable. That is what the OPW is funding.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: A memorandum of understanding was signed between the OPW and Dublin Zoo in 2025. Payments are made only after the zoo submits its vouched invoices and its works are approved. This ensures compliance with the public grant rules.

On the Deputy's last question, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is responsible for the licensed inspection of the zoo and the oversight of an annual inspection of Dublin Zoo. Inspections are carried out by an independent multidisciplinary team with specialist expertise.

Not a week goes by that the Deputy is not standing outside the zoo with a phone. Does she ever go in? Has she ever gone in to see the good work the zoo does and that the staff do? I visited the zoo on the basis of some of the things that have been said in this House. The workers in the zoo treat all the animals with the height of respect and dignity. The zoo is essential to the people of Dublin and Ireland. I work closely with my colleague beside me, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and other Deputies in the House in relation to Phoenix Park. I have control over the work that goes on. Dublin Zoo is a place I visit on a regular basis and I cannot but praise the people in Dublin Zoo for the work they do.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Is the Minister of State a zoologist? A report was done recently by independent zoologists on Dublin Zoo. Elephants have half-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It is probably the Deputy's report.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----the lifespan-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy is very good out there with her social media, shouting and roaring.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Minister-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: May I have extra time? The Minister of State is barracking me as I am speaking.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Keep going, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is unbelievable that he cannot sit and listen. I get little enough time to raise this topic. Elephants have half the lifespan in Dublin Zoo. Matriarchy and family are very important for elephants. These two sister elephants were split up. We should not be spending money sending children to zoos. Any money for conserving species and biodiversity would be better spent out in the wild where there are very good programmes under way, rather than diverting it to Victorian concepts like zoos. Many other issues with animals have been reported. The NPWS does not have zoology expertise. It is also very close in relations to the management of Dublin Zoo. The Minister of State should meet zoo keepers and give them more funding and more space and time to deal with the animals, but we really should be phasing out zoos.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Okay. It was very difficult when I was being barracked by the Minister of State.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I allowed you another ten seconds for that. The Minister of State to reply.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I cannot believe the Deputy never mentioned the big cataract operation that was done in Dublin Zoo. It was all over the news all over the world. It was the first ever carried out. She did not mention the good work of the zoo. She continually comes in here and complains and says there is cruelty to the animals in Dublin Zoo. I asked her a question. Did she go into the zoo and meet the people or did she stand outside taking pictures and selfies and talking and complaining? She should go in and meet the staff and management to see the good work they do. The people love that zoo. It has hundreds of thousands of visitors every year and the Deputy is telling me that because one element she has centred on is wrong, everything is wrong in the zoo. The zoo is perfect in my eyes and I will continue to support it.

Budget 2026

5. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the reason figures for existing levels of service, ELS, were not included in the budget 2026 documentation; the plans for these to be provided in detail in budgetary documentation going forward, considering recommendations from the Oireachtas Committee on Budgetary Oversight; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11621/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: Each year the expenditure report seeks to improve on previous iterations to refine and improve the approach used to present budget day figures. The expenditure report for 2026 provides a more detailed description of the budget package components than in previous years, in the table set out on page 12. There have been many alternative approaches in the past and work on the best way to present each year's budget will be an iterative process. The approach taken to the budget 2026 differs from previous years and therefore cannot be compared on a like-for-like basis. The information is no longer available in the format used in recent years as the budget estimates for 2026 have been constructed in a different way to previous years' budgets. This was undertaken to better reflect the totality of expenditure, where this funding is being invested and what is being delivered for our growing population. This approach placed a greater emphasis on reform, efficiency and placing value for money at the centre of government decision-making. It allows for more focus on the total size of the overall expenditure ceiling.

The 2026 expenditure report provides a more detailed breakdown of the budget package than in previous years, as shown in the reconciliation table provided on page 12. The overall uplift for 2026 is allocated across the following categories: €900 million for increased recipients of public services in social protection, childcare, disability and housing; €2.2 billion for key policy adjustments and expansion of services, including welfare measures, education and youth reforms, increased apprenticeship places and supports for public transport; €1.1 billion to meet the 2026 cost of decisions taken in 2025, such as the roll-out of pay-related benefit, auto-enrolment and additional PSO transport supports; €1.2 billion for the cost of the public sector pay agreement; €1.4 billion reflecting ongoing scheme costs, additional staff recruitment and programme-specific funding across a number of areas; €2.1 billion; and €300 million unallocated, to be assigned later as required, consistent with previous years.

A range of sources of information relating to the budget are published throughout the year. The expenditure report on budget day summarises the programmes. The Revised Estimates Volume follows the budget and provides additional details and information on spending plans. The fiscal monitor each month provides year-to-date spending figures for each Vote group. This compares them against the profiles set out by Departments and against the previous year. The public service performance report details how Departments performed against targets set in the Revised Estimates process. I have more I can set out.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The budgetary oversight committee is great and we have a diverse range of people on it. The one thing we want to see is accountability. We want to be able to see forecasting. The job of the committee is to go back year by year and see where moneys are being spent and where the delivery is. Looking at the Departments, if I ran my

business the way the Government runs its business I would not be in business. We want to see the delivery of the funds the Minister has named and all the millions he has listed to see that we get delivery on budget and on time. What I have seen to date is that we have seen a lot of moneys spent but we are not getting the delivery. If you compare it with business models we are not getting the same results. Those businesses make profits out of their work but the Government cannot deliver in the same way businesses can. I need to try to address that.

Deputy Jack Chambers: To take the Deputy's business model analogy, businesses do not do ELS as he has sought in his question. Businesses look at the totality of expenditure and to drive better delivery, better outputs and better efficiency in terms of the totality of spend. That is exactly what we are seeking to do in how we framed and delivered budget 2026. That is where the weaknesses of existing levels of service are identified and we now focus on the totality of expenditure rather than only the incremental budget package, which has been the nature of it in previous years. That places reform, efficiency and value for money at the centre of decisions we make and shifts the emphasis from the expenditure level towards what policies are being advanced, what services are being delivered and how funding supports a growing population. That is where, in terms of the ELS, there is an inconsistency across Votes. Just sitting additional expenditure above a system that might be inefficient in a particular expenditure area does not address the need to better link output. What we are trying to do and how we have changed the expenditure approach is to extract better outputs around how we manage the totality of expenditure, aligned with the point the Deputy has made.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I understand what the Minister is trying to do and I take in the context of what he is saying. There is better forecasting - that is probably the word I am looking for. However, look at the children's hospital where we have gone €1.2 billion over budget. Now I hear we are looking to take a legal challenge against the contractors for not finishing the job. The problem here is not the contractors but the contract and how it was set out on the first day, through the Departments. Every year that goes on, the regulation changes. It is an ongoing issue. From the point of view of the delivery of infrastructure such as that hospital - which is becoming a white elephant and I wonder whether it will ever be finished - how can the Minister budget for that within his Department of infrastructure? It is €1.2 billion over budget. Where would that go to deliver a lot of the services out there? I want accountability not only for the developer but also for the Departments and how they deliver for the Minister and the people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is obviously a separate issue to the existing levels of service in the Deputy's question. What we have set out is a new national development plan and a new way of delivering infrastructure in the economy. We have a series of reforms we are advancing through 2026 which are about accelerating wider delivery but also responding to the evidence, which is there, that too many of the systems are cumbersome, slow and duplicative in many instances. This has impacted delivery on water, energy, transport and the wider social and economic infrastructure of the State.

Of course we have had reports published on overspends and the children's hospital and there have been learnings from that for the Department of Health. Reforms have been made to mitigate the risk of such an example arising in future. Obviously that is a separate and distinct

issue from the existing levels of service, but we are seeking to deliver more infrastructure and to speed that up because the time spent in a process-driven approach has a cost and we are trying to bring a broader rebalancing to get projects moving.

Flood Risk Management

6. Deputy Barry Heneghan asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the extent of any engagement his Department and the Office of Public Works have had with Dublin City Council in relation to flood risk, coastal overtopping and storm surge impacts in Clontarf following recent flooding incidents; whether the Office of Public Works has carried out or plans to carry out assessments of existing coastal defences and flood mitigation measures in the area; the interim or longer term flood defence measures under consideration; the way in which such works would be funded and prioritised within the national flood relief programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11103/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I have a question for the Minister of State on the engagement his Department and the Office of Public Works have had with Dublin City Council in relation to flood risk in north Dublin, coastal overtopping and storm surge impacts.

We all saw the devastation that occurred last week. I thank the Minister of State for the work he did in Portrane to protect houses. Houses on the Hole in the Wall beach are at risk. I would love the same scheme to be rolled out there. How will flood defence works in north Dublin be funded and prioritised in the national flood relief programme?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I have witnessed first-hand the impact of flooding and the devastation it causes to homes, businesses and local communities. I am very familiar with the flood risk in Clontarf, having visited the area and met with local representatives, businesses and the community in May and October of last year. As the Deputy is aware, Dublin City Council received planning consent for a flood relief scheme for Clontarf. However, the scheme did not progress to construction. The OPW is engaging with Dublin City Council to progress the design of the flood relief scheme for Clontarf. The assessment of the recent flooding is informing the development of scope of service for the appointment of engineering and environmental consultants and will also inform the design of the flood relief scheme for Clontarf. The scheme will be designed to protect against a one-in-200-years coastal event and meet the requirements of Insurance Ireland.

Dublin City Council is leading the Clontarf flood relief scheme. The council and the OPW are engaging on the development of tender documents for the appointment of engineering and environmental consultants. Progressing a viable flood relief scheme for Clontarf is to be funded by the OPW, through funding for flood relief under the national development plan. Pending the design and completion of a permanent scheme, last year I prioritised the replacement of temporary sandbag structures along the promenade. In May, I met businesses and the local community to listen to their concerns regarding the appearance of the sandbags. My office worked with Dublin City Council on feasible alternatives, which I discussed with the local community, when I visited last October. This meeting facilitated the agreement for the replacement of the sandbags with interlocking barriers as a temporary measure. Dublin

City Council has advised that over 300 m of the interlocking barriers have been successfully installed on the Alfie Byrne Road. Work will be completed in the coming weeks.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I again thank the Minister of State. To have him in the constituency I represent three times in the first nine months of the Government's term was like Christmas coming early. I thank him for that. They call me Mr. Sandman now for getting rid of the sandbags. I want to sincerely thank the Minister of State for his engagement.

The two recent flooding incidents have exposed the scale and urgency of the work that is needed. The Minister of State indicated that planning was granted for flood defences. I have clarified in the House before, and will do so again now, that there was a proposal for a berm for the north city arterial main, NCAM, project running down the promenade that would have been covered in muck. It would have been joined. Anyone who is elderly, vulnerable or with additional needs would not have been seen on the promenade. The promenade is used by many people in north Dublin. A flood defence is very much needed there. The work proposed was going to be the same, and there would have been a secondary wall. In the context of the demonstrations the Minister of State has shown me, we know that if the second wall had been in put in place, it would not have acted as a catchment area. I look forward to engagement on increasing the height of the secondary wall adjacent to the cycle lane or for an additional mountable wall to be built. There is a wall there which is 100 years old and which has mountables in it. It is important that the work is done.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I love the drive of the Deputy when it comes to this matter. He might be a colleague of mine, but if I could get every colleague in the House to go to their local authorities, drive schemes and develop the interim solutions such as those the Deputy is working on in Clontarf, I would be very grateful. We come into the House and blame the OPW and everybody else, but public representatives have a huge part to play in delivering by pushing local authorities. I fund local authorities in the context of staff, and I need them to drive schemes forward.

Regarding Clontarf, I have changed the funding limit for the minor works scheme from €750,000 to €2 million. That will allow the local authority to develop more interim solutions. The Deputy and councillors have invited me to a meeting, which I look forward to attending in due course, to determine how we can deal with this, what we can do in the interim - we did the same thing last year - and whether we can do more.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I appreciate that. The Minister of State has agreed to meet Councillor Kevin Breen and other local representatives. I have attended meetings with him and the OPW. It is amazing to see what happens. If every Minister of State was like him, we would get a lot more done. I thank the Minister of State for agreeing to meet all of the other Dublin Bay North Deputies in the coming weeks to discuss Northern Cross. That is something that needs to be progressed.

The work in Clontarf needs to be done immediately. We objected to the flood wall and the berm. It needs to be said that those would have removed everything. People always say we lowered the wall. The wall was lowered down at St. Anne's Park. It is a completely different

wall. That needs to be said because it is constantly stated that people in north Dublin did not want flood defences. We need to build a wall, and we need to make the southside pay for it.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I will work with the Deputy and with the local authorities. He referred to on Portrane, which is another prime example of interim measures. This is the first time we have ever obtained a MARA licence to allow us to do work on the coast. That should happen in respect of areas all around the coast of Ireland. Other local authorities that have issues with coastal flooding should look at what was done in Portrane and, in the context of the MARA licence, deliver more critical infrastructure to protect communities. I look forward to engaging with the Deputy, his colleagues and the local authority.

When a scheme that meets the criteria comes before me, I have never been found wanting. We have always engaged with local authorities to do the best thing for communities. While we all talk about the delivery of long-term projects, which is the overall large scheme, a lot can be done in the interim. That is something on which I have put a huge focus over the course of last year. That is why I made the changes to delivery. I want to continue that work, but I need help from everybody in the House to drive those projects forward. That is very important.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Public Transport

7. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on the infrastructure projects currently being undertaken in Dublin West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10742/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I ask the Minister for an update on infrastructure projects for the Dublin West constituency. The focus of my question is public transport, because of the litany of woes I hear about from constituents daily who, because of the other investment we have had, do not have access to the Luas or a metro. We have one of the largest populations in the city. People are suffering daily in their lives trying to get to work and get their children to school. What investment in public transport in particular will be provided?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As part of the budgetary process each year, my Department sets overall expenditure ceilings for each ministerial Vote group. These are laid out in the budget day expenditure report, with further detail provided in the Revised Estimates published in December.

Following the allocation of each expenditure ceiling, each Minister designs the programmes and subhead level across Departments and the agencies under their remit, accounting for the demands for services in different areas and regions and having regard to demographics, population growth and other factors. Within this process, current and capital expenditure are allocated on a departmental basis.

More broadly, the Government wants to achieve balanced regional development as part of Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the spatial strategy, as part of the

national development plan. Since Project Ireland 2040 was launched in 2018, the Government has overseen the delivery of many impactful national development plan projects across the country, including in Dublin West, such as the recently completed teaching building in Technological University Dublin Blanchardstown and the provision of hundreds of social and affordable housing units in Church Fields, Mulhuddart, some of which have been completed while others are being built. There have been multiple school projects across the Dublin West constituency. Many projects have been completed and are planned for Connolly Hospital.

Regarding transport commitments, the Deputy is aware of the wider Bus Connects plan, which is being progressed by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and Dart West has advanced through the planning process. Arising from the national development plan published in July last year, €19.1 million in Exchequer capital investment will be provided in 2026. This increases capital investment across the country that will generate substantial employment demand in the construction sector.

Departments have also published sectoral investment plans setting out the capital projects to prioritise for 2026-30. These plans provide visibility of the delivery pipeline, giving construction firms the certainty they need to invest as part of the multi-year approach designed to support industry planning and ensure that regional capacity can grow in line with demand. I will come back in on some of the other items.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have received many representations from people about the odyssey of the 39 bus route. Every time there is a new development, it is added to the same route without new or distinct routes being created. There needs to be change. I want to focus on the Tyrrelstown-Hollystown area because that is where much of the additional building has taken place. Public transport in the area is particularly atrocious.

For a female worker from Tyrrelstown trying to get to her job in Dublin Port every morning, there is no connection to the N4 route at Rosemount Business Park and buses do not arrive early enough to allow her to get to work. Many people report having to get taxis to work. One day in particular, it cost the woman in question €67 to get from Tyrrelstown to work. The 238 is a ghost bus. It is the only route to the town centre in Blanchardstown. Parking charges are being proposed for the centre, but people do not even have a reliable bus service to get there. In a moment, I will talk about Hollystown and changes to BusConnects.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the particular issue that exists. I meet with many constituents from both Tyrrelstown and Hollystown, where the bus service does need to be much improved. There has been a significant increase in housing supply in Tyrrelstown and Hollystown, but there is a need to improve the service for the sake of many of the existing residents. Part of the BusConnects plan is to deliver that, which is obviously more on the infrastructure side, but there is also a need to improve the frequency of buses and the respective bus routes that service Tyrrelstown and Hollystown. This is something I have engaged on frequently with the National Transport Authority in relation to the additional service roll-out in the period ahead. I have also interacted with BusConnects to ensure that those involved future-proof further developments in the context of areas, including Tyrrelstown and Hollystown, where there has been or will be significant population growth. People in both places need access to better public transport, as the Deputy referenced. That is a matter on which I continue to engage with those involved.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I accept the Minister's acknowledgement of the position. However, as a Minister who represents the area, he has to deliver for people. Who else is going to be able to do that?

The 40E is going to be replaced by the 262. I have already had two representations about that. The 262 route will terminate before Hollystown. As a result, people in Hollystown will not have a direct route into the city centre. That has to be addressed.

I have been contacted by a huge group of parents who have been told that when the 40E route is replaced, the new route will no longer cross the bridge into Cabra. It will turn onto the Ballyboggan Road instead. This means that people cannot get their children to school in St. Dominic's or in the Navan Road area. That has to be addressed. We have already had issues where people in Tyrrelstown could not get their children to school in Hansfield. They had to organise car pools. Will the Minister speak to TFI and Dublin Bus about that matter? We cannot lose the connectivity people in that area have - they need more - in order to get to work and to get their kids to school.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There have been issues for people in Hollystown. Some even have quite a long walk to get to the existing bus stop. There is a need to improve the existing service but also to reflect the feedback people have given in respect of the various bus routes. Like the Deputy, I will engage with the National Transport Authority on some of the amendments that need to be made to the bus routes and in the context of reflecting the feedback we are getting from constituents. The authority needs to future-proof the transport system in the area in light of ongoing population growth. There is a need to improve in that context, and I will pursue that.

Stáisiún Gharda

8. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the status of the proposed new Garda station for Northern Cross in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10080/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I did not find the answers earlier on estimated levels of service convincing ar chor ar bith. I have a briefing tomorrow and I look forward to that.

When the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, has responsibility for the OPW in 2019, a site was identified for a new Garda station at Northern Cross. It was announced that a new station would be provided. Seven years later, however, there is no sign of that Garda station. In replies to parliamentary questions last year, the Minister of State referred to needing to identify a site when one was identified seven years ago and was in the pipeline for years before that. Does he have an update on this matter? Ba mhaith liom freagra ceart.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration published its sectoral investment plan on 4 December last. The second phase of the plan is to focus on bringing the projects for Dublin metropolitan region, DMR, north, to construction in 2028. Following the publication of these priorities, the OPW will engage with An Garda

Síochána and the Department of justice. This engagement will support the identification and appraisal of the most suitable site for this project.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome the indication that the station will be constructed in 2028. What I am struggling with are the references to identifying a site, particularly when a site was announced in 2019 when he had responsibility for the OPW. How is that seven years after this project was announced – and there were senior Ministers from the Government out announcing it at Northern Cross – the Minister of State is still talking about identifying a site? The announcement was made by the Government before last at a time when he was Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy has raised this consistently at committee meetings and in the House, and I agree with him about the timeframe and the delays. As he is well aware, however, I am the contracting authority. I build the Garda station when a particular project is presented to me.

As already stated, money has been provided for the station. My Department will work closely with the Department of justice and An Garda Síochána. I cannot explain why work at the site to which the Deputy refers did not go ahead. However, I can tell the Deputy that the money for the project has been made available through the development plan. My job is to work with the Department of justice. When we find a site, we will get on with the job. We are delivering Garda stations around the country. The projects in this regard are very slow - I am not taking away from that - but an awful lot of work goes into identifying sites and building stations.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The situation is that the money is there and the Department is committed to building the station in 2028. A site was identified and announced by the Government in 2019 when the Minister of State had responsibility for the OPW. He is still talking about identifying a site when he previously identified such a site seven years ago. I do not understand this. How is it the case that, seven years later, we appear to be going backwards? The Minister of State is still talking about identifying a site. A site was announced by the Government before last when he had responsibility for the OPW. Can he explain to the community in Northern Cross, which desperately needs this new Garda station, what is happening? There has been huge development in recent years in Clongriffin and Belmane and a corresponding increase in population. Why is he referring to identifying a site when one was identified seven years ago and an announcement that a new Garda station would be built there was made?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It was seven years ago, as the Deputy said. A site was identified, but I cannot tell the Deputy why the project did not go ahead. I have been out of government for five years. I am back. The Deputy raised this with me at committee level. I reached out to the Department of justice, on his behalf and on that of other Deputies who represent the area, to try to bring this scheme forward. I am asked every type of question in this House about the building of Garda stations. As stated, I am the contracting authority. Until a project comes before me, I cannot build. When a project does come before me, I will do it.

I will speak to the Minister for justice in order to see how we can expedite this matter and bring it to a conclusion. I promise the Deputy that.

Flood Relief Schemes

9. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if, in view of the impact of flooding in Dublin, he will expedite the Camac river flood alleviation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10563/26]

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: This question relates to the Camac flood alleviation programme. The Camac, as we know, is one of Dublin's main rivers. It rises in Saggart in the south west, flows eastwards towards Clondalkin, Bluebell, Inchicore and Kilmainham and joins the Liffey at Heuston Station. The River Camac flood alleviation scheme is a critically important piece of infrastructure that will help up to 413 homes along the river. Residents quite clearly remain concerned about flood risk, particularly in view of the increased rainfall we have seen. In January 2025, the bank of the River Camac at Inchicore collapsed. Will the Minister of State provide a timeline in respect of this matter.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council, with funding provided by the OPW, are leading the development and design of the River Camac flood alleviation scheme to manage the flooding risk within the catchment of the River Camac to protect some 413 properties. The River Camac is an unusually complex river system, and has presented significant challenges during the modelling of the flood risk and the design options for a flood relief scheme. Work on the modelling of the flood risk is continuing and it is programmed to be completed later this year. There are monthly meetings of the steering group between the council, the OPW and the consultants to complete this work.

The proposed Camac flood alleviation scheme may include the construction of new flood defence walls with floodgates and the possible strengthening and raising of existing flood defence walls. The construction of new flood defence embankments is in addition to the possible raising of existing embankments. The current estimated cost for the delivery of the scheme is €50 million.

It is open to Dublin City Council to apply to the OPW for funding for flood mitigation works under the OPW's minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme in advance of the delivery of the main scheme. The purpose of the scheme is to provide funding to local authorities to undertake minor flood mitigation works or studies to address localised flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. The OPW welcomes applications for funding under the scheme and is available to engage with local authorities.

I know first hand the pain people out there are going through out there. As I said to the Deputy, while we are waiting for the long-term scheme, there is a strong possibility that the local authority could engage around the minor works programme. I have not spoken to the Deputy before in relation to this but I have visited a lot of the areas up and down the country. I tell people that I read the water and I understand when there is a flood. I watch where the

water recedes and follow the water paths. I always look at them in the context of a minor works application or some solution being found. I believe one can be found here.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister of State. We were told at the Committee of Public Accounts that there were issues with the initial hydraulic modelling. It has gone back to the same consultants to remedy the situation, which raises its own questions. Residents understand that the modelling has to be correct and robust and no one is looking for a shortcut. We are also not looking for a patchwork quilt in relation to this. The Minister of State is telling us to go back to Dublin City Council for any remedial works. That is not good enough. I am asking the Minister of State to expedite the situation, bring in the relevant people, ask them what is going on, get a good feel for it and give the residents of Kilmainham and Inchicore a timeline for when this is going to be done. It has been delayed for far too long.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: In the first instance, it is up to the local authority to come forward with the scheme and the Deputy can play a pivotal role in doing that. She can go into the local authority and ask what stage it is at and look to engage with me. The Deputy can be part of that. It is about us all working together. Communities are being affected up and down the country. My job is as Minister of State but I keep saying in the House that I need help from all the public representatives as well as TDs to drive on these schemes. There is a minor works scheme and funding has been increased from €750,000 to €2 million. It is open to all local authorities to come in and identify a solution in the short term while we are waiting. I agree with the Deputy that this has been going on quite a long time. To bring it to the next stage, if the Deputy can get the local authorities to agree, I will meet with it to see if we can push it on together.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: With all due respect, I think I have raised this at every possible forum. I have raised it in Dublin City Council, with the Minister of State's predecessor, at the Committee of Public Accounts and in the Dáil. We are all on the same page here. What we are not seeing is any urgency from the OPW to steer this scheme and programme. It is one of the flood alleviation programmes that is just left on the sidelines. I ask the Minister of State today to commit to me that he will take a personal interest in the Camac flood alleviation programme. That is all I am asking. I want the Minister of State to take a personal interest and have his own meeting. I have asked Dublin City Council, South Dublin County Council and senior representatives of the OPW at the Committee of Public Accounts, and all I am hearing is that there are significant delays with hydraulic modelling. I want the Minister of State to take a personal interest in the Camac flood alleviation scheme.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I cannot be more clear than to say it is driven by the local authorities. They work with my Department. There are significant delays in the modelling but I am giving the Deputy a way to alleviate that pressure through the minor works programme while we wait for the overall scheme. The local authorities have it within their remit to do that. While I fully appreciate the pressure the Deputy is under from the local community, delivering protection to the local community is very important. Local authorities are the people who drive on these schemes. We support them with the advice and the finance but we also help them to deliver schemes. The local authorities know only too well about the minor works scheme and

I believe they can play a pivotal role in delivering an interim solution to the problem the Deputy is raising. I will go further and will talk to the local authorities for the Deputy.

As I said, everywhere is gone over the last 15 days, I have to intervene to try to drive on schemes, when the local authorities have the resources - sometimes we are funding them - and the means to get on with the scheme. People will say it is the OPW but it is not and we have to wake up to that. We all have to work together. I am sick of saying that in this House. We should not play politics with flooding. Sometimes we do have to say the scheme is there and the money is there, so get a scheme in place in the interim to deliver part of the long-term solution. As the Deputy has asked me, I will make phone calls to see how I can drive on the scheme further.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister of State.

Coastal Erosion

10. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if funding will be provided to tackle coastal erosion and flooding in Rossbeigh, Waterville, Kenmare, Tralee, Listowel, Glenbeigh, Dooks, Cromane Lower, Killorglin and Glosha; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10966/26]

Deputy Michael Cahill: I am raising the matter of funding for a host of locations across County Kerry, including Rossbeigh, Cromane Lower, Killorglin, Whitestrand, Cahersiveen, Waterville, Ballinskelligs and the major flood relief schemes there for Tralee and Kenmare.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am very familiar with the coastal erosion and flooding issues in Kerry having visited the county twice, on 11 and 12 September and on 20 and 21 November 2025. Localised coastal erosion and flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each local authority to investigate and address. The OPW is working closely with Kerry County Council to implement a number of initiatives to tackle coastal erosion and flooding in the county. We are currently funding three local authority staff in Kerry County Council to manage the delivery of flood relief schemes: a senior executive engineer, an executive engineer and a senior staff member.

The minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme was introduced by the Office of Public Works in 2009. The purpose of this scheme is to provide 90% of funding to local authorities to undertake minor flood mitigation works and studies to address localised flooding or coastal erosion problems. The scheme generally applies where a solution can be readily identified and achieved in a short timeframe. The funding available for each scheme has recently been increased from €750,000 to €2 million. Further details related to this are due to be announced shortly. The minor works scheme is a demand-led scheme. Funding allocated is based on the cost submitted by the local authorities for consideration. Since 2009, the OPW has approved some 40 projects and €4.2 million for Kerry County Council under the minor works schemes. Some €2.9 million of this approved funding relates to coastal erosion works and studies. Funding has been made available to Kerry County Council, totalling €897,405, for works or studies at Rossbeigh, Waterville, Kenmare, Glenbeigh and Cromane Lower

through the minor works scheme. I have a long list of other schemes that I can give to the Deputy afterwards.

Deputy Michael Cahill: We need coastal protection works, flood relief schemes and marram grass initiatives, among other initiatives. We need to expedite funding for these schemes. From my experience, and I have been shouting about coastal erosion and flooding for almost 40 years now, this situation is not given the urgency it deserves. We seem to wait until the damage is done after big storms where there has been major flooding and homes have been destroyed. I am dealing with families living in fear when the tides are high, especially when they coincide with storms. They cannot sleep in their beds at night.

I will mention another issue we spoke about recently, which is the whole area of insurance. I am coming across numerous families who cannot get home insurance. They can get insurance for fire, theft and all the other matters but they cannot get cover for flooding.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Looking at the figures, there was €24,000 for the seawall in north Kerry through the minor works scheme. For the North Kerry Way, there was €18,000 through the minor works scheme. There was €150,000 for Tralee Bay, and €44,000 for Tralee itself. For the Fenit Road, there was €405,000, and €360,000 for the Fenit Road Lower. Over €1 million has been given out in recent years. There was €216,000 for Cromane Lower, €35,000 for Waterville, €450,000 for Rossbeigh and €195,000 for Glenbeigh.

The OPW has not been found wanting in supporting Kerry and the local authority. The Deputy knows of my visit there in recent weeks, before Christmas, where we came with interim solutions for different parts of Kerry. We are now looking at coastal areas, but this is driven, in the first instance, by the local authority. I appeal to the Deputy to go out to Portrane to see what the local authority has done to get a licence from the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, to deal with flooding. We need local authorities to step up and apply for these licences. In order to apply, they have to show where they are going to carry out works and provide protection to people along the coast. If they do that, they can apply for a MARA licence. I thank the staff in MARA because it is the first time ever we got a licence to do work along the coast. The Deputy can see in Portrane the work that was done to protect that area. I advise Deputy Cahill, as I advise every Deputy in the House, to follow suit and deliver for his community through the local authorities.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I thank the Minister of State. I acknowledge that he visited Kerry and Rossbeigh, where I live, and saw for himself the situation there. There will be a public meeting at 6.30 p.m. this evening in the Towers Hotel. The Minister of State also visited Cromane where homes have been destroyed in the past. I have been in houses when there was 3 ft of saltwater in them.

In 2015, I was a member of a deputation that came here to discuss the cliff road in Rossbeigh, where 16 houses had been cut off. We were told by the then Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, Deputy Simon Harris, that pilot studies needed to be carried out and that he did not want deputations coming up to the Dáil every couple of weeks. It took ten years for the pilot studies to be completed. They will indicate where funding should and should not go. As I mentioned, a host of areas need urgent attention, including

Rossbeigh, Incherea, Dooks in Glenbeigh, lower Bridge Street in Killorglin near the fishery, Cromane Lower, which is critical, Glosa, Whitestrand in Cahersiveen where the public toilets and car park are at risk, Waterville, Ballinskelligs, and the Kenmare and Tralee flood relief schemes.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Ó Murchú wants to ask a supplementary question.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Le do thoil. The Minister of State will not be shocked when I raise the issues we have had recently in County Louth, particularly in the Dundalk area. In fairness, the Minister of State visited Blackrock. The local authorities stated minor works schemes could be implemented in Dundalk, more so even than Blackrock. The Minister of State has spoken of the need for a personal property scheme to be implemented. He might give some detail on that.

Obviously, we need works done. We have seen coastal erosion recently on the Carlingford Lough greenway. Ballagan has had huge issues, and Antóin Watters and Fiona Mhic Conchoille have been on to me multiple times about that. There was a bun fight with OPW around cleaning the Blackwater river but, according to the Louth local authority, it has found a way through that and it looks like it is willing to clean it, which should have happened previously. However, we also need a conversation with Uisce Éireann to keep the pressure on because we have an infrastructure deficit, with the joint system that is not going to be operated for years. Where I live, we get flooded on the basis that we cannot clear stormwaters and sewage at the same time.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Deputy Cahill is right that I visited Cromane. I met with Michael Healy-Rae's colleague in relation to the same issue only yesterday. I asked him to ask the local authority to come in with minor works for Cromane, and it will be dealt with. Let us call a spade a spade. When I visited the place during Christmas week, I identified areas that could get protection. I looked at the street and we identified one shop, a chemist, that did not flood. Why did it not flood? It put in its own individual property protection, IPP. I reached out that day to the local authorities to look at an IPP system through the minor works programme. I await that because I cannot drive it. I ask the Deputy to drive that with the local authority.

We talked about the flooding of recent days. After the devastation that happened in Enniscorthy, when we were talking about more rain my biggest concern was County Louth. Deputy Ó Murchú's colleagues in the House rang me. I was fearful. My team in the OPW met with the local authorities last week and will continue to engage. I need the local authorities to push on. I am providing staff to the local authority to deliver on those schemes.

Departmental Strategies

11. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the way in which his Department plans to implement a risk scorecard to enable the acceleration of key infrastructure delivery in the next few decades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11083/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Neville. In December 2025, the Government published the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan. It is a comprehensive programme of actions designed to speed up the delivery of critical infrastructure across the State. This action plan responds to well-documented challenges of lengthy development timelines, fragmented processes and rising costs. These have all been identified as major barriers to achieving Ireland's housing, energy and climate objectives.

The plan sets out 30 targeted actions grouped under four areas, namely, legal reform, regulatory reform and simplification, delivery reform, and public acceptance. My Department has already led on a number of reforms to date, including, but not limited to, the drafting process of the general scheme of the critical infrastructure Bill to be progressed during March, which has been published in the Government's published legislative agenda; the establishment of a regulatory simplification unit, whose work will include reviewing regulatory structures, governance, oversight and accountability and revising and simplifying different legislation and statutes; and preparing reforms to the infrastructure guidelines, which is being progressed this month.

I have also launched a new service to accelerate major Government capital investment through the expertise of the National Development Finance Agency. We have had the first meeting of the new joint utilities and transport clearing house to have shared collaboration across sectors and greater delivery and co-operation.

Under pillar 3, co-ordination and delivery reform, the aim is to introduce risk appetite statements to enable proportionate oversight and accelerate infrastructure delivery. This action is to provide a better strategic-level risk governance tool that sets a higher level of risk for Government Departments or agencies on what they are willing to tolerate, identifying boundaries on high-risk decisions and wider and clearer expectations for risk oversight. This action is intended to support the creation of a co-ordinated, legally empowered system that reduces delays, improves planning certainty, increases the risk appetite and deals with the wider issues of risk aversion, which have been well documented. Following Government approval, Departments will be asked to define and publish clear, proportionate risk appetite statements for critical infrastructure decisions that can support a higher risk appetite. This will progress better expected benefits of delivery, which would outweigh the potential costs in the context of greater assumed risk. Examples of taking on a higher level of risk could include-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will go into that detail shortly.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister very much for his response. I know he is very passionate about this issue, which the Joint Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery has seen. As Vice Chair of that committee, I am very focused on it. As a councillor, I saw a lot of houses being built in north Kildare, for example. I am sure the same applies in the rest of the country. In Celbridge, we need a second bridge. In Leixlip, we need development at the top of Confey and in Maynooth, a relief road is required. These are simple things but we see delays.

A change in culture is required across the Civil Service and local authorities. In fairness, we have significant funding available due to good governance. We have €102 billion available to be spent in the next four years and €275 billion to be spent on capital projects over the next nine years. That is extremely welcome. The reason we need to ensure the right culture and accountability are in place across the Civil Service and local authorities is to ensure we get to spend this money. It is really important that we make sure people make decisions. Sometimes, the most difficult thing in the Civil Service is to make a decision because the worst thing people can do is get something wrong. Sometimes, making no decision is actually better for those individuals. That is what we need to control.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I agree with everything the Deputy said and I appreciate his inputs at the infrastructure committee as well. There are well-documented issues with the existing culture, which has been too risk averse, leading to delays and cost increases. It is too process driven. It is about putting a delivery culture and delivery focus first. That means increasing risk appetite, but also taking practical steps, for example, carrying out early site clearance works in advance of or in parallel with another part of the process or forward ordering of key components for critical infrastructure so we can start a project much quicker while waiting for something else to conclude.

10 o'clock

Putting a lot of steps in parallel involves greater risk appetite if something does not happen as expected. It will come down to increasing risk appetite in multiple areas and decision points in the infrastructure lifecycle. The risk appetite statement is about us backing the public service to do this, which could have an adverse effect in a minority of projects but ultimately will yield better delivery and cut through the risk aversion which is well documented.

Deputy Joe Neville: I really sympathise with the Minister's final point. Potentially mistakes will be made and we must ensure that people will be backed through the various projects. I am a member of the public accounts committee and we look retrospectively at decisions. We need to ensure that people are backed. The main thing is that they are supported and that proper guidelines are in place so they are not afraid to make decisions. This is at all levels, including at the highest level. The Minister has taken responsibility himself centrally. We need to ensure this responsibility is sent out to all areas, such as to the CEOs of local authorities or further down to the local engineers. We need to see delivery on the ground. We all know how the various people in these roles are judged. The question is whether they are judged and held accountable. We know that ultimately the people in this room will be held accountable in 2029 on the doorsteps. I want to ensure that we deliver these projects so that we will get the response we need from people.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is about having a clear, greater and more proportionate risk appetite statement for many infrastructure decisions. Ultimately we are measured on delivery and it is a process-driven approach. We have circular analysis and delays that will not narrow the infrastructure gap, which is well documented. The risk appetite statement will set out the expected benefits for delivery for a Department or agency, and how the assumption of greater risk outweighs the potential cost. We know that some of the processes we are trying to cut through and cut out in many instances add a significant level of cost to our overall capital

spend, which the infrastructure committee has discussed. We will define and publish these in quarter 2 of this year. This is a clear signal to the public service to get on with delivery and have a delivery focus first. It will allow for a broader rebalancing. In terms of the public accounts committee and others, the risk appetite statements will provide a context in the years to come when, hopefully, we will have a higher level of delivery for the infrastructure committee. This will have to be seen in the context of wider assessments when analysing spend.

Capital Expenditure Programme

12. Deputy John Connolly asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if the infrastructure guidelines have been amended as per action 23 of the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan, including for increased project expenditure thresholds; the removal of the external assurance process and enhanced timelines for the preparation of the preliminary business case; when infrastructure projects can expect to benefit from the new guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10933/26]

Deputy John Connolly: Tugaim faoi deara ar maidin go bhfuil go leor de na ceisteanna ar an téama céanna, ar nós an chinn a bhí ag mo chomhghleacaí ar mo thaobh clé anseo maidir le cúrsaí infreastruchtúir agus an luas ar breá linn a fheiceáil le cur chun cinn i gcúrsaí infreastruchtúir agus infreastruchtúr a thógáil níos tapúla. Roimh an Nollaig, d'fhoilsigh an tAire an tuairisc nua. Before Christmas the Minister printed the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan. I saw it described as one of the most comprehensive and ambitious Irish Government reports of recent times. This ambition is due to the number of actions and the timeline laid out for the completion of these actions. I want to ask about one in particular, which is action 23.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Connolly and I appreciate his support on this. My Department is responsible for the infrastructure guidelines, which replaced the public spending code for capital appraisal since the end of 2023. These set the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating, planning and managing Exchequer-funded capital projects. Management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department, Accounting Officer and Minister.

Action 23 in the accelerating infrastructure report, published in December 2025, commits my Department to streamline and speed up the project approvals process by amending the infrastructure guidelines. In line with this action, I brought a memorandum to Government this week on the following changes to the infrastructure guidelines. In relation to major projects, the threshold will increase from €200 million to €500 million for sectors with a well-established track record of delivery, particularly in the energy, transport and water sectors. The external assurance process will be replaced with a streamlined and time-bound internal review by the Department for all sectors to save significant time. Major projects at approval gate 2 will no longer need ministerial approval and may now be approved solely by the Accounting Officer of the Department that is funding the proposed project. Ministers will continue to be involved

at approval gates 1 and 3, which are the critical decision points. Trying to remove duplicate and unnecessary steps to save time has been the central objective for us in government.

These changes will remove unnecessary time delays for critical infrastructure projects while retaining the necessary governance and oversight arrangements to ensure value for money for the taxpayer. In particular, the removal of the external assurance process, which was taking on average 20 weeks, will ensure projects move more rapidly through the delivery lifecycle while ensuring projects over a particular threshold will see the major project advisory group involved.

These and other recommendations in the action plan, including on the introduction of administrative guidance on timelines for preliminary business case assessment and maintaining a maximum length, will be included in the overall public financial management and control framework as part of the wider review of public financial procedures. Saving time and improving delivery is our wider focus.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the Minister's confirmation that we are not removing political approval for these projects. There was some concern about the elimination of ministerial approval at stage 2 of the project timeline but the Minister has clarified that ministerial approval will still be required at stages 1 and 3. This is very welcome. There was a sense that we were moving on and leaving decisions to unelected officials rather than Ministers.

One of the reasons I have focused on this action plan is because of its reference to transport and water infrastructure. We are all familiar with delays in the progression of major transport infrastructure and major water infrastructure. One of the things outlined in the action is that the approval processes in transport are to be reviewed to identify opportunities to eliminate duplication. Uisce Éireann receives a lot of criticism for how it implements infrastructural plans but it is clear now that the guidelines we have set down for it are part of the reason for this. At present, Uisce Éireann business cases must be approved through the infrastructure guidelines and by the CRU. Will the Minister provide clarity on transport and water in particular, and on the elimination of dual processes?

Deputy Jack Chambers: On Deputy Connolly's first point, this is removing an unnecessary middle step which was adding time. The critical points are approval of the preliminary business case, which sets the political direction for a project to be advanced with prospective capital spend, and final approval for a contract award, which involves the respective Minister. Again, it removes a middle step which did not provide value and just added time. This is what is being changed.

In terms of transport and water projects, we will have a regulatory simplification unit to look at the wider regulatory landscape where we have duplication of approvals, whether through the CRU or other respective bodies. The changes we are making relate to the thresholds and will significantly help the better delivery of water infrastructure in the State by moving the threshold from €200 million to €500 million. There are certain dual approvals required and, in some instances in transport, sometimes more than two approvals required and multiple agencies regulatory bodies are involved. This will be assessed by the regulatory simplification unit to simplify the approval process and avoid duplication, as Deputy Connolly has referenced, to speed up delivery.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the Minister. I would like clarity. The emphasis and focus in action 30 is on transport and water. Will the Minister confirm that it is not limited to these and that we are looking at using this action in other areas? The Minister mentioned energy at the outset. Further clarification on my next point would also be welcome. How do projects in the planning process stand in terms of this new action? Will they benefit from it? I hope we will get a positive planning decision, although it cannot be guaranteed, on the Galway city ring road. We would like to see this project move quickly should a positive planning decision come through. Another project on my mind is the quay in Rossaveel, which is in the planning process. I hope both of these, should they be granted planning approval, can move quite quickly to construction. Will the Minister clarify the status of those projects that have already been granted planning permission, such as the passing loop in Oranmore? Will there will be a difference in how projects in the planning process and projects that have completed the planning process are treated by this action plan?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have taken every step in the infrastructure life cycle and tried to cut time. The Deputy referenced transport and water. We have the joint utilities and transport clearing house. That reflects those key sectors which build the foundations of any community in terms of water, energy and transport infrastructure. Improving co-ordination in how that wider infrastructure is delivered is part of that objective. All the utilities are involved in that, including Eirgrid and the ESB in the context of infrastructure.

We will advance the critical infrastructure Bill, which will help set the prioritisation and political direction for the Government and the Oireachtas around particular projects. That could be in advance of projects going into the planning process. With some of the projects that are in the planning process, the wider risk when they leave it is that licensing and consents are sometimes required. We are reforming that area so we can deliver some of them in parallel. The risk of judicial review also hangs over a lot of projects. The reforms we will advance this year in the context of judicial reviews are to try to deal with that issue. One of the major issues when a project receives permission is whether it can actually start it if there is a threat of judicial review. My colleagues and I are also advancing that reform.

Strategic Infrastructure

13. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on the legislative and non-legislative progress being made to implement the measures recommended in the accelerating infrastructure action plan. [9939/26]

28. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the initiatives his Department is undertaking to speed up the delivery of infrastructure projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11082/26]

61. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the immediate actions that will be taken by his Department to accelerate delivery of critical infrastructure outlined in the accelerating infrastructure action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10694/26]

77. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation whether performance indicators or delivery targets have been established for the infrastructure division and the accelerating infrastructure task force; if these metrics will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10997/26]

83. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the reforms that will be introduced in his Department to deliver on infrastructure promises made in the accelerating infrastructure action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10693/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 13, 28, 61, 77 and 83 together.

My Department will be managing the monitoring and reporting on delivery of the actions in the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan, which will be led within the infrastructure division. The action plan details 30 headline actions for delivery by quarter and sets target outputs and outcomes to be achieved. All lead Departments have continued to engage over recent weeks and days to provide an update on what is meant to be delivered for quarter 4, 2025 and quarter 1, 2026 and the important structural changes within their sectors to aid the delivery of the 30 actions.

All actions required for delivery in 2025 have been completed. Some of the key deliverables include the publication of the NDP review 2025 and the subsequent publication of all sectoral plans. We have also had a wider step-change in investment in the water, transport energy and sectors.

The sectoral plans detail over 200 specific projects that are being prioritised, with a particular focus on projects going to tender and construction in 2026 and 2027. This is with the specific aim of providing construction sector certainty on the pipeline.

Government consultation on the scale of fees for environmental judicial reviews is being led by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment which will, in effect, limit the cost that the State pays in environmental judicial reviews.

The first meeting has been held of the new joint utilities and transport clearing house, which will ensure a shared understanding and better co-ordination between the utilities and transport sectors on infrastructure delivery.

We have the heads of Bill being brought to put the judicial review process on a statutory footing by my colleague, the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, in January.

At this point, good progress is noted for actions required for delivery in quarter 1. Some of the progress areas include the following. The public consultation process on proposed scale of fees closed on 15 January 2026. Work on the critical infrastructure Bill is progressing in terms of drafting and input by the Attorney General, which is happening on a weekly basis. The publication of a general scheme in March has been confirmed in the Government's published priority legislative agenda. A high-level group on EU policy and the European co-ordinators network has been used to monitor legislation and regulations that may impact on infrastructure delivery. A meeting of this group took place on 21 January.

As committed under action 23, reforms to the infrastructure guidelines were brought by me to the Government for approval this week. These key reforms relate to higher thresholds for major projects, the discontinuation of the external assurance process and the reduced approval requirements prior to issue to try to simplify the approval steps.

The Government has also approved an enhanced role for the National Development Finance Agency to support infrastructure delivery and key Exchequer funded projects. A circular outlining how Departments may avail of this support will be published.

There has been a meeting of the joint utilities and transport clearing house which is continuing in quarter 1, 2026. My Department is also engaging with bodies to map structures and identify the key specific administrative constraints to effective co-ordination and delivery. There is also work ongoing on revised structures within the construction sector group to advise on actions detailed in the December report on how we can improve further productivity and innovation within the construction sector. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, and I will be advancing procurement reforms to further enhance the attractiveness of public sector construction.

My colleague, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, and his Department have published and are working on a critical skills needs assessment for the construction sector. This sets out the wider delivery of increased labour force with the capital investment programme that we have. At this point, we have delivered what we said we would in quarter 4 of last year and we are working on continuing to build momentum in quarter 1 and beyond this year.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. I want to go back to what he said to Deputy John Connolly in relation to gate 2. I welcome the announcement that it will no longer need ministerial approval. The Minister said it did not add value, but added only time. How much time will this actually save? Is it four weeks, eight weeks or 20 weeks? This is an important point to highlight. Whether there is ministerial approval or not gets lost in translation for the person at home, whereas if we hear a solid number or estimate of the time that will be saved, it will send out a very positive message.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are essentially reducing the number of approval steps from three to two. The critical approval role of a Minister is after the preliminary business case. It is about putting discipline on how a preliminary business case is designed. In many instances, the administrative timelines taken for preliminary business cases are far too excessive. We are trying to put much greater discipline on that in terms of the wider project design and how a preliminary business case is built up.

Even though political direction may have been given after the preliminary business case, there was an interim approval step which varied across Departments. Again, this will just simplify what is required in terms of the approval stop process. The Minister sets the direction post the preliminary business case which justifies why a project is needed following economic appraisal and assessment. The final decision of a Minister is post the tendering process where the tenders received align with the objectives set out in a preliminary business case. The critical involvement of a Minister is in those two areas. This median step only added time. If a Minister gives a direction at the preliminary business case, the outworking of that is to see the outcome

of a tender and whether it meets the value requirements and the delivery that is set out in terms of the respective project.

The biggest time saving from the changes I am making in the infrastructure guidelines is on the removal of the external assurance gate. The average time taken on that is about 20 weeks. Some take months longer than that, while others take a little less time. This was a duplicate step and the advice I received was that the value proposition involved is questionable in terms of the time that it took. That is being removed entirely, in part to try to simplify the wider delivery process.

Deputy Paula Butterly: My understanding is that 17 of the task action points set out for quarter 1 sit with the Minister's Department and nine of those, if not progressed, cannot go any further. Has the Minister already identified any pinch points that could delay this progress and, if so, how are they going to be addressed?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We engage daily with the infrastructure team in the Department and the infrastructure division. According to the latest update, everything has been delivered in quarter 4 and we are on track with respect to the actions set for quarter 1 of this year. We are working in parallel to ensure steps or actions that are required in quarters 2 and 3 are being worked on as well if they have timelines in the middle of the year or later on in this year. Right now, there is progress across the respective areas. Over the last number of weeks, we have brought different memorandums to the Government in respect of various reforms to infrastructure delivery, such as the National Development Finance Agency, the reforms to the infrastructure guidelines and the conclusion of the sectoral investment plans, all of which aim to build momentum in terms of infrastructure delivery in the economy.

We will work on the critical pieces, ensuring the continued work on the critical infrastructure Bill advances. The intention is to bring the scheme to Government in March, which is a really important piece on providing legislative backing for the acceleration of infrastructure in the State. That is on track as well.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Butterly is next on the list with parliamentary question No. 70. Does she want to take it? This is the last question for the Department. If she does not want to take it, that is okay.

Deputy Paula Butterly: May I ask a further follow-up question?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): For question No. 70 or this one?

Deputy Paula Butterly: A follow-up on this one. It would probably follow on more fluently, if the Minister is so willing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Butterly has already used her time and I cannot allow extra time. Does Deputy Butterly want to take parliamentary question No. 70? She does not want to take it. That brings an end to questions to the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 10.21 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.26 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 10.21 a.m. and resumed at 10.26 a.m.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Special Educational Needs

92. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of children notified to the NCSE before the October parent notification deadline; the number of children notified to the NCSE after the October deadline; the number of those children currently without an offer of a school place for September 2026; the measures she is taking to address this to ensure every child has an appropriate school place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11341/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): The Government is committed to continuing the acceleration of the provision of additional special class and special school places for 2026-27 by providing at least 3,000 new spaces in locations which are best meeting the existing and future demand. The provision of timely information is a key requirement to support the forward planning of new special education provision.

Budget 2026 provides funding for over 400 new special classes and at least 400 new special school places for the 2026-27 school year. The NCSE has sanctioned over 301 special classes so far this year to commence in September 2026, with more planned in the coming weeks. I commend the Department and the NCSE for the work they are doing in this regard. This is months ahead of last year and should provide greater clarity for parents.

To support the NCSE and forward planning, the Department of education published Circular 39/2025. This circular informs school management and patrons of measures introduced to support forward planning and reiterates the need for parents to inform the NCSE through the parent notification process that they are seeking a special school placement for their child. This year, to facilitate earlier sanctioning of classes for the 2026-27 school year, an earlier date of 1 October was set for parents to complete the process. The NCSE undertook significant work at local and national level to ensure that families and schools were aware of the timeline and process.

Based on the volume of applications received by 1 October, it would appear there was a good awareness of the date and it is clear there is an increased demand for special education placements compared with previous years. The NCSE advises that a significant number of children and young people coming through the parent notification process and seeking a special class or special school place for the 2026-20 school year are already enrolled in schools and are being supported by existing special education teachers and special needs assistants.

I am please to confirm that this week, the NCSE has this week recommenced the issuing of letters of eligibility to children and young people who have made contact with them after the 1 October timeline.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. He did not give the numbers in response to the question I asked - the number of children who had applied pre- and post-October and the number of those children who have an offer of a school place or, more importantly at this stage, do not have an offer. It is that question of unmet need.

When I raised this with the Taoiseach last week, he said both the Minister and Minister of State had reported to Cabinet that there were huge numbers applying to the NCSE and that it was a significant increase on last year. What are those numbers? Will the system be able to respond to ensure every child has an appropriate school place for September?

There is real concern, and I would be grateful if the Minister of State could outline the process.

I very much welcome the fact that letters of eligibility are beginning to be reissued. I have a long list of people who will be eager to get those letters of eligibility and they are eligible for them. What do they do?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The NCSE is currently working through to make sure that the letters of eligibility are being issued to those who contacted it after 1 October. The Taoiseach is right in reflecting what both the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I have seen as the huge increase in the number of children who have contacted the NCSE, both prior to and post 1 October.

To reiterate, 1 October was hugely significant in order that we have clear vision of the demand that was within the system. Last year, it was 1 February. We have an awful lot of work done over the past four months. We are very committed. Last year, there was continuous talk right through the summer about numbers. We gave a commitment here and at committee that we would work to ensure that we had a place and a pathway for every child. That is what we are going to do and we are not going to have an auction right through until September.

We gave a commitment last year. We worked extremely hard on it - both the Department and the NCSE. It is the same because we have sight of what the challenges are and we are working right through system to make sure we are meeting the needs of every child and every family.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I welcome the students from Lucan Educate Together school and their teachers. I have been led to believe they wrote to the Minister about solar panels in their school.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Another job for the Minister.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Coming from the Gallery.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: That is it.

There are significant issues. In fact, I would say the crisis in special education is worse this year than it has ever been. We are hearing that there is a huge increase. The October deadline

was seen as an opportunity, and rightly so, for many children in the school system to get an appropriate school place. A number of the people I am dealing with are in mainstream, for example, looking for a place in a special class or in a special class looking for a place in a special school. The issue of letters of eligibility remains a major one.

There are a number of other things happening in special education that are of deep concern, for instance, the issue of the closure of early intervention classes and the redesignation in mild and general learning disability special schools. The slashing of SNAs is reported in schools across the State, including in the Minister of State's constituency, where there are proposals for a huge number of SNAs to be lost. What does the Minister of State say in relation to that?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: On the seriousness with which the NCSE and the Department are taking the numbers, we have worked throughout - right up to almost Christmas, to 23 December - to make sure we had sight of what figures were and how we are going to work on it. At the end of this discussion, there are children and there are families and it is hugely important we give certainty to them.

As the Deputy quite rightly acknowledged, we brought back the date to 1 October. There is huge investment in special education to ensure the needs of children with additional educational needs are being met. We are heading for almost 25,000 SNAs across the system. We are looking at where SNAs are deployed. It is the first time in a long time that we have had a full review because we want to ensure that the need is being met but we have a colossal amount of investment in SNAs. That has increased many times over the past three, four or five years. We understand the challenges that are within the special education system and we are meeting them head on.

Residential Institutions

93. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her plans to ensure the survivors of institutional abuse who recently ended their hunger strike receive their HAA card and full contributory pension. [11582/26]

Deputy Jen Cummins: I congratulate the Minister on her role. I have not seen Deputy Naughton in the Chamber in this capacity. I wish her the very best of luck.

I wanted to discuss those people who were on hunger strike for 51 days before Christmas. Lots of promises have been made and negotiations have happened but there has not been much action. I want to remind people why they were on hunger strike. It was because when they were children, they were boarded out. They were part of industrial schools or reformatory schools. They were physically abused, mentally abused and sexually abused. They were unloved, underfed, beaten, spat at, kicked and punished for years and years. I want to know what are the Minister's plans to make sure that everything they requested and that was negotiated will now come to fruition.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy for allowing me the opportunity respond to her question. I am deeply conscious of the enormous trauma that has been endured by all

survivors of abuse. While nothing we do now can ever undo the hurt which has been caused, Government is committed to providing appropriate supports to survivors.

Last July, the Oireachtas passed the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025. The Act has two main purposes: to enable the delivery of ongoing health and education supports to survivors of abuse in residential institutions; and to allow the formal dissolution of Caranua. The package of supports builds upon the already significant State response to this issue.

In September, following the passage of the Act, a group of industrial school survivors commenced a protest outside Leinster House, seeking additional support to be put in place. There was significant engagement with the group, including with officials from my Department and multiple meetings with both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Taoiseach. Arising from this, the group agreed to engage in a mediation process and cease their protest. The mediation process recently concluded, and Government has approved the implementation of a number of commitments.

Under the Act, eligible survivors will be provided with a medical card which will entitle them to certain health supports and services through the HSE. This entitlement, which is similar to the health supports provided to survivors and former residents of the Magdalen laundries and mother and baby institutions, will be for life and will not be subject to a means-testing review. Government has agreed to strengthen this package of health supports through the appointment of specified liaison officers within the HSE and through improved access to counselling and physiotherapy services. This is not a Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, card but is instead a package of supports specifically for survivors.

The Deputy asked about the timelines around this. Work is ongoing within my Department with all the relevant Departments to finalise the arrangements on the delivery of those supports as soon as possible and further information will be published on the Department's website, and it will be communicated widely with the relevant groups and agencies.

Deputy Jen Cummins: While that is welcome and the survivors, with whom I have spoken, are happy the things being outlined are going to happen, the problem is around when they will happen. When will there be the apology from the Government about the criminal records given to these children? The Taoiseach promised these things in the letter in November. When will the apology from the Government about the boarding out of the children happen? Has the circular to the local authorities gone out as promised?

With regard to the social protection that would give financial assistance, when will that happen? Some of the people who have been on hunger strike have been suffering financially because they are living in local authority situations that, I have to say, are not great. Before Christmas, I was quite worried about one in particular.

I know the package of supports is not the HAA card. I would caution that I am aware that for people who were in mother and baby homes and have a HAA card, it does not always work out like it is supposed to be. Where things are supposed to be free of charge, they are being charged but I can come to that at another time. The health liaison officers are still not in place. When will they be in place? It is really a matter of when. I am looking for more specific details than it will be in the near future.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Issues were raised with regard to a pension as well. Government has instead approved the expansion of the education support payments scheme under the Act to provide support for informal learning and self-development, as well as formal learning. This revised arrangement has been accepted by the survivors. My Department is finalising arrangements for the delivery of these supports as soon as possible. The Deputy can be assured of that.

I would also note that my Department has engaged Sage Advocacy, an independent advocacy organisation with a strong track record in providing advocacy supports to vulnerable adults, older people and healthcare patients, to develop information, support and advocacy services for survivors to assist them in engaging with and accessing relevant services and supports. Sage has appointed advocates around the country who are providing this assistance to survivors.

The Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025, which was passed last July, provides for the delivery of a package of ongoing health and education supports. This marks a new phase in the State's response to this issue. To fundamentally answer the Deputy's original question, this will happen as soon as possible and work is ongoing within my Department.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I appreciate that, and I know they do as well. Going back to the human level, however, that Act was enacted in July and they were on strike in the autumn. It is now springtime. They have had decades of recurring trauma based on how this country treated them as children. Some of them are of advanced age and some are not but, with the toll it has taken on them - not only the hunger strike but the entirety of their lives - they have said they do not know how much longer they have. I urge the Minister to be as fast as she can on this and that we never forget. I am hoping the Government will issue that apology sooner rather than later. I know there are technicalities it needs to do but an apology is an acknowledgement of things not being right in the past.

Before I finish, I welcome my transition year students who are up in the Public Gallery and have done great work this week. Well done lads, you have been brilliant.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: To reassure the Deputy, I know the importance given to this from the Taoiseach down in respect of providing these supports as quickly as possible. My Department is working to finalise the arrangements of the delivery of those supports the survivors agreed to as quickly as possible. That includes engaging with relevant Departments and agencies, particularly the Department of public expenditure and reform and digitalisation and the Departments of Health and Children, Disability and Equality and the HSE. Further information on the supports, including the application processes, will be published on the Department's website in due course.

The availability of those supports will be communicated as widely as possible, particularly through engagement with survivor groups, the special advocate for survivors and Sage advocacy, so that survivors are made aware of the availability of the supports and are provided with clear information on them and how they can be accessed.

Commissions of Investigation

94. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the position regarding the work of the inter-departmental group considering the recommendation for a redress scheme arising from the scoping inquiry into historical sexual abuse in schools run by religious orders; the way in which this will be incorporated into the work of the Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11342/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Likewise, as this is my first exchange with the Minister in her new role, I wish her the best with it. There is a lot of work to be getting on with and we are dealing with many important issues this morning.

I wish to ask the Minister the position regarding the work of the interdepartmental group considering the recommendation for a redress scheme arising from the scoping inquiry into historical sex abuse in schools run by religious orders, and the way in which this will be incorporated into the work of the Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Schools.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. The report of the scoping inquiry into historical sexual abuse in day and boarding schools run by religious orders was published in 2024. The Government takes revelations of historical sexual abuse in schools extremely seriously and has established an independent commission of investigation, chaired by Mr. Justice Michael MacGrath, to investigate the handling of complaints and allegations of historical sexual abuse in schools. The commission was the principal recommendation of the report of the scoping inquiry and the commission does not have a role in relation to redress.

The scoping inquiry's report also recognised the significance of redress for survivors, many of whom told the scoping inquiry's survivor engagement process they viewed it as a measure of accountability for those running schools where child sexual abuse occurred. The scoping inquiry recommended consideration be given by the Government to establishing a redress scheme and that it consult with the orders on contributions to any such scheme.

The interdepartmental group, IDG, established to advise Government on the scoping inquiry recommendations was cognisant of the views of survivors on redress as a measure of accountability. It recognised that consideration of a redress scheme may have far-reaching implications and advised further work is required to ensure Government is fully informed in any decision it may take.

The interdepartmental group has commenced this work to further examine the levers and mechanisms that may be brought to bear so that those responsible for schools where historical sexual abuse happened meet their obligations to survivors. The work of that group will not impede the progress of the commission of investigation, which has begun its work in parallel.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Can the Minister confirm it is the case that the IDG aims to report to her and subsequently to Government within 18 months? There was a previous indication in relation to that, but is that still that case? What measures will the Minister take to hold religious bodies financially accountable and to make them pay redress? Sinn Féin

submitted amendments to the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Bill 2025 specifically on this issue. I know the Labour Party also has legislation on the books, with the Civil Liability (Child Sexual Abuse Proceedings Against Unincorporated Bodies of Persons) Bill 2023. There is a real eagerness among many of us in the Opposition to see this issue pursued. Many survivors say the legal obfuscation in redress payments is inherently criminal in its nature and that there may be opportunity there, for example, in terms of criminal assets to pursue these.

What options will the Minister consider, and can she give assurances there will be justice in this scheme?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As regards how long it will take that interdepartmental group to report, the work of that group is very complex and involves several Departments, State agencies and relevant expertise. The work of that IDG is entirely separate from the work of the commission, which does not have a role in redress. That group aims to complete its work within 18 months. When that interdepartmental group has completed its work, it will provide a report to me and then subsequently to Government.

Many of the survivors who spoke to that scoping inquiry view financial redress as an important measure of accountability for those who ran schools where sexual abuse happened. The State has some experience in dealing with the religious orders in the context of redress, and it is important we learn from that experience, particularly given the potential scale of redress for historical sexual abuse in schools. Clarity on that scale is critical and all mechanisms that can be used by the State to secure the appropriate funding from those who were responsible for child sexual abuse in schools will be carefully examined.

It is important to ensure there is financial accountability for those who were responsible for child sexual abuse in schools, particularly as so many of those who are alleged to have abused children are now deceased and will not face criminal charges.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I agree with the Minister entirely and I welcome those words. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, in terms of the action of it. Any time we speak of the commission, I have to make the point that there are concerns it is going to be restricted to sexual abuse and not to physical abuse. There is more than a grey area there in terms of the motivational intent of the evil carried out on people.

I want to pick up on a point Deputy Cummins made earlier in respect of a related group of survivors. It is very important that the suite of measures is introduced at the earliest opportunity and that we have the apology. Deputy Cummins specifically mentioned the enhanced medical card as opposed to the HAA card. There are significant issues with the enhanced medical card as certain things that were expected to be covered are not being covered. It is why there is the argument around the HAA card. If Government is going to fall short of that, it is essential it reviews the enhanced medical card and ensures those additional supports it has committed to are delivered in a timely fashion.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I outlined the process for this to Deputy Cummins. Work is ongoing in my Department on that issue of the supports agreed by the survivors with an Taoiseach prior to Christmas.

The Deputy made reference to two different issues there. Regarding the commission of investigation, Mr. Justice Michael MacGrath was appointed effective from 1 October 2025 as chair of that commission. It is independent in its function and the chair has outlined an essential preparatory work phase which must be completed by the commission prior to engagement with survivors and others, and updates will be given online relating to that.

Mr. Justice Michael MacGrath is working on developing the necessary systems and processes to safely gather and store data and information. This is particularly important given the deeply sensitive and personal nature of the information that may be shared with the commission. It also includes work to ensure that the commission has the appropriate premises to ensure that it is as safe and welcoming an environment for survivors as possible and that the necessary supports are in place for those survivors.

Special Educational Needs

95. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to outline the Government's decision-making processes for assisting children in State examinations with specific learning difficulties; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10098/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish the Minister the best of luck and I look forward to many robust debates on educational matters. I am sure the Minister is in very good hands there with the experience of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan.

I just want to focus on the Government's decision-making processes for assistance in State examinations for children with specific learning difficulties. My question concerns the recent announcement of ten extra minutes for children with specific learning needs.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The State Examinations Commission has responsibility for the operation of the State examinations including the scheme of reasonable accommodations at certificate examinations, RACE. The purpose of the RACE scheme is to remove barriers for students who have special educational needs to enable them to show what they know and can do in the examinations on an equal footing. Access to accommodations is based on the individual needs of the candidate and not on the provision of a diagnosis. Applications are made to the State Examinations Commission by the school based on the school's knowledge of the student's needs and his or her normal way of working. Some accommodations for those with learning difficulties have particular criteria such as a standard score test in reading, spelling or writing, which is administered by the school. In 2025 more than one in four candidates received an accommodation under the RACE scheme.

The State Examinations Commission is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of the scheme. This is structured so that rolling changes may be implemented as it progresses. The 2026 interim scheme of additional time that was recently announced by the State Examinations Commission is one of these rolling changes. Under this scheme more than 30,000 candidates across junior cycle and leaving certificate will be eligible for ten minutes of additional time per examination paper. This is an important step forward in addressing the programme for Government commitment to ensuring that candidates with specific needs are provided with additional time in exams in certain circumstances. The impact of this interim

scheme will be evaluated alongside other accommodations that already exist to inform arrangements for 2027.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: In the decision-making process this was a 5% to 7% extra time allocation. Dyslexia Ireland has highlighted that other jurisdictions normally offer much more with a minimum of 25% extra time for students with dyslexia in second level exams, using the United Kingdom as an example. In relation to the decision-making processes here the State Examinations Commission would have made this decision. Would the commission have brought it back to the Minister's Department to sign off on? Will the Minister clarify if psychologists, special education teachers, or disability advocacy groups were involved in this decision? Was this a decision that was taken by the State Examinations Commission and brought back to the Minister's Department for sign off? It is important to clarify where we got this ten minutes from. Where did we get that decision from? We could not have taken it from other jurisdictions because, as I have outlined, they are completely different. Where did this decision on the ten minutes come from? It is almost like we just picked it out of the sky and we have no idea where it came from.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The State Examinations Commission, SEC, has operational responsibility for State examinations, including the RACE scheme. The SEC has looked very carefully at how to operationalise that commitment to additional time and it has taken account of the need to balance on the one hand access for candidates with special educational needs and on the other hand equity and fairness for all candidates undertaking their examinations.

This is an interim scheme for 2026. It will be evaluated and that evaluation, together with ongoing research, will provide the evidence base for considering arrangements for 2027 and beyond. This evaluation recognises that there is a need to understand the combined effect of all supports of exam outcomes, including both additional time and the accommodations that already exist in lieu of additional time. For example, there is a spelling and grammar waiver in place. Pending that evaluation, this is a prudent approach to the quantum of additional time. I welcome the fact that this eligibility is broadly based and that more than 30,000 students are embraced within this scheme for the 2026 exams across junior certificate and leaving certificate.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I want to make it clear that my intention here is not to criticise progress. I welcome progress but the evidence has been collated by advocacy organisations, by the students themselves, by parents and by other NGO's in relation to what we can possibly do to alleviate the pressure faced by students with dyslexia, dyscalculia or other specific learning difficulties. I have a fundamental question and it has to be asked. How did we come to this decision? I do not understand it. When comparing it to the United Kingdom or Northern Ireland, for example, they give a 25% increase on the allocation of time for state examinations to children with specific learning difficulties.

While this is an interim measure, does the Minister not accept the fact that students who are taking their State exams in 2026 will be far worse off if we change this for 2027 and took on the UK model? Thankfully, I am experienced in the area and perhaps ten minutes would not make much of a difference.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There is an interim review under way. This is evidence based. This is the work of the State Examinations Commission, which is independent. There is a large amount of consultation, research and evidence as part of this decision. This is a rolling programme and it is considering international best practice in relation to this. The review of the RACE scheme is comprehensive and system-wide. It seeks to address the relevant issues that take account of best practice internationally. That is the work of the State Examinations Commission.

As part of its work, the SEC has commissioned research into national and international policies. Following a public procurement process, a contract for the provision of research and public consultation for this review has been awarded to Alpha Plus Consultancy Limited. This is a UK-based company, which has undertaken work for the Irish education system previously. Output is expected on that this year. Consultation with stakeholders is also extremely important. The SEC has already engaged with stakeholders, including with Dyslexia Ireland, Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance, and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. This engagement will continue as the review is under way. A roundtable stakeholder discussion is also planned for later this month.

Schools Building Projects

96. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the school building and refurbishment projects in Dublin 24 that will be included in the NDP sectoral investment plan; when they will be included; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11024/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to ask about the school building and refurbishment projects in Dublin 24 that are included in the national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan. As far as I know, there are 105 projects listed for the tranche for 2026 and 2027. Only one of those is in Dublin 24 and there are zero in Tallaght despite plenty of schools having a very desperate need. I know Government backbenchers are giving out about the number of projects in Galway. Ten of the projects are in Galway, which is 10% of the projects, when Galway only has 5% of the population.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Deputy will be aware I recently published the €7.55 billion NDP sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for 2026 out to 2030. Of the €7.55 billion investment it is envisaged that €5 billion of that will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings. An additional €2.25 billion of the NDP funding will focus on supporting the existing school estates, including maintenance, minor works, and the climate action summer work scheme. Project roll-out under the NDP will continue on a prioritised basis within the parameters of available funding to meet the most urgent needs for provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. In this regard, I have published a list of 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to tender and construction in 2026 and 2027. These projects were prioritised with a strong focus on maximising existing capacity and prioritising project roll-out to meet the most urgent needs.

11 o'clock

This list includes two significant projects in Dublin 24 to provide a new 1,000 pupil building for Firhouse Educate Together Secondary School and a new 16-classroom primary school for Scoil Chrónáin in Rathcoole.

These projects are in addition to €193 million in capital funding for Dublin 24 schools between 2020 and 2025. During that period, a total of 23 schools were upgraded, either through provision of new school buildings, a large-scale extension or the provision of modular accommodation. In addition, seven school projects in Dublin 24 are currently under construction.

To give a breakdown for Dublin, between 2020 and 2025, the Department of Education provided €1.7 billion in capital funding for schools. Over this period, 244 schools were upgraded, either through provision of a new school building, a large extension or the provision of modular buildings. There are currently 64 school projects in Dublin under construction and 20 school projects will go to tender or construction either this year and next year.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Could the Minister respond to the suggestion that has come from Government backbenchers that, effectively, there is some parish-pump parochialism going on in terms of the inclusion of certain schools in these tranches? There are ten projects in Galway, which has 5% of the population of the country, compared with 22 in Dublin - approximately 21% of the projects - where in the region of 27% of the population lives. The Minister might want to take the opportunity to respond to that suggestion, which, I again stress, is coming from Government backbenchers.

There is nothing in Tallaght, although there are plenty of schools there that are in desperate need. I want to highlight the case of one. I have spoken about this over a number of years in the Dáil. St. Aidan's in Brookfield is an amazing school. It has amazing staff and amazing students but the building is in a horrendous state. A new building is needed. The school has spent millions on emergency works just to keep the existing building patched together, but it has not dealt with the leaks in the roof and the white stuff coming out of the windows. It is not possible to the windows because the grilles on the outside have become corroded and are stuck to the frames. I will come back on this. The school desperately needs a new building.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I reiterate that €193 million in capital funding was provided between 2020 and 2025 in Dublin 24. There are seven school projects under construction in Dublin 24. Some 23 schools have been upgraded, either through the provision of new school buildings or large-scale extensions. That is not the end of the matter, however, because this is a rolling programme out to 2030. My Department will continue to engage with patrons and schools across the country, including in Deputy Murphy's constituency and in Dublin, to inform targeted and prioritised capital investment. That will include the identification of any urgent required works or capacity.

In relation to Galway, a full county-by-county breakdown has been published to clearly show the full scale of delivery and expenditure under the NDP. That breakdown covers delivery and expenditure over recent years. The criteria for identifying the 105 prioritised projects included the condition of the school, projects in areas where there were capacity pressures, growing demographics and projects in the pipeline.

Galway is a large county with a significant number of schools. It includes the city and town areas which are experiencing demographic growth, as are Kildare, Cork and Dublin. The Deputy will see from the list that five of the 45 stage 3 projects - that is, already tendered projects - in the county include a campus in Athenry for two Irish-medium schools, which is an area of demographic growth. Of the three stage 3 projects, two are in Galway West, my constituency.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Minister.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will come back to the Deputy with further details.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to stress the point about St. Aidan's in Brookfield. A previous Minister visited the school and agreed that the building is simply not suitable. It dates from the 1980s. There was an article in *The Irish Times* about it that contained a series of pictures that I took when I visited the school previously. If the Minister visits the school, she will see that the building is not acceptable. There is a kind of penny-wise-and-pound-foolish approach to these emergency works to patch up roofs that just cannot be patched up and that are continually affected by leaks. The facade of the building is broken down and crumbling. It is damp and paint will not adhere to it. There is just problem after problem. The building is no longer suitable.

I invite the Minister to come to the school to meet with the staff and the wonderful students there. If she does, she will see that there is space there to construct a second building and that there would be no need to decant students from one to the other. There is enough space for a new building. There is a growing population in the area, which is adjacent to City West and so on.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Deputy and call on the Minister to respond.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I acknowledge there are more schools that need investment and that is why this is a plan that goes out to 2030. What the Department of education will be doing now is engaging with schools across the country. For the first time, by the end of this year, the Department will have completed an energy and condition survey of all of our 4,000 schools across the country. That will really help with the prioritisation. It will also look at the demographics in an area, enrolments, the condition of the school and how we can prioritise over the next few years and out to 2030. That work will be led by the Department. Again, this is the first two years of a national development plan out to 2030. If there are schools that need remediation works, there is funding in place through the emergency works scheme and the summer works scheme. The engagement that is being carried out by the Department through the energy and conditions survey is evidence based. That will feed into prioritisation for the next tranche.

Question No. 97 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

School Admissions

98. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the pilot single application system for post-primary school admissions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10773/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Mar a dúirt Teachtaí eile, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire as ucht a poist nua. Go n-eirí léi. Tá muid ag súil go mbeidh muid ag oibriú le chéile chun dul chun cinn a dhéanamh. I want to get an update from the Minister on the pilot single application system for post-primary school admissions.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The roll-out of the pilot single online application for schools represents a significant step towards improving the school admissions system. This system has for the first time provided families with a single online application process and introduced synchronised and streamlined timelines for schools to manage admissions and issue offers.

In recent years, demographic shifts and increasing demand for special class provision for students with special educational needs have placed growing pressure on school admissions processes across the country. Complexities in the admissions process can cause unnecessary stress for families and place a significant administrative burden on schools. In response to these challenges and a commitment in the programme for Government to reforming the admissions process, my Department is working towards a nationwide common application system. As a first step, the apply to school pilot scheme was launched in October of last year for the 2026-27 admissions cycle. The pilot was introduced for 15 post-primary schools in five school planning areas, namely Athenry, Celbridge, Clonakilty, Greystones and Tullamore.

While the apply to school pilot scheme received positive feedback, obtaining an 80% customer effort score, a key objective of the pilot project was to accumulate learnings for future developments. Detailed post-project evaluations with participating schools are currently under way and this input will be carefully considered and integrated into future iterations of the scheme. Key deliverable improvements to the system aimed at further enhancing user experiences are targeted for the next phase of the project. More complex issues, such as the expression of school preference, will be considered for future implementation following appropriate consultation with key stakeholders, and with a focus on an equitable and transparent solution.

I expect to have a further update on the next phase of this project later in quarter 1 of this year, which will include clarity on greater system functionality and a larger cohort of participating schools. I assure the Deputy that my departmental officials will continue to work in consultation with all stakeholders to develop an evidentially informed, equitable and trusted solution for the nationwide common application system.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is good to hear that the pilot across the 15 schools is progressing well. It is also a good idea that we trial a system like this with schools and learn across a few different areas before we do it nationally. Families, and parents in particular, know how

difficult it is to secure a school place for their children, especially those seeking special education places. This is going to be particularly relevant and important in that area. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, mentioned earlier the amount of work being done with the NCSE on placements across the education system.

I have a constituent who has a child looking for a special place in second level, who has applied to 16 different schools across Dublin - from Rush to Kilnamanagh. They were individual applications, some posted and others in various different shapes and sizes. One can imagine the frustration of those parents who have to do that.

A system like this would help because the NCSE would be able to see what is coming and what the needs are. It would be able to assist greatly in that process. Does the Minister see an opportunity for this to be implemented in the future, particularly for special schools?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is doing great work on the special education side of the Department. That 1 October deadline is now moving. With regard to the data coming to the NCSE, it is getting notifications of requests and the need for special classes and special school places earlier. We absolutely acknowledge that the demand is increasing, and we are responding to that. The education budget for special education is now €3 billion. We will continue to work, both the Minister of State and I, with the NCSE, parents and schools to ensure that children get the places they require in a timely manner.

With regard to the common application process, we are getting feedback, including positive feedback that I have received from schools. There are issues but that is always the way with a pilot scheme. We need to be able to recognise the issues and try to unravel them and help schools. The 80% customer effort feedback was very positive.

Department officials are currently conducting more detailed post-product evaluation lessons and they will be integrated into the new phase. We are in a learning phase with the common application process. We want to take the stress away from parents so they do not have to be applying to numerous schools. We have to take a transparent and fair approach in this regard, working with school management bodies.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Duplicate school applications are an area where this could help because parents are naturally applying for multiple schools and schools think every application is a bona fide application. While it is, not every child will show up for every application in every school. That is where a system like this would be helpful. I look forward to hearing about the feedback later this year and the pilot being rolled out.

I might follow up directly with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, separately in relation to that particular case because the constituent is frustrated. They are doing their best for their child in terms of the incoming school year. I will follow up with him in that regard.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am open to feedback as well from parents and schools that are engaging with this common application process. The Department is engaging with them but feedback from Deputies is very much welcomed because we want to get this right in relation to any child seeking a place, be it for a mainstream class or special class. We want to work

with them. I absolutely recognise the frustration of parents when trying to access a school place. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is working with me, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Department to make these spaces available as quickly as possible. We already have a number of tranches of special classes that were announced and we will continue to do that over the next few months. Having that earlier deadline of 1 October was helpful because we now have greater sight of the requests and demand for this upcoming school year.

Schools Building Projects

99. Deputy Brendan Smith asked the Minister for Education and Youth when a much-needed building project will proceed to the next stage (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10770/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: This is the first opportunity I have had in this Chamber to wish the Minister every success in her role. It is always a demanding and challenging one in a Department that impacts so many people. As the Minister knows, I have been in regular contact with her through representations and parliamentary questions on the need to advance as quickly as possible a number of building projects throughout Cavan and Monaghan. This particular parliamentary question refers to the proposed building project at Milltown National School, Cavan, that needs to be advanced to the next stage as soon as possible, particularly to cater for the needs of children with additional needs.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am pleased to inform the Deputy that a project comprising two mainstream classrooms, two special education tuition rooms and one special education needs base has been devolved for delivery to the school authority. This project was approved in 2022 and my Department has been engaging with the school to support it through stage 1 of the architectural design process to advance a design solution that is consistent with the approved project brief and in line with the Department's technical standards. My Department has recently issued advice to the school and is currently awaiting submission of a revised stage 1 report.

My Department has a strong track record of delivering the Government's school building programme, with over €6 billion invested since 2020. In that period, my Department has provided €92.61 million in capital funding for Cavan schools. There are currently four school projects under construction across the county. A total of 24 schools have been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation.

As the Deputy will be aware, I have recently published the national development plan's sectoral investment plan for education and youth, which is worth €7.55 billion out to 2030. This sets out my Department's approach to prioritise investment in school infrastructure. There is a strong focus in the plan on maximising existing capacity and prioritising project roll-out to meet the most urgent needs, particularly to support special education provision. The project at the school in question forms part of this overall pipeline of school building projects that will continue to be managed in line with the funding parameters within which I have to work through the national development plan.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I strongly welcome the major investment in school buildings since 2020, both in my constituency and nationally. In her response, the Minister stated that the Department is awaiting a submission of a revised stage 1 report from the school. I have been in contact with the Department in this regard, as has the school. This will mean that the school will be submitting plans to the Department for the third time. The Department has requested that the design team cuts down on the cost of the project. In order to reduce the cost of the revised project, the architect is proposing that the new extension be elevated by 1.2 m. This will reduce costs of the excavation, earth disposal, retaining walls and access ramps. The proposed new drawings have both steps and an enclosed lift on the main corridor.

In an effort to speed up the process, and before the school sends the drawings to be repriced by the quantity surveyor, the board of management of the school has asked both me and the Department for clarification as to whether the building unit in the Minister's Department will accept the building with split levels when pupils with special educational needs will be accessing those corridors. I appreciate that detail is not in the Minister's briefing notes but I ask her to quickly give me a note on this or for the Department to write directly to the board of management and principal stating whether the revised plans with split levels are acceptable to the Department's specifications. The school does not want to waste money in doing this if the plans will be rejected.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: As the Deputy will appreciate, I cannot comment on the technical details of any school across the country. I can advise and certainly assist. I am sure there is a line of communication, as there always is, for these building projects where the design team of the school engages directly with the Department of education. I will certainly follow up with the Department to get clarity around that and ensure it engages with the school directly around those particular concerns. As the Deputy can imagine, I cannot give any kind of confirmation or otherwise in relation to technical and design elements of particular schools. If a line of communication is needed between the Department and the school, I have no issue facilitating that.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I fully appreciate that the Minister is not to get involved in technical details but the board of management, the principal and I have sought clarification from the Department and it has not been forthcoming. The board of management, the principal, Mr. Keith Conefrey, the parents' association and all the staff do not want to waste time getting a redesign, submitting it to the Department and then being turned down again. We are talking about ensuring the best value for money here. An answer via a note to myself or directly to the school from the Minister's Department would benefit everybody. It would benefit the Department from an expenditure point of view and it would also help speed up what is very much needed.

The Minister referred to this accommodation being particularly focused on the needs of pupils with additional needs and ensuring there is proper accommodation in that regard. This school's enrolment has grown from 51 pupils 15 years ago to 175 pupils today. There is a special emphasis in this school on providing for children with additional needs. This accommodation is needed. If this project could be progressed as soon as possible, it would be a good day's work for that community.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will certainly raise the matter with the Department and ensure it engages directly with the school.

Special Educational Needs

100. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the measures being taken to ensure that schools in County Galway have appropriate SET and SNA allocations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9696/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On behalf of my colleague, Deputy O'Hara, I wish to ask about the measures being taken to ensure that schools in County Galway have appropriate special education training, SET, and special needs assistant, SNA, allocations.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for providing me with the opportunity to respond. As he knows, this Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs to achieve their full potential. The primary responsibility for the education of all pupils, including those with special educational needs, is the class teacher or subject teacher.

The special education teaching allocation provides schools with additional teaching hours to support the learning needs of students in mainstream classes based on their profile of need. The number of special education teachers, SETs, in Galway has increased from 1,003 to 1,187 since the 2020-21 school year. Special needs assistants, SNAs, play a central role in the successful inclusion of students with additional and significant care needs in schools by helping to ensure that these students can access an education to enable them to achieve their best outcomes and reach their full potential.

The number of SNAs allocated to schools in Galway since the 2020-21 school year has increased from 887 to 1,224. By the end of this year, there will be close to 21,000 SETs and almost 25,000 SNAs in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools.

In the case of both SETs and SNAs, it is accepted that any model which distributes resources requires to be flexible to allow for circumstances where additional need may arise. In these circumstances, schools, including those in Galway, can request the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to undertake a review of their allocation. Where the NCSE identifies the need for additional resources, they will be provided so that they are available to the school ahead of the relevant school year.

It should be noted that schools in County Galway have seen an overall increase of 18% in the number of SETs in the past five years and, as I outlined, a 27% increase in SNA allocation.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We all welcome the increase in the numbers of SETs and SNAs, but I must say that the Minister of State's response does not reflect the reality. There is a massive unmet need. There is need for greater allocation. Worse than that, we have seen a pattern in recent years, and particularly in the last couple of years, of resources being taken from schools and different application of the same criteria as they apply to significant care. Children who had the necessary support of SNAs are now seeing it withdrawn, or there is at least the threat of that happening. That is the lived reality. It is worse to go to review and even

worse to go to appeal. I ask the Minister of State to listen to any teacher or school community. It is a very serious concern. What is the Minister of State going to do about it?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We must accept that we have put a huge amount of resources into special education, particularly for SNAs and SETs. In this year's budget, it was one of the sectors that got the greatest increase. We are deeply committed. Whether in mainstream, special classes or special schools, the strength of our special educational system is based upon SNAs. They do amazing work in school communities. They enable children to flourish and benefit from the education system. On the backs of SNAs and SETs, we have built special education, together with all the school communities across the country.

We have close to 25,000 SNAs within the education system this year. There has been an increase in the budget figure and the number of SETs. We are continuing to invest in the education system and particularly on the special education side.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Warm words will not cut it. The reality is that on a daily basis, children who need the support of an SNA do not have it. Also on a daily basis, schools are faced with the reality of a cut or the threat of a cut to their SNA allocation. The children absolutely need those SNAs. The Minister of State's words do not reflect what schools are dealing with and what we, as public representatives, are hearing.

When representatives of Fórsa and the Department were before the committee, an indication was given that there would be some reflection of the expanded role of SNAs in the new workforce development plan. I took that as a positive. Everything in the meantime has been completely negative. Will that be the case with the workforce development plan? When will we see it?

Deputy Jen Cummins: The issue in respect of SNAs is coming up in my constituency. When the review from the NCSE comes along, there is a downward turn in respect of the numbers of SNAs. That is despite the fact that when the new students arrive, schools must again increase the numbers of SNAs. Long-term staff are being let go and rehired by another school, or reappointed when the new students come. Everything is a little topsy-turvy.

One school in Kilkenny contacted me. It is very concerned because it is going to lose 1.5 SNAs. The way the school is operating will mean there will be one SNA to 140 students in the mainstream. It has a lot of need. The school is in the direction of Newtown and Dunleckney. The Bagenalstown principal was in contact with me. That situation needs to be reviewed. We cannot be taking away services when we know that need is on the increase. That review needs to be paused. We should not be cutting SNAs when the level of need is increasing.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Like other Deputies, I have seen the same situation in my constituency. Bweeng National School in County Cork is losing two SNAs. Those are vital posts.

The Minister of State made a statement about all the things the Government is doing. On the ground, these reviews are leading to cuts. A number of schools in Cork city and county are losing SNAs. The Minister of State referred to the progress that the Government is making. The reason we are getting extra SNAs and SETs is that for years there was a shortage. The

Government is only playing catch-up. At the same time, the Minister of State telling us how great the Government is. The reason there has been an increase is that previous Governments did not hire enough SNAs. I am deeply concerned about the impact of the current situation.

One SNA who contacted me said she loves her school and the children. As a mother herself, she cannot understand why the decision is being made. One parent said to me that there is no inclusion without support. Parents feel let down.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the point. If I may be a little flippant, I might contest that Bweeng is in the Cork North-West constituency, rather than Cork North-Central. That is only a flippant point.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Students from Cork North-Central are attending there because the school has two special classes. I am just letting the Minister of State know that.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I appreciate that. I understand. I am fully aware of the work that is going on in Bweeng. I do not want to single out any specific school. I take the point.

If I am realistic, I am heartened each time there is a debate on special education by the commitment across the House and Deputies' fundamental understanding of the challenges that are there in respect of special educational needs and special classes. We are putting in resources. There are almost 25,000 SNAs across the system. We are putting in further supports for educational needs.

I take the point that there is a considerable amount of need within the school communities. We are working extremely closely with them. Neither the Minister, Deputy Naughton, nor I is blind to the challenge we have and the growing need that is there. We are going to continue to expand. We expanded the figures in the most recent budget and will continue to do so. With the resources in the classrooms, we will allow children to grow and develop and to lead as full a life as possible. That is fundamentally what I believe.

I take the Deputies' points. Each school should engage with the process for reviews and appeals. There is a process there. However, I take the point about the seriousness of the engagement.

Special Educational Needs

101. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the projected timeline for the roll-out of the 1,717 additional SNAs and 860 additional SETs announced as part of budget 2026; the regional allocation model; and the measures in place to ensure timely recruitment. [11013/26]

Deputy Paul Lawless: The budget promised over 1,700 SNAs and 860 new SETs. I ask the Minister of State about recruitment and delivery so far, and the timelines involved for the roll-out of those SNAs and SETs.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy.

The Government is fully committed to supporting special education needs to achieve their full potential and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this objective. The NCSE has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children with special education needs. I assure the Deputy the 860 special education teachers and 1,700 special needs assistants will be allocated well in advance of the commencement of the 2026-2027 school year to mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. As in previous years, the special education teaching allocations for mainstream classes is intended to be published as part of the general staffing allocation in February. The NCSE manages the allocation of SNAs to the school and it is the responsibility of the council to ensure these resources are allocated to children with the greatest level of need. The number of SNAs available for allocation has continued to increase annually and this has resulted in a significant increase in the number of SNA posts in schools. Budget 2026 provides for a further 1,700 SNA posts, which will bring the total number to close to 25,000 by the end of 2026.

As in previous years, the NCSE will advise all schools of their SNA allocations in this year and these allocations will be made known to schools at an earlier stage than in previous years. The provision of early allocation to schools will ensure they will be in a position to plan for the 2026-2027 school year, including recruitment where necessary. In addition, given the large number of additional resources for specialised provision, it is important to point out 300 special classes have already been sanctioned for 2026. That is months ahead of where we were last year. This time last year we just looking at the numbers in the first and second week of February. We are a number of months ahead, we have those sanctioned and there will be recruitment in relation to those as well.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I thank the Minister of State. I asked this question because of the importance of schools and families being able to plan. However, in reality there are families who still do not know what school they can send their child to. They are right across Mayo. A special school in Mayo that does absolutely wonderful work is St. Anthony's School in Castlebar. The management team of Fiona Byrne, Anna Sweeney, Helena Brady as well as all the staff do amazing work but within the first hour of admissions opening for this calendar year the school was oversubscribed. Applicants exceeded the capacity of the school. That is leaving families and also the school in an incredibly difficult scenario. The Minister of State says this is going to happen in February and March but families are struggling and stressed today. St. Anthony's and many other schools across Mayo are trying to accommodate children but they do not know what resources they will have. This is a priority. There must be an expected timeframe for delivery.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. Last year 1 February was the deadline. That was extended by a week due to Storm Éowyn. We looked at trying to plan in February, March and April last year and saw the challenges families and people were meeting. A decision was made by the then Minister, Deputy McEntee, and me to bring the dates back to 1 October. One of the first discussions I had with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, upon her appointment was to look at the whole concept so we can bring better planning into the system and greater certainty for students and families. A number of years ago I was at a school gate meeting a family whose child was finishing sixth class on 26 June without knowing where the child was going to start post-primary education in September. Through the various challenges we have had on it, I constantly have that family in my mind, and we need to do far better. The Deputy

makes the point that families and parents are stressed about this. We have moved this system back four or five months to bring certainty to them.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. It is fundamental that families have certainty today. They need to know. We talk about forward planning and so on but in Mayo letters are coming from the Department and the NCSE and basically promising children a place in a special education school. Then the family goes to the school and is told it is oversubscribed. That is the type of planning I am talking about. The system is so disconnected. How do we have a scenario where the NCSE is delivering letters promising a special education place when there is no such place in Mayo for the child? That is the point I want to get across to the Minister of State. I must acknowledge the 2,500 teachers promised in the budget is very ambitious but I am asking the Minister of State for certainty and timelines for SNAs and special education teachers for St. Anthony's School and for many other schools across Mayo.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): Deputy Cummins has a supplementary question, as does Deputy Gould.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for letting me come in. I agree with Deputy Lawless and the Minister of State that the planning is most welcome because there is then an opportunity to foresee what is going to come down the tracks. However, I have raised several times that the 1 October cut-off point has been very detrimental to parents and I am still hearing they are not being given letters of eligibility and are being told the portal has closed. What is the solution to that? I am still concerned. I had a meeting yesterday with a number of parents, teachers and principals about special education and there is still huge confusion. The Minister and Minister of State are doing their best on the forward planning and I appreciate that but a bit of clarity would help. Families feel there is a drip feed of information on the plan being put in place for next year, so the speedier that is the better. I am especially worried about those who are going into post-primary who still have not heard where they are going. The transition is very important, particularly the one from primary to secondary school.

Deputy Thomas Gould: This goes back to the Minister of State's point about planning. We welcome extra resources, special classes and special schools. I spoke to a principal yesterday. St. Killian's School wants to build an additional school as it is full to capacity and there is a need for extra places. I know of a child in Cork and we are in February now but he has no school place. How can a child have no school place? I hear about all these announcements but what is happening on the ground is children being left behind. The Minister of State is talking about planning. The principals of the special schools must be included in decision-making, planning and engagement because they are the people who are on the ground and know what is happening. I have a final point in relation to Bweeng. You have children going to special schools and classes all over the county because there are not places where they are from. I take the point made earlier but I am a TD for Cork North-Central and I know of children going to Cork East, Cork North-West and Cork South-Central. They are travelling from Knocknaheeney to Carrigaline and to Macroom. That is what is happening on the ground.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I accept the point they are travelling across the county. Transport and trying to ensure the provision of special education is as close as possible to

families is one of the things we have discussed. A lot of children with additional needs are travelling long distances to get to their school places and it is something we need to be very mindful of. Regarding 1 October, for anyone after that date we are issuing the letters of eligibility. Those letters have started over the past day or so and they will continue. We have worked very closely on it. I want to be clear on this because there is some commentary that 1 October is an arbitrary deadline but 1 October was brought in to ensure we would be in a position to have forward planning. On that planning, it is important we have sight of the information from other Departments like the Departments of children and Social Protection. We need good information to plan properly. There are a raft of issues around it but we need sight of where the challenges are. We are looking at ways and means of ensuring we have information earlier, not just when the parent notifies the NCSE but also if a child is on domiciliary care or AIMS.

I have no issue if the Deputies have individual cases. We will work with them to try to find solutions for them.

Education Schemes

102. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the establishment of a new DEIS plus scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10774/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question relates to a topic I have raised on previous occasions, namely, DEIS plus and getting it on the blocks for those schools and communities that need it the most. I would appreciate an update.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Tackling educational disadvantage is a key priority for me as Minister. The DEIS programme is my Department's policy to support schools with high concentrations of students at risk of educational disadvantage. Though DEIS, my Department provides over €180 million in additional resources to almost 1,200 primary and post-primary schools, reaching approximately 260,000 students.

I am also aware that there are students at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools. My Department provides a range of universal supports, including free schoolbooks and access to the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, to all schools that support students at risk of educational disadvantage.

The success of the DEIS programme is clear. Schools in the programme have significantly narrowed the outcome gaps with non-DEIS schools. However, for a cohort of schools with the highest concentrations of students experiencing educational disadvantage, a significant gap in educational outcomes remains. Budget 2026 added an additional €16.5 million in 2026, rising to €48 million in 2027, to support the implementation of the new DEIS strategy, and the achievement of the programme for Government commitment to introduce a DEIS plus scheme to support those schools.

I recently met the DEIS plus design advisory group, which has helped to inform the development of the DEIS plus scheme. The group includes principals, home school community

liaison officers and school completion programme co-ordinators who work directly with students experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage. I heard first-hand from this group about daily challenges faced by students, such as reliance on school meals - the hot school meals programme is important across the country and is another universal approach from the Government - and the impact of intergenerational trauma. I also heard about what works and how we can build on that through DEIS plus. The new DEIS strategy, including the new DEIS plus scheme, is currently being finalised, which is probably the Deputy's question, and will be published in the coming weeks.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is good to hear that the strategy is coming. The beauty of DEIS plus is that it can take educational resources and really target them at students who need them the most. I have regular contact with schools in my area, including Our Lady Immaculate Senior National School in Darndale, St. Francis Senior National School in Priorswood and St. Joseph's Coolock, which are located in areas of serious deprivation and disadvantage. DEIS plus will, I hope, help them greatly and cannot come soon enough.

Those schools need to know they will be in the programme. Principals need to start planning for 2026-27. What will they get when the rubber hits the road? When will they get it? What else do they need to do to plan? What else do the principals and management teams in those schools need to do? I welcome that the plan will be published very soon. I hope it will include the level of detail those schools will need. I appreciate the ongoing support from the Department for the programme. I look forward to a further commitment of resources in the years ahead to support it.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Under the DEIS programme, 306 primary schools with the highest concentration of children at risk of educational disadvantage are included in DEIS urban band 1. These schools receive the highest level of staffing and funding available under the DEIS programme. The Department recently introduced two additional measures to support children in schools at very high levels of disadvantage. Strand 1 of the counselling and primary schools pilot was extended to 61 urban DEIS primary schools in Tallaght, Clondalkin, Ballymun, Finglas and Darndale. This pilot provides one-to-one counselling support for children most in need. Funding was also provided for the appointment of 15 community link workers to support Traveller and Roma children and those at risk of educational disadvantage. These roles will work with families, schools and communities to improve attendance, participation and achievement in education.

Regarding the DEIS plus programme, it will be targeted towards schools at the highest level of educational disadvantage. They will not need to apply to become a DEIS plus school.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I appreciate that. I welcome the fact that the plan should be signed off on very soon. What are the expectations of the Minister in terms of the Department notifying schools? As she said, they will likely be automatically included in the programme. What are the views of the Minister on how schools will be notified so that they can start planning for 2026-27? That educational year will come upon us very soon and schools will be closed will summer. Management will work on these priorities through the summer. What does the Minister see happening once the plan is published and agreed?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The schools will be notified. A design advisory group was established to inform the Department of the DEIS plus schemes. That group includes principals, home school liaison officers, school completion programme co-ordinators and professionals who work directly with these children. The Department has engaged with other Departments, agencies, education partners and stakeholders across the education sector to develop the scheme and make sure it is reaching those children and students who need the supports the most.

In 2024 and 2025, my Department carried out consultation workshops, focus groups and other engagements with key education stakeholders, including children and young people. That work has been ongoing and it is extremely important in informing development in this area.

Analysis of the HP deprivation index indicates that areas with high intergenerational disadvantage are primarily located in urban areas where poverty related challenges such as hunger, substance abuse, domestic abuse, parental incarceration, eviction and homelessness are most acute. These challenges are also reflected in schools in those areas where the outcomes for urban schools in the DEIS programme are lower than for DEIS schools in rural areas.

Education Policy

103. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Oideachais agus Óige na ceantair pleanála scoile sa Stát nach bhfuil meánscoil lánGhaeilge iontu a ainmniú, agus cad iad na bearta i ngach cás acu atá déanta ag a Roinn chun an bearna sin a líonadh [10906/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá an cheist seo dírithe ar na ceantair pleanála scoile sa Stáit nach bhfuil meánscoil lánGhaeilge iontu agus iad sin a ainmniú, agus ar cad atá ar siúl chun an bearna sin a líonadh agus an t-éileamh atá ann do Ghaelscolaíocht ag an dara leibhéal a shásamh.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Mar a d'fhéadfadh an Teachta Dála a bheith ar an eolas faoi, tá 314 ceantar pleanála scoile ar fud na tíre agus tá 50 Gaelcholáiste ag feidhmiú faoi láthair. Seolfar liosta de na ceantair pleanála scoile nach bhfuil iarbhunscoil lánGhaeilge nó Gaelcholáiste iontu go díreach chuig an Teachta Dála mar a iarradh.

There is varying demand for Irish-medium post-primary provision across the country, which is evidenced by the majority of Gaelcholáiste having underutilised capacity, even in areas of demographic pressures. Aonaid are an important element of Irish-medium post-primary provision where demand levels are not sufficient to support a sustainable Gaelcholáiste. Many school planning areas are meeting local needs in this way.

D'fhoilsigh mo Roinn plean infheistíochta eanála le déanaí ina soláthraítear faisnéis ar threo an tsoláthair trí mheán na Gaeilge agus luaitear ann go ndearnadh infheistíocht chaipitil €466 milliún ó bhí 2020 ann. Tá infheistíocht bhreise beartaithe faoi choinne soláthar trí mheán na Gaeilge mar chuid d'fheidhmiú céimneach tionscadal faoin PFN in 2026 agus in 2027.

The programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future, includes a commitment to establish Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáiste where there is demand and support for parents

choosing Irish-medium education for their children. In that context, last November my Department published a policy for Irish-medium education outside the Gaeltacht. The policy sets out the Department's vision that high-quality Irish-medium education will be available to all in inclusive and multicultural settings.

A task force on models of provision of Irish-medium education was established as a key action under the policy. The role of that task force is to provide a platform for collaboration between the Department and key stakeholders to develop a pathway to increase the provision of Irish-medium education.

That task force is expected to be completed within one year and will make recommendations to my Department on areas such as the criteria for Irish-medium education provision and how to support schools transitioning to Irish-medium education and mechanisms to facilitate expansion.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tuigim cad atá á rá ag an Aire agus fáiltím roimh an tascfhórsa, ach amháin go bhfuil sé blianta ró-dhéanach do a lán dóibh siúd atá tar éis teacht tríd an córas Gaeloideachais ag an mbunleibhéal, agus nach raibh aon sholáthar dóibh dul chuig meánscoil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is é sin an Stát ag loic ar na cearta oideachais agus teanga atá na daltaí sin ar fad. Ní mise atá á rá sin, ach an Coimisinéir Teanga. Dúirt an coimisinéir ag an gcoiste Gaeilge, Gaeltachta agus Pobal Labhartha na Gaeilge in 2024, "Ní léir go bhfuil freastal cóir á dhéanamh, áfach, ar an éileamh ar sholáthar na iarbhunscolaíochta lán-Ghaeilge." Ní leor an méid sin. Ar an liosta de na ceantair nach bhfuil an soláthar sin ar fáil iontu, cé go bhfuil an t-éileamh ann, tá leithéidí Caisleán an Bharraigh, Cill Dhéagláin, Coill na Silíní, Droichead na Bandan, Fionnbhrú, Sord agus Mullach Íde. Is iad sin na háiteanna ina bhfuil breis is 500 dalta ag iarraidh freastal ar Ghaelcholáiste. Is gá obair i bhfad Éireann níos tapúla a dhéanamh ná mar atá i gceist ó thaobh an tascfhórsa de.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: We have a commitment in the programme for Government to establish Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí where there is demand to support parents to choose Irish-medium education for their children. My Department launched the new policy last November. A key action of that policy was the establishment of the task force. My Department has established three new Irish-medium post-primary schools since 2014 for demographic reasons - Coláiste Ghlór na Mara in Balbriggan, Gaelcholáiste an Phiarsaigh in Rathfarnham, and Gaelcholáiste Charraig Uí Leighin in Cork. The task force is going to make recommendations covering a number of areas such as the models needed to provide Irish-medium education at primary and post-primary levels, the definitions of those various models, how inclusive the high quality of Irish-medium education that can be provided within each model along that continuum, what supports the schools may need to implement these models and how to effectively assess the demand for Irish-medium education.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá léarscáil ansin agus tabharfaidh mé don Aire níos déanaí é. Taispeánann na pointí buí ar an léarscáil na Gaelscoileanna. Tá éileamh ann don oideachas trí Ghaeilge. Níl, nach mór i lár na tíre ar fad, aon mheánscoil lánGhaeilge. Tá éileamh ann. B'fhéidir nach bhfuil sé chomh mór céanna leis an éileamh don Bhéarla, ach ní chiallaíonn sé sin gur chóir don Stát loic ar na cearta atá ag daltaí oideachas a bheith acu trí Ghaeilge. Tá ag teipadh ar an Stát. Glacaim leis go bhfuil céimeanna chun tosaigh glactha ach, in ainneoin an

méid a dúirt an tAire, níl go leor acu. Is gá díriú isteach air sin. Dúirt an tAire ag an tús go bhfuil 314 ceantar pleanála scoile ann. Tá 264 acu sin gan meánscoil trí Ghaeilge. Is léiriú é sin ar an fhadhb bhunúsach atá ann ó thaobh an Stát de. An bhfuil an Roinn chun díriú isteach ar na háiteanna ar luaigh mé ina bhfuil feachtais, tuismitheoirí agus éileamh atá cruthaithe cheana féin?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Aontaím go hiomlán leis an méid atá ráite ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, i dtaobh na háiteanna nach bhfuil meánscoileanna lánGhaeilge iontu. Tá an-chuid de na meánscoileanna lánGhaeilge atá againn faoi bhrú i dtaobh foirgnimh agus spáis. Tá éileamh níos mó ann ná mar gur féidir leo freastal air de dheasca an easpa infheistíochta i bhfoirgnimh, suíomhanna agus a leithéid. Táim ag smaoineamh ar Ghaelcholáiste Phort Láirge i gcathair Phort Láirge, a bhfuil ag feidhmiú as prefabs le blianta anuas agus nach bhfuil baile dá chuid féin aige. Freastalaíonn an Ghaelcholáiste seo ar éileamh ó roinnt mhaith bunscoileanna lánGhaeilge sa cheantar - i dTrá Mhór, i gcathair Phort Láirge agus sa cheantar mághuaird. Tá géarghá anois le hinfheistíocht ní hamháin sna cheantair nach bhfuil meánscoil lánGhaeilge iontu ach freisin sna meánscoileanna lánGhaeilge atá ar an bhfód cheana féin.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Ba mhaith liom déileáil le fadhb atá ann maidir le Gaelcholáiste Dhún Dealgan. Tá sé mar scoil satailíte de chuid Choláiste Ghlór na Mara i mBaile Brigín. Tá fadhb sa scoil maidir leis an gcóras iompair. Nílimid sásta leis an bhfreagra atá faighte againn ón Roinn. Níl córas iompair á chur ar fáil fá choinne na scoile. Ba cheart go mbeidh sé sin déanta. Chomh maith leis sin, tá fadhb ann maidir le scrúduithe. Tá uimhir scrúdaithe de dhíth ón scoil fá choinne na scrúduithe móra Stáit. It is fairly straightforward. There is a particular issue with the Gaelcholáiste. It is trying to grow its numbers. It is a project to try to grow a Gaelcholáiste at secondary level in Dundalk through Irish and it really needs facilitation in relation to transport. The answer at the minute from the Department is not good enough. An exam number is needed so people do not have to travel to Balbriggan to do the State exams.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There are currently 50 Gaelcholáistí across the country and almost all of them are undersubscribed for enrolments. This Government is committed to establishing and supporting-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: On a point of order, the Minister cannot put wrong facts on the record. Coláistí Eoin and Iosagáin are bursting at the seams. They are not undersubscribed in any sense. The Department has accepted that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Minister to respond. Can the Deputy sit down, please?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: My Department and the Government are absolutely committed to expanding the number of Gaelcholáistí and Gaelscoileanna across the country. As the Deputy knows, there was a recent primary school survey which included questions to establish parental interest in Irish-medium provision and while it was a survey for primary schools, it provides very useful information and a guide to inform post-primary provision.

There will be further clarity on the outcomes of that survey later this year. We have committed in the programme for Government to establishing Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí where there is demand. The task force is undergoing work in relation to this. I will keep Members updated. I am absolutely in support of the need to expand this and where schools need to be upgraded as part of our NDP, the Department will engage directly with those schools, particularly with the energy and condition surveys that are happening throughout this year.

Special Educational Needs

104. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the way in which children with additional needs in Drogheda without a school place will be accommodated for the upcoming school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11023/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On behalf of Deputy Byrne, I ask about the way in which children with additional needs in Drogheda without a school place will be accommodated for the upcoming school year. On behalf of Deputy Byrne, I raise the specific case of Alfie, an eight-year-old boy from Drogheda. His mum, Lorraine, expressly asked that his case be raised. He is one of a number of children in mainstream school with a recommendation for a special school or class place but who do not have a letter of eligibility from the NCSE. What advice can the Minister give for young Alfie?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: My understanding is the issue is 1 October. That is my information on that specific case. We are aware of it and will follow up and report back to both the Deputy and his colleague.

In regard to Drogheda and County Louth, in particular, the Government is committed to continuing acceleration of provision of additional special classes and special school places across the country. The National Council for Special Education is the statutory body responsible for that and the Department and the NCSE are working very closely with both myself and the senior Minister in the Department, Deputy Naughton, to ensure we have certainty for families and students into the 2026-2027 school year.

To date, the Department and NCSE have sanctioned 301 special school classes. That is a number of months earlier than it was last year. Five of these new special classes are being provided in County Louth. This brings to 120 the total number of special classes available across County Louth.

12 o'clock

Additionally, there are four special schools in County Louth supporting 421 children. The sanctioning of these new special classes is a number of months ahead of last year and should provide greater certainty for parents. It also provides schools with more time to establish new classes. I expect schools will open new classes to move forward now with admissions processes. The NCSE will keep us informed weekly of developments in relation to the special classes and the provision of education.

We will respond directly to the Deputy and his colleague on the issue raised. As we are talking about Gaelcholáistí, I think visitors from Gaelcholáiste Chiarraí are about to join us in

the Public Gallery. It would be remiss of me if I did not mention it. I have a vested interest. My good lady wife is working in the school.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I mí an Mheithimh 2024, scríobh an Tánaiste faoi mholadh cánach do thithe atá ag teastáil ó cheannaitheoirí céaduaire. Dúirt sé nach féidir cur suas leis agus thug sé gealltanais nach dtarlóidh seo arís, ach ar aghaidh go dtí i mbliana 2026 agus ceisteanna curtha air, dheimhnigh sé go raibh 293 teach bulc-cheannaithe díreach anuraidh ag creach-chistí agus tiarnaí talún corparáideacha. An nglacann an Tánaiste leis go bhfuil teipthe iomlán ar a pholasaí anois?

This week, the Government's damning failure in housing has been laid bare for all of us to see once again. Its choices are making it harder for working people to afford a home. Last night, the Government pushed through a Bill that will hike rents by up to €5,000 for 60,000 renters every year, a gift to big corporate landlords on behalf of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. This morning, we woke up to the news that there are no housing assistance payment, HAP, properties to rent in 16 different areas. These are right across the country, and include areas in Cork, Galway, Dublin, Athlone, Limerick and Waterford. I could go on. This is piling even more pressure onto those desperately seeking to put a roof over their heads.

That is before we come to the abysmal failure to stop vulture funds snapping up family homes. In June 2024, the Tánaiste wrote that the bulk purchasing of homes needed by first-time buyers cannot be tolerated. Those are his words, not mine. Two years on, those words ring hollow. Under questioning by me, the Tánaiste confirmed that 293 homes were bulk purchased last year alone by vulture funds. These were 293 homes and 293 opportunities lost to working people. There were 293 young people who had done everything right, saved for years and cut back, with some even moving back into their family homes to build up a deposit, only to find themselves outbid. Couples queued for hours and hours outside developments, lining up before dawn to secure a chance to bid on a first home, only for the vultures to swoop in, not with a mortgage application or savings scraped up year after year, but with institutional capital that no ordinary worker can compete with.

This happened and was tolerated under the Tánaiste's watch as Minister for Finance. He told the public the Government's policy would put a stop to this. We said it would not. The Tánaiste stood over that policy and defended it. He said it would deter bulk purchasing. It has not deterred it and it has not stopped it. It is still happening. Of the 293 homes purchased last year by vulture funds, 154 were bought in the last three months alone. This is happening right now under the Tánaiste's watch and the reason is simple: the Government's legislation is not working. It made a choice to leave the door open and vultures are swooping right through it. When the Tánaiste says that bulk purchasing cannot be tolerated, what exactly do those words mean? What we are seeing is not intolerance but permission for large investors to compete directly with first-time buyers and permission for a model where ordinary working people are told to save harder, wait longer and try again next year. Does the Tánaiste accept, in the face

of the facts, that the Government's policy has failed? Does he accept that as long as these exemptions remain, first-time buyers will continue to be gazumped by vulture funds? Will he now act to keep the promise he made and ban vulture funds from snapping up family homes? He said the practice, in his words, could not be tolerated. Will he finally step up and deliver on that promise?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: First, in relation to the housing assistance payment and the Dublin Simon Community report that the Deputy referenced, I thank the Dublin Simon Community for the work it does. I thank it for the recognition in its commentary in relation to the tenancy protections we are putting in place in the legislation that passed in this House last night and now goes to the Seanad today. I thank it for the work it is doing, including in this capital city with the opening of its new facility this week to help people in relation to addiction and homelessness.

I also want to acknowledge that when it comes to housing assistance and the housing assistance payment, we do intend, in line with our housing plan, to review the HAP limits and to have that completed within the first half of this year. That is a commitment the Government has given because we believe HAP can make a difference to people and we believe it is making a difference to people. I am pleased to see that already, when we look at people who have been on HAP and at their journey to longer-term accommodation and a more permanent housing solution, there are encouraging signs, with 37% of exits from the HAP scheme now being to other forms of social housing. The point in relation to needing to review HAP and the HAP limits is something this Government concurs with. It is something we are acting on and we will have that work concluded in the first half of this year.

My second point in relation to HAP and supply more generally is that we have to keep on increasing supply. There are some encouraging signs, which I am not surprised the Deputy did not mention, when it comes to housing supply. Last year, we saw almost 100 homes built every single day, an increase in our housing figures by more than 20% on the previous year. We saw commencements of new homes in December double on what they were in November. We see 600 people buying their first-time home every single week. We will have social housing figures shortly, but I believe those will also show progress.

The Deputy referenced institutional investors. The Deputy and many people, on all sides of this House, often talk about the Housing Commission report. It is important we do not pick and choose which bits of the report we want to talk about. The Housing Commission report itself says we must see private investment in our housing market. It is really important; the State cannot do it all. In fact, the State is investing way more than most European countries in housing, but we do need to also attract in private investment. There may be a policy difference with us on that. I do not know, but there may be. However, the Housing Commission report, and not you or me, recognises the importance of it.

When it comes to bulk buying, and we did discuss this the other night, we have acted. We introduced a higher rate of stamp duty. When I was Taoiseach in the period of time the Deputy referenced, I acknowledged and said clearly that the extra rate we brought in, the 10% rate, was not high enough in my view. I worked closely with the then Minister for Finance, Michael

McGrath, and the Government and we increased that rate of stamp duty by 50%. That saw the number of homes being bulk bought fall in 2023, 2024 and 2025 and we expect it to fall now.

Another fact the Deputy did not mention, but that he should mention because I did put these figures on the record of the House the other night, is that we now see institutional investors selling more homes than they are buying in Ireland. There is a need for all of the facts to be looked at. We need private investment. We took action in relation to bulk buying. We took further action in relation to bulk buying, and we are now seeing more homes being sold than bought up by that sector.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste gave a commitment in 2024. He said that the bulk purchasing of these homes by vulture funds should not be tolerated, cannot be tolerated. He is the Minister for Finance. He has not just been tolerating this once or twice. He tolerated it 293 times last year. These were 293 opportunities snapped away by vulture funds from young people who wanted to buy their first home. The Tánaiste stands there and somehow defends this because he offers no solutions. It could not be tolerated in 2024 and it should not be tolerated now. Vulture funds should not be allowed to outbid and swoop in to buy homes from under the noses of ordinary first-time buyers. That is simple as. What is the Tánaiste going to do about it? If he genuinely believes it should not be tolerated, as he said, then what is he going to do about it? The solution is simple: ban vulture funds from bulk purchasing family homes. It is as simple as that. End the practice. Step up and do the right thing on behalf of people who are being completely outpriced in the market and are losing faith as a result of the Government's policies.

The Tánaiste: I have told the House quite clearly what we are going to do. We brought in a higher rate of stamp duty. We increased it further. We are seeing the number fall. We brought in specific planning guidelines that are having a very significant effect. We are now seeing more homes actually being sold than bought up by institutional investors. That is a very significant change. We gave a commitment, we acted on the commitment, and we are seeing the benefit of that policy now. It is important, though, that we discuss these issues in relation to housing. It is important that we discuss the issues in relation to HAP. However, it is also important that we are not hypocritical. We are having a discussion today about the housing assistance payments. That was the starting point the Deputy made with the Simon Communities report. Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson described HAP as a chronic waste of money. That was Sinn Féin's position. We are trying to actually review it and make sure it works. When it comes to Sinn Féin, Mary Lou McDonald comes into the Dáil and speaks of a housing emergency and then goes back to Cabra where it is a housing objection. That is hypocrisy.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ivana Bacik: As we all know, it has been raining solidly since what feels like forever and communities across the country continue to deal with the fallout of flooding. In that time, my office has also been flooded - with pleas for help from terrified renters who are starting the new year with eviction notices. Things were already bad enough for tenants, but the Government's appalling new rent law has given landlords an effective amnesty on rent hikes; an incentive to evict. It passed the Dáil last night by a small majority. People know they will

now be forced to pay even higher rents for new tenancies. That is guaranteed. Perhaps that is the reason the debate was guillotined by the Government last night. It was forced through by Government after reaching only the ninth of 69 amendments. That is the signature move of the Minister, Deputy Browne. It is a nifty trick to avoid accountability and avoid light being shed on just how daft these housing plans are. Last year, debate on every single Bill from the Minister's Department was guillotined. Not one full Report Stage was taken in the Dáil. This new year, the term has kicked off with the same thing again on highly controversial legislation. It is bad governance from a bad Government, and this is a bad week for housing policy.

It is one year since stroke politics delivered us this regressive tripartite coalition with the Lowry-Healy-Rae Independents. In truth, we are seeing the impact of this arrangement and their influence across housing policy. Let us take short-term lets. We all know they are cannibalising housing supply across the country. I know the Tánaiste wants to deal with this but this week, the Government again watered down its own proposals. Instead of towns with a population exceeding 10,000, the Government's regulations, whenever they eventually come into effect, will only apply to populations of more than 20,000. This is clearly a concession to the Lowry-Healy-Rae Independents. How curious it is that the population of Killarney is 14,000. We know what the results are.

The Simon Communities' Locked Out of the Market report, published this week, which the Tánaiste mentioned earlier, found zero properties available to rent within standard HAP limits across all 16 areas surveyed. Just 31 properties were available even at the higher discretionary rates, which is a pathetic 3% of all listings. Our Labour Party housing spokesperson, Deputy Sheehan, has acknowledged, as we all do, the flawed nature of HAP, but it is supposed to get people out of homelessness. I am glad that the Government is reviewing HAP limits, but what good is that when there is literally nowhere to rent? What are people who are contacting my office, and all our offices, with news of eviction notices supposed to do? What are they to do? I am working with one woman, a civil servant, who is being evicted from her home now. She tells me of her grave distress and constant worry and anxiety. She said the property has been her home for the last 14 years, but she now has nowhere to go. Some 5,000 children are homeless and 17,000 people are in emergency accommodation. Where are they to go? It has been a bad week for Government housing policy, but renters, families and children in homelessness are the ones living with the consequences. What is the Tánaiste doing to address this?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Bacik very much. I take the point about having enough time in the Oireachtas to tease through things. I would also balance that point with the fact that there is a housing emergency and every day matters. Every day we do not take a decision is a day where progress is not being made at enough speed or enough pace in relation to housing supply. We have been very clear as a Government for quite a sustained period of time as to the changes we wanted to make in relation to the rental market. I do not think, and the Deputy would expect me to say this, that her analysis of the Bill we have put before this House, and which has passed this House, is balanced. If she looks at Dublin Simon Community's comments - and I am not suggesting that the Dublin Simon Community is supportive of all aspects of the Bill; it is certainly not - it did acknowledge a number of positive aspects of the Bill, on which I would hope we could see acknowledgement across this House, including the expansion of the rent pressure zones on a nationwide basis. That is something I am not sure

the Deputy would have predicted this Government was going to do. It is probably something lots of people in opposition called for us to do, and we did. As a result, there are counties that did not have rental protections in place that now do, including County Donegal and other places as well.

We have really brought in a very strong tenant protection regime in Ireland, and that is acknowledged by people working in this sector and people working in homeless organisations too. We have to balance that alongside recognising that we can have all the rental protections in the world, but we also need places to rent. This Government is getting criticised in both directions and that is usually a sign that we are probably trying to get the balance right here. What we are also doing is trying to stimulate supply because otherwise, it is an academic conversation. We need more homes for people to rent. Yes, many of those homes will be built with money from this State and direct money to local authorities, but also with money through agencies of my own Department, such as the Land Development Agency, LDA. In fairness, the Deputy's party put forward ideas around how it would have liked to see that evolve. We have tried to expand its role as well.

We now have one of the strongest rates of home completions in the European Union, with 5.9 homes being completed per 1,000. The EU average is 3.3. The Deputy referenced that constituent or person who contacted her. I do not in any way dispute that there is a housing emergency in this country. I do not in any way dispute that the challenge is really acute for people. However, I also know that the remedy to that challenge is more supply. It is building more homes.

There are two specific recommendations the Deputy touched on regarding HAP and short-term lets. In our housing plan, we have committed to acting on both of them this year. In relation to HAP, the Deputy has acknowledged that we are reviewing the limits. That review will be completed in the first half of this year. I acknowledge and thank my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Burke, for his work on that. In relation to short-term lets, we have to have the register up and running by 20 May. We did want to get this right, though. This is a balance, and I am sure some of the Deputy's colleagues from places outside of Dublin, respectfully, or outside the greater Dublin area, would make this point too. We do not want to have an unintended consequence where there are areas that really rely on short-term lets for the tourism sector as well. It is about making sure that the juice is worth the squeeze in terms of getting extra homes back into rental. We thought 20,000 was a good balance in relation to that.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I think we can agree on one thing. There is a housing emergency.

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There is no doubt about that. I have certainly welcomed, as have my Labour colleagues, positive aspects of the legislation. However, the unfortunate truth is that these are undermined by the provisions that enable rent hikes, which incentivise rent hikes and incentivise evictions for the purpose of rent hikes. That is the problem, and it is a problem that renters across the country are experiencing. The real truth also, which nobody in Government is willing to admit, is that there is no evidence that this will work. The Tánaiste says the Government is doing this in order to ramp up supply, but there is no evidence that will work.

Indeed, I am hearing from landlords in my constituency who are telling me they are leaving rental properties. They are not going to rent out any more. Why? Because of the uncertainty and the enormous number of changes there have been. The reality, again, is that we need to have significant State intervention here. The Tánaiste acknowledged that the Labour Party put forward very strong proposals in the last election campaign in order to see the State deliver at scale and ramp up the Land Development Agency to create a State construction company. Only that will enable delivery at the scale that is required to deliver the homes people need.

The Tánaiste: I did acknowledge it. I acknowledged during the election campaign and in the potential programme for Government talks after the election that the Labour Party had put forward constructive proposals. I do acknowledge that. We have a different landing zone, in that I think the Labour Party wanted a new State agency. I am not trying to misrepresent its position, but our view was to evolve the Land Development Agency. I think the Labour Party had a different proposal. I acknowledge that there was constructive engagement. I am not taking from that. We do have to take measures when it comes to supply, however. I say this respectfully. The Deputy made a point about landlords in her constituency. This is a point I am making. Sometimes, we come into the Dáil and we are told by the Opposition that we are taking all these measures to help landlords. Then, people go back to their constituencies and hear landlords saying that, hang on a second, this is actually introducing it to be a protection for tenants that poses a challenge for them. In a housing emergency, there is no perfect set of policy measures, but we do have to use a whole range of levers to try to get housing supply going. That is what we are doing. There are encouraging signs that some of the decisions we took in the budget, some of which were vehemently opposed by the other side of this House, are having a positive effect. Forget about industry and forget about developers. We are hearing that now from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, which is talking about the viability of apartments. We keep working on this every day.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Families and children have been let down appallingly by Children's Health Ireland, CHI. There has been scandal heaped on scandal, and report after report. Behind all of that are sick children and their families who have been failed by the healthcare system and the State. Children and families are still being failed because promises to act have been broken and long-promised reports remain unpublished.

The Nayagam report was commissioned in 2023, two and a half years ago. Families still have not seen it. This is a report into the medical treatment of their children. As campaigner and mother Claire Cahill said on "Morning Ireland", this report belongs to the families and their children, yet they remain in the dark. They only realised the Minister had the report after reading about it in a Sunday newspaper. Families feel like afterthoughts in the whole process. They are being strung along and fed excuses while the system closes ranks on them. Now they are told that the report cannot be published for legal reasons. There is no credible timeline for when those legal issues will be resolved or when a partial version of the report or, even, the recommendations it contains can be published. There have been 12 reports into CHI, just six of which have been published. Using legalities as a shield against transparency cannot continue, particularly when we are speaking about sick children and their healthcare. How can issues at CHI be resolved unless we are clear about everything that has gone on and about the reforms that urgently need to happen?

It is more than three months since the Government agreed to hold a statutory public inquiry into spinal care for children with scoliosis and spina bifida, but all we have is a headline. A mediator has not been appointed and work to draft the terms of reference has not even started. Families have again been left in the dark. The original commitment was that the terms of reference would be agreed within 16 weeks. With three weeks left, no mediator has been appointed and no meetings have taken place. There is now little hope that the deadline will be met. That is another broken promise.

Nine years ago the Tánaiste promised that no child with scoliosis would wait longer than four months for treatment. He is aware of how much hurt this broken promise has caused. I cannot understand why the Government continues to make promises to families which are not worth the paper they are written on. Families want honesty and transparency. Can the Tánaiste indicate when will phase 1 of the Nayagam report, or even part of it, be published? Does he accept that the Government will miss its own deadline to draft terms of reference for the statutory public inquiry?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for raising this very important issue. I will begin where he began by absolutely acknowledging that the priority in all of our discussions, and I know this is something we all share a view on, must be, is and must remain the children and their parents. Deputy O'Callaghan did not do so, but it is often easy to talk about reports and everything else in this House. We are talking about children and worried parents, and they should be our priority. I agree with Deputy O'Callaghan on that.

I heard the Deputy's party colleague Deputy Rice on the radio this morning. Deputy Rice does a very good job chairing the Oireachtas health committee. I assure him and Deputy O'Callaghan that the Government wants to see as much information as possible published, and certainly shared with parents. The Government wants as much information as is absolutely legally possible to be made available to a statutory inquiry. I genuinely and sincerely mean that. In fairness to my colleague the Minister for Health, I know this is her position. The Minister has been engaging with the Attorney General in respect of this matter.

I am very conscious and careful, even though we are in the Dáil, of the fact that phase 1 of the report relates to the clinical practice of an individual consultant. I am also very aware of processes that may be under way legally. I am also very aware of processes that may or may not get under way in future. We need to be very careful in relation to this. Phase 1 of the report is specifically a risk assessment of the practice of an individual consultant. I do not want to say anything, and nor does anyone else, that cuts across this. However, I can inform the House that the Minister absolutely wants to be in a position to share this information. There is no reason in the wide earthly world why she would not want that. This is an important step to try to fix a very serious issue and, ultimately, to try to rebuild trust and confidence in children's healthcare and CHI.

I want to make a point regarding the children. The words of Dr. Colin Henry, the top doctor in the HSE, the chief clinical officer, yesterday are important. These are his words and not mine. He stated that while "these are not clinically urgent, but nevertheless, in the interest of peace of mind and assuredness to families, this exercise needs to be carried out quickly in the coming weeks." The latter refers to follow-up appointments. We need to make sure that this happens in an expeditious manner and in a manner that puts children at the centre of the process.

Specifically in relation to the statutory inquiry, the Minister spoke to this matter at the Oireachtas committee yesterday. She wrote in December to communicate her intention to appoint someone. Although I do not have the letter, I believe she also identified the person she was hoping to appoint. There has been an exchange of correspondence and information in the interim. She certainly has identified the person. She wanted to find a person of substance and high calibre who will also be available to do the work. That person has been identified and I believe the appointment is imminent. The scoping exercise needs to take place as quickly as possible. I fully understand the urgency of it. I also understand from my engagement with parents that it is both urgent and a matter of getting it right. I really hope that in the coming very brief period we can see this move forward.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Tánaiste for his response. He is absolutely right that children who have suffered pain are at the heart of this matter. They have been badly let down, and that is what this is absolutely about. They and their families deserve as much information as possible. We have had 12 reports, but only six of these have been published to date. Does the Tánaiste acknowledge that this is not acceptable? Does he acknowledge that for the statutory public inquiry to work, as much information as possible needs to be available to it, including when the terms of reference are agreed in order for the families to engage with the process and not be left in the dark? Does he accept that it is two and a half years since the Nayagam report was commissioned and yet all the families know is what they read about in the Sunday newspapers? They have not had sight of the report, even though it is about their children. They have a right to have sight of it and to as much information as can possibly be made available. The Tánaiste knows that information can be published, even if some of it has to be redacted initially pending further legal advice. When is the Government going to make that information available? When will the terms of reference of the statutory public inquiry actually be agreed? Identifying a mediator is not enough.

The Tánaiste: I find myself in broad agreement, as, I think, does the House, with the Deputy. I do not think there is a huge difference of opinion here, but I take the point. The only reports that should not be published are those where there is a legal issue with publishing. I also take the Deputy's point about circumstances where there are legal issues and trying to identify if there are ways of overcoming them and putting some information in the public domain. I genuinely know that the Minister is working in good faith on that matter.

I want to make a point, and I wish to do so sensitively. I absolutely understand why people want to see the report. I am not dismissing that at all. Any parent has a right to all of the clinical information in relation to their own child. As part of the follow-up procedures with hospitals, all of the information relating to a child's medical history absolutely must be made available to their parents. It is normal for clinicians to engage with the parent of any child in this way.

In relation to the statutory public inquiry, the aim is to get into a process where a facilitator or mediator, and I have heard both titles used, would be appointed imminently to work with the families, the Government and everyone else to get the terms of reference correct. I expect the Minister to be in a position to make this appointment imminently.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Despite the opposition of People Before Profit and most of the rest of the Opposition and protests last night, the Government insisted on ramming through a Bill relating to the RTB that is going to mean further hikes in rents which are already unaffordable, worsening an already dire housing crisis. The Government rejected amendments which proposed that rents be kept at affordable levels and that no-fault evictions should not continue. In the context of the purpose of the Bill, the Minister stated, "We do not want rents for long-term tenancies to fall behind market rents." The purpose of it therefore is to increase rents and make sure they do not fall behind a market that is completely unaffordable.

No doubt the property speculators, the corporate landlords and the vulture funds will be rubbing their hands with glee because they are set to be able to ratchet up rents and make even more profits off the back of the housing misery huge numbers of working people, young people and students in this country are experiencing. The human cost of all of this is going to be significant. I will provide an example, namely that of Michael and Shannon, a young couple in their 20s. Michael is working and Shannon was working but had to give it up because of their housing dilemma. They have two young children, a two-year-old who came in here with them last night and a nine-year-old daughter, both of whom have special needs. They are facing eviction in the next week by a small landlord, which will still be allowed under the legislation, through no fault of their own.

They are facing the prospect of emergency accommodation. They are nine years on a council list but with no prospect of a council house. They are on the three-bed list. They have been approved for HAP and told to go out and try to find a HAP tenancy but the limit is €1,912. That is the homeless HAP limit. They can pay a bit of a top-up on that which they cannot really afford. The cheapest rent today in south Dublin is €3,100 for the number of bedrooms they need. As the report confirms today, nothing is available in most areas of the country within the HAP limits. The same family has been hit by the council rent hikes that the councils are putting up.

How is the Bill going to help them? Is it not the case that after 1 March their prospect of finding an affordable rental property is now absolutely gone, as it is impossible at the moment, and that their vulnerable children with special needs are now facing the prospect of going into a hostel? Shannon was breaking down in tears in front of me with her partner saying her kids cannot go into that situation. What does the Tánaiste have to say to Michael and Shannon?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett. I say to Michael and Shannon and to all people across the country in need of housing that every action we take is to increase the number of homes that are available to rent or buy. That is not just one type of home. It is more social homes, more affordable homes and homes through the Land Development Agency, LDA. Quite an incredible the number of homes are now receiving some level of subvention from the State to be built. It is also private homes because private homes and private investment are good and there are lots of people who want to buy their own home and see either themselves or, indeed, their adult children be able to move into one of those homes.

I take the Deputy's point relating to the HAP limits. I know Deputy Boyd Barrett has been a strong advocate for this. There is a commitment in the housing plan that will be concluded in the first half of this year.

I would push back, as the Deputy would expect me to, around the point he made in relation to this kind of corporate landlord capture. I have heard a lot of this in the past number of days. I do think this is in the space of misinformation. Small landlords make up 88% of all landlords in this country. They are providing 45% of all private tenancies and these reforms are explicitly designed to also help retain landlords while improving tenant security. We have to do both. If a small landlord leaves the market, tenants lose the ability to rent a home. There is a cause and effect here. Small landlords and landlords are not the enemy of the public good as is often portrayed by the far left. It is a vital part. Who is going to rent the homes if there are no landlords?

Deputy Boyd Barrett does not agree with my political outlook on the world but Michael Byrne of the school of social policy, social work and social justice in UCD specifically said that what is being missed in the current discussion is that the new legislation that was passed last night in this House is designed, once established, to reduce the level of notice of terminations. That is what the professor in the school of social work and social justice said our Bill is trying to do, that is, when it is enacted, to reduce the number of notices of terminations. So, yes, as is always the case, there is teasing through the legislation and debating and discussing different elements of it and what people think is good, what people think is bad and what people think should be better. However, we should not misrepresent the purpose here. People are looking at this Bill, including the Dublin Simon Community which acknowledges and welcomes the tenant protection elements of this legislation while having different views from us on other elements of the Bill.

We have to increase supply. We have to keep landlords in the market, particularly the small landlords, and at the same time we have to make sure that, for the very first time in Ireland, we have a nationwide, permanent system of tenant protections.

I do not say this dismissively of the very serious situation Deputy Boyd Barrett's constituents are facing, and that he rightly raised, but I do not have the specific information relating to any individual case. However, we are increasing the number of social homes and we are increasing housing supply. We have been very clear on what we are going to do in relation to HAP. We are living in a country again where almost 100 homes are being built every single day.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Factually, the number of landlords has increased in the past two years. They are not leaving the market.

The Tánaiste: That is a good thing.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There was 103,000 landlords two years ago and now there are 105,000. There are 2,000 more landlords than there were and more tenancies. So, the Government does not need to enrich them even more at the expense of tenants.

What are Michael, Shannon and their two kids supposed to do? Does the Tánaiste think it is acceptable that their two vulnerable children with special needs go into a hostel, which will damage and traumatise them? Shannon was bursting into tears with fear and she is joining the parents of thousands of other children, many with special needs, and parents who are struggling. Their chances of getting out of emergency accommodation are now diminished because there will be no affordable rents. No rents are affordable under the HAP limits anyway

but now there are definitely going to be none because all of the new tenancies after 1 March will go up to market levels, which are absolutely unaffordable. Has the Tánaiste got anything to say other than at some point the supply is going to come on stream? Seriously, that is not a response to people who are terrified for their kids about what is going to happen next week.

The Tánaiste: It is not at some point that supply will come on stream. Supply is increasing despite the Deputy's best efforts, whether it is objecting in his constituency to housing developments. That is a cause and an effect-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There he goes blaming the Opposition again.

The Tánaiste: -----if you object to a house, Deputy O'Reilly does too. I know Mary Lou does. If you object to houses, and I have never objected-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is everyone else's fault but the Government's.

(Interruptions)

Deputy John Cummins: The Opposition does not like the truth.

The Tánaiste: I have never objected to a home and nobody in this House should. I do not care what party they are in. They should stop objecting to houses. Everybody should stop. There is a housing emergency, end-of.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We do not object to houses; we object to profiteering.

The Tánaiste: Surely to God we can agree on that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We object to profiteering, not homes.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would Deputy Boyd Barrett allow the Tánaiste answer? He asked the question.

The Tánaiste: That is my political point which I am entitled to make. Nobody in this House should object to housing. I feel very strongly on that. I hope we can all agree on that.

I am not sure whether Deputy Boyd Barrett is upset that there are more landlords in the market or not by what he just said. If we were to see an increase, that is a good thing but his figures are not comparing like with like because, as he knows well, we now register approved housing bodies in relation to tenancies as well. So, he is not comparing like with like. If the Deputy thinks there is a flurry of people putting up their hand saying they want to be a small landlord, he is not engaging across his constituency as I know he does.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: In relation to Shannon and Michael, I hope Deputy Boyd Barrett's office and everyone in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council will engage very proactively to assist them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We certainly are. They have been told to go to a hostel.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move to Other Members' Questions, I have a message to welcome the guests from Gaelcholáiste Chiarraí in Tralee. They are guests of Deputy Pa Daly but I am reliably informed the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan's wife is a teacher there. They are very welcome.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to raise the issue of the national development plan and, in particular, health infrastructure and the delivery of it under the national development plan. For many of the Members in this House who support the Government each week, we want to know that our colleagues in Cabinet are making the national development plan a priority and that those projects within it are a priority. However, more importantly, we want to know that the mechanisms are put in place to ensure the timely delivery of critical infrastructure.

I welcome the Minister for Health's recent publication of the sectoral plan which allocated almost €10 billion to the area. That is the most amount ever recorded for the area of health. I appreciate that will amount to €1.5 billion alone in 2026. The way we will judge the performance of the people we support in here will be on the delivery of projects and the way we will be judged will be on the delivery of specific projects in each of our constituencies.

I want to raise some of those projects with the Tánaiste because that is how the Government will be judged. Long-standing projects include Beaumont Hospital, the Finglas primary care centre, Teach An Saol in Ballymun, which I know the Tánaiste has visited, and the redevelopment of the National Orthopaedic Hospital at Cappagh.

The €30 million allocated for Beaumont Hospital was very welcome and I know there are colleagues in the House, like Deputy Ó Muirí, Deputy Heneghan and my party colleague, Deputy Brabazon, who are working with the hospital to ensure the 20-bed cystic fibrosis unit is delivered later this year and that the 95-bed inpatient unit and the new emergency department are delivered. We want to see clear timelines for those projects. As we have learned, being in the capital plan alone is not enough.

I also want to raise the issue of the primary care centre in Finglas which has been bogged down in a lot of planning over time. However, we are now getting to the point where enabling works, like the moving of pitches to facilitate new sports facilities as part of the primary care centre and so on, are all starting. Again, we want to make sure the HSE prioritises that project.

Teach An Saol, which the Tánaiste has visited, is a centre for those with acquired brain injuries. We had a very welcome visit from Bernard Gloster and we have a commitment that the project is now at design and tender stage. We hope that will be concluded by the summer

of this year and that we will move to have a new facility where the new national nuero team will also be in place. However, clear timelines are needed on that too.

Anyone who has visited Cappagh Hospital - I visited it with the Tánaiste's predecessor, Leo Varadkar - will know that the old nightingale wards are awaiting replacement. There is a master plan that is crying out for investment. I would like to see more in the capital plan when it is published, which I believe may happen in the next number of weeks. We want to see clear timelines and we need delivery. That is in every constituency across the country.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this issue. All of us on these benches agree with him because, thankfully, we are now in a position where we can provide a significant level of capital funding. Roughly speaking, we are planning on spending €275 billion out to 2035. That is badly needed for housing, for the enabling infrastructure for housing and a growing population and for the delivery of modern public services, including in the area of health.

I and my colleague the Minister, Deputy Chambers, agree with the Deputy. Alongside funding, the challenge now is going be making sure we cut through the red tape, bureaucracy, the bottlenecks, the gates, the stages, the external consultants and this, that and the other that have led us to a situation where big projects are taking far too long to deliver. That is not consequence free. It has a real impact in the Deputy's constituency, in my constituency and in constituencies across the country.

In addition to the work that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, did in the context of the accelerating infrastructure task force, I am pleased to say that we are now seeing real delivery. There was a proposal before Cabinet this week that we estimate will cut around 20 weeks off the delivery of the projects by not having to go back to external consultants. I say that by way of both form and credibility in terms of Deputy McAuliffe's constituency action in relation to that.

On health specifically, we are expecting the HSE capital plan to be published, as the Deputy rightly said, in the next number of weeks. The Minister for Health will keep in close contact with the Deputy in relation to that and with all of our Deputies across the Government benches too.

The Deputy referenced a number of projects in relation to Beaumont Hospital, such as the cystic fibrosis facility, which, I know, is important to Deputies Ó Muirí and Heneghan too. This is a very important facility, and we all feel strongly about the extra bed capacity and the emergency department. Deputy McAuliffe also referenced Finglas primary care centre. My understanding is that the tenders for phase 1 have been received by the HSE, which expects a positive outcome on tender award over the coming weeks. Enabling works are now anticipated to commence on the site in the middle of this year, which will come as welcome relief after the long period for which the Deputy's community has been waiting for that facility.

I am really pleased the Deputy mentioned the SAOL project. I have given a commitment to coming out - and I would be delighted to do it with the Deputy - to see that project. I feel very passionately about it. I have gotten to know those involved personally. My colleague and friend Councillor Gayle Ralph raised this matter with me as recently as last Saturday, but I would be very pleased to go out with the Deputy to visit SAOL and make sure we get this over

the line. This is a chance to transform lives. A huge amount of work has been invested in this by SAOL but by the HSE. Bernard Gloster has been very committed to the project, as has Deputy McAuliffe. I am committed to working with the Deputy to try get it over the line very shortly.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Tánaiste identified a particular matter there. For a long time when we had no money in the country, we had multistage processes to show that projects were progressing but they were not actually getting anywhere. We are now in a situation where we have plenty of money and where the multistage processes are delaying projects. That does not happen often. It is important to have public scrutiny of public money, but we need to see delivery. I do not doubt commitment of the Minister for Health on this. However, people at every level within the HSE need to know these projects are desperately needed because of the increase in our population and on foot of new and emerging needs. They are also desperately needed because Beaumont Hospital is over 40 years old. It was a state-of-the-art hospital when it was built, but it now needs critical investment.

Equally, we have a desperate shortage of GPs in Finglas. GPs are an incredibly important in the context of people seeking to access healthcare. As a result of the demographics that obtain, Finglas is not as attractive as other areas where people might pay for private doctor visits. It is often entirely reliant on medical cards. That is all the more reason why the HSE should provide a primary care centre.

The Tánaiste: I do not disagree with anything Deputy McAuliffe said. It is now about delivery. The Minister for Health is very committed to it, as are the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers, and the Government. We all identified in advance of the previous election that our challenge is to put the resources our country has to work in terms of getting these projects moving.

There are encouraging signs in that regard. I have seen a level of focus and an appetite for this reform in the new infrastructure division of the Department of public expenditure and reform. The Deputy is right in that we have to translate this now to every level of the public service. I do not say that critically. We can have a policy but we need to make sure it is translated right down to the front line. We will be very eager to monitor that very closely with the Minister for Health and the HSE, and at the Cabinet committee on infrastructure delivery. This is a year in which we will see good progress for Finglas in terms of the primary care centre.

We are all very committed to Beaumont Hospital. We will see a number of projects coming forward, but, in fairness to the HSE, I want to await the capital plan. I am always conscious that these projects being delivered on live hospital sites presents extra complexity, which is something the HSE is factoring in. I will keep in touch with the Deputy on this matter in the coming weeks.

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

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am sure the Tánaiste watched the "Prime Time Investigates" programme on the mental health service and the catastrophe within it. The families of Natalie

McGuinness and Jimmy Loughlin, both of whom lost their lives as a consequence of failures within the mental health service, appeared on the programme. Both families live in my constituency, and I have their issues here several times. Many other families who appeared on the programme expressed their frustration at being stonewalled by the system and at not getting any accountability.

I recently tabled a parliamentary question about the number of people who presented at Sligo University Hospital with mental health issues in 2025. The reply indicated that 1,242 people presented to the emergency department but that only 198 were admitted. This is not a historical problem; it is happening now. People are being failed by the mental health service. I saw the Tánaiste on that programme. I can only say that his announcement was fraudulent. He stated that things would get better; they have got worse. People with mental health issues who approach the system get worse outcomes than they got 20 years ago because the Government closed everything down and replaced it with nothing. People are so frustrated and so annoyed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Leave the Tánaiste time to respond.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am dealing with constituents who are in a situation where they have loved ones who are afraid they will lose their lives because the system is failing them----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Kenny is using another Member's time.

Deputy Martin Kenny: -----and the Tánaiste stands over that system.

An Ceann Comhairle: We stick to the 60 seconds. If you cannot make your point, then you have asked the question in the wrong forum.

The Tánaiste: Ideally, we stick to not making extraordinarily charged comments about people that are not backed by any evidence. The Deputy can debate me any time in relation to this matter. He should not interrupt me again. He should not do that again. I am not taking this bully-boy attitude. I am speaking; it is my go.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The programme was very clear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the answer, Deputy.

The Tánaiste: The programme points out very serious issues. This Government, through the leadership of the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, is absolutely committed. None of us wants to see a scenario-----

Deputy Martin Kenny: The Tánaiste is stonewalling the families.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Tánaiste: Those families deserve answers.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Give them answers, then.

The Tánaiste: The mental health service will continue both the investment it needs and be the subject of the reform that Deputy Mary Butler is working tirelessly on. She has my full support for that work.

Deputy Martin Kenny: People are dying.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Last week, on 5 February, the first annual report of the mother and baby institutions payment scheme was quietly released. It had been completed in June 2025 and relates to the year 2024. It had gathered dust on the desk of the Minister, Deputy Foley, for seven months. I had asked the Minister a number of times in parliamentary questions why the report had been delayed.

The special advocate, Patricia Carey, expressed strong criticism last week when the report was released. She said that the scheme is not achieving its goal of speedy, easy and trauma-informed access to redress for survivors and affected persons. She also pointed to the many failures of the redress scheme since its launch in March 2024. She further pointed to the fact that the redress scheme has spent less than 10% of its budget. Survivors have talked about arbitrary and narrow eligibility criteria and an unwieldy nine-step application process. Patricia Carey has called for the expansion of the scheme. Will the Tánaiste indicate whether this matter will be addressed and whether the scheme will be amended?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Bacik for raising this issue. It deserves a more considered response from me because it is a very important issue. We need to get it right. On foot of Deputy Bacik raising this matter, I will discuss it with the Minister, Deputy Foley. I will also discuss with her the Government's response to Patricia Carey's analysis in relation to the current scheme and the processes relating to it. I will revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Maud Coffey was killed by her partner who was suffering from a severe and enduring mental health condition three years ago. They were a loving couple and life was looking very positive for them. Maud was a lovely, kind, creative person who loved her family. The family have only her best interests at heart in the context of what they would like to see happen. I grew up with Maud Coffey and her family, and I count them among my extended family. This family are coming from a place of care, for their sister they lost and for her partner, who was deeply unwell at the time he killed Maud.

The lived experience of this family is vitally important in the context of developing better practices and policies. They are not seeking compensation or to lay blame. They are seeking constructive engagement and change in order that similar tragedies can be prevented. The family are due to meet the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in the coming weeks. I urge the Tánaiste to please ensure that the ten learning points the family will bring forward are listened to and that action is taken.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this issue. I am so sorry for Maud's family and Maud, and indeed the Deputy who described her relationship, which is obviously one of closeness, with the family. I am pleased to hear the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will meet the family in relation to the ten points. I would be happy to talk to the Deputy in relation to it as well. I will certainly talk to the Minister of State in advance of the meeting. Let us hope that meeting can bring real progress. I am sure I speak for everybody in this House in saying that to see a family who are so generously willing to give, in the hope that no other family ever experiences the most horrific pain, tragedy and loss that they have experienced, is something we are all very grateful for.

Deputy Charles Ward: Raphoe is facing an immediate escalating flood risk and a very serious danger to life. During heavy rainfall, floodwater runs from the hill down into Frank McBrearty's property, then onward towards Irish Street heading downhill and then finishes up at Andrew Hunter's property. There is a 10 ft. hole underneath and it floods into a field in Magherahaan. I understand that the flood prevention works for Raphoe have already been approved and funding is available, yet no works have been commenced and funding has not yet been drawn down. This is leaving Raphoe in a precarious position. It is unacceptable. Will the Government now intervene to ensure flood prevention works in Raphoe proceed as a matter of urgency? Will the Tánaiste indicate a clear timeline for delivery?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this issue. I will speak with the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, Deputy Boxer Moran, today in relation to the situation. From memory, I know the Minister of State was in Donegal in recent days. I will get a brief from him, my Oireachtas colleagues and, indeed, the Deputy in relation to that visit.

We had a Cabinet committee meeting on flooding yesterday morning. The main message from that was for all of us to empower the OPW to provide as much assistance as possible to local authorities for what we are calling "interim measures", measures in the here and now that can make a real difference. I will certainly make sure Raphoe is part of that conversation. Either the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, or I will be back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: My concern is that I want local authorities to be a watchdog over Uisce Éireann. It has been reported under health and safety that Uisce Éireann employees have turned up to plants with no risk assessments or method statements and without confined space training. This is putting people who work for Uisce Éireann at risk. We want a watchdog, so the likes of county councillors and TDs have a watchdog over Uisce Éireann to make sure it is compliant and makes sure our water services are kept up to the highest standard. We need to keep that connection. I want the local authority to make sure we have a watchdog over Uisce Éireann. It could then directly report to the Government to make sure compliance is kept. Under health and safety, there are massive concerns there.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising the issue. I do not want to give a knee-jerk response, other than to say that I will certainly give consideration to what the Deputy said. I will also talk to the Minister, Deputy Browne, in relation to this.

There is a broader issue, if I can raise it, in relation to the Deputy's question around Uisce Éireann and its accountability to elected representatives. The Deputy's colleague and leader,

Deputy Collins, raised this last week. I have discussed it with the Minister. I am not sure why Uisce Éireann, and this is not a criticism of the Ceann Comhairle or the Oireachtas, does not have a responsibility to answer parliamentary questions. That is not to my satisfaction. The company needs to be much better at communicating with Oireachtas Members because we are all going back to our constituencies trying to provide information. We are looking at engaging with Uisce Éireann in relation to how we improve at that level. I will be back to the Deputy on the specific issue he raised.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I have been contacted by deeply concerned parents who are waiting for a letter of eligibility from the National Council on Special Education post the 1 October parent notify deadline. As a result, these children are without access to a special class. Families are living in limbo. The stress and anxiety this is causing them are immense. These children need stability and access to education in an environment that meets their needs and their parents urgently need clarity and reassurance. I understand NCSE staff are awaiting further direction from NCSE senior management. Can the House be updated on when this directive will be issued and parents will be given peace of mind and certainty?

The Tánaiste: I am pleased Deputy Brabazon raised this matter. It is an issue that is coming up quite a lot. The Department and the NCSE tried to do something good here, which was to get ahead of things earlier this year through better planning and the like. As is often the case, however, other things happen and, through no fault of their own, not all parents were in a position to apply. Something that was about trying to facilitate earlier sanctioning of classes has obviously posed a challenge.

The NCSE has advised the Department of an increasing number of children and young people who have come to its attention since that timeline. The Department has now worked with the NCSE on proposals to address the needs of those children. The Department confirms that the NCSE is now in a position to issue letters of eligibility to children and young people who have made contact with it after 1 October and who meet the criteria for a special class or special school placement. The NCSE is commencing this process this week.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I raise the issue of delays in Tailte Éireann's registration processes. In 2023, Tailte Éireann received 240,803, with 4,630 applications in arrears. By 2025, the volume had increased to 296,039 applications, but 57,612 of those were in arrears. We talk about the housing crisis. This is just another factor. The administration is gumming up here. Anything we can do to speed up these processes and move these registrations on would help because there is somebody out there waiting for an application to be finished so that they can occupy their home. I am just raising that with the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising this matter. He is entirely right. Every lever and every stage of the process needs to be expedited in relation to homes, housing and getting the housing market moving. Tailte Éireann tells us that it is working to address the registration backlog through both increased resources but also improved processes. It also makes the fair point that many applications are not in order when they are first submitted. That figure was about 38% last year. There is clearly either a communications issue or a process

issue there in relation to making sure the lodging parties' applications are in order. That would certainly speed up times.

We also need to look at how digital services and the uptake of e-registration services can speed things up here. Where paperless application types are available to legal practitioners and financial institutions, that helps reduce processing times for all service users. I understand Tailte Éireann is currently running a tender process for an e-registration system, which would move the entire registration system to a paperless system.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The Tánaiste stated earlier that he comes in here every day to do work. The Tánaiste has been in here 5,454 days, and for many of those he was Minister for Health. My local hospital, University Hospital Limerick, is in perpetual crisis. There were 131 people on trolleys in the hospital yesterday. If we had not opened the new bed unit in October last, we would probably have more than 200 people on trolleys. The figures for this year so far have been the exact same as last year's figures, so there has been no impact on the people presenting. February is probably going to be the worst February ever.

The Tánaiste will be well aware that in September 2025, HIQA released a report which set out three options, A, B and C. The Tánaiste will know what the options are. I want the Tánaiste to confirm today whether the Government is going to implement option A, B or C, meaning delivering extra capacity at UHL, delivering additional capacity adjacent to UHL and delivering a second hospital with an emergency department in the mid-west region. That is what the people of the mid-west and Limerick need and deserve.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: The staff have been under huge pressure for years and it is not fair on patients and their families.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for counting how many days I have been in the Dáil. I am grateful to the people of Wicklow for returning me to this House each and every time I have asked them. I never take that for granted. I work very hard for them and for this country. I think the Deputy has been here since 2016 and I am sure he tries his best for his community too.

In relation to University Hospital Limerick, I acknowledge that the Minister for Health has been working on a cross-party basis on this issue. In fairness, I acknowledge that the Deputy has been a part of that too, as has Deputy O'Donoghue and many Deputies across the House. For the first time, we have near political consensus on what needs to happen. I do not want to speak for the Minister, and I do not have the note in front of me, but she brought proposals to Cabinet before Christmas in relation to not saying it is a choice between this, this or this, but saying we need to move forward in relation to all options. However, it is a question of doing it in a certain sequence that makes most sense for the Deputy's constituents in terms of increasing bed capacity. I will ask the Minister to continue to engage with the Deputy and all mid-west Oireachtas representatives in relation to this.

Deputy Martin Daly: Figures I received in reply to a recent parliamentary question show that HSE west-north west accounted for 1,263 delayed transfers of care from hospital into the community due to lack of access to residential care, care in the community and rehabilitation. That accounts for one third of the national average in spite of HSE west-north west looking after less than one fifth of population. Of those delays, 938 related to residential care, which is roughly half the national figure for that category. This is the region that has the highest number of medical cards and the highest number of people in receipt of disability. We are talking about Roscommon, Galway, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Donegal and west Cavan. We have the longest waiting lists for primary care, the longest number of hours on trolleys and the longest delay between diagnosis of cancer and getting to cancer treatment.

1 o'clock

It appears the region with the most need is receiving the least resources.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Daly for raising this issue. I genuinely appreciate his expert knowledge, as well as his knowledge as a TD, of health services in the west and north west.

One piece of work we have undertaken as a Government is we have created regional health organisations so that we can see the full spectrum of health, population, budget and staffing. This should allow us to be much more analytical in making sure that we are putting resources where they meet the needs and demands of an area and the demographic profile.

On foot of the Deputy raising this matter, I will ask both the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State with responsibility for older people, Deputy O'Donnell, to look at the figures he has put on the record of the House and come back to him directly.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I raise the matter of a Carlow sheep farmer who recently lost 15 sheep in the floods. That might sound like a small number to many but to this farmer, it will present a significant financial impact. One of the sheep was a pure-bred ram and the other 14 were replacements. I acknowledge the supports offered by the Government in the immediate aftermath of the flood, but none of them seem to be available to this Carlow farmer. In fact, the Irish Red Cross said we should go to the Department of Social Protection. That Department sent us to the Department of agriculture, which sent us to the Department of enterprise, and so far, everybody has said "No" Will the Tánaiste provide some guidance and direction on where this Carlow farmer can seek some redress for his lost flock?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Callaghan for her question. As is often the case, she has highlighted an issue which we need to give some consideration to. I am very conscious that in her part of the country, in my part of the country in the south east and in much of the east of the country, we saw significant rainfall over an extended period, with flooding, including of farmland, particularly in the east and south. Thankfully, with most cattle housed this time of year, the impact was somewhat limited compared to what it could have been if it had been a different time of year. We have not been experiencing a shortage of fodder either. We have seen some challenges in relation to slurry tanks at capacity and limited opportunities to spread organic manure. A number of schemes have been put in place but I need to speak with the Minister for agriculture to try to get some specific direction in relation to the sheep farmer the

Deputy referenced. I undertake to engage with Government colleagues to see if there is anything we can do to assist and to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Pa Daly: Tá a fhios ag gach duine atá anseo ó Ghaelcholáiste Chiarraí an tacaíocht agus an chabhair a thugann SNAs do dhaltaí agus don phobal iomlán sna scoileanna.

I have been contacted by many schools, in particular, Fossa National School outside Killarney, which has lost four SNAs in that one school in the analysis provided to date. A review is coming up, but there seems to be an overly strict application of the meaning of "significant needs". I have also been contacted about this issue by schools in Glenflesk, Listowel and Portmagee, as well as schools in Donegal and Cork. I ask the Tánaiste to consider this issue and pass on that clarity is needed by SNAs and school communities. In Fossa National School, for example, there will be two SNAs left for 236 pupils after the proposal to cut four SNAs. Will the Tánaiste look at this and maybe relax the strict interpretation that is being made so that he can give some comfort to people? Pupils need to feel safe and parents need to know their children are safe in schools, and with help.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Daly for raising the matter of SNA provision in his own county and, indeed, Donegal. I will certainly speak to the Minister for education and the Minister of State with responsibility for special education on that point and the point he made about the interpretation or definition of significant need and how it is being applied in various schools. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Michael Collins: In west Cork, we are extremely lucky to have not one but two outstanding outdoor sailing and training centres, namely, the Fastnet marine and outdoor education centre in Schull and the Kinsale outdoor education centre. These centres are a lifeline for our young people, schools and local economy. In recent weeks, we have learned that the future of both centres is at risk because of a lack of funding. I ask the Tánaiste to work with the Department of education to ensure proper funding is channelled to Cork Education and Training Board so that both centres can run and be fully staffed separately, as was promised to the people. Cork ETB recognises the vital role these outdoor education services play. The impact they have had on young people's families and entire communities is enormous. We cannot afford to lose them. People travel to Schull - I know this because I live there - to bring their children specifically for sailing and kayaking. These centres are a massive draw for tourism, jobs and the social education and sporting life of our coastal communities. We need urgent action to protect them. Will the Tánaiste intervene to help ensure their long-term future is fully secure?

The Tánaiste: I will. I am conscious that the Deputy's part of the country, as well as all the benefits he has outlined, has also produced a fair few Olympians and people who have represented our country with distinction as a result of the experience and training they have had in the water and on the sea on our south and south-west coast. From my time in the Department of further and higher education, I know the benefit of outdoor education. We have to look at education in the round. It comes in many different forms. It is not just a classroom or university lecture hall. Outdoor education centres are also important and, obviously, there is a benefit economically and to the tourism product of west Cork, as the Deputy said. I will

Speak with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, in the first instance and ask that he engage with the ETB and come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Last week, I wrote to the Taoiseach to seek international co-operation for an inquiry into the recent release of a witness statement as part of the Jeffrey Epstein files, in which a young girl was trafficked through Ireland for "politicians and notable men" for the purposes of sex. We heard from Garda Headquarters yesterday that no investigation or inquiry is under way regarding this claim. This witness statement is not the only concerning document released in those files relating to Ireland. Within them is an email from one David Wassong to Ghislaine Maxwell which asks if she will send him "the names and numbers of people to play with in Ireland". Our State has a dark history when it comes to the abuse of children. We have seen a history of those in power, be it politicians, the clergy or police, that investigations can be shelved and victims and injustices ignored. We need to be proactive here at the very least. We need to see some form of action from the Irish State to fully explore what is in those statements and emails alone, and indeed, if there is anything further.

The Tánaiste: I note and appreciate the Deputy's work on this and his engagement with the Taoiseach. Indeed, I read his comments on the issue. We are all absolutely appalled, sickened and disgusted at the depraved - and that word does not fully capture it - conduct we are seeing in some of the Epstein files. Like the Deputy, all of us are seeing that many files are being put out with different bits of information at different times.

Of course, all law authorities, enforcement agencies and police forces are going to have to play any role that is appropriate or important in relation to answers, truth and justice. My understanding is that there has not been specific information in relation to the Garda and the like. However, on foot of Deputy Smith raising the matter in the Dáil, I will discuss it further with the Taoiseach and the Minister for justice.

I appeal to any person in this country who may have any information at all in relation to this to please go to the Garda and make that information available. It is safe enough to say this much. You clearly had here vulnerable young women in a powerful network of despicable powerful men who abused that and carried out depraved acts.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Tá an ghéarchéim thithíochta uafásach.

Today, it has been revealed by the Simon Communities Locked Out of the Market report that there are zero properties available within standard housing assistance payment, HAP, limits. This is the first time any Simon Communities report has shown there is not one property available. Where are people to go and how are they supposed to afford the extortionate market rents? It is an emergency, but the only emergency action the Government is taking is to allow landlords to hike up rents. In my constituency, I have people coming to me all the time who cannot afford the rent and are stuck in homelessness. We saw emergency action during Covid. We saw the eviction ban and short-term lets being used to house people. Will the Tánaiste take emergency action? Will he raise the standard HAP rates on an emergency basis so that people can afford a home?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Hearne for raising this. I genuinely thank Dublin Simon Community for the work it does on behalf of our country and homeless people and its advocacy. I note and take seriously the report; I do not dismiss it. I was also looking at some figures which show that 272 new HAP tenancies were created in those 16 areas in December, but I do not take from the seriousness of the issue the report highlights. The Government's commitment is to review HAP limits and levels, to have that completed in the first half of this year and then to act on it.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I highlight and press an issue in County Louth, namely, the inadequate school accommodation across the entire county. In recent weeks, I have spoken to many principals and school communities in the county. Most recently, I met with St. Mochta's National School and Monksland National School. Their classes are being squeezed into spaces that were never intended for teaching children or learning. These include converted rooms, cupboards, shared areas and halls, as well as temporary solutions that are just not fit for purpose in Ireland in 2026.

The Department's responses reference an overall reduction to primary school enrolments. This is not helpful for County Louth. It is not what is happening in our county in areas such as Dundalk, Blackrock, Louth village, Cooley Peninsula, Ardee, Drogheda, Termonfeckin, Clogherhead and everywhere else. We are building in County Louth at unprecedented rates. Housing development is absolutely accelerating and we are not forward planning. Children are being squeezed into halls. I would really like some action taken on schools in County Louth.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGreehan for raising the point. In my own constituency, I see something similar. Yes, I think it is a statement of fact to say the demographic situation in relation to primary schools might be changing but it is not equal across all parts of the country because there are some parts of the country where the population is continuing to grow very quickly and a lot of that is on the east coast. The point raised by the Deputy in relation to County Louth is valid. We have to start to look at data on a much more granular basis in terms of counties but even parts of counties as well.

The Deputy will know the Minister has announced tranche one of the capital programme. What I would say to the Deputy's constituents and to those schools she has referenced is that it is not the final word, it is tranche one. We do intend to fund many more education projects and I am happy to liaise with the Deputy directly on that matter.

Deputy Joe Neville: Today I want to highlight the issue of school spaces, or the lack thereof, and the desperate need for joined-up thinking between Departments to ensure early indicators are there, so we know where we will have issues. More conversations are needed between the Department of Education and Youth and the Department of Social Protection, potentially, around the number of ECCE applicants we are seeing in local areas, which I do not believe is taking place. Otherwise we need to look at the census data from year to year to see who is coming on stream. Ultimately, these children are applying for schools but the schools do not know how many kids are coming in and we are left short of spaces. Currently in Leixlip the population is continuing to rise and there are over 40 children still without primary school places. In Naas all the schools have come together - the eight primary schools - and have said

they do not have spaces. They are all making applications at this stage to the Department but, ultimately, this information should be known ahead of time in the local areas. If we have that data, we need to use it. This is the key point I want to make. We are not forward planning well enough. We are putting in the houses, as we said earlier, but at the same time in the likes of Leixlip, Maynooth and Celbridge, we are not seeing planning ahead.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this issue. He makes this point quite often and he is right about County Kildare and the population and the need for public services, including education, to keep up with it. The Department tells me that it basically divides up the country into what it calls school planning area levels. It looks at both enrolment and child benefit data. It updates it annually and it is geocoded to the 19,000 small areas across the country. From that, it analyses at a granular level the population of school-going children and the schools they attend. It is not currently using ECCE data. I think there is something interesting about that, considering the number of kids now involved in ECCE is so high. I will certainly engage with the Minister on that. I will also ask her to come back to the Deputy directly in relation to Leixlip and Naas.

The Department tells me it has consulted with St. Corban's National School in Naas and has sanctioned the opening of an additional junior infant class for September in an available classroom to meet a specific demand there. We have also seen the completion of a new 32-classroom co-educational primary school in Naas and the establishment of a new primary school in Leixlip. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, will continue to engage with the Deputy on the issues.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The incessant rain is destroying our roads. They are in an awful state. This weekend we have a hard frost coming, which will only add to that. Very many roads are in a state of terrible disrepair, with potholes and craters. In my county, I could list them all off in north Meath, Cortown, Kells, Gravelstown and Baile Ghib. I would pay particular attention to Downstown Road in Duleek. The council has responded to requests and it repairs them but then those repairs are washed away. There is a need for a major increase in investment in roads maintenance and repair in light of the terrible weather we are having. Does the Tánaiste recognise this and will he respond?

The Tánaiste: I do recognise this and I thank the Deputy for raising it. I know Deputy O'Rourke's part of the country is one that has been badly impacted. We had a meeting of the Cabinet committee on climate yesterday that was dedicated to the issue of the recent floods and the impact. The Department of Transport provided an update on that. It is fair to say the damage will run to tens of millions of euro. The message to the local authorities and the Department of Transport was to get on with it in terms of repairs. They have enough headroom within their capital allocations to make that work. We can obviously address other issues at a future Estimates time. The most important thing is that they get on with actually repairing these roads because quite a lot of damage has been done. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to specifically link with Deputy O'Rourke in relation to the roads in Meath.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I call on the Government to urgently enforce the existing ban on sulky racing on public roads in light of the horrific cruelty and the dangers it poses to both the animals

and the public. Just this month in Ballyfermot, a pregnant horse named Anne collapsed during an illegal sulky race, suffering severe cuts, blood loss and suspected broken bones. Despite the heroic efforts of My Lovely Horse Rescue and the UCD veterinary hospital, Anne and her unborn foal were euthanised after being tormented to death. Sulky racing endangers road users with high-speed carts on busy roads and it inflicts barbaric suffering on horses kept in unfit urban conditions.

The Government has moved swiftly, and rightly so, to impose a ban on scrambler bikes in public places under Grace's Law following the tragic death of young Grace Lynch. Stricter regulations are there. I call on the Government to adopt the same zero-tolerance approach to sulky racing.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising the issue of sulky races and making the point in relation to the current laws that exist regarding that. It is important they are enforced. I know the Minister for agriculture is working on animal welfare proposals too. The Deputy is quite right in relation to sulky races in terms of the animal welfare abuses, the abuses of horses, the lack of care for them, and the devastating impact this can have from an animal welfare point of view, as the Deputy has outlined. I pay tribute to organisations such as My Lovely Horse Rescue and others on the work they do. In light of the Deputy raising this I will ask the Minister with responsibility for road safety and the Minister for agriculture to come back to the Deputy. I will also ask the Minister for justice to raise with the Garda issues around enforcement.

Social Housing Passport Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to allow the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to introduce a social housing passport in order to allow households on social housing waiting lists, or in receipt of social housing support, to transfer their social housing file, or their social housing support, to another local authority based on criteria set out in regulations laid down by the Minister.

The Government is not delivering a sufficient volume of good quality social homes. This is why people are waiting so long for the social housing allocations and why so many single people and families are homeless. The Government is also putting many other barriers in the way of people having their social housing need met. Probably one of the most significant barriers is the inability of people when their life circumstances change to be able to move from one local authority housing list to another and not be punished by losing their time on the list. The legislation we are introducing today gives the Minister for housing the power by way of regulations to introduce a social housing passport that will resolve this matter. It creates a set of circumstances whereby if somebody's life circumstances change and they need to move from one local authority to another they can move to that local authority housing list and keep their years intact.

The group of people who most urgently need this change are women fleeing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, and that is a key part of the legislation. For people who get a job offer, who get an opportunity to study, who need to move to access permanent medical

care or who for humanitarian or compassionate reasons need to move, a social housing passport is absolutely vital. It was contained in the housing plans of former Ministers, Deputy Alan Kelly, Simon Coveney, and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien but it has been dropped from the current programme for Government, which is deeply regrettable.

The Bill attempts to address a very practical and straightforward problem. We hope the Government will support it. It also contains an important provision, subject to negotiations between the Minister for housing here and his counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive to explore the opportunities to operate this on an all-Ireland basis, again on the same grounds. It is sensible and practical and we will seek to introduce this Bill on Second Stage as soon as possible. We look forward to the Government's support.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to thank my colleague, Teachta Eoin Ó Broin, for his work on this legislation. It is very much required simply because of the length of time that families are left on social housing waiting lists. In my area, it is 14 years. That is hard to believe, is it not? They are left for so long that they are forced to move to counties and places outside of their original area. What happens then is that their kids join clubs and they join schools. It is more acute when we are looking at families who have children with special needs because they access services and they become embedded in the community. When it is time for them to go back to their original area, they cannot afford to leave all of those supports. It is very cruel that they are forced to make a choice about losing those years because they are simply left waiting.

I want to briefly mention a woman in my area. I have mentioned this case many times. She moved from the city centre to north county Dublin.

She has been advised by the Garda to remain where she is for her own safety. Her ex nearly killed her. He is now out of prison and living in the area where she was originally on the housing list. Some 12 years later, she is faced with an impossible choice. She should not have to make that impossible choice. She should not have to choose between her own safety and losing those years. That is why she requires a social housing passport, and why a social housing passport is essential.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank my constituency colleague, Deputy Ó Broin, for the work he has done on this legislation. The Social Housing Passport Bill is a really important piece of legislation. It provides a person with the ability to move from one local authority list to another without losing their time on the housing list. I first raised this issue back in 2019 when I got elected in a by-election. It was in the 2020 programme for Government, but it was not included in the 2025 programme for Government.

I am going to put my Dublin hat on because this measure is particularly needed in Dublin. Despite being the capital of our State, Dublin is a small county and people move across the four local authorities. For example, a HAP tenant on the Dublin City Council list cannot move to South Dublin County Council's list without losing their time on that list. One of the reasons the social housing passport is badly needed is a direct consequence of the housing list and the amount of time people are left languishing on it.

I previously raised the case of a constituent living in my area in Newcastle, which is in South Dublin County Council's area. She has been living in Newcastle for 12 years. She set

down her roots in the Newcastle area and her children go to school there but, because she is on Dublin City Council's list, she cannot apply for any of the homes that become available in the Newcastle area. If she wants to secure long-term housing, she will have to uproot her family. I hope the Government will support this Bill as it progresses through the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): No.

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 Eoin Ó Broin: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.22 p.m. and resumed at 2.02 p.m.

International Protection Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Deputy Paula Butterly: Before I speak about my approval of this Bill and give my thanks for the work done on it, I wish to make my position on immigration very clear. Having listened to various debates over the last number of days, sometimes it feels, as an outsider looking in, that the lines tend to get a little bit blurred when we talk about immigration and what immigration is. It is important to underline that our position is that immigration is welcome in Ireland. We welcome people of all shapes and sizes and from all corners of the Earth to come to Ireland to be part of our society because what they offer is invaluable. They offer a rich, cultural contribution and we would be very much the poorer were they not here.

The purpose of this Bill has always been to align and put together a process that is fair to everyone and, above all, to those people who come to the country seeking asylum protection. Without a defined, rules-based process, people are left hanging on the edge, stressed, worried and in doubt. That is not fair. This Bill aims to produce a system that is fair so that, from the outset, they know, even before they come to the shores of this island, what exactly our rules are and what will qualify them to stay here and become part of our society. The word "fair" cannot be repeated enough when we talk about immigrants and asylum seekers.

The set of rules that have been introduced are fair. The streamlining and the speeding-up of the process give everybody a sense of where they stand. They know that, when they come here, there will be a defined time to apply and receive a speedy response from the State with regard to their status. It will also allow them to prepare the next steps in their journey if they

are not granted asylum. It is also fair to the children, parents and all of these people who are coming here because when they get here, if they are granted asylum, they will know what they can expect from the State. It is fair to people in the communities because they will know how this is being processed, rather than a wilderness in which they do not know who is coming, when and in what kind of numbers. This is a system that is firm, and that is to be accepted. We must have rules in order to have an efficient system. It is extremely reasonable and fair, both to the applicant and the people in the communities who are welcoming these applicants.

We should never blur the lines when we talk about immigration. We are an open society. We operate an economy that is multinational and international. We need people with skill sets that, very often, we cannot provide ourselves. We offer a great, rich society to people coming here, but they can offer us even more in return. Not only can they teach us different cultures and ways of thinking, but they also bring skill sets into international companies that have to be respected. We have to learn from them.

I broadly welcome this Bill. I thank the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, for the work they have done. I am not going to criticise it in any shape or form. However, I am mindful that maybe at some stage we could give some consideration to those people who have been refused asylum but have a serious illness. Consideration should be given to the progress and medical avenues available to them. We should also always be considerate of those children who come to this State on their own and ensure that their best interests are always placed at the very centre of the discussion.

Deputy David Cullinane: Ireland needs an international protection system that is fair, efficient and enforced. That means being fair to those coming here fleeing war and persecution. We have to respect and protect their dignity and provide clarity and timely decisions. It must always be fair to communities as well by providing resources and supports to them when additional people come.

The system also has to be efficient. It has been accepted by the Government that the system has not been as efficient as it should be. We have not been managing migration or the efficiency of the system because we all know it still takes far too long for decisions to be made. That is not in anyone's interests. It is not in the interests of the people who come here or the State that, in some instances, it can take years for an application for asylum to be processed. Everything that can be done to speed up that process is in everyone's interests, most especially those of the State.

Of course, it must be enforced. When we say the system has to be enforced, we have to stand by that. If it is the case that someone applies for asylum and is refused, there is an obligation on the State and the Minister to enforce that. I support that because it is the only way to ensure we have a rules-based system that works. I say that because in a lot of the discussion and debate on migration over the last number of years, there has been, in my view, a quick reach to label anyone who talks about managed migration as racist, and that is simply not the case. There are racists in Ireland. Sometimes, we see them on the streets. We see them on the extremes of politics but the vast majority of Irish people are decent and fair-minded people who want a fair, efficient and enforced system. Talking about these issues and wanting to see the system enforced makes perfect sense. It is what any state should do.

Communities have also felt aggrieved because of poor decision-making and communication. We always hear about communities looking for a veto, but I have never experienced that. While I may have seen some instances where some individuals demand it, in most cases what communities want is better communication and fair treatment. For example, the Minister has acknowledged in recent times that using the only hotel in a community for international protection, when the community is saying alternative accommodation and options should be looked at, creates problems and tensions. If there is poor communication with communities about additional resources and supports, including for those people coming here who need to be supported, it raises tensions and creates problems.

We always have to learn from mistakes that were made and improve. We cannot ignore people's lived reality. We must accept where they are at. We must accept what they see. As I said, people are fair-minded. They want a managed migration system. They want to support people who are fleeing war and persecution and are coming here to make a life. They support that, but they want the system to be managed.

They also know the difference between people who come here seeking employment and people who come seeking international protection. There are instances in which people use the international protection system to come here as economic migrants. There are, of course, options available to people through work permits. That is what should be done. That is why we need a system that is enforced and that can make decisions quickly. What really upsets and challenges people is when they see situations where it takes three or four years, or longer, for a decision to be made. I know the Minister has looked to tighten up on that and to make the process much more efficient and quicker, and I accept that.

I also believe that balance is essential. Humanity in order together must be the foundation of any migration policy. The primary issue I have with this Bill relates to what it is designed to do. It is about giving Irish sovereignty on migration to the European Union. Deputy Carthy has already set out Sinn Féin's position on this issue very clearly. The Bill legislates for the EU migration and asylum pact and replaces the International Protection Act 2015. It introduces new processes for screening and biometrics; application procedures, including age assessments; first-instance decisions and returns; decisions made by ministerial officers; a new appeals structure via the tribunal for asylum and returns appeals, TARA, with tight appeal timelines; expanded return and entry ban provisions; and an independent monitoring mechanism via a chief inspector for asylum border procedures.

The problems in our current system are real. I spoke about some of them already and there are others. Fixing them does not require signing up wholesale to a pact that does not reflect Ireland's circumstances. Not every country is the same. Every country has different issues and problems. We must have flexibility and be nimble enough to respond to issues that happen in Ireland, which may be different from those in other countries and unique to us.

Sinn Féin's position is clear: the majority of this pact is not in Ireland's interests. It undermines Irish sovereignty by handing over more power to the EU and limiting our ability to make decisions in an area that must remain responsive to Irish realities. Ireland is in the EU but is not in the Schengen area. We operate a common travel area with Britain, which is a state outside the European Union. These are crucial detriments to how migration flow works in Ireland, as the Minister knows. We should retain the flexibility to respond, including retaining

the ability to legislate in a bilateral way, where necessary. We should not tie the hands of future Irish Governments to EU policy.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice recommended that the Government should reconsider opting into the majority of the pact. I take the view that where it suits us and where it is in Ireland's interests, there must, of course, be co-operation and there can be mutual arrangements and obligations. However, where it does not suit us, if it is possible for us to opt out we should do so if it is in the interests of this State. Unfortunately, the Government has ignored that recommendation, which is a serious failure of judgment and accountability.

The same committee raised concerns that the State might not be able to meet the commitments it is making under the pact, which may result in failure-to-comply risks, infringement proceedings and heavy fines. We have seen that in other areas where targets are set. Everybody knows the targets are not going to be met and we end up having to pay fines because the targets that were set in the first place were unrealistic. I do not want to see us paying fines and chasing them in this situation, rather than putting in place proper rules, procedures and processes that have a real impact and better equip this State to operate the rules-based system that exists. The Government should not sign up to obligations that the State is not capable of delivering because it leads to more dysfunction and public mistrust. There are deep concerns about the impact on the civil legal aid scheme and Tusla, both of which are already stretched. If the Government expands legal and procedural obligations without resourcing these services the outcomes are predictable: more delay, more frustration and less fairness for applicants and wider communities.

Sinn Féin supported the parts of the pact that are clearly in Ireland's interests. That is obviously the right thing to do. We support the asylum and migration management regulation, which determines responsibility and allows applications to be processed in the correct member state, supporting a fairer sharing of responsibility. That makes sense. We support participation in Eurodac to improve consistent access to appropriate biometric data to support vetting and checks. That makes sense to help tackle trafficking, which needs to be tackled, and to support returns, where appropriate. However, Sinn Féin is opposed to opting wholesale into all of the measures that reduce Ireland's sovereignty, control and flexibility.

We also have serious concerns about whether deadlines for the pact can be met without undermining fairness and robust decision-making. The Minister has indicated proposed changes to restrict or delay family reunification. That is a distraction from the real problems, which are delay, backlog and a failure to enforce outcomes. That is where people see the problems and challenges in our migration system. They want the Minister to spend his energy to resolve those issues and resource the system to ensure quicker decision-making. We must deal with the delays and enforce outcomes much faster so we can avoid the unnecessary detentions that can develop if cases are not dealt with as quickly as they should be. Where protection is granted, integration must be real. Family reunification is part of integration, especially for parents and children. We have seen that play out in the United States and we certainly do not want anything like that in this State. Any policy must be sustainable, but must also be fair and humane.

Public confidence depends on rules being followed at every stage. At every stage of the process, we need fair processing and protection, where justified. We have all agreed, or most of us in the Chamber have agreed, what that means, what is justified and what the rules are.

Once we agree on the rules and have a rules-based system, enforcement is the most important part because in any situation, if you develop and put in place rules but then ignore or do not enforce them, you do not have rules at all. That will be exploited. It makes no sense to the communities who watch on and see it. They support fairness and efficiency but also want to see this State and the Minister doing more to ensure that the rules which we have agreed to put in place are enforced. Otherwise, public confidence is low. It has been low because our system is operating in crisis mode. We can see that in communities. We can see that in relation to how applicants who come here are treated. It is because there has been systemic Government failure for too long. Decisions and appeals take too long. Enforcement is inconsistent. Accommodation policy has been driven by private interests and profiteering rather than public planning. The reality is that we have made a small number of people very wealthy on the back of international protection accommodation. When communities see that, and particularly when they see vital amenities being used when they could point to alternatives in the communities, it creates upset, anger and challenges we do not need and would not have if we had better public planning and resourcing of accommodation in these areas. Transparency and accountability around contracts are essential. The approach to locating accommodation must be based on community capacity and service availability and not on who can profit the most and the fastest.

We are calling on the Government to end planning exemptions for this type of accommodation, to access local services and to engage properly with communities. Ireland must support integration properly from the ground up through community-based supports. There must also be zero tolerance of racism. Everybody in this House should state that clearly because we have seen examples of it and it is wrong. As the health spokesperson for Sinn Féin, and as someone who has visited hospitals the length and breadth of this country, I am proud that people of so many different nationalities work in our health service. I ended up in the eye casualty department of a hospital a number of weeks ago. I was struck by the number of doctors from outside the country. They do wonderful and fantastic work, and without them, our health services would not work.

There are challenges whereby people who want to work in our health service and train here cannot get into hospitals because of employment barriers.

They are issues that need to be resolved. If we do not resolve those types of issue they will create tensions that are unnecessary. Some of the racism we have seen is obviously ugly and has to be faced down. The best way to do that is for us to agree what the rules are, put in place a system that is fair and efficient and then enforce it. If we do that, we will get the confidence of the vast majority in this State and that is what I want to do. I cannot support this Bill for the reasons I have outlined.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Several of my colleagues have spoken on it over the last week or so. It is not an understatement to say migration, emigration and the policy that supports the area are complex issues. There is no doubt about that, but the policy we develop in here that finds its way into the legislation on our Statute Book cannot be done by simply appealing the views of bar stoolers who get their news from Facebook. There is far too much of that in the reactive response we see to this issue.

Having assessed the Bill I can only conclude much of what is provided for here is as driven by the politics of the day as it is by our requirements to legislate and comply with the EU pact

and the framework we signed a short time ago. In his contribution on this Bill my colleague Deputy Ahern, a lawyer of long standing, said, "A faster, more efficient asylum process is a worthy aim". It absolutely is and would be something that could command the support of a large majority in this House but this Bill is not that. The legislation seems, as Deputy Ahern suggested, more concerned with limiting established and well-understood rights of asylum seekers in ways that are concerning and have been well ventilated by others in this Chamber. This Bill goes well beyond the obligations we have signed up to at EU level and this in itself is telling. What we would expect from the government of a proud liberal democracy – with a sophisticated economy in which our health, IT, financial services, pharma, tourism and care sectors depend on migrant workers – is an informed, evidence-based public campaign to challenge the myths and shibboleths that, when unchallenged, have contributed to members of the Indian community and other people who do not look like me, the Minister and most of us in this Chamber experiencing violence and hate. Instead of the responsible campaign and approach we in Labour have been advocating for some time, we get this Bill. We heard claims recently from the Tánaiste and others that there is some kind of campaign going on to silence him and anyone who might disagree with my position on this matter, or the positions of those of us who might describe ourselves as being on the left. This does not stack up. Hearing comments like that from somebody who has the largest forum in the country from which to pronounce is quite extraordinary.

I do not intend to use up all the time available but I want to address a couple of issues that have been well ventilated but are worth reflecting on again. The measures in this Bill are, in the words of the Labour justice spokesperson, Deputy Kelly, "cruel". We all deal day in and day out with applications from family members of people who are here working in our health service, in our financial services system and across the economy who want and require their families here. If we are to seriously consider how we best integrate the new Irish then we unite them with their families and loved ones and we make this a welcoming and tolerant place for them. What is proposed in the legislation before us is far from that. I have received correspondence about the Bill, as lots of other Members have. I received some from a group in my area I work closely with. They are based in Dundalk and represent the interests of the LGBT+ community in the north east. They are concerned about the legislation and the requirements that will be placed on international protection applicants who are members of the LGBT+ community. Some LGBT+ applicants will find it difficult to make some of the declarations they will be required to make and may find it difficult to speak freely to people in authority because of their experiences in their home countries, which are not as tolerant as Ireland and do not have as progressive a legislative and social framework in terms of the LGBT+ community. These issues have been raised with me and we need to be very conscious of them. There are people fleeing persecution from countries around the world under threat of the death penalty and who have suffered all kinds of terrible experiences because of who they are. They come here because we are a welcoming and tolerant place for members of the LGBT+ community and we have shown that in our society.

The Minister and Minister of State will be aware that two years ago this week the previous Government signed a contract to use all of the D Hotel in Drogheda to provide accommodation to international protection applicants. I wrote to both of them recently and raised this by way of parliamentary question to get their assessment of whether this contract will be renewed on expiry. It is due to expire this week, this month. About the time that contract was signed I

worked very hard under extreme pressure with other colleagues in my community to ensure this decision and the response to it was managed effectively. It was managed well in our community in the way I would expect and the response was precisely what I would expect from the people of the great small city I am from, which I am proud to represent. We are a town that is synonymous with solidarity and we have shown that time and again. At this time two years ago when other parts of the country were frankly disgracing themselves, our flag and the essence of Irishness, the people I represent did not. We chose not because that is not who we are. We are people who show solidarity and people who show leadership. The decision taken two years ago removed more than half of Drogheda's hotel bed stock at the stroke of a pen. It removed the largest full service hotel from the tourism landscape. An economic assessment done at the time suggested the cumulative loss to the local economy was about €22 million annually. This is not on those who need accommodation when they come here to have their applications assessed, who are coming here seeking safety and the shelter which is their entitlement. This is about the loss of a key piece of very critical local economic infrastructure. This or indeed any other hotel in the country is not an appropriate place for children or families and this place has been no exception. On countless occasions over the last two years, including working with Drogheda 4 All - a welcome group I helped support and establish some time ago to express solidarity and to work with new arrivals to our community - I have represented people and families who have been treated very badly in this place. I have made the reports and they are on record. I have engaged with officials. There is a lengthy list of issues with this place. As I said, the contract expires this month.

This hotel has a track record. It is inappropriate. From the point of view of the needs of the local economy, the contract must not be renewed. It is as simple as that. The Government's promise at the time that this would be a two-year contract must be honoured. The commitment made by the owners that this would be a two-year contract and that the funds generated by the company would be reinvested in the hotel must also be honoured. The hotel must be returned to productive economic use locally.

We need the State-run and State-supported expert services that we should have an entitlement to expect in this rich republic to support people who are seeking international protection who are, by definition, the most vulnerable in our society. We need that now. There is very little evidence of that happening at scale. When the Minister and Minister of State make their concluding addresses, it would be very much appreciated if they would place on the record their view in respect of the D Hotel. I corresponded with both on the matter. This is an issue of concern to the community I represent. I know the Minister and Minister of State are aware of that. Their guidance at this point, as the contract is about to expire, would be appreciated.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank all of the Deputies who contributed to the debate on the three days over which it has been held. I recognise that every Deputy who contributed made a point of emphasising that they want to acknowledge the important role played by migrants in our communities. It is commendable that every speaker did that.

It is apparent that there is a very good understanding in the Chamber of the different types of immigration into Ireland. We discussed issues relating to international protection and asylum, as it is referred to, but there are other types of immigration, whether through the free

movement provisions relating to workers in the European Union or the granting of work permits and visas that facilitate people who want to come here to work.

It is unquestionably the case that asylum is more complicated from the point of view of the State than other types of immigration. Deputy Nash referred to issues in his constituency. There are issues in every other constituency. Referring to them indicates that asylum gives rise to challenges for the State and the public that do not arise if people come here, have accommodation available to them and do not need to be processed because that has been done in advance as a result of them receiving work permits.

I will not have an opportunity to respond to every Deputy. I will refer to some of the broader themes of the debate. Sinn Féin Deputies consistently referred to the fact that we should not have entered into the migration pact and that it is not respectful of Irish sovereignty. They said that if Sinn Féin had been in government and controlled the Oireachtas, we would not have entered into the pact. Nonetheless, they said that they are supportive of two aspects of the pact, namely asylum and migration management and Eurodac. I disagree with what they said, as does Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, but I wish to advise my colleagues in Sinn Féin that we have a huge amount of leeway and capacity to put in place the domestic laws that we want to see apply in respect of asylum in Ireland. I ask Sinn Féin to move away from the myopic discussion about the pact and tell me and the Oireachtas what rules it would like to see operate in Ireland for our asylum laws.

In effect, what we are seeking to do in the Bill is set out the rules that will apply in respect of individuals when they arrive in Ireland, how they will be processed, the legal requirement to ensure that their applications are determined in an expedited manner, how they will have the right to appeal and the rules that will apply in that regard. Rather than saying that it would not have entered into the pact, Sinn Féin needs to set out the rules it would like to see being applied, particularly as there is a huge amount of leeway available to Ireland when it comes to the application of our domestic laws.

Deputy Gannon and others in his party referred to children. There was an emotive reference to the detention of children. It has to be pointed out that when it comes to the very limited circumstances where a child can be detained under the provisions of the Bill, that can only happen where it is in the best interests of the minor and safeguards the unaccompanied minor. It is not the case that we are trying to introduce some sort of detention scheme for children. This only arises in the context of section 2§ in circumstances where it is in the best interests of the minor.

Another issue raised was that of family reunification. Obviously, our asylum laws and this Bill are very much moulded by the numbers of people applying. As stated previous, the numbers prior to Covid were small. I cannot ignore the fact that approximately 60,000 people have come to Ireland to apply for international protection since 2022. The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I have examined family reunification. As the House knows, it was proposed that we would have a requirement for a three-year waiting period. Having listened to the opposition and to our colleagues in our parties, we will alter that to a two-year period. We are doing that on the basis of what has been said, but also on the basis of the European Court of Human Rights, which in the case of *MA v. Denmark* clearly recognised that a two-year waiting period is permissible.

I will deal with the issue of legal counsel on Report Stage. It is a complicated issue. We have done our best to reform the system as best we can in the interests of fairness for everyone.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank all Deputies for their contributions. I sit and listen and sometimes wonder if there is type of parallel world here. The purpose of the Bill brought forward by the Minister and me is to reform the IPAS system in order that we will have a firm, fair and effective system. I listened to Deputies one minute welcome that and the, particularly in the case of Sinn Féin, which is a bit ludicrous, stated for purely anti-EU ideological reasons that they could not agree to it.

I remind Sinn Féin that we are part of the European Union. We are an integral part of it. We have the ability, as a sovereign state, to do what we need to do and we have the ability, working in conjunction with the European partners, to be able to develop and implement far more effective systems. That is the important part.

If we pass the Bill, we will put in place something that most people in this House want, namely a system that will reduce the waiting time to 12 weeks. As a result, there will be a system that will be much fairer for applicants and for people already living in communities in Ireland because it will be less onerous due to the fact that people will be processed more quickly. It will answer the questions raised by the Deputy across the way about why and how we will get out of the situation which none of us want of having hotels around the country being used for IPAS.

The Minister and I are quite clear. We want to move to a much more effective State-owned system which we believe is the best way to go. We are in government and do not have the luxury of standing up to complain. We recognise that we had a crisis whereby the numbers went so exponentially high that the State had to respond fast. The purpose of the response by the State was for humanitarian reasons, namely that we wanted to be able to offer people accommodation and shelter when they arrived so that we could process their claims.

We now want to address the key issues around how we can do that in a much more effective way. We will not let ideology impact on us. I am going to respect what I believe are the genuinely held views of Irish people, regardless of whether they have the luxury of sitting in this seat or on a bar stool, when it comes to migration. The majority of Irish people want to see the type of system we are talking about, namely a firm, fair and effective rules-based system that enables people to come in and that grants them the right to remain in this country and contribute to it if they can make their case in that regard. If that does not happen, they will have to go. I do not think there is anything hard, wrong or in any way inappropriate about having that type of policy. That is what the Bill is about at heart.

I echo what my colleague the Minister said.

There are choices that have to be made and there are choices people will say are too harsh. I do not believe that. I believe it is a balance of fairness. What we are saying on family unification is really important. We are saying that if a person comes here and is granted the right to remain, not only does he or she have the right to look for family unification after a period of time, but must have the ability to sustain people coming into the country because we have to be reasonable in terms of what this country can actually do. We need to make sure

there is a balance between people being able to reunify with their family and the costs involved in that to the State. It is not something we can ignore or pretend to wish away. It is a real choice and cost. We are determined to strike what we believe is the correct balance around fairness in that. We believe a two-year period in allowing for family reunification and someone being able to clearly show they can support and sustain people coming into the country to join them is not only fair to the person wishing to do so but to the Irish communities and the people who are living here.

I thank all of the Deputies for their contributions. It has been very informative to listen to so many views in relation to this. I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on it.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 18 February 2026.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss the north city arterial main water main works due to commence in north Dublin.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the severe cuts in SNAs across multiple schools in Kerry.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss implementation of the agreed 2% pension increase for An Post and Eircom pensioners.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the HSE's refined scope and budget for the planned elective hospitals.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the Moone to Timolin cycle path.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the review of the Garda vetting process and planned measures for simplification.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the provision of school accommodation at St. Mochtas National School, Louth village.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss preservation of the GAA pitch at St. Mary's Boys' National School, Lucan.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss funding for provision of community-based housing for adults with disabilities in Dublin Fingal west.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the disability action plan targets for additional residential places.

Deputies Pearse Doherty and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn - To discuss the impact of the signing of the PSO contract for flights between Donegal and Dublin.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss emergency works at CBS Westland Row in Dublin 2.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the principle of pay parity in Irish law.

Deputy Réada Cronin - Post-primary school waiting lists in North Kildare.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the recruitment and employment of paediatric dermatology consultants in the south-west region.

Deputy Pearse Doherty - To discuss the impact of the signing of the PSO contract for flights between Donegal and Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Réada Cronin, Michael Cahill, James Geoghegan, Mark Wall and Pearse Doherty have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Education Schemes

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State for attending to reply on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I raise this Topical Issue in relation to a local school in my constituency. It is a very famous secondary school that a lot of people might be familiar with, namely, CBS, Westland Row in Dublin 2. It is a DEIS school that has a very diverse student base. There are children who are living in emergency accommodation, in international protection accommodation, and in many of the neighbouring areas of the city.

I called into the school on Wednesday because the principal and the deputy principal had contacted me. They are essentially reaching the end of the road with the school's emergency works application in relation to a downpipe issue in the school. I was brought through the various classrooms with black mould on some of the ceilings and toilets that are completely out of use. I think there is one toilet available for all of the boys. It is a mixed secondary school. There is a possibility that some of the classrooms will have to be shut.

The challenge lies not in the Department being unwilling to provide the necessary funding to complete the downpipe but in bureaucracy. In December 2025, this school was granted emergency works to the value of €742,688 for a stand-alone electrical upgrade project. In fact, the moneys granted exceed the amount necessary to provide that stand-alone electrical work upgrade project. The actual project will cost the school €425,270.47, some €300,000 less than what the Department granted for it. I am not an engineer but it seems likely that this electrical upgrade project, which has been granted by the Department, will be almost impossible to proceed, or it does not make sense to proceed, while these downpipe issues continue. Yet when the school applies under the emergency works application for the downpipe works, it faces a

ceiling of approximately €50,000, which its own architects have identified will be insufficient to meet the challenge.

The school has been advised by the Department that it can come back for the summer works programme for the downpipe issue but the challenge there is the deadline has already closed for the summer works programme for this term and it would have to wait until autumn. Meanwhile, it has received funding of €100,000 from the community integration fund for its hall. It has also received funding for a science laboratory. All of these funding mechanisms have been made available but the underlying mechanics of the school are so challenging that some of the classrooms would have to shut.

All I am looking for is for one side of the Department to talk to the other and that a pragmatic outcome is arrived at to support a DEIS secondary school in the heart of the south inner city. The principal and deputy principal are just trying to keep the school open, ensure the teachers are working in a safe environment, and maintain the classrooms it currently has. I ask that one side talk to the other and sufficient funding be made available to meet the downpipe challenge the school faces.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am responding on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides me with an opportunity to discuss the role of the Department of Education and Youth's emergency works scheme. The purpose of the emergency works scheme is to provide funding specifically for unforeseen emergencies or to providing funding to facilitate inclusion and access for pupils with special needs. It does so by ensuring the availability of funding for urgent works to those schools in need of resources as a result of an emergency situation. An emergency is deemed to be a situation which poses an immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment, which is sudden, unforeseen and requires immediate action, and in the case of a school, if not corrected, would prevent the school or part thereof from opening.

The emergency works scheme operates on the basis of a minimal scope of works required to address the emergency situation. The scheme is intended to remedy an emergency situation and usually provides an interim measure until a permanent solution can be delivered under a summer works scheme. The new climate action summer works scheme approved 297 applications in November 2025.

The school in question submitted an application for funding under the emergency works scheme for roof works on 1 October 2025, with a decision issuing by the Department on 8 October 2025. Unfortunately, the school's original application was refused as the application did not fit the remit of the emergency works scheme, that being the scope of works that was presented did not meet the criteria of sudden and unforeseen. However, the option remains open to the school to appeal this decision. Appeals will only be considered if additional relevant information that was not provided as part of the original application is provided to the Department.

The school in question had other emergency works applications approved in the past 12 months. In August of last year, the school was approved funding for electrical installation, emergency lighting and a fire alarm. This project is currently with the school to progress further. With all emergency works scheme applications, the emergency works team is aware

of the urgent nature of the works required, and will keep the school informed throughout the process.

In November 2023, the school in question submitted an application for funding for roof works under the emergency works scheme. The Department sought further information from the school in a number of queries in November of that year but due to the passage of time and having received no response from the school to the queries, the application was closed off. I understand the school is also in contact with the Department of Education and Youth in regard to a current issue and I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to provide an update on this matter directly to Deputy Geoghegan.

Assessing the response from the Minister, I know the new application did not meet the criteria for emergency works. There is an opportunity for the school to appeal. The key point Deputy Geoghegan is making is that he is very much of the view, based, I am sure, on his visit to the school, that the two issues are related and that to do one is not feasible without doing the other. I am sure this would be the key point as the basis of any appeal open to the school.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know he will be coming back with a further response. I will certainly be relaying the fact that he raised this issue and the points he made to the Minister. I have no doubt that the Minister will liaise with him to see if there is a way forward.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Minister of State for his response on behalf of the Minister and the Department. I also thank the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton. In the context of any appeal the school may bring, I take note of the link between the significant amount of funds provided for the electrical works scheme and the challenge that, for whatever reason under the Department's system, a downpipe does not meet the necessary threshold that, perhaps, electrical installations, emergency lighting or fire alarms meet. The school faced this issue previously. It is a protected building. Funding was received for windows that have been installed, but it was not possible to get additional funding to deal with the downpipe. I saw the windows. Over €280,000 was spent by the Department on them. They are now rotting away at the side because of the issue with the downpipe.

Some moneys have been allocated in excess of what the school sought. Common sense should prevail here. Acknowledging the number of schools the Department funds throughout the country and the number of applications that are made, I urge that particular priority be given to this school. As I said, it is a DEIS school, which, let us be frank, is different from another school that might be in my constituency and that might be able to take out the biscuit tin and raise some money from parents to ensure that the necessary work is done. CBS Westland Row is simply not in that position. I hope the school will submit an appeal. In light of what the Minister of State said, I think it will do so. I also think that the Department will see sense and will support the school with the additional moneys it has been granted to fix the issue with the downpipe in order to avoid the school being closed or the children not being able to gain access to it.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will certainly relay the points the Deputy made back to the Minister. The response I have been given outlines the difference between the emergency works scheme in terms of the criteria to qualify for it and for the summer works scheme. The

Department is making the case that the downpipe issue is a matter that would qualify for the summer work scheme as opposed to the emergency works scheme, even though, as should always be the case, it would appear that the school is achieving very good value here in relation to the electrical works contract, the cost of which is coming in under the amount allocated via the emergency works scheme.

If the two issues in terms of the downpipe and its impact on the capacity to effectively carry out the work in relation to the electrics are related, they should certainly be presented alongside each other. The way forward here is for the school to examine the opportunity of an appeal, no doubt working with the Deputy to see how that could best be put forward. It can also make the case to the Department concerning how that emergency works money should be considered as contributing to the downpipe work as well to see if that can somehow be made to meet the criteria to be approved.

I thank the Deputy again for raising the matter. I will faithfully report back to the Minister on the debate and on the Deputy's requests and representations.

School Admissions

Deputy Réada Cronin: I understand that the Minister of State is taking this matter on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. I appreciate him being here. I am disappointed that the Minister is not here.

This matter relates to waiting lists for post-primary school places in north Kildare. This has been a persistent and growing issue in my constituency of Kildare North, which is one of the fastest growing constituencies in the State. Housing estates have been built across Maynooth, Naas, Leixlip, Celbridge, Prosperous and Clane over the past few years. This is really to be welcomed, but it has not been matched by a corresponding level of investment in the infrastructure that is desperately needed to facilitate and support the resultant population growth. School waiting lists in the area are a key indicator of what is happening in this regard.. The housing crisis bleeds into everything. It has bled into the matter of school places. It used to be the case that where an estate was built, the schools in the area would be informed about it. My mother was a school teacher and principal, and she would have known that her school would be getting so many children from a certain estate when it was built four or five years down the line. That is not the case any more because people are very lucky to be getting their first homes and getting their families well and truly under way. This is putting immense pressure on primary and post-primary schools that are being obliged to cope using the same resources and facilities they have had for decades.

Over the past few weeks, I have been in touch with post-primary schools across my constituency about their waiting lists. Some of the lists are staggering. There are 190 students on the waiting list for one school alone, namely Maynooth Community College. Coláiste Chiaráin in Leixlip and Confey College between them have well over 200 children on their waiting lists. One school in Maynooth told me the Department had asked it to take on more students this year, even though it is already oversubscribed. That is really worrying. Parents in deep distress have been in touch with me over this issue. Can you imagine being told your child is as far down as 200 on a waiting list? That could mean that six or seven extra classes would be needed in a school. It is causing anxiety for the families and the children who are

worried they might not be able to attend school with their friends and those with whom they were in primary school.

School facilities are another major issue. The Department will be well aware of St. Patrick's national school in Celbridge and the dire straits it is in regarding its premises. The school has been operating in temporary prefabs for the past 18 years. Unbelievably, it did not make the priority list. Other schools are also waiting for facilities and this is contributing to problems. I spoke to Celbridge Community College, which has also been waiting many years for a permanent building. I was told it would be happy to take on more students, but it is simply not feasible in light of its current set-up. This is having a serious impact on students and parents who are really anxious about what will happen in September. The same could be said of St. Mary's in Naas. Planning permission for a new building was given in 2022, but the work has yet to commence. The school was delighted to see it made the priority list. I understand, however, that this school has been added to the Department's list. The projects to which I refer long overdue and the schools involved have been impacted.

One principal told me that there are many issues with the single application system pilot project. The schools involved have had a meeting with the Department of education and expressed their concerns about the scheme's operation. I hope these concerns will be listened to and acted upon for next year in order that some of the issues that have been raised with me will not be repeated. I ask that the Department provide an update on its plans for improving school capacity and facilities in Kildare North in order to accommodate the growing population.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Cronin for raising this matter. It gives me an opportunity to set out for the House, on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, the position with regard to long waiting lists for post-primary school places across north Kildare.

I assure the Deputy that the provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including those with special educational needs, is an absolute priority of the Department. While the Department is aware of enrolment pressures and demand for additional school places in some areas, it is important to note that enrolment pressures can be driven by duplications of applications, applications from outside an area, and school of choice factors. Since 2020, the Department has invested over €397 million in school infrastructure across County Kildare. The Department is continually planning for and investing in existing and new schools in order to ensure that every child in the State has access to a school place.

In the context of post-primary enrolment pressures in north Kildare, the Department is aware of pressures for school places for the 2026-27 school year in certain areas. The data sharing arrangements that were in place for the 2025-26 admissions process have been put in place again for the 2026-27 admissions process in school planning areas that are experiencing enrolment pressures, including areas in north Kildare. The admissions data provided by schools allows the Department to analyse duplicate applications as there can be significant overlaps in areas.

3 o'clock

On foot of this engagement, Maynooth Community College has increased its first-year intake by an additional class group relative to what was indicated on its admissions notice for 2026-27.

The Deputy will appreciate that the nature of the admissions processes is quite complex. As a result, there can be multiple iterations of offers. For 2025, based on data supplied by schools, it is estimated that there were over 4,200 first-year places available in County Kildare, with around 3,794 sixth-class pupils in the area. On this basis, the Department estimates a surplus capacity of approximately 400 places, or around 9%.

The Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in the area. In relation to school admissions, it is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act 1998.

As the Deputy will be aware, the apply to school pilot was introduced to simplify and improve the admissions process for post-primary schools in five pilot areas, including Celbridge. The roll-out of the pilot represents a significant step towards improving the school admissions system and delivering on the programme for Government commitment to introduce a nationwide common application system. While the apply to school system facilitates the submission of a common applications system for parents, the individual schools retain responsibility for issuing offers based on these applications in accordance with their published admissions policy. The Department does not offer or hold a centralised record of offer outcomes for individual schools.

Deputy Réada Cronin: While I appreciate that the Minister is not here, I hope the Minister of State will come back to me on this because it is really frustrating. As a member of the infrastructure committee, it feels as if we criticise every week how upside down the system is. We have so many infrastructural deficits up and down the country. Next week, the committee will have officials from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in to discuss the use of the census to forecast population and the need for infrastructure. Time and again, I get responses from the Department of Education and Youth mentioning the geographic information system, GIS. I do not believe the system is working because the principals of these secondary schools tell me that they are talking to each other, going through their lists and checking for duplicates. Parents have a right to send their children to their local school and the school their children's friends are going to attend. This would not be an issue for so many TDs in north Kildare if it was not a problem. I truly wonder if the GIS could be used to predict a bit better where people are coming from.

These schools have been crying out for facilities for years and they are now at breaking point. They need extra classrooms and spaces. The new school in Maynooth is being asked to take an extra 200 children. There are two schools beside each other on the same campus, with 1,000 pupils in each. They are already at capacity. My children - my girls - were meant to go to those secondary schools. They were promised when they were in primary school that the schools would be ready for them. They went through their entire secondary schooling in the old building. They never got inside those schools and the schools are already at bursting point. This applies to St. Patrick's school as well.

This is really important. I have spoken to parents whose children move down the list and when they get a place, they feel relief. However, those families should not have to go through this. We need a system that works so that parents and their kids do not have to go through this anxiety every year. It is the same thing every year. The Department says it has places, but it consistently does not have them.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will relay to the Minister for education the Deputy's comments and the representations she has made on this issue on the floor of the Dáil today.

To touch further on the assessment of need and demand for school places in a school area, the Department uses data from a range of sources, including child benefit data, enrolments and information on new residential developments, to plan for school place needs. As has been outlined, there has been significant investment made in school infrastructure across County Kildare, and the Department is continually planning for and investing in existing and new schools.

Furthermore, the Department's national development plan sectoral investment plan, which runs from 2026 to 2030, involves a very strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. Of the total €7.5 billion investment, it is envisaged that approximately €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings across large-scale and additional accommodation, as well as the modular and annual September accommodation needs programmes. Over the course of 2026 and 2027, there will be construction work at approximately 10% of the school estate. These projects, when completed, will provide about 57,000 additional and modernised school places, with a strong special educational need focus in all of the projects.

As I mentioned, the Department will continue to work closely with the patrons and schools to ensure that all pupils in north Kildare receive an offer of a school place. I will update the Minister on the challenges and pressures and the Deputy's contribution for her to consider and for her officials to work on further.

Cycling Facilities

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for coming into the Dáil to discuss this important topic for the residents of Moone and Timolin who have had to put up with what has been described locally and nationally as the road to nowhere. I refer to a cycle lane that was designed and commenced some time in 2024, but actually appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, in June and July 2025. It is 3 km long, and has no connections and no start or finish. Local people had a very good road which they cycled and walked. There were few, if any, accidents on it. Since the cycle lanes were put down, the road has altered. As of one o'clock today, there had been about 90 incidents since the road was laid. That is a huge issue for the people of Moone and Timolin and surrounding area in that part of south Kildare.

The local community group, the Moone Timolin Positive Action Group, made a submission on this but heard very little back. In fact, it heard nothing until people saw the cones arriving on the road. In all the debates we have had, and in all the questions I have asked and conversations I have had with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and Kildare County

Council, I am told there were plenty of conversations with local people. That is not the case. It is as simple as that. In October 2025, when this road to nowhere appeared on national television, TII came back to say that the project was built to the required standards and had passed the required safety audits. That is all well and good. As we all know, that is what every road and cycle path should be. Cycle paths are welcomed in Moone and south Kildare but not in this location. As I said, this road starts and ends nowhere, and it had caused 90 incidents as of 1 p.m. today. Some of the incidents were minor but some were major, involving the write-off of several cars and people being hospitalised. It is, therefore, a huge issue for the Moone Timolin Positive Action Group.

That brings us to January of this year when I and my colleagues on Kildare County Council, Councillors Mark Leigh and Aoife Breslin, received the safety audit for this road. This is where the next problem arises because the safety audit of the road, which was built to the required standard, identified multiple problems with the cycle lane, from the width of the kerbs facilitating high speeds to signage on traffic islands being too small. There not enough lighting on the road signage along the route is relatively poor. The cycle route itself is misaligned on either side and does not direct a cyclist along the intended route. The route is badly lit. The current lighting is obstructed by trees in some locations. The list goes on.

Kildare officials in County Council, who have been active in replying to me and all the local representatives, say there is a concern that TII is responsible for this.

Perhaps in his reply the Minister of State might tease out exactly who has been responsible for it. The safety audit is so bad and raises so many concerns that the community want the cycle path taken out and gone. We have had 90 incidents, and now we have a detailed safety audit that states there are so many problems. This has to go. This project has cost €1.9 million to date. I hope the Minister of State will bring some solutions for the cycle path today.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Wall for raising this matter today. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter with Members of the House on behalf of the Minister for Transport and to provide an update on this pilot scheme in County Kildare. The Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to the national cycle network. The national cycle network was published in 2024 and identified core cycling corridors around the country which, when delivered, will help increase cycling rates among residents, leisure users and tourists alike. The ambition of the national cycle network is significant. It is composed of 85 corridors connecting over 200 settlements, with a combined population of over 2.8 million people. It will provide an excellent level of connectivity nationally and help to support our commitment to reduce transport emissions by 50% by the end of the decade.

For road safety reasons and cyclist comfort and confidence, the national cycle network plan emphasises the importance of physical segregation between cyclists and motorists on busier roads. The reallocation of road space on intercity and intertown roads for segregated cycle facilities is a relatively novel concept in an Irish context. For this reason, it is prudent to pilot and assess various segregation techniques *in situ* to inform potential use in future projects.

The Moone to Timolin scheme is such a pilot. It consists of approximately 3 km of declassified national road on the R448. The width of the road offered the opportunity to trial different road separation treatments along its length. The objective of this pilot is to evaluate

the effectiveness of various segregation options for potential roll-out across the wider national cycle network. The impact on cyclists, pedestrians and motorists will be considered.

This pilot went through the relevant planning process in 2024, with public feedback sought following the publication of the proposed traffic calming measures by Kildare County Council. Construction works commenced in July 2025. Concerns from the local community were raised during construction. Representatives from Kildare County Council and TII met residents and the farming community in early September to hear their feedback. Arising from this meeting, certain amendments were made to the scheme where it was feasible to do so. Changes included adjusting road markings to provide better guidance and amending the transition points between separation treatments to increase visibility, as well as making greater provision for pedestrian use on a short section of the route. This engagement signalled a genuine commitment to working with the local community in delivering a safer environment for vulnerable road users.

Construction works on the pilot concluded in December. Following construction, as is good practice, an independent road safety audit was carried out on the Moone to Timolin scheme. The purpose of this audit was to identify any features of the scheme that could be removed or modified to improve safety. The audit highlighted 22 features that should be changed to improve the safety of the scheme and minimise accident occurrence. These include recommendations to calm traffic, reducing the carriage width in certain areas, increasing the visibility of kerbs, as well as ensuring that the shared walk and cycle lanes are kept clear of excessive leaves and are clearly marked. Nineteen of the recommendations have been accepted by Kildare County Council. Alternatives to the remaining three recommendations have been accepted by the independent auditors.

This evaluation has taken place in a timely manner and Kildare County Council has committed to addressing the recommendations. Continually improving road safety for all users is the cornerstone of infrastructure delivery. The information gleaned from the Moone to Timolin pilot will help inform the future roll-out of active travel infrastructure on the national cycle network, with the ultimate aim of connecting more people, businesses and communities in a sustainable and safe manner.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I want to go back to a couple of issues. The Minister of State said, "This engagement signalled a genuine commitment to working with the local community in delivering a safer environment for vulnerable road users." There is no doubt the Department and Kildare County Council in particular have engaged with the local community but what has come out of those engagements and the works carried out in the interim is that we now have an independent safety audit that states there are 22 features that are wrong with this. The question remains at this stage as to who will pay to fix these 22 features. The State has already spent €1.9 million on this cycle lane. How much will these 22 recommendations cost? Will the Minister for Transport, through the Department, come back to me and the people of Moone and Timolin on the additional cost of dealing with the 22 recommendations? There is also concern that three of the recommendations have not been accepted but addressed in a different way. This is simply not good enough and the Minister of State would accept this.

One thing the people of Moone and Timolin will tell us is that their road is being used as a pilot and it has been used in order for others to gain and benefit. They have no problem with

the greatest consensus on this but the problem is that the lessons learned by TII, Kildare County Council and other local authority should be taken away to develop cycle lanes, which we will always support in the right area. This is the wrong area. It has led to 90 incidents as of today. We have a safety audit that recognises 22 issues. TII, Kildare County Council and every other local authority have gleaned what it means to create a safe cycle lane. I ask again that the Government, TII and Kildare County Council take out this cycle path now. They have learned their lessons. This will allow other areas to have a safe cycle path, and this is what the people of Moone are asking for.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Wall will appreciate that it is critical that we do, and are able to, offer a real alternative to people in different parts of the country to ensure they can walk and travel in a safe environment. This is why there was and is a necessity for pilots such as the Moone to Timolin scheme. I acknowledge that the novel nature of the pilot has caused concerns and frustrations, as have been very clearly articulated and represented by Deputy Wall here today on the floor of the Dáil. I assure him the pilot is important and that the lessons from the scheme will inform the approach taken to the design and delivery of future road space reallocation schemes.

In light of the findings from the road safety audit, Kildare County Council will look to implement the recommendations in a timely manner to ensure the scheme adheres to the best safety practices. I trust this clarifies the position on the project for Deputy Wall today. Certainly I will relay back to the Minister for Transport the very clear outline Deputy Wall has given on how this has developed, the frustrations locally and the challenges there have been from a safety point of view. Obviously, the bottom line is that it is a pilot and it is to be learned from. It is also very important that what is being built is safe and that all of the considerations and findings of the audit are taken fully into account. I will ask Minister for Transport to continue to liaise with Deputy Wall on behalf of the local community on how things evolve.

Air Services

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In all my time in politics I probably only ever saw the anger of the Donegal people as acute as I have seen it in recent days and that was with regard to the handling of defective blocks in the county. There is probably a thread that runs through this. The Minister who refused to come to our county and meet homeowners with defective blocks was the Minister for housing at the time, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is now the Minister for Transport who signed the contract that ended the midday flights from Donegal to Dublin for the next four years, affecting cancer patients across the county. People travelled to Dublin yesterday and told their testimony. They explained that they would not be here today if it were not for those midday flights. They literally would not have been able to get to Dublin in time to have life-saving treatment.

The Government was told time and again in the lead up to this the importance of these flights. It has entered into a contract with the airline which will end these flights. I struggle to find words in parliamentary language to explain the frustration, anger and hurt of the people of Donegal in terms of what has happened.

It is best shown in terms of what has happened over the last number of days when we found out by accident that the Government had actually entered into this contract, which it has known about since October last year and which meant that the afternoon flights from Dublin and Donegal would end. When we heard this, people from across the county, from community groups, sporting organisations and State bodies to musicians and actors, pulled together and explained that this is unworkable. They are demanding that Donegal be no longer the forgotten country and that we hold on to what we have. The best example of that has been Majella O'Donnell, Daniel O'Donnell's partner, who spoke on "The Late Late Show" about the importance of these flights.

The Minister of State and his Government have done a dirty deed. The Government has seriously betrayed the people of Donegal. The contract was executed just 24 hours before the Government knew of a delegation representing 500 cancer patients who currently use the flight and 15,000 people who signed a petition in a matter of days. That is exactly how people feel. They feel hurt and betrayed. However, we also need to feel a bit of hope that this life-saving service can be restored. We need a Government that is working not against the people of Donegal but with them and with the group, the advocates and the cancer flights and services group that travelled up here. One of its members is back in Dublin today after being up here in a deputation yesterday. This person is accompanying a cancer patient in a hospital here in Dublin who is getting life-saving treatment. The consultant, a very senior person in that hospital, had a conversation with a patient today in which he said he saw this issue on the news yesterday and that if it goes ahead, it will be unworkable, and he had no problem being quoted on that. Everybody knows that what the Government has entered into is unworkable. It is not fair to the people of Donegal, tourism, businesses, commuters and it is a disaster for people who rely on this service. Between 10% and 15% of the 44,000 passengers are healthcare passengers. This has to be reversed. I ask the Minister to spell out clearly whether the Government will finally stand on the right side of this and stand with the community campaigning to get this decision overturned.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Doherty for raising this important matter for our county on the floor of the Dáil. I am glad to be taking it on behalf of the Minister for Transport who has been in London since yesterday meeting Cabinet counterparts in the British Government. I have been authorised to take this Topical Issue on his behalf and a number of other Topical Issues on behalf of a number of other Ministers who are not in the country today.

Both Deputy Doherty and I attended the meeting yesterday with the Secretary General in the Department and representatives of the cancer committee from Donegal, who travelled down on a plane yesterday to make their case very strongly to the Government in relation to the importance of this flight and the importance of a schedule that meets the needs of the public in our county. The Government very much recognises the important social and economic role that this service plays and, more broadly, in providing people and businesses in the north west with daily connectivity to Dublin, as well as further international connectivity via Dublin Airport.

The Government is fully committed to maintaining connectivity to the north west by continuing to provide an Exchequer-funded public service obligation, PSO, air service on this route, which also supports inward tourism and regional economic development.

The current public service obligation air service contract on this route expires on 25 February. To ensure continuity of services beyond this date, the Department of Transport conducted a public procurement process in line with the requirements of the EU regulation. This process formally concluded on 10 February, with the award of a contract to Emerald Airlines.

While the new contract continues to provide for a daily return service from Donegal to Dublin, with an early morning departure from Donegal and an evening return from Dublin, two specific changes to the service have been proposed by the service provider under the new contract which have raised concerns for people in our county. The first concern is around the fact that the aircraft will no longer be based in Donegal Airport, as the Deputy knows, and the second is around the changes to the schedule, where the afternoon flight from Donegal has been replaced with an evening service departing from Donegal Airport.

As I mentioned, a public procurement process was undertaken and the market responded to that. Only one tender submission was received and this met the minimum requirements set out in the request for tender, which was published by the Department following consultation with Donegal Airport. In the absence of any competition to operate this service, and having taken legal advice, the Department's priority had been to execute the contract in order to safeguard services beyond 25 February. This was vital to ensure that the people, particularly critical care patients, could book flights for travel beyond 25 February as soon as possible. I am sure the House will appreciate that in the absence of any option to extend the current contract, any alternative from the Department's perspective would clearly have imposed a consequent risk to the continuation of this air service route.

As Deputy Doherty knows, the Minister has listened to the concerns conveyed to him by all of all Members from the county, including Deputies Pat the Cope Gallagher, Doherty, Mac Lochlainn and Ward and our Senators in the county, and particularly those raised by members of the Donegal Cancer Flights and Services Group who met with the Secretary General yesterday. The Minister is considering what more might be possible to meet the demands of the users of the air service and to facilitate them. The Minister for Transport has also committed to meet with the Donegal Cancer Flights and Services Group and will continue to engage. We know from our meeting yesterday that this was discussed in detail. The objective now has to be to find a way to make sure the flight times that are available meet the needs of the people from our county. We are fortunate to have an exceptionally good airport. It is important that we make sure, through the public service obligation, that it is utilised in a way that provides the best possible service to the people of our county. We all need to work together to find an appropriate way forward now.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State talked about the airport. Staff at Donegal Airport are ripping about this. They are actually taking legal advice. They told the Department not to enter into the contract. We told the Department not to enter into the contract. I put it to the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach. The Minister of State said the Minister for Transport is listening. The Minister just gave a slap in the face to the people of Donegal. He entered into a contract. It is there in black and white. I have a copy and it refers to "the Minister for Transport and the airline". He entered into that contract without even speaking to the representative group which organises and supports the cancer flights from Donegal to Dublin. That is how much

respect the Minister of State's colleague gave to the people of Donegal, the Minister of State and anyone else who tried to be in his ear.

At the end of the day, this is a Government decision and the Government knew about this since October. The Minister of State talked about risk. There is no risk any more for us because the midday flights are gone. The risk has materialised. People who I know and, I am sure, the Minister of State knows are telling him today that the reason they are able to still put their children to bed is that those flights were not a convenience for them but a lifeline, and the Government signed them away. What has happened is appalling and I still have not heard the steps the Government needs to take to do that. There is a way to fix this. It should never have come to this.

Donegal Airport did not even know about it and found out about it by chance just a couple of weeks ago. The Government knew about this for months. When the airline said it was getting rid of the afternoon flights, the Department should have said, in October, it was going back out to tender and would stipulate that afternoon flights be provided. Nobody should be in this situation, but we now need to clean up the mess. I am raising this today, as I did with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste last week, because we are not going to let this go until these flights are restored.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher and I, along with Deputy Doherty and all the other Oireachtas Members from the county, are at one on this in terms of trying to find a way forward and make sure there are flight times in place that suit and meet the needs of the people of our county. Deputy Doherty will see from the response how this evolved. We both heard at yesterday's meeting that the tender that was issued was the same as the previous tender.

There was no change but what came in as a result of that tender was different. As the response I outlined shows, there was only one applicant for the tender and it met the minimum specifications of the tender. As outlined, the reason the Department signed the contract was to ensure there would not be a discontinuation of flights from the county and a service would continue to be in place. The Department did that following legal advice.

From a Government point of view, there is very significant funding for the public service obligation, and rightly so. We fund and have a wonderful airport in Carrickfinn but we have to make sure the flights available best serve the public and connectivity from Donegal to Dublin, given all of the other challenges we have. The objective now, which we all discussed yesterday when we met with the Secretary General, is to find ways to have the afternoon flight restored and have the issue of the aeroplane overnighing in Carrickfinn considered and addressed.

The Department is working within a legal framework. There was no change in the tender that went out this time compared with the tender that went out the previous time. What changed was the response. There was only one response to the tender, it met the minimum requirements and there were legal obligations around that.

We now have to work collectively to make sure the investment we are making in terms of spending taxpayers' money on this service, and rightly so, best meets the needs of the people

we represent. The Minister is committed to meeting with the cancer group next week and to meeting and continuing to engage with all of us to find a way forward here.

Quality in Public Procurement (Contract Preparation and Award Criteria) Bill 2021
[Seanad]: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for being here as he has responsibility for the area of procurement. I thank Senator Alice-Mary Higgins for her work on this legislation. Senator Higgins has worked for the past eight years on this specific legislation. Her commitment to the area of procurement stretches back to before she was elected to the Seanad, however, to her time in civil society when she recognised, as so many others have done, that the issue of procurement has such a wide-reaching impact and effect on so many other areas of how we work in the public sector and that it needs improvement.

What is at the core of this Bill is that public procurement is decided essentially on the criterion of lowest cost only. It is the default mechanism by which public procurement is decided. This Bill seeks to introduce quality as a much stronger criterion. It does not abandon lowest cost but recognises fully that is a hugely important factor in the process. It introduces quality as a measure which should be included in the process. This is all doable within the directives and legislation in any case but, unfortunately, it is not the custom in the design of our procurement processes. That is what we are seeking to address. I thank Senator Alice-Mary Higgins for all her work in bringing the Bill to this Stage. It has been through all Stages in the Seanad and now comes to the Dáil on Second Stage, ready to go to the finance committee if I can convince the Government to reverse its decision to oppose this Bill. I am really proud to build on the work that Senator Higgins has done and bring it to the Dáil floor.

Before I talk about the details and provisions of the Bill and plead again to the Government to support us in bringing this legislation through to the next Stage, I will talk about procurement more broadly, what it means and why it is such an important part of all of our lives. Procurement is very far-reaching and covers everything we buy as a State. As a party, we were trying to figure out how to make procurement sexy, and I do not know if we can, but one way of trying to help people understand it a bit better is that it is basically how the State does shopping. It is how it goes out and buys and purchases things, be those services or goods.

We are all very familiar with the big projects and the scandals, essentially, that have hit this Government over the last number of terms. They include the national children's hospital, CervicalCheck, the hot school meals programme recently, and in so many different areas. Having listened to previous Topical Issue debate, which was raised by Deputy Doherty, it sounds as if procurement is at the heart of another issue that has been raised on the Dáil floor.

Procurement also reaches into many of the smaller things. I have worked in the public sector and I have been an Accounting Officer in a State agency, so I am very familiar with the procurement process and how deep it is in the heart of every public sector body. It is an area of expertise within public sector bodies and it is important that we empower people who procure on behalf of this State to count not just price in the design of their criteria but also introduce quality.

Besides the big examples I gave, I will introduce some smaller ones that people might not be as familiar with or might not remember. One that I will mention is the contract for library books back in 2012. A contract drawn up at that stage essentially excluded smaller providers from bidding within the contract structure. Ultimately, the contract went to a UK company. This decision gutted bookshops across the nation. There were a huge number of lay-offs and closures. A bookshop in Sandyford in my constituency had to close down as a result. One of the bookshop owners said:

What galls me the most is the tender notice stated candidates should have access to, and experience of, dealing with small, local publishers and authors and have in-depth of the Irish publishing scene. I fail to see how a UK chain would have any knowledge of little known publishers in Ireland. This decision was made purely on price and it is really short-sighted.

This has been happening for many years. The example I cited was raised with me when I spoke with the Minister's colleague, Deputy Lahart. When I spoke about this process, he immediately came back to me with an example. That has been my experience because I have been talking about this to many colleagues over the past two weeks. They all have examples of how the current procurement process has failed us and how they see the value in this legislation.

Another example we have discussed was one that came from a carer who talked about the fact that the HSE provide for her, in the provision of her work, incontinence pads, which she then uses on her clients. She said because the HSE switched providers, she had to start changing incontinence pads for her patients four times a day instead of twice a day because the quality of the product dropped with the new provider. I genuinely cannot think of a more human example of how public procurement reaches into the depths and intimacy of our lives than that exact example. For that patient and client, it means that twice as many times a day and twice as many times across her life, she has to experience the discomfort of having that incontinence pad changed. That seems like such a small example but for somebody in that situation, it is a mammoth way in which her life has changed.

Let us have a look at the numbers when we talk about procurement because Ireland plans to spend €275.4 billion in the next five years under the national development plan. We know that is already in addition to the €19 billion a year we spend on public procurement. This is so wide-reaching. I will now talk about the provisions because, as I mentioned, this is about shifting the culture of how public procurement is done from one that values cost only to one that should value quality. The key provisions and sections in this Bill are sections 3 and 4, which outline exactly how quality should be considered within the procurement process and that when quality is not a consideration, how those exceptions should be applied.

We fully appreciate and acknowledge that there are times when lowest cost only is a metric which is applicable to a particular procurement process. This was very much a piece of work that Senator Higgins did in reshaping the legislation to say we want you to think about quality and if you are not thinking about quality, you need to explain why not. There is a mechanism by which you have to raise up the flag pole of any public sector body why you are not thinking about quality and you have deemed that this process should be based on lowest cost only.

That is exactly the kind of accommodation that we seek to see when we are developing this kind of legislation, and in response to Government concerns when it was going through the

Seanad and in her interactions with the Office of Government Procurement, OGP. I should add, by the way, that this has been done in consultation with the OGP throughout these eight years of work and, indeed, with the co-operation of the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, in the development of the legislation itself.

Sections 5 and 6 then go on to deal with certain other elements. The public sector duty was introduced into the State in 2014. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 sets out that public bodies have to have regard for human rights and equality in the work that they do. Section 5 allows for this to be a part of the procurement reporting process. Section 6 also emphasises that social consideration should be another part of it.

It is a simple Bill. It is a straightforward Bill. It is a Bill that is essentially in response to the 2014 directives that determined how Ireland would go about its procurement and how every member state, indeed, would go about procurement. Unfortunately, in that instant, Ireland chose to interpret it in such a way that led us to this default situation of lowest cost only, and this legislation seeks to correct exactly that.

We are lucky because we have a Dutch experience where this type of legislation has been introduced and we have really strong data which captures what happened there. What we see in that Dutch example is that 73% of the contracts still go to lowest cost only. We are not trying to say that it should not be that big a feature. We know that it is, but we want to make sure it allows us to take account of the quality criteria as well. Within that Dutch model, the other important figure is that they found that there was a 3% increase in the procurement process costs - not in the projects themselves; let us be clear on that - which is a marginal one, and there was a 2.4 times equivalent benefit reported by those actors.

I will conclude and pass over to my colleagues to talk about specific examples in this area by pleading with the Minister of State to support this Bill and reverse the Government's decision to oppose it. Any concerns the Minister of State has about money - I am pre-empting what he might say in his contribution - can be dealt with on Committee Stage or the money message process. Any concerns the Minister of State has about those finance considerations can be dealt with there. What I want to see is the Minister of State putting his money where his mouth is in terms of saying that he wants us to offer solutions and that he wants to work with us because I could not find a clearer example of exactly that. I plead with the Minister of State to support it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Feighan.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: No, there is five more minutes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I have to check formula-wise. Deputy Gannon is down for interaction but I am not sure the Deputies can share time. The Deputies are not sponsors of the Bill, or are they?

Deputy Gary Gannon: We usually share time at the start of a motion.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Yes, I did ask.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I think you can.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputies can finish out their time. They have five minutes. It is two and a half minutes each, if that is what they wish.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is fair to say I am about to speak on a Bill which, at first, I did not fully understand. It is not one that, when you sit down to read it initially, will get your blood boiling and make you excited, but that is exactly what good administration should be about because when public procurement becomes exciting, it usually means that something has gone wrong, and we have seen too many instances of that. This Bill probably shapes people's lives in a way that they will not fully understand just yet. This is about how the State spends billions of euro every year on schools, hospitals, roads, IT systems and services. It all flows through procurement rules.

Under EU law, contracts must be awarded on what is called the most economically advantageous tender and that can mean best price and quality combined or it can mean lowest price only. Ireland chose for a strict lowest price only when we transposed that law and this Bill clearly says that maybe we should rethink that.

The Bill says that in principle contracts should be awarded on the best price-quality ratio and that if a public body decides that price alone is enough, it should explain why. That is by no means revolutionary. It is not anti-market. It is not red tape gone mad. It is asking the State to pause for a second and ask whether we are buying the cheapest thing or the best outcome.

It also proposes that for major public works above €5.35 million-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, is the Deputy's colleague coming in?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Yes, but I thought the Ceann Comhairle was going to give us back the time.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We cannot help it. We are all very excited about this Bill.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We are very excited.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We did not think we would be this excited, to be honest, as Deputy Gannon said. I nearly had a heart attack when I thought I was going to be talking on public procurement because it is not something you think about every day but, as the Deputy says, it is vitally important.

As education spokesperson, I have to say we can see this in our schools every day. Where we see that is when, for example, €5 billion has been spent on prefabs over the last five years. Prefabs are a stopgap or are put in because things are not going right in schools - where buildings have not been built or are falling apart or whatever. What we see now is prefabs being used for special classes. This is not a good use of public money because it costs €5 billion and they are there for years. We need to see forward planning for school buildings.

As Deputy Gibney has already said, we see it in hot school meals - a vital universal programme that is rolled out in primary schools. We need to see it in secondary schools as well. The procurement there should not be on the basis of the lowest cost. The cost is the cost. We know what it costs for hot school meals. I would argue that we should increase that, but it has to be about quality.

The outcome of public services in this country is vital to the health and well-being of every person. We can see that from education and health. What is really important is that it is not a race to the bottom and it is not a race to make sure that we are undercutting or able to provide the best tender or whatever. It should be about quality because quality public services are what every citizen in this country deserves. It is vitally important that we are able to explain where taxpayers' money goes and that we are using it efficiently and effectively.

I thank Deputy Gibney and Senator Higgins for all their work on this. As their video on Instagram said, this is not the sexist Bill that will come to the floor of the House but it is hugely important and it impacts every part of our lives. When we do not see that every day, that is when it is working well, as Deputy Gannon said. We have so many examples from my constituency, such as the children's hospital, of it going desperately wrong and children ageing out of a service because it has not been effectively managed. I thank Deputy Gibney and Senator Higgins for all their work,.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputies for giving me the opportunity to discuss the Government's position on the Second Stage of this Private Members' Bill. The Bill, brought forward by Senator Higgins and Deputy Gibney, is well intentioned. However, the priority for this Government is delivering the critical infrastructure that Ireland needs while ensuring value for money for Irish taxpayers, which this Bill could hinder and not help in delivering.

The Government has concerns regarding the Bill's potential impact on the ability of the State to seek value for money in providing critical infrastructure and that it would increase the level of bureaucracy and complication in the public tendering process, ultimately creating additional regulatory burdens with little to no benefit in terms of outcomes. The Government is seeking to reduce those barriers and streamline procurement processes so projects can be delivered effectively in this country.

With the current set of rules in place, according to the European scorecard 2025, Ireland is in the top three for use of price-quality ratio, with only 12% awarded on price only. The remaining 88% of tenders are awarded based on quality criteria.

The Bill seeks to give further effect to Directive 2014/24/EU on public sector contracts to promote the use of social considerations and the best price-quality ratio, in relation to procurements to which the directive applies, prohibiting the award of contracts on price or cost as the sole award criterion unless the Minister makes a declaration that it is appropriate. This would require the Minister to issue guidelines on qualitative, environmental, social, human rights and equality considerations that may arise in public contracts and create a system of reporting to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

I will now set out the reasons behind the Government's concerns relating to what the Bill seeks to do. The Government is undertaking an ambitious programme of reform and accelerating infrastructure with a committed spend of €275 billion on the national development plan, NDP. The associated projects in the NDP already factor quality into their tenders as determined by detailed specifications and ongoing contract management. Therefore, the current approach seeks to ensure quality while keeping value for money as paramount in the delivery of the NDP and does not require additional regulation.

The Bill being proposed is similar to a scheme introduced previously in the Netherlands which reportedly increased costs by approximately 3%. Applying this to the delivery of the NDP could potentially increase costs to the taxpayer by up to €10 billion.

The Bill further complicates the procurement process. It introduces inflexibility in the selection of appropriate criteria for a given competition, which has the potential to compromise value for money, particularly for standardised goods and services where it might not be needed. The Bill is also expected to create delays, given the increased risk of litigation that results from the reliance on subjective social criteria. The European Commission is in the process of reviewing the public procurement directives underpinning this Bill and there are clear signals that Directive 2014/24/EU will be repealed and a less restrictive regime put in place. As such, the legal base for the Bill would no longer apply.

I will now expand further on the Government's immediate priority, namely, delivering the critical infrastructure that we need to resolve the housing crisis. Since the Bill was put on the Order Paper, Government approved the accelerating infrastructure report and action plan. Pillar 3 of the plan, co-ordination and delivery of reform, introduces a new central co-ordination role for the Department, as envisaged by the programme for Government, and features reforms to procurement and approvals that will more effectively convert funding into outcomes. It will also build the capacity of the construction sector and enable better sequencing of major projects, ensuring that infrastructure is delivered on time, within budget and with minimal disruption.

Procurement challenges are one of the key barriers the plan identifies, with lengthy timelines and complicated processes hindering our ability to deliver value for money and making procurement less competitive. Action 25 seeks to address these barriers through changes in the capital works management framework, CWMF, and improved procurement standardisation, professionalism, centralisation and training. Considerable amendments to the CWMF have been introduced to increase flexibility, including price variation, limitation of liability and indexation for inflation. Further amendments will be introduced later this year to support increases in construction sector capacity and innovation. This will be through the adoption of modern methods of construction, design contests and early collaboration.

The overly adversarial nature of procurement, driven by risk transfer objectives, poses challenges to delivery. Therefore, further changes will be made to support a more collaborative approach with tenderers, involving alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and changes to the inflation framework, with the longer-term objective of a greater sharing of risk. It is essential the public service operates in a co-ordinated and effective way and delivers value-for-money and sustainable savings for taxpayers. This Bill contains several provisions that will hinder delivery of the action plan. It introduces inflexibility in the selection of appropriate criteria for a given competition and potential disproportionality in legislating for the fixed

weighting of cost in assessing tenders. Additionally, and following on foot of advice from the Office of the Attorney General, the Bill contains several provisions which would be likely to increase the risk of litigation. This would significantly lengthen the procurement process and delay the delivery of critical infrastructure. This goes against the Government's work to overcome barriers to infrastructure delivery by putting in place further barriers and strengthening the opportunities for legal challenges, which will likely increase costs to the taxpayer.

The Bill proposes contracting authorities award on the basis of the most economically advantageous tender rather than price only, unless sanctioned by a Minister or Accounting Officer. While I appreciate the concerns surrounding the use of price-only in procurement processes, such a provision would be disproportionate and add to the administrative burden of buying generic commonly acquired goods and services. The European procurement directives and their transposing national instruments already permit public sector bodies to prohibit the award of contracts on the basis of price or cost only and restrict the use of price-only to certain categories of contract. The Bill misrepresents the procurement landscape. Many price-only awards are the second part of a two-stage award process, where the first stage has been an assessment of quality. The Office of the Attorney General advises that the use of a limit on the price criterion would need careful consideration in order to demonstrate that it remains within the MEAT criteria.

As stated above, EU directive 2014/24 expressly permits member states to restrict the use of price to certain categories of contracts or prohibit the use of price or cost only as the sole award criterion for public contracts. However, in contrast, the directives do not expressly permit member states to specify a target quality ratio for specified projects. Recital 89 of EU Directive 2014/24 might also be seen as against permitting this proposal. These recitals emphasise the freedom of the contracting authority to select the economically best tender. Recital 89 of EU Directive 2014/24 states:

This can be obtained by using the terminology 'most economically advantageous tender' as the overriding concept since all winning tenders should finally be chosen in accordance with what the individual contracting authority considers to be the economically best solution among those offered...

Regarding implications arising from imposing additional reporting obligations on contracting authorities related to their function as public bodies pursuant to section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, contracting authorities will be required to record steps taken to comply with section 42 of the Act. In particular, information relating to the preparation, allocation and granting of contracts will need to be included in the Article 84 report. Reports to the Minister on the contracting authority's performance on these matters will also be required, with the Minister given the role of designating appropriate forms for such returns. There do not appear to be any restrictions in the procurement directives to prevent obligations of this nature being imposed on contracting authorities. Further, it is noted this would be a clear, unambiguous obligation imposed by primary legislation. Additionally, mandating how a contracting authority should conduct a procurement process should be avoided, especially via as blunt an instrument as primary legislation. Contracting authorities need to be free to decide the best process for them, and any legislation should facilitate that. This is also true for construction projects, where quality is largely achieved through good

design and specification before the procurement process and in the subsequent contract management. The Government has used policy circulars and guidance on these matters to recognise the need for flexibility and the specific circumstances of each individual procurement.

While quality must be afforded due consideration in tendering processes, this must be done in the context of available budgets and in a proportionate manner. It has to be acknowledged that public procurement facilitates the State to be in a position to provide much-needed public services in a sustainable manner, and reducing the public buyers' choices for assessing tenders could impact on the sustainability of such service provision.

It should also be noted that Ireland scores highly among EU member states in the use of price-quality ratio. In the last round of reporting available, the European Commission's Single Market and competitiveness scorecard 2025 shows that in Ireland the proportion of price-only awards halved from 2020 to 2022, falling from 24% to 12%. Ireland had the third-lowest incidence of price-only awards. As noted, this figure of 12% includes those awards for which quality was assessed at an earlier stage. Therefore, the Bill would introduce complications and barriers to infrastructure delivery for a problem which does not really exist in Ireland, and in respect of which improvements are already happening.

Complementary to and supporting the work on accelerating infrastructure, a key priority for the Department is the programme for Government commitment to value for money in State spending and to review the public procurement process to make it more transparent and work to ensure greater participation from SMEs in Ireland.

4 o'clock

The Department is in the final stage of drafting the national public procurement strategy to set out the strategic direction of public procurement for the next five years. A key focus of the strategy is advancing socially responsible public procurement, supporting sustainable public procurement and the UN sustainable development goals. A public consultation for the strategy was launched in March 2025 and ran until May 2025. This included three roadshows in Dublin, Cork and Athlone, which were attended by a variety of stakeholders, including public bodies, industry bodies, utility suppliers, social enterprises and a dedicated supplier and SME webinar. Senator Alice Mary Higgins, this Bill's author, was supportive of and engaged with the consultation for the strategy. The strategy is a more appropriate policy instrument to progress the well-intentioned objectives in the Bill. As mentioned, the programme for Government seeks to ensure greater participation from SMEs in public procurement through the SME advisory group, which I chair and which meets quarterly. My Department engages directly with SME representative bodies.

The Bill contradicts the Government's commitment to support Irish enterprises, in particular SMEs and small family businesses, because it has the potential to compromise value for money, particularly for standardised and commodified goods and services, adding undue weight to quality, adding undue burdens for SMEs, potentially reducing the numbers of bidders, and overlooking that quality may also be addressed in selection criteria and technical specifications.

The European Commission's focus regarding procurement is on the simplification of the current complex legal code and a reorientation of procurement to act as tool for steering investment and increasing competitiveness. In seeking to deliver this, it began an evaluation

of the procurement directives in December 2024. Officials from my Department have engaged in this evaluation process at all levels and have facilitated the process through stakeholder workshops, targeted consultation and direct engagement at Commission level to best represent Ireland's interests.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is a bit regrettable that we did not have a copy of the Minister's speech when we started but I am sure that can be addressed for future debates.

I am pleased to see this legislation. I understand it was first proposed by Senator Higgins and the Civil Engagement Group in the Seanad. I thank them for their work on this very important issue. I also thank the Deputies who brought the Bill forward for debate in the Dáil.

This legislation builds on work done by my colleague Deputy Mairéad Farrell who, in 2021, introduced her policy report, *Towards A New Strategy For Progressive Procurement*, and followed that with her *Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024*. For Sinn Féin, this is a very important issue. We believe that where the Government is spending taxpayers' hard-earned money, it should be aware that it is a significant player in the market and a driver of quality or, indeed, of low standards. That choice is the Government's. This legislation would ensure the Government makes those choices in favour of decency and quality, not just the lowest common denominator and the lowest possible price all of the time.

How their money is spent is important to people. Obviously, they want to see value for money and of course they are aghast, as I am, when they see the costs for the national children's hospital spiral out of control. Of course, they want to see that value-for-money element. They also want to know that their money is being spent in pursuit of decency. The Government is a major player here. How it spend money really matters. I know from my previous work in a trade union that we had disputes with the Government, and in some instances its agencies, in relation to trade union recognition, so riddle me this: how can one arm of the State say, through the Labour Court, that there should be a collective agreement, while the other arm of the State can say it will continue to do business with a company even though it does not respect workers' rights or the determinations of the Labour Court? Whenever these arguments were put to various Governments made up of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party and, more recently, Independents and the Green Party, the answer that came back was the Government had to be careful because it is charged with spending taxpayers' money so it has to ensure we get value for money. Value for money does not always mean the lowest common denominator or the cheapest possible option. Value for money, in many instances, actually means spending money where workers' rights are protected and in a way that is decent and a driver of quality. The Government is indeed a big player in this market.

I should not be a bit surprised that this Government is opposing this legislation. As I and others have said, this Government is allergic to accountability. Transparency is a different world from where this Government exists. This legislation is very simple. The Minister of State sought to convolute the issue and make it sound like it was more complicated than it is. In truth, however, this legislation is very simple. It puts quality as well as price into public procurement decision-making.

The Minister of State extolled the virtues of his Government but he did not mention its greatest hits of procurement. He failed to mention the €330,000 bike shed, the €1.43 million security hut for Leinster House or the €7 million of taxpayers' hard-earned money spent on a

failed IT system for the Arts Council. This is all before we even consider the massive cost overrun of the national children's hospital. The Minister of State expressed concern about the potential this legislation has to put up the costs. He said this had happened in Holland where costs went up by 3%. Jesus, there has been a 300% increase in the cost of the national children's hospital. The Minister of State seems unbothered by that, but 3% is going to keep the Government up at night with worry.

I cannot accept the arguments that were put forward. The legislation seeks to limit the practice of lowballing. I have seen that in action. I have seen companies, large global multinational corporations and SMEs go in with figures that are absolutely unattainable. They know that. They did it with home helps. They know the decision will be made on the basis of money. They go in with the lowest possible price and are then sure they will get the contract. Thereafter, whose business is it? It is the business of the poor unfortunates who have their time cut back. It was public procurement policy and the outsourcing of the home help services that led us to what is called the 15-minute call. Previous to that, a person got an hour with their home help. It was a minimum of an hour. Because of the Government's procurement policies, that time was whittled away and companies are now in pursuit of the big value-for-money lowest common denominator of 15 minutes for an elderly person. What can you do in 15 minutes with an elderly person? You cannot wash, shower or change them. You can barely have a conversation with them. There is not a cup of tea and no dinner. You could probably not light a fire in 15 minutes. That is where ignoring quality, standards and human rights gets us.

I am long enough in here to know not to plead with the Minister of State because I know well that once the decision is taken, there is very little that can be done. However, even at this stage, I urge the Minister of State to go back to the senior Minister and discuss this legislation with him. As has previously been indicated, there is nothing the Minister of State has cited as a concern that could not be teased out, addressed and dealt with on Committee Stage. I would go so far as to say that is exactly what Committee Stage is for. It is where we scrutinise legislation and make it as good as it can be. In truth, it is the principle of this legislation, not the outworkings of it, that would enshrine transparency, accountability, human rights, equality and quality. That is what the Government has a problem with. The problem is not with the mechanics of the legislation because the Minister of State and I both well know that this can be worked out.

The problem relates to transparency, accountability, quality and human rights. The Minister of State should have been honest about that. He is not a bit concerned about a potential 3% rise in costs. Would you go away out of that? Nobody is buying it. Nobody for a moment believes that it is a real or genuine concern because we know, in truth, that costs spiral out of control all of the time. What the Minister of State did not address was how he is going to build in quality, human rights, transparency and accountability, because they are not there at the moment. He read his script well, which is fine, but he did not demonstrate how these aspects are going to be built into public procurement.

As it stands, the State is a major player. It was stated previously that this is hard to understand. It is not. Anyone who spends money in a shop understands how it is done. Anybody who spends any money at all understands how this is done. We understand the purchasing power of our own wages. We understand that every year a campaign is run asking

people to support local and to drive local jobs. We understand that when we spend money, we are supporting either ethical procurement or procurement that falls well short of that. The outworkings of Government policy result in a lack of transparency and accountability and the lowest possible standards for the people who depend on the Government for support. It is a very simple thing to say, but it is a very important thing to do. The Government should spend taxpayers' money where decency, workers rights, accountability, transparency and quality are the watchwords and not continue with its current practice, the result of which we do not just see all around us, we pay for.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Gibney for bringing forward this important Bill and Seanadóir Higgins for originally instigating it. I am very happy to support the objectives behind the Bill.

As has been said, it is very straightforward that price should not be the only consideration when awarding State contracts. That is a no-brainer, not least because I am dealing with major problems, as I am sure others are. The national children's hospital is the obvious big example, but, at local level, I am dealing with an apartment complex that was delivered as social housing. The tenants in it tell me that it is going to have to be pulled down. They want out, although they have only been in it for a year. That is just dreadful. After waiting for a decade or more to get their social homes, the building is rotten with mould and damp. There is water ingress in the car park that is in the vicinity of the electrics. It is a mess. As stated, people have only been living there for a year. That shows why quality is important. Somebody can just bid on price, but if they are cowboys, they can cut corners. I have heard anecdotally and seen some evidence in social housing provision of specifications being lowered. In fact, in the instance I am talking about - what has happened needs to be investigated - the developer originally planned to build it for the private sector and when it was contracted by an AHB to deliver social housing, the specifications were lowered. I think that is what actually happened but I am just speculating.

The Bill proposes that there should be a 50:50 quality-price ratio for large projects. Often, people might bid low on price but you get a higher quality for a higher price. The one with the higher quality may often end up being lower in the end because we know that sometimes it is the cowboys who engage in the race to the bottom and the type of lowball bidding that gets them the contract, and then it ends up costing a lot more. They have the State over a barrel because they got the contract and the State feels it is in too deep to say anything and they can ratchet up the price.

I do not know if it was mentioned, but I was just reading an article about the watchdog - the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC - that refers to cartels that are rigging their bids for State projects. The article mentions areas like construction, but not just construction, where companies are working together to see how they can bid up the price or co-ordinate in order to get the best price from the State for contracts. In the context of what is proposed in the Bill, it is eminently sensible to have these considerations much higher up the agenda when we are contracting out or procuring projects.

Brid Smith, the former Deputy, introduced a Bill in the previous Dáil to ensure that there should be no competition on wages and conditions of employment when it comes to tendering for State contracts. I will take the example of public transport and Go-Ahead. Wages and

conditions are significantly less favourable for workers in Go-Ahead, which is providing public transport services. That is also why the company finds it more difficult to get drivers and why their buses are more unreliable. They do not have enough drivers because they pay them poorly. Dublin Bus is not much better, but it is a little better in terms of its treatment of bus workers, mechanics and so on. Ultimately, that impacts on the quality of the public bus service because it is determined by price competition. What they are competing in respect of is, essentially, a race to the bottom in terms of the treatment of employees. That is consequently very stressful for the workers, who are under pressure. There is a box system, and there are people on the radio who say that drivers either have to slow down or speed up because of traffic congestion, which is completely out of their control in any event. This is all to meet certain criteria. Essentially, privatisation is undermining the wages and conditions of workers.

I am happy to support the Bill. Whenever the State is considering outsourcing, it should also consider whether it would be better for it to do something directly. I will mention something that is topical. Kevin Reynolds from RTÉ was on "Morning Ireland" earlier. He stated that workers are now voting no-confidence in the management of RTÉ, although they are really pointing through that to Government policy. Essentially, the ability of RTÉ to produce public service broadcasting is being dismantled. They are absolutely right. It will all be outsourced to independent private companies to do the job of public service broadcasting. Kevin Reynolds rightly made the case that private companies will not want to make a lot of the public service broadcasting programmes that we need because they would not consider it profitable or important, or they would be wary of the legal risks involved. They might not have resources necessary to make them even if they wanted to, so the stuff that we need our public service broadcaster to do will just not happen.

Under the guise of reforming RTÉ, the public service broadcaster, we are actually dismantling it. The workers are very angry about that. They are absolutely right to be. I tried to highlight the consequences that can have in areas like the film industry where conditions are affected. We pump huge amounts of money into film production companies and the employment rights and conditions of workers are not fully vindicated, even though large amounts of public money are being invested. These are just some examples.

We must consider whether we should be doing this ourselves directly rather than going out to tender in the first place.

Would we have more control over the process? Could we guarantee quality and the right pay and conditions of employees? These are all considerations, rather than increasingly defaulting to outsourcing these things.

I will say – it may be an ideological point – that the privatisation of a lot of things that used to be done by the public sector is an ongoing agenda, one we have seen over the last 20 or 30 years. Things that used to be done by the public sector are increasingly outsourced to private companies, with very questionable benefits and, in many cases, serious adverse consequences at all levels for workers, including the pay and conditions of workers.

It also affects things like tax revenue. I remember when I was out supporting the pickets of bin workers of a privatised bin company, Greyhound Recycling. It is a service that used to be carried out by Dublin City Council. They pointed out at the time that Greyhound Recycling, the private company they worked for which treated them so poorly they felt the need to go on

strike, was tax resident in a tax haven. Should that not be a criterion we look at? We are awarding contracts to companies that do not pay tax here or are actively trying to avoid paying tax. A huge amount of public money is going into their pockets.

A lot of the private sector, which goes on about entrepreneurial ability and all the rest of it, is entirely dependent on State money. It is kind of ironic. There is often this counter-positioning of the private sector versus the public sector. In truth, however, a huge amount of the private sector is completely dependent on money from the public sector. We should at least demand quality and proper treatment of workers.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. I commend Deputy Gibney on introducing it to the House. I thank Senator Higgins for introducing it and shepherding it through the Seanad. I know a huge amount of work was done in the background on this. Senator Higgins obviously had extensive engagement over the years with businesses, representative groups, trade unions and broader civil society. This Bill received cross-party support. I believe it received unanimous support in the Seanad, which is testament to the work Senator Higgins did. It is, therefore, deeply disappointing that the Government is opposing the Bill on this Stage. Like others, I encourage it to reflect on that position.

This Bill is definitely one for the policy nerds but it also seems to be stating the bleeding obvious. We all know in our personal lives the pitfalls and trade-offs that are involved when choosing the lowest cost option for anything, whether it is in a small and insignificant context like avoiding the cheapest bottle of wine on the menu or choosing to actively buy something Fairtrade in the supermarket. In doing so, we are making a choice about the provenance, quality and rights of workers behind these products. The choices we make are important. This applies even when we go on to bigger and more important choices in our personal lives, such as choosing the provider that will carry out work on our homes or the individual who will carry out a medical or dental procedure on us. It also applies when it comes to buying a cheap flight. If we choose the cheapest option, we are going to have to pay extra for an assigned seat, early boarding or flexible travel times. We all factor quality, safety and durability into our everyday spending decisions. Why are we not doing this with our public procurement?

I cannot see any reason any government would not support this Bill. We all profess to be obsessed with ensuring our public funds are spent wisely and appropriately. We have seen too many incidents where that has not happened, as others have alluded to today. While we all want to see public projects being delivered faster and more efficiently, focusing on quality rather than just cost at the tendering stage may force those who are preparing tenders to look around corners and identify potential pitfalls or additional costs at an earlier stage rather than, as happens so often, providing us with multiple surprise obstacles and bills at a later stage of the process.

This Bill has the potential to improve and speed up the delivery of public projects and critical infrastructure. It is fair to say that our public procurement system has not always served us particularly well. As has been noted by others, the lowest price model often results in longer term costs. Often, we see a contract being awarded to the lowest bidder and then supplementary claims start to build and build. The national children's hospital is the most obvious example of that. Not only does this represent a waste of public money, but the drip-feeding of delays

and additional costs undermines the public's faith in the State's ability to get anything right. There can be serious consequences too in terms of the human cost, such as those we saw with the CervicalCheck scandal.

This Bill is trying to move towards a price-quality ratio model. It is essentially about ensuring that we are getting the best bang for our buck, which is exactly what the Minister of State is looking for. It should not always be about finding the cheapest way to get things done when it comes to public works. Scrimping on important infrastructure means further costs down the line. When we are talking about public funds, we should always strive to achieve quality, be it in service delivery or infrastructure. We must be mindful that public money is just that - it belongs to the public and we have to respect that. Showing respect for taxpayers does not always mean choosing the cheapest option. It means delivering value. If continually having to go with the cheapest tender means finding faults down the line, spending additional time and money on follow-ups, inspections and so on, we are not delivering value but, rather, wasting public funds.

This is a timely Bill given that we now have a national development plan worth €275 billion before us, not to mention the Government's accelerating infrastructure action plan. We know there are huge infrastructure deficits in the country, be it in public transport, education, housing, water or the energy grid, etc. We have a lot of things we need to spend money on and it is so important that we get these infrastructure projects right because we failed to do so too often in the past. Often, it seems to come down to the fact that we have been penny-pinching at important points.

It is important that it is recognised within public bodies that there is a need for stronger criteria that would place greater emphasis on quality in awarding public contracts. We need a greater focus on who can provide the best outcomes rather than a race to the bottom on who can provide the lowest cost.

The Minister spoke about value for money. Quality is value for money. Many Members referred to the Netherlands example today. While 3% was added to the overall additional cost of procurement, additional benefits of 240% were achieved in the outcomes of using these methods. There is no issue with looking for the best deal but it has to be weighed against the quality that will be delivered. This Bill brings us in that direction. I also hope that the move towards a more quality-focused approach with this Bill will lead to greater consideration of environmental and sustainability issues in our procurement processes.

Something that I have raised before on the matter of public procurement is the need to prioritise contractors who engage in collective bargaining, recognise trade unions, respect workers' rights and agree to engage with the Workplace Relations Commission and our dispute resolution bodies when required. A price-only approach to tenders only penalises the good companies that already invest in the environment, employment law, workers' rights and human rights standards. The Construction Industry Federation and the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland support this, as do all the unions. The Labour Party is proud to support this Bill today. I commend it to the House.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank everyone for their contribution. Some issues were raised and I will certainly bring them back to my Department.

The Bill pre-empts the European Commission's revision of the 2014 directive. Therefore, it seems the entire Bill is premature. The Commission is in the process of reviewing the public procurement directives. There are clear signals that EU Directive No. 2014/24 will be repealed and a less restrictive regime will be put in place. As such, the legal basis for several of these provisions will no longer apply.

After careful consideration, the Government has decided to oppose the Bill because it could undermine the current ambition, which is delivering the critical infrastructure that Ireland needs and ensuring value for money for Irish taxpayers.

I again thank the speakers who contributed. We all agree that the State should act in the public interest. The intentions behind the Bill for the pursuit of quality as much as price are laudable. However, the Bill would likely have a negative impact on the ability of the State to seek value for money or deliver on the Minister's accelerating infrastructure report and action plan commitments. It introduces inflexibility in the selection of appropriate criteria for a given competition and potential disproportionality in legislating for the fixed weighting of cost in assessing tenders, notwithstanding its inconsistency with the directives.

As the Deputy rightly stated, an evaluation of the cost increase associated with civil procedures in the Netherlands was estimated at 3%. Applying the metric to the national development plan would result in an increase of over €10 billion. This would cancel out the €10 billion equity funding to which the Government has committed, with major energy, water and transport projects.

As mentioned, the proportion of price-only awards in Ireland halved from 2020 to 2022, falling from 24% to 12% in 2023. As of 2025, Ireland is third in the European Union for the lowest use of price-only award criteria.

The Bill cannot help but contradict the Government's commitment to supporting Irish enterprise, in particular SMEs and small family businesses, because it has the potential to compromise value for money, particularly for standardised and commodotised goods and services, adding undue weight to quality and adding undue burdens for SMEs, potentially reducing the number of bidders and overlooking the fact that quality may also be addressed in selection criteria and technical specifications.

Work that will impact reporting requirements, e-forms and the public procurement data project is already under way in the European Commission, as is the revision of public procurement directives. Therefore, the Bill may also introduce conflicts with the current EU legislative framework. There are clear signals that directive 2014/24/EU will be repealed and, as I said, a less restrictive regime will be put in place. As such, the legal basis for several of these provisions would no longer apply. For these reasons, the Government opposes the Bill.

I thank all the contributors for their helpful advice. I look forward to liaising and working with them in the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Deputies Ahearn, Boyd Barrett and O'Reilly for their contributions.

This whole experience of bringing forward the Bill, talking to countless colleagues across the Government and Opposition benches over recent weeks and then coming to the House to

receive the news that the Government is not going to support it makes me, as a new TD, so sad. I hear every day from the leaders of the Minister of State's party and its coalition partner that we do not offer solutions and that the Government engages constructively. This Bill is the result of eight years of constructive engagement, inside this House and outside. It was brought to the Government as a solution and its answer is, "No, thanks." I am genuinely sad that I am faced with that. I am a legislator. I was elected to be a legislator. This is legislation that addresses a very real problem that we all acknowledge and the Government is saying, "No, thanks".

I am going to go through some of the details. Some of details of the Minister of State's response are problematic and completely ill-informed. I will start with the children's hospital. It seems to me that the Minister of State is saying that the Government is happy for the model to continue that allowed the decision for the children's hospital project to go the way it did because the cost was considered at 75% within the procurement matrix. This Bill would bring quality to 50%. Is the Minister of State okay with that? Two days ago, the Minister of State's colleague the Minister for Health engaged with my colleague Deputy Rice. When asked if the contract was fundamentally flawed, the Minister said that we would not take that step again. She said that the contractual structure is not one we would approach or adopt again. This Bill does exactly what she is asking. Two days after she spoke, the Bill is available to the Government on the Dáil of the floor. The Government says we do not offer solutions and do not want to work collaboratively. That is what I am doing today and this is the response I get. It takes the wind out of my sails, as a new TD, to get this kind of response. It is depressing.

I will go through some of the misinformation that I have identified within the Minister of State's contribution. The Dutch figure has been misconstrued. The increase of 3% is in the procurement process, not in the projects. The figure of €10 billion is just wrong. The actual increase, which was shown in other research from Utrecht, which is perhaps where the Minister of State is getting this from, was 1%. As other colleagues have pointed out, that 1% increase in cost must be compared with the trade-off involved in losing quality and life-cycle costs. The actual value for money overall is bolstered by bringing in quality. It is not diminished, which is what the Minister of State's whole contribution seemed to say.

The Government says it wants value for money. This Bill would bring value for money. It is achievable within the framework of the most economically advantageous tender. We chose, as a member state, to interpret it in a completely restrictive manner. All this Bill would do is address that. To say it is premature when it is in response to a 2014 directive, which was 12 years ago, is insane. It has taken us this long to get the legislation to the floor of the Dáil. It took work to get it through the Seanad, where colleagues of the Minister of State who will vote against it next Wednesday spoke in favour of it. Deputy Malcolm Byrne, who was then a Senator, spoke in favour of it. I have the quote here. He will shortly to vote against it. What changed between 2022 and 2025? He spoke in favour of it. The Government spoke in favour of it. I ask the Minister of State to tell me why we should now decide that this is not the way to go.

I want to pick up on another factual piece. The Minister of State talked about the ministerial oversight that is sought when cost-only is required. That is an out-of-date response. It was in one of the earlier drafts of the legislation. That is exactly what I was talking about. Senator Higgins addressed that in this newer 2022 draft. The updated Bill stated a requirement for a

senior figure in the organisation, which means it will not have to go to ministerial level. That is another point I wanted to address.

The Minister of State referenced the progress that has been made in this space. I fully acknowledge that progress has been made. Circulars have been issued. It is referenced in the national strategy for collective bargaining as a pilot. All of that is the result of the work of Senator Higgins. It is because she has been engaging with the OGP and officials in the Minister of State's Department. That is why this is happening. This legislation would put it on a statutory footing and give clarity to everyone. That would allow us, as a member state, to say that we are progressive in our procurement and that we are recognising the social and ethical considerations that should be a part of the procurement process.

Going back to the point about value for money, this Bill would allow for better decision-making that embraces value for money. The Minister of State said that it contradicts the Government's aim of supporting local and indigenous businesses, but he is wrong. That is exactly what it will do. As I said earlier, I have done this. I have designed and overseen procurement processes as part of the development and running of a State agency. I can say that because the culture is lowest cost only, the hands of the people in the procurement process are tied. They come to the decision-making process and see someone coming in who they know is problematic but they have to give them the contract because they have low-balled. That is what happens. The Minister of State talks about freedom. The freedom in the existing process is a fallacy. This Bill would empower people to introduce social and ethical considerations. That is a side aspect. The main thing it allows is the rewarding of good behaviour. It would reward good performers who will provide quality contracts to the State. That is what the Bill would allow for. It would not tie people's hands. It would untie them.

I also want to reference the example of CervicalCheck, which was touched on a couple of times. I do not think it has been shared that the Scally report, which was an independent review of the CervicalCheck scandal and the screening programme, identified an overemphasis on obtaining the lowest cost from suppliers without equivalent emphasis on other quality and service-level measures as a key concern. That is a human cost of a poor procurement process. The independent expert is telling us that it is because we could not consider quality in the process.

We have the big-money scandal of the children's hospital. We have the tragic human scandal of CervicalCheck. Numerous examples have been outlined today, and yet this Government continues to oppose the legislation.

I think I know where the heart of the Government's objection lies. At the beginning of his speech the Minister of State referenced there being an increase in the level of bureaucracy and competition. He also said it seemed the entire Bill was premature. What is actually going on is the Minister of State and the Government are buying in to the current European vision for simplification and harmonisation. They are the two words I hear again and again. I am hearing them in relation to AI and the digital omnibus package travelling through the EU at the moment. We hear it about the occupied territories Bill. We hear about simplification and harmonisation all the time. One of the Minister of State's colleagues mentioned relieving the regulatory burden to me last week, though I cannot remember what it was in relation to. This is a better way to do procurement but, according to the simplification agenda, the Minister of State suggests it is about increasing regulation. That is my issue. I suspect what the Government

wants is deregulation. It wants to embrace this drive to the bottom and this abandonment of the European Union standards we all hold dear and cherish as citizens of the Union. That is the agenda that is being promoted and which this Government is buying into hook, line and sinker. It does not make me anti-European to say that.

We are one of 27 member states. I had a brief exchange on this with the Minister for public expenditure and reform last night and he told me this is not in line. The Minister of State has said the same and that, basically, these discussions are happening. I do not buy that for a second anyway because those discussions and negotiations will take years, meaning the Government could implement this legislation and then deal with anything else further down the line. As such, I do not buy it time-wise. When it comes to ethos and principles, however, if the Government knows simplification is coming and that it will ultimately drop the standards and quality of the procurement process in this State, it should not be rushing to conform to it. The Government, on behalf of the Irish people, should be pushing against it with all its might. That is what this Bill does. The Government should go back to the table and say Ireland has introduced quality into the process and it has been beneficial to the State, rather than waiting for the EU to tell it to drop it altogether. That is the saddest part of all this. In his response the Minister of State tried to pick things out and used examples that are ill-informed, poorly packaged and show me he does not understand what this Bill attempts to do. Underlying this is that the Government is hell-bent on the agenda of simplification, which in other words is deregulation. This Bill does not sit with that and that is why the Government is going to resist it. That is what has changed between 2022 and 2025.

Like Deputy O'Reilly, I urge the Minister of State to bring this back to the Minister, Deputy Chambers. I will continue to talk to the Minister of State's colleagues. I have talked to so many of them over the last two weeks who looked at the Bill and said it was a great idea and asked why we are not doing this already. I will continue to do that until the vote next Wednesday and I am going to look all of them in the eye when they vote against it.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 4.43 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 17 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 4.43 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 February 2026.