



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 19 Feabhra 2026

Thursday, 19 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 Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 44 - Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Income Inequality

1. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the way in which he will address the disparity in income levels across the State; the way in which he will ensure high-paid jobs are not only centralised in major urban areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13851/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: What is Minister doing about the disparity in income levels across the State and what is he doing to ensure that well-paid jobs are not just centralised in the major urban areas but also spread out to the regions?

I and many other rural and regional Deputies stand here week in, week out asking for fairness and balanced regional investment to attract secure and well-paid jobs to our regions. We have an over-concentration of high-paid employment in major urban centres forcing people to relocate or commute long distances just to access employment opportunities.

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): The programme for Government sets out a strong enterprise and fiscal framework that prioritises economic and employment growth. Last year, the Irish labour market saw sustained

employment growth and rising participation with a record number of persons at work at 2.8 million people so our policies are working and our economy is resilient. The latest data to hand shows that our labour market was better than many had expected in the latter part of 2025 with the monthly unemployment rate revised down to 4.7% in December. Other data, such as CSO information on employee payrolls, also shows positive momentum at the end of 2025 with employee numbers up 2%. However, I do expect that activity levels will moderate through this year in part due to international conditions but also given that the labour market is close to full employment.

My Department is continually monitoring labour market conditions and several of our recent initiatives will be central to supporting the broader economy not least our ambitious investment plans and the action plan on competitiveness and productivity I published last year. The Government remains fully committed to improving our competitive position and adding more jobs in the future and the action plan has a range of measures to build a more resilient economy.

Another important initiative on the labour market front will be the successor strategy to Pathways to Work 2021-2025, which is overseen by the Department of Social Protection. That Department has recently concluded a public consultation on this as the Government looks to develop a new successor strategy.

In respect of the high paid jobs being centred on major urban areas, it is important to stress this Government's commitment to balanced regional development. Over the past number of years, we have seen strong regional development with intensive employment growth post-pandemic. Since the pandemic, numbers at work have increased by close to one fifth - 440,000 persons. In fact, budget 2026 highlighted in particular the spread of employment growth with job gains in every region in marked contrast to previous employment expansions. For example, between 2013 and 2019, growth was disproportionately driven by Dublin.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The newly released 2024 data from the CSO shows stark disparities in disposable income and worrying employment trends, particularly around the northern and western region. I will set out some of the figures that are causing me concern. The average disposable income per person nationally in 2024 was €30,139 but in the northern and western region, it was €27,166. In Mayo, it was €27,343, which was almost 10% below the national average. That is not a marginal gap but a clear regional imbalance that confirms what communities already know, which is that workers in the northern and western region are more likely to be in lower-paid employment and have less money left at the end of the month. Even more alarmingly, in 2024, 58,140 people were recorded as employed in jobs physically located in Mayo, which was a drop of 8.7% on 2023.

Deputy Peter Burke: I would point out that the gold standard for us as politicians and our citizens is the CSO. It has pointed out that all 13 sectors of the economy are growing equally and that the gross average industrial wage is over €1,000 per week, which is a 45% increase since 2015. We have seen 2,700 new jobs in the west over the past year, which means 2,700 families have an additional income this year compared to last year. It also means that we are working to ensure we have very strong clients based on budget 2026. Look at Hollister in the Deputy's own area. Look at AbbeVie, Coca-Cola, Fanta and Baxter. These are huge multinational clients providing high-value jobs in the west. The policies in budget 2026,

particularly our research, development and innovation tax credit, will deliver high-quality, high-paid jobs and that is what this Government is committed to doing.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: There is something to see here. I ask the Minister to pay attention to this because what I quoted to him in terms of the drop of 8.7% in 2024 in Mayo alone represents 5,540 fewer jobs located in the county in just one year. Yes, some people commute to neighbouring counties but when the number of jobs physically based in a county falls so sharply, it signals declining regional investment and missed opportunity. While this data does not yet include 2025, it paints a deeply worrying picture of growing regional inequality. The statistics do not lie. Balanced regional development cannot just remain a slogan. If high-paid jobs continue to cluster in a small number of urban centres, we will deepen the housing crisis pressures in those cities, hollow out rural communities and widen the income gap between regions so we need very targeted regional enterprise strategies and stronger incentives for high-value industries to locate in the northern and western region.

Deputy Peter Burke: The data I am quoting relates to quarter 3 of 2025, so this is the up-to-date data regarding new high-quality jobs going to the west. The figure is 2,700. There are 3,900 new jobs in the midlands while the figure in the south west grew by about 4.7%, so all sectors are growing, all component parts that make up our economy are growing and our wages are growing. Critically, the key point in the CSO annual return in December was that this is the first time that we have seen real wage growth in our economy and that the growth in wages outpaced the rate of inflation, which means people have more purchasing power. The data is very clear for everyone to see. We want to continue on the basis of budget 2026 to bring more high-quality jobs to rural areas. Our IDA strategy is very focused on that with 55% going to the regions. This will be key to delivering that over the next five years and we are very much committed to doing that.

National Minimum Wage

2. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment whether he will increase the minimum wage for apprentices to address the construction sector skills gap. [13853/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need about 80,000 additional construction workers to meet our infrastructural needs and goals over the coming years. That means we have to make apprenticeships much more attractive for people to go into, so we have the tradespeople and the craftspeople to deliver on those infrastructural goals. We also have skills shortages in many other areas. There are many aspects to making it more attractive to take up apprenticeships but increasing the minimum payment, particularly in the first few years of apprenticeships, is critical. Does the Minister of State intend to raise these minimum pay rates for apprentices?

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): My Department has responsibility for the National Minimum Wage Act 2000. The Act prescribes the minimum hourly rate of pay for the majority of employees in Ireland subject to a small number of exemptions. Apprentices are excluded from the Act and from the right to receive the national minimum wage. Apprentices are excluded from the National

Minimum Wage Act in recognition of the unique nature of apprenticeships and the fact that a long-established practice for determining rates, which adequately protects apprentices, exists.

Apprenticeships offer a unique combination of education and work experience. When the national minimum wage was first introduced, it was recognised that providing an exemption for apprentices would promote apprenticeships and encourage employers to focus on training apprentices and offering opportunities to them while at the same time recognising the cost to employers in terms of time invested and productivity forgone.

Apprentices are employees and all of the 78 apprenticeship programmes are undertaken under a contract of employment. For the majority of apprenticeships, the rate of pay is agreed between the apprentice and the employer with the employer paying the apprentice during both on-the-job and off-the-job training elements. For the 25 craft apprenticeship programmes, the minimum rates of pay applying under the employment contract are either agreed within the relevant sector or are set out in legally binding sectoral employment orders recommended by the Labour Court.

I know that considerations regarding apprentice wages may affect learner and employer demand for apprenticeships. Wage levels may present a barrier to entry to apprenticeships for some individuals. Conversely, wage costs and training costs may discourage some employers from hiring apprentices. We must consider this issue very carefully.

9 o'clock

While I take the point about apprentices in training, the CSO has reported that over 90% of apprentices who qualified in 2020 were in employment two years later with median weekly earnings of €935 and over €48,600 annually.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The average starter age for somebody taking up an apprenticeship is 21 to 22 years. While many of those are living at home, many are not, and some want to get out of home. If the Minister of State wants to make it attractive, a first-year wage of €7.67 per hour or €11.50 per hour in the second year is not exactly an attractive option. If they are living out of home or if they have children, it is completely unsustainable. There are then added things like equipment costs, which are very significant for many apprentices, transport costs and so on.

We have got a major problem in delivering on our housing goals. We are failing significantly. We are tens of thousands short of what we need annually in terms of houses to put roofs over the heads of the people in this country. We have to make it more attractive and that means raising these pitifully low wages, particularly in the first and second years for apprentices.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government is taking important steps with regard to supporting the apprenticeship programme. We have seen huge investment in recent years. In budget 2026, we allocated over €78 million to the apprenticeship programme. This investment is delivering significant results. We have seen annual apprenticeship registrations increase from 5,326 in 2020 to 9,352 at the end of 2024. We are very ambitious to drive that to 12,500 by 2030 and, indeed, we have worked with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to try to support that. Our focus is on supporting entry and ensuring

that we have retention and completion. The Government's new updated action plan on careers in construction for 2026 is an important element of that. It specifically looks at barriers to participation, especially for women, but also for those who are under-represented and those we can include into the construction sector because, as the Deputy said earlier, we need to ramp up the number of apprenticeships coming through.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The number of people has increased, but it is still well short of what we need because, as we know, we have a housing emergency, we have water infrastructure that we have to develop and we have shortages in a whole number of areas, including a shortage of chefs. We have to make it more attractive. The further education committee is producing a report next week which goes into many aspects of this. I repeat that the wage for the first year is €7.67 per hour and for the second year is €11.50 per hour. If the average age of people going into apprenticeships is 21 to 22, it is just not a runner. I cannot say it is not a runner because some people do it, but it is tough going. If the Minister is talking about inclusion and the barriers that exist for women, people with disabilities and different groups, this is a serious barrier and we need to do something about it. Part of the reason I am in favour of a State construction company is so we can take on more apprentices on better rates and make it more attractive to be an apprentice. At a minimum, we need to raise those first-year and second-year rates to minimum-wage rates.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We are all in agreement that we need to address the construction skills gap and that is very much central to the Government's strategy. We do not want to price young people or employers out of the system and that is important to reflect on. We are investing in career pathways, educational access and targeted incentives. We are very much focused on building confidence in careers within the construction sector through apprenticeships and we want to do that. As I said earlier, apprentices are not at the bottom of the pay scale when it comes to their transition with a skill that they have developed over their apprentice programme. Most who qualify are on over €49,000 per year two years post entry into the sector. That is reflective of the programme they undertake, but also their post-qualification position and what that means.

We need to do more and that is why we are continuing to invest with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the craft apprenticeship programme to address the skills gap across the sector.

Small and Medium Enterprises

3. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on the comprehensive review assessing the cost structures for SME and family-owned businesses, which can be found in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13850/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The cost of doing business in this State for small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs; family-owned businesses; and the self-employed is running out of control. In the programme for Government, it is listed that the Government will conduct a comprehensive review to assess the cost structures for SMEs and family-owned businesses

to identify areas where costs can be reduced. Will the Minister provide an update on this review? Will he tell businesses the areas he has identified where costs will be cut?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her important question. The Government recently established the Cost of Business Advisory Forum and published the action plan on competitiveness and productivity, both of which are commitments in Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future. The establishment of the Cost of Business Advisory Forum delivers on the commitment regarding supports for small businesses, enterprise and industries. The forum is a tripartite collaboration bringing together various representative bodies spanning multiple sectors as well as SMEs. The purpose is to jointly consider those issues that can lead to higher costs for businesses in Ireland, any associated regulatory or infrastructural issues that merit a changed approach, and steps that could be taken to mitigate these issues.

The first meeting of the advisory forum took place in June. Numerous organisations representing Ireland's enterprise sector, including SMEs, were joined by officials from a variety of State agencies and Government Departments. The second meeting, which was the forum's first thematic meeting, took place in July and focused on energy costs and security of supply. Other thematic meetings included a meeting on insurance costs in August, a meeting on regulation and planning in September, November's meeting focused on water services, the meeting in January of this year focused on legal costs, and a meeting on tax reporting and compliance took place yesterday. The forum has met regularly over the past eight months, with each meeting devoted to a distinct thematic area of concern for businesses. There are two outstanding meetings. The last thematic meeting will be on banking, payments and financial services and will take place on 25 March. The last meeting of the forum will focus on members' feedback in relation to the final report to the Government and is scheduled for the first half of 2026.

The focus of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity is on the key actions that can be taken to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness and productivity which in turn will lead to improvements in our economic performance. The action plan was published on 10 September 2025 and contains 85 actions across six themes, including the third theme, which focuses on creating and scaling more SMEs.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for that update. The important thing is that it makes a difference on the ground and makes a difference to businesses because the situation facing SMEs with regard to costs is increasingly more unsustainable. We saw 848 insolvencies last year. I fear for what the number will be in 2026. At the end of 2025, 80% of businesses from across all sectors that participated in the SME business sentiment survey by Chartered Accountants Ireland and GRID Finance reported an increase in their costs, with a special mention for energy costs. It was reported yesterday that Irish business confidence has fallen to just 54%. This is the lowest level since the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is down sharply from 81% at the beginning of the year. In contrast, 74% of SMEs globally remain optimistic about the year ahead with only a slight year-on-year decline, so there is something we need to focus on here.

Deputy Peter Burke: I focus on evidence. I refer, for example, to the measures that were taken in budget 2026, such as the reduction in the VAT rate for the hospitality sector. We are giving the sector 4.5% on its margin to assist with its costs and we are saying that we need 7% growth right across the tourism sector under our strategy, A New Era for Irish Tourism. We have also reduced energy costs with the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity. We have increased the loan limit available from Microfinance Ireland to €50,000 for low-cost loans into the sector and will be coming forward with a working capital programme to succeed the growth and stability loan of €500 million, which was utilised late last year. We also increased the innovation voucher to €10,000. Critically, we reduced a host of conditions for sustainability grants like the energy-efficiency scheme, which gives €10,000, or 75% of the cost, to small businesses like local shops and butchers. Such small businesses on the high street are so important to the fabric of rural life. We will keep doing that and keep working to ensure we do our best to reduce those key costs for businesses.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The question that must be asked is this: what is happening here at home? When we look globally, the Minister has named all of the initiatives he is doing but why are Irish business leaders growing even more pessimistic about the future? Confidence in projected revenue growth dropped dramatically at the end of last year, from 79% to 59% in just three months. When businesses were asked about increasing head count in 2026, the figure dropped from 59% to 46%. These figures are not abstract statistics; they signal the slowing of growth, reduced hiring and growing uncertainty across local economies. We need to look at this and we need more actions.

SMEs and family-owned businesses are the backbone of our economy. They sustain communities, provide employment in rural and urban Ireland and drive innovation and local enterprise. The programme for Government recognised the need for a comprehensive review of SME cost structures. Businesses are now urgently waiting for that to make a real difference in their businesses and in keeping their doors open.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am very acutely aware of the cost of doing business. That is why we have brought forward a forum, it is why we are going to take action in this regard and it is why we have taken a suite of measures across budget 2026. We know what is happening in the Irish economy; 2.82 million people are employed in our country. That is a record. We know that the average wage is €1,000 per week. That is a record; it is up 45% since 2015. We know that all 13 sectors of the economy that are measured in the CSO data are growing. That is a record right now in this country. Our tax revenue coming in to resolve the infrastructural deficits we have is at a record level.

I would point out that the Deputy has opposed every attempt I have made to stabilise small businesses, from subminimum rates to the living wage to sick days - every area that drives costs for business. If you ask a small family business what its biggest driver and challenge is, you will be told that it is wages. The biggest challenge for every business is wages. We are assisting with that and we are helping real wage growth in the economy, where we know our most vulnerable employees are outpacing the rate of inflation with their pay packets.

Youth Unemployment

4. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his concerns regarding the high levels of youth unemployment; the initiatives he has in place to tackle it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13849/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We wanted a PRSI rebate in the budget to help businesses with their costs, including additional labour costs. We need good, quality jobs. We do not need a race to the bottom but we will have that discussion on another day. I wish to ask the Minister if he is concerned about the levels of youth employment. What initiatives is he putting in place to tackle it? I am deeply concerned with the consistently high level of youth unemployment here. The latest figures for January show that it stands at 12%; it wavers between 12% and 14%.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for her question. The programme for Government sets out a strong enterprise and fiscal framework that prioritises economic and employment growth, with a target of creating 300,000 extra jobs by 2030. I am pleased to report that the Irish labour market saw sustained employment growth, rising labour force participation and record job numbers last year, indicative of a resilient performance. In total, over 2.8 million people are now employed in Ireland.

The unemployment rate remained unchanged at 4.7% in January, broadly consistent with full employment. The youth unemployment rate, for those between the ages of 15 and 24, increased slightly to 11.8% in January but remains well below the EU and euro area averages. It is not unusual for youth unemployment rates to be higher than those of older cohorts. This can be due to a lack of relevant work experience among youth workers, skills mismatches, or difficulties experienced in moving between education and employment, with clear seasonal and demographic patterns. However, many of these factors are temporary in nature. As young people widen their professional networks and gain broader work and life experience, their employment prospects improve. It is also important that we focus on employment as well as unemployment, with the former clearly under the remit of my Department.

The statistics show that we created a lot of jobs right across the economy last year and that our employment rates for young people are very high by any margin, certainly in comparison to our European peers. It is important to stress that huge numbers of our young people are in education or training as well as in employment. I can point the Deputy to CSO data for this very subject, in particular the CSO data on a series of measures in regard to the numbers of people not in employment, education or training, the so-called not in education, employment or training, NEETs, rate. In 2023, for Ireland, the rate was 8.6% relative to an average of 12.1% across Europe. We are doing so much right here in creating opportunities for young people.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The Minister of State rightly says that this is not unique to Ireland but I do not think that is a reason for saying that everything is okay. If you look at the EU average, yes, it is 15%. In Britain it is 15.3%. However, there are actions that need to be taken here. For unemployment in general, we have nearly three times that rate for youth unemployment. Young people who complete their education are struggling to find well-paid work. They deserve to have career prospects after completing their studies or training and having invested in obtaining a qualification. Some 44,600 people aged 15 to 24 years are currently unemployed in this country. When we say unemployed, obviously that is not people

in education but it is people who are available for and willing to work. I take on board what the Minister of State is saying around the lack of experience and all that but again, I think there is something worrying happening here in youth unemployment. These people are not in any form of education or training and we need to put initiatives in place.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I disagree entirely with the suggestion that Government is not doing anything and is complacent on youth employment. We can see from the CSO's recent data that it has clearly identified a temporary demographic and seasonal effect, while there is also a surge in young people entering the labour force for the very first time. That is not a collapse in youth opportunity; it is, in one sense, supported through the creation by this Government, across many sectors, of job opportunities within engineering, green technology and construction. We have seen a huge number of new opportunities being created, even in 2025. We are also seeing that most of the recent increases in youth employment affect those without post-secondary qualifications. That is why we have, as a Government, invested in programmes such as Springboard+ and MicroCreds and expanded the apprenticeship network. As I said earlier, we have an ambitious programme to continue to invest in apprenticeships to ensure that every young person can transition from learning and earn the right skills to enter the workforce correctly.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: My view of the world is different from that of the Minister of State. When you look at our own county, you see that Youthreach is a really good programme in regard to addressing disadvantage and social exclusion. We have waiting lists to get onto those programmes in Ballina and Kiltimagh. We do not have either the physical space to be able to do the training with them or the personnel. I ask the Minister of State to look at that in particular. We cannot leave so many young people behind. There are real social and economic consequences to leaving so many people behind and with adjustments, things could be done.

There needs to be a joining up of further and higher education and the workforce as well, which I do not believe is happening to the extent that it needs to be happening. In regard to investment in career guidance, it needs to start at a much earlier age - I would even say in national school, with regard to people's subject choices when they go into secondary school and taking it on from there. We do not have enough career guidance within the schools to ensure that young people can avail of the opportunities that match their interests and skills.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I agree with some of the Deputy's suggestions in regard to continued investment in key actions under Pathways to Work. I know that needs to provide enhanced supports for young people and jobseekers. The establishment of the employment and youth engagement charter is important to bring employers and young people together to tackle the barriers in regard to getting into the workforce.

As I said earlier, we need to continue to strengthen the partnership between our further education and private employment sectors and consider how the Government can support that.

We need to break the cycle whereby, if there is no experience, people are not entitled to a job, or if there is no job, there can be no experience. This is about aligning policy with education reform. We are making an important partnership by expanding flexibility around blended forms of learning and, as I said earlier, the apprenticeship model. We will continue to do that.

Small and Medium Enterprises

5. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the specific supports which are available to indigenous SMEs operating in rural towns to ensure their long-term sustainability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13848/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: As the Minister knows, small and medium enterprises are the backbone of our economy. Many of our young people end up getting their first job or first experience in these businesses. What specific supports are available to indigenous small and medium enterprises operating in rural towns to ensure their long-term sustainability?

Deputy Peter Burke: I am committed to boosting the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of SMEs across the country by supporting them to reduce costs and improve their overall productivity. The Government now has a range of supports available to SMEs to save on energy costs, while improving their sustainability. The local enterprise offices, based within the 31 local authorities, offer advice, consultancy and grants in the areas of lean, green and digital. These grants focus on enhancing productivity and improving competitiveness in small businesses.

Effective and efficient use of materials and resources can make a significant difference to the profitability of businesses, making them more sustainable and increasing their ability to respond to shocks in the economy. For example, the energy efficiency grant offers up to €10,000, or 75% of the costs, for small businesses to invest in technologies and equipment identified in a Green for Business, GreenStart or SEAI energy audit. The aim of the scheme is to reduce the impact of enterprises on the environment and, critically, their energy costs in the longer term.

Enterprise Ireland has a broad range of supports that help rural SMEs improve productivity, embrace digital tools and transition to a low-carbon future, which will be essential for their long-term sustainability. These include the climate action voucher, which provides up to two days of independent training or advisory services to develop an initial sustainability action plan, and GreenStart, which provides up to €5,000 to fund the cost of hiring a sustainability consultant to introduce best practice sustainable systems to the business. Additionally, the Climate Toolkit 4 Business is a free online resource where SMEs can estimate and understand their businesses' carbon footprint. Businesses receive a tailored climate action plan specific to their business, with recommendations on the most impactful steps they can take, and directions to the Government supports to help them achieve these steps.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the work being carried out by the local enterprise offices and Enterprise Ireland. Their support and engagement with businesses is widely recognised and is making a real difference. However, when speaking to SME owners, particularly in rural towns, the message is clear: they need more practical, easy-to-access supports that help with the real cost of doing business. Many enterprises, especially those that provide services rather than manufacture products, feel they are often left in the wilderness when it comes to qualifying for certain schemes. Retailers, hospitality providers and other local service businesses are the backbone of our communities. They create jobs, drive footfall

and sustain town centres, yet some believe that existing supports are not always designed with their needs in mind.

One measure that is frequently raised is the reintroduction of a scheme similar to the Power Up grant, which provided straightforward assistance when businesses needed it most. Will the Minister give consideration to bringing back a targeted grant to help SMEs manage ongoing cost pressures?

There is also growing concern about rising employment costs. While increases in the minimum wage are important, small employers are asking that future changes be linked more closely to inflation and introduced in a predictable manner, so they can plan ahead with confidence. Above all, we must continue listening to people on the ground.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy McCormack for his concern. I will make a few points. First, in addition to the sustainability grants, digitalisation allows businesses to either grow their revenue or reduce their cost base. That is a key way to change the business model. The critical thing about a grant is that the business does not change its model, which potentially leads to an unsustainable pathway, so it has to be done every single year. Businesses can increase revenue or reduce costs. That is how they get on a winning path. We are trying to continue with that. Our National Enterprise Hub has 250 supports. I would encourage all SMEs to log onto that to get the details on the range of supports.

I would also point out that we have reduced the VAT rate on gas and electricity for SMEs, and we reduced the VAT rate on hospitality to 9% from 1 July. I am saying to businesses in the hospitality sector that that is 4.5% on their margins. I need 7% growth from them to ensure we get a very strong return of jobs and revenue back into the Exchequer.

We also did a huge amount of work with the low-cost loans, increasing the microfinance loan to €50,000 and doubling the investment innovation voucher to €10,000.

Deputy Tony McCormack: No business should feel invisible when it comes to Government support, yet many service-based SMEs believe they are overlooked simply because they do not manufacture or export. These businesses face significant overheads before they even open their doors, from licences and regulatory requirements to insurance, energy, wages and other rising costs. Despite these pressures, they continue to provide local employment and play a vital role in keeping town centres alive. If we are serious about supporting them, we need to commit to delivering at least one new practical support specifically for service-based SMEs this year, and to engaging directly with business owners on the ground so the supports reflect the real challenges they face. Listening is important but it must lead to action. What clear, practical step can be taken now to reassure these businesses that their contribution is recognised, and that they will not be left behind?

Deputy Peter Burke: I would be willing to work with the Deputy across government to enhance the supports the LEOs have been offering to SMEs, the small family businesses that make up two thirds of all the employment across our country and drive so much of the economic activity in our communities. We are absolutely looking to enhance supports for them. The Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, and I are doing a lot of work in relation to the LEOs, Enterprise Ireland and the service level agreement that pertains to both.

With regard to the midlands, I would point out that from quarter 3 of 2024 to quarter 3 of 2025, 3,900 new jobs were created in that locality. Critically, that means there are 3,900 families with an additional income that was not the case a year earlier.

On the broader spectrum, budget 2026 was an exclusively enterprise budget. That will fuel the engine for the years ahead to ensure we can do so many things for employees and tackle our infrastructural deficits in the coming years. That will be critical to the success of our economy.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Small and Medium Enterprises

6. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps his Department is taking to support SMEs with rising delivery and postage costs, and the impact of those increased costs on their competitiveness and ability to do business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13367/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As other Deputies have raised, SMEs are acutely feeling the cost of business right now. Many of them do not have the budget or level of business to be able to engage the courier services for the same rates as bigger businesses. Many rely on An Post but it has recently increased its rates and lowered the upper limit for parcels. What is the Department doing to support small businesses dealing with the cost of delivery services so they can get their products to the consumers who continue to support them?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government fully recognises that small and medium enterprises have faced significant cost pressures in recent years, driven by high energy prices, global supply chain disruptions and international economic developments. Despite these ongoing challenges, progress is being made to support SMEs, with the Government taking proactive steps to implement measures to reduce business costs and ease regulatory pressures. The Government is pleased to note there are emerging signs of improvement, with the CSO's wholesale price index showing a 6.4% decrease in the year to December 2025.

The cost of postage is a commercial matter for An Post, and I would advise the Deputy to follow up with the company in that regard. My Department is delivering on the programme for Government with two priority commitments: first, to improve the business cost environment with the establishment of the cost of business advisory forum in June 2025; and, second, to strengthen Ireland's competitiveness position in response to international economic developments with the publication of the action plan on competitiveness and productivity in September 2025.

The cost of business advisory forum serves as a central mechanism to examine the key cost pressures affecting SMEs by bringing together business representative groups, Government Departments, State agencies and regulators to discuss a series of agreed thematic areas, such as energy, insurance, infrastructure and planning and legal costs. It is advancing further work on regulatory costs and payment, banking and financial services.

Its objective is to identify practical actions that can reduce the cost burden on SMEs and support a more competitive business environment. While delivery and postage costs have not been specifically raised as an issue for discussion by the members of SME representative bodies, the work of the forum is still ongoing. Work is under way to present its findings and a series of recommendations in a final report to Government and the indicative timeframe for that is later this year.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: This issue has been raised with me and I suggest that if the Government is looking for practical measures, this is one that it should explore. We have a landscape where many small businesses do not even have retail spaces any more and make the majority of their money from online orders which they then have to send via the post or by courier to their customers. The cost of doing this has gone through the roof and there is very little these businesses can do to mitigate it, except to put up their prices. I hear so much talk about Ireland's competitiveness and the need to support a competitive economy and yet this has a huge impact on the ability of small businesses to compete. This is at a time when we are encouraging businesses to explore further digitalisation. Local enterprise offices can only do so much and we need to see real ambition from the Department when it comes to addressing the daily struggles of small businesses in a meaningful way.

I accept that this should be raised with An Post directly and with the other Department with oversight of that organisation. However, this is not the first time that I have raised an issue only to be told to go to another Minister but I would argue that this is what Cabinet is for. Ministers can liaise with each other at Cabinet and the Department of enterprise can connect with the Department of culture, communications and sport to ensure that these small businesses are not being penalised.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Delivery and postage costs are primarily a commercial matter for An Post and that is the reality. We are in the Department of enterprise but there is a Minister of State in another Department who actually deals with An Post specifically. We will engage in open dialogue and listen further to business representative groups either through the enterprise forum or the retail forum the Minister, Deputy Burke, and I chair. If it emerges as a key priority, then certainly we will feed it directly into those considerations and escalate it through the proper channels.

I accept some of the Deputy's points and understand some of the frustration that small businesses and enterprises may face with rising input costs. That is why we have stepped up substantive supports in recent times. In budget 2026, we delivered over €9.4 billion in a pro-enterprise package to try to support our SMEs and businesses over the next number of years. We will ensure that Government can respond to the cost pressures but also build resilience into the sector so that we can continue to create jobs and support communities right across the country.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I appreciate the Minister of State's willingness to explore this issue. I would argue that there are two ways to tackle it. One is by looking at the retail costs of An Post and the other is by looking at the supports that the his Department can specifically offer. Small business owners who have contacted my office feel forgotten. Some are new, some have been in operation for decades but these businesses are not aiming to become big operations.

They provide goods and services that people want. They provide employment and a huge benefit to their communities. A small business which employs people but never expands to become a franchise, a mid-cap or unicorn is still a public good, an economic good and an important part of Irish society and enterprise. All of the supports that the Department has for such businesses seem to lead back to a business model based on either making SMEs into big businesses or allowing them to struggle and fold.

Delivery cost is such a nuts and bolts basic issue. Every business needs to be able to deliver its products to its customers. Recent changes have impacted the ability of SMEs to do that and compete effectively in our economy. This is something the Department should be keen to help to tackle and find solutions for.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I acknowledge the points the Deputy has raised. The Minister, Deputy Burke, the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and I are listening to businesses and SMEs. We have established the cost of doing business advisory forum, which is independently chaired. It engages directly with the key SME employer representative bodies, including IBEC, Retail Excellence Ireland, ISME and Chambers Ireland. It is a really important forum where we hear about the issues that matter most to businesses but also design practical policy responses. An integral part of that is ensuring that businesses can remain competitive, viable and sustainable into the future. I take the Deputy's point about the delivery and postal cost increases. If it is an issue of concern, we will respond in a systematic way to try to address some of the challenges that smaller businesses may encounter. Again, I thank the Deputy for raising this matter on the floor of the House.

Artificial Intelligence

7. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps he will take to tackle harmful AI tools (details supplied) and the online platforms that host them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4109/26]

16. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in light of reports that generative artificial intelligence tools can produce highly realistic child sexual abuse imagery, the specific engagement his Department has had on the online safety and cultural implications of such technologies for children and young people; the concrete actions being taken to ensure child protection and online safety frameworks are adequate to address these risks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [4132/26]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I ask the Minister to outline the steps he is taking to tackle harmful AI tools and the social media platforms that host them. I invite him to give a definitive statement this morning on the concrete actions being taken to ensure enhanced protection for online users.

Deputy Peter Burke: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 16 together.

I thank Deputy Byrne for her very important question. This is a very serious issue and the Government has been very clear from the outset that the sharing of non-consensual intimate images and the generation of child sexual abuse material is illegal and that the use of AI to

generate illegal material or to cause harm is unacceptable. The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, known as Coco's Law, creates a serious offence of distribution or publication of an intimate image without consent with intent to cause harm to the victim. Under the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act, the production, possession and distribution of child sexual abuse material, whether offline or online, whether generated by AI or otherwise, is illegal and attracts a sentence of up to 14 years imprisonment.

Under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission is responsible for the oversight of very large online platforms like X which are required to assess and mitigate risks that their services may create in relation to the proliferation of illegal content online and the protection of minors. An urgent cross-Government response was mobilised in response to this issue when it arose in January, including the relevant Ministers and the Attorney General as well as Coimisiún na Meán to ensure a full understanding of the significant legislative and regulatory framework that already exists and provides protections in relation to this issue and how it was being applied.

Coimisiún na Meán is Ireland's digital services co-ordinator under the Digital Services Act and has engaged intensively with the European Commission since the initial reports on this serious issue. Nationally, Coimisiún na Meán has met with the assistant commissioner for organised and serious crime, the heads of the Garda national cyber crime bureau, the Garda national protective services bureau and the online child exploitation unit as well as separately with both *Hotline.ie*, Ireland's national reporting centre, and the Data Protection Commission. An Garda Síochána has stated its full commitment to supporting victims and numerous investigations are currently under way to determine if there have been breaches of the law.

On 26 January the European Commission announced the commencement of an investigation into X and the use of Grok to generate and disseminate illegal content under the Digital Services Act. Coimisiún na Meán collaborated closely with the Commission in its preparation and is formally associated with the investigation. The Digital Services Act puts responsibility for facilitating the dissemination of harmful content where it belongs, namely with the online platforms.

The Government also welcomes this week's announcement by the Data Protection Commission that it has commenced a large-scale inquiry which will examine X's compliance with some of its fundamental obligations under the GDPR in relation to the matters at hand. It is important now to respect the independence of the relevant national authorities and the European Commission who are responsible for enforcement of the relevant laws and regulations and allow their investigations to be carried out independently and in accordance with procedural safeguards. In addition to these ongoing investigations, the Attorney General and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are examining the matter and will consider whether further legislative measures are needed in the area of non-consensual intimate images. Work is also under way in the Department of justice to transpose the EU violence against women directive which provides new protections in this area.

My own Department is liaising with the European Commission and member states to advocate for adding the use of AI systems for the generation of such images to the list of prohibited AI practices under the EU AI Act. Online safety will be a core pillar underpinning the new national digital and AI strategy which was published yesterday and a priority for Ireland's Presidency of the European Council. These measures reinforce the Government's

commitment to enhancing online safety, in particular for children and young people, as a whole-system priority.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: This question was originally submitted to the Minister for communications but was transferred to the Department of enterprise. I am not entirely sure why he did not want to answer it last week.

I note his comments about examinations, reviews and the work under way in various Departments but the fact is inaction by this Government against social media giants cannot continue. Thus far the Government has sat back and waited for anyone that is not it to act even though there are more than enough adequate Irish laws for it to use to step up and face down social media companies when harmful AI tools like Grok are used. The Minister mentioned Coimisiún na Meán extensively in his response. Coimisiún na Meán could use the Online Safety Media Regulation Act today to issue a penalty or fine of €20 million or up to 10% of turnover but it is waiting, like this Government, for the EU to conclude its investigation under the Digital Services Act. Despite everything the Minister has outlined, the Government is refusing to call on Coimisiún na Meán to use the Online Safety Media Regulation Act, so enforcement of the regulations in place is not paramount. While the story rolls on, in the absence of enforcement, people are left exposed, mainly women and children.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the publication of the Government's AI and digitalisation strategy but the issue relates to harmful products coming onto the market, as Deputy Joanna Byrne outlined. I appreciate we are going to be placing a lot more responsibility on the regulator but some of this has to be about putting responsibility back on the platform before the product or service is released onto the market. We are going to invest in our regulators to be able to deal with this, but the Minister will appreciate that if a new financial service or product is about to be launched onto the market, there are certain reporting obligations to the Central Bank as the regulator. We need to look at a similar situation where social media and AI companies, before they launch a product or service on the market, will have reporting obligations at that stage to the regulator to identify issues early before the product ever comes to market. The difficulty is we have been treating companies that operate in this space very differently from how we treat companies and organisations that operate in similar spaces.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have been dealing with big tech in a very different way. If we were just relying on good manners and decency, we would not need to have this conversation. It is difficult to see how anybody thought it was an okay idea to produce an application that would allow for the creation of child pornography. That is what we are talking about. I agree with my party colleague Deputy Joanna Byrne that we need to see the operation of the online safety and media regulation legislation here. We need action to be taken from our point of view while pressure obviously needs to be maintained on the European Commission to ensure the DSA is operated. Are we sure the legislative gaps are going to be dealt with in the sense that a tool like this should be absolutely illegal? It is also about taking on those who allow the app to be put up and provide the app stores where it can be downloaded. They cannot be let off the hook in any way.

Deputy Peter Burke: Irrespective of any entity, large or small, the Government will not be found wanting in protecting our children. I say that as the father of two young children. Our primary concern, irrespective of any company in this State or tax revenue any company will bring in, is our future, which is our children. Four investigations are live in this area, as I referenced, under the DSA by the Commission, Coimisiún na Meán, An Garda Síochána and the DPC. We live in a constitutional democracy. Due process has to happen for investigations. If I say anything here that prejudices an investigation that is ongoing, it would do a disservice to the State and the victims, who have been at the forefront of what we are speaking about. My action in relation to the AI Act has been on trying to ensure we get additional protections in. Critically, from our meetings with the Attorney General and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, and the work she has done, we know the law is strong in this regard. Investigations are ongoing and action will be swift. I will be very much at the forefront of calling for that, in the context of any company in this State. If it compromises in any way the safety of our children, it should pay the ultimate price. The Government is unequivocal on that. That is why are doing a huge amount of work over the next weeks and months in relation to the protection of our children and online safety, which will be so important, working with our European colleagues to get a co-ordinated response. We have to respect due process. Investigations are under way, which I referenced. That demonstrates action, and I am taking additional action under the AI Act and advocating through a European response.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Those are very strong words and it is great to hear the Government will not be found wanting in this regard, but talk is cheap if it is not backed up by action. I sincerely hope the Minister meant everything he said. The Government has powers. Nobody is asking him to jeopardise any investigation. It is just about enforcement of the powers under the existing mechanisms, to ensure they are enacted with the full rigour they can be in order that we will not have a repeat of the Grok scandal.

Deputy Peter Burke: I assure the Deputy those powers are under investigation in terms of completing the files. We know that from An Garda Síochána and the DPP. Independence is a core tenet of our democracy and we have to let investigations run their course. I cannot pre-empt action that might happen arising from an investigation because that would jeopardise the whole investigation. Action is very visible from the four authorities I listed that are investigating this, together with the work I am doing with the Ministers of State, Deputies Smyth and Dillon, in relation to the AI Act.

Labour Market

8. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the status of the review of the critical skills occupations list and ineligible occupations list; whether the review will take into consideration the availability of housing in addition to the needs of the labour market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13201/26]

Deputy Alan Dillon: Ireland's economic migration policy is designed to address verified and persistent skills shortages across the economy. The system is vacancy-led and managed through the critical skills occupations list and the ineligible occupations list, which the Department reviews on a regular basis. A new review of the occupation lists is under way.

This began with an open public consultation, which closed on 19 September and attracted a broad range of submissions including from the construction and built environment sectors. As part of this review, we consider both the eligibility of occupations and, where relevant, the need for quotas. Previous reviews have already made a significant number of construction-related roles eligible for permits, reflecting the importance of supporting increased housing delivery. For this review, the Department has worked closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure the employment permits system aligns with the national effort to expand housing supply. This collaboration focuses on identifying pathways for occupations that are essential to improving Ireland's housing output. More broadly, when assessing changes to the lists, we take into account not only labour market evidence but also wider whole-of-government collaborations. This includes the impact inward migration may have on housing demand, transport, health and other public services. The economic migration interdepartmental group has convened and considered the evidence of the Department's inputs. The Department is finalising the outcome of the overall review and we expect to publish the updated occupation lists in the coming month. I remain committed to ensuring the employment permits system continues to be responsive, evidence based and supportive of key national priorities, including the delivery of housing.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I would appreciate clarity on some specific points. The Minister of State said a new list will be published next month. I assume that means quotas will be allocated to various sectors. He also said that when deciding those quotas, the Department will give consideration to other factors including housing and access to services. What precisely does "take into account" mean? We know about the pressures, in particular on the housing market. We also know that the only way we are going to increasing housing demand is through having international workers.

There is a balance to be struck here. We know that in many areas there is a huge housing pressure. Some people who have come here on employment visas have ended up in desperate housing need and desperate housing conditions because their employers have not provided that or arranged that. In other areas, huge pressure has been put on the local private rental market because international workers have taken that up. Will the Minister of State clarify what exactly he means when he says "take account of"? How will that be a deciding factor in allocating quotas?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank the Deputy for the points he has raised. Targeted migration is essential for sectors, such as housing. It does not worsen the housing challenge that we are presented with. Through controlled and skilled-based migration into sectors such as construction, engineering and housing delivery, it directly increases our housing supply. That is reflective of the example where access to qualified tradespeople and technical specialists for housing completion will be a positive. Last year, over 2,000 permits were issued in the construction sector. That was a 47% increase on 2024. That is reflective in the completions. We have had over 36,000 new housing completions. These are record numbers. It is a 20% increase in housing supply from 2024. It is important to reflect that without those tradespeople and permits, our housing completions would slow down. It is having a positive impact regarding where we place these skilled labour workers.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I do not dispute anything the Minister of State said. When deciding what level of a quota any given sector is having beyond the construction sector, he said that his Department takes into account housing need and housing availability. How does the Department take this into account? On the one hand, we need international workers to help us build the homes that we need but, on the other, we have a housing shortage. When the population of a given area is substantially increased through any means, that is going to add pressure. How do those things balance out? The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and I come from a county that has a large agrifood sector, no more than the Minister of State's constituency. We know the value of international workers but we also know the benefits of companies providing housing and ensuring housing is in place for workers before they come because that makes integration and the life experience of those who are coming on permits and those who are already in the community much better. When that does not happen, it creates huge problems for housing demand locally. How precisely is housing need taken into account when deciding quotas?

Deputy Alan Dillon: We look at it through an interdepartmental group. We identify our domestic talent within certain specific areas in terms of where the skills needs are. My Department engages extensively with the Department of further and higher education, the National Skills Council and the skills and labour market research unit. We ensure that every recommendation on the occupations list is paired with where our domestic supply strategies are. That is across construction, ICT, healthcare and advanced manufacturing. We ensure the allocations we provide help to plug the gaps today, while we build up long-term strategies within the Irish capacity and educational system. It is about in one sense to manage carefully the balance between safeguarding our competitiveness, protecting our growth model and delivering for key sectors and our communities.

Employment Schemes

9. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps being taken to increase the very low participation rate for persons with disabilities in the labour market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13377/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: Employment opportunities are vital for the well-being of our population. This Government and the previous ones since 2011 have had remarkable success in giving our people employment opportunities. However, we have one of the lowest participation rates in the western world for people with disabilities at 32%. What actions are being taken to increase this number?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government continues to support workers throughout their careers with initiatives to improve work-life balance and flexible working arrangements, which encourages greater labour market participation including the participation of people with disabilities, resulting in greater diversity and inclusion within our workforce. The Government has a wide range of supports in place to assist people. For example, through the Department of Social Protection's Intreo centres, disabled people can access mainstream employment opportunities and employment schemes as well as referrals to

tailored supports, such as EmployAbility, which is a service that offers a professional job matching service and ongoing supports and advice.

I also point to the wage subsidy scheme, which offers employers a financial incentive in hiring disabled people. Budget 2026 recently provided for an expansion of the scheme to people who acquire a disability while in employment and to those who transfer from invalidity pension to partial capacity benefit. In April 2026, the subsidy rate will also increase. My Department is co-lead of the employment pillar in the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was launched in September last year. The ambition of the employment pillar of the strategy is to substantially reduce the employment gap between disabled people and others who are in employment and to enhance the opportunities for disabled people who can earn a living that they can do so. The central commitment for my Department is to establish a ministerial-led forum on disability employment as a subgroup of the Department's enterprise forum. This forum will be issue driven and serve as a means of progressing how best to support employers to employ people with a disability, including addressing the perceived obstacles from an employers' perspective and covering issues, such as cost, productivity and legal concerns. The forum would also be a means of raising awareness among employers of the benefits of employing a person with a disability.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister of State. I commend him on those actions. However, what is missing here are some of the numbers as this hides the scale of the problem. These figures can never be totally accurate as people tend not to disclose due to stigma or fear of discrimination or may answer differently depending on who is asking the questions. Based on labour survey data, there were 181,700 people with disabilities in employment in 2024. With a 32% employment rate for persons with disabilities in Ireland, this potentially means that there are 386,000 unemployed persons with disabilities. Based on these figures, Intreo centres need to engage with these unemployed people. Even by contacting 35,000 in early engagement, this is only 10% of the total. While activities are occurring, these are not even close to making a dent in the unemployment numbers.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I strongly support the question raised by my colleague. It is critical that we enhance opportunities for those with a disability. I particularly encourage a further examination of the wage subsidy scheme. The Government made a significant increase in the context of budget 2026. Although it does not come into effect until the beginning of April, it could be considered in the budgetary process for 2027. For instance, a company like Murphy Furniture based in Tinahely, which has a number of stores operating right throughout south Leinster, employs a significant number of people with intellectual disabilities and who are neurodivergent. It is a challenge because companies have to adapt their operations in some of those cases. Something like the wage subsidy scheme is critical but there are costs involved. In the context of the budgetary discussions with the Department of Social Protection, I encourage the Minister of State to address this as well.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank both Deputies for raising these important matters. I absolutely share the concerns they have raised and about how long change has taken in this area. I want to underline that we are finally moving from language to implementation. Through the reporting and monitoring implementation group chaired by the Taoiseach, he wants to see the

pillar around employment progress. As I said earlier, we have an employment gap between those who are disabled in employment and those who are not. At the most recent Fine Gael disability network conference, it was very apparent that we need to engage more with employer representative bodies to try to engage better with them to see what the perceived barriers are but also to ensure the likes of the wage subsidy scheme are refined to meet the needs of those who can avail of it.

10 o'clock

The 15-hour threshold is a bit of a challenge. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, has been informed about that. It is something we could use into the future.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I compliment the Minister of State on the very successful disability conference that was held in Galway a couple of weeks ago. What is the Government doing to upskill people across the board in recruitment and employment services? These are the people who find the people with disabilities and put them into jobs. There are potentially over 100,000 people available to work who could be living more fulfilling lives and contributing to the tax base but who are now unemployed, with many receiving social welfare payments at a cost to the country when that is not necessary. We are not being fair to these people and giving them the opportunity to succeed. Having these programmes is great but I do not see their impact or their targets. How are these programmes increasing the participation rate, particularly as Ireland ranks lowest in the EU for the participation of persons with disabilities in the workplace? What are the targets to show progress in this area over the next five years?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Many of us have spoken in here about the low level of employment among those with disabilities. I get that, to a large degree and particularly with some of the schemes, this falls into the ambit of the Minister for Social Protection. However, a holistic approach is needed. While we have seen decent work and decent schemes such as WorkAbility, EmployAbility and the work of the Trinity centre and others in engaging with employers, I do not think these are sufficient. It is too *ad hoc*. We need to see a greater level of engagement.

With regard to the wage subsidy scheme, a number of employers, particularly those who employ more than one person with disabilities or a considerable number of them, say the scheme does not take sufficient account of the added costs of doing so. The reasonable accommodation funding provided through the work and access programme is also not fit for purpose. All of that needs to be looked at. Even with the wage subsidy scheme, we probably need to look at the self-employed and entrepreneurs. All of that is necessary.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputies for raising these important matters. The most important lesson we have learned as to why there have been low rates of participation is that employers have not been engaged enough. We need to turn the dial as regards the challenges they may face and the barriers that may present themselves. We must ensure they are supported to have better disability and inclusion policies that are focused on employers. The voices of those within the disability sector also need to be heard at that table. We will look at the concerns, the challenges and the stories that have been presented. Many businesses want to

employ people but need clarity on flexible arrangements and legal obligations. We have schemes in place that are managed through the Department of Social Protection. However, the Department of enterprise also wants to ensure that enterprises, SMEs and businesses are supported through the Department of Social Protection. That is an important element.

Artificial Intelligence

10. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will establish an AI observatory to complement the national AI office, and track real-time issues and project future impacts on jobs and skills to provide independent forecasting and policy advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12952/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Question No. 10 will be taken by Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Will the Minister establish an AI observatory to run in parallel with the national AI office to look at real-time figures with regard to jobs displacement and the skills needed for Ireland to avail of the opportunities AI presents?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his question. Last year, the Government received recommendations from the AI Advisory Council and National Skills Council to establish observatories on AI and skills. The action plan for competitiveness and productivity subsequently included a strategic action to establish an AI observatory. The basis for these observatories is a need to provide up-to-date data and insights on aspects such as labour market dynamics, skills and other AI metrics. I fully agree that the intelligence developed through the work of the observatories could greatly assist the Government by providing evidence on an ongoing basis to inform policy decisions.

The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science recently brought a memorandum to Government informing it of his intention to progress the establishment of a national skills observatory. It is envisaged that the national skills observatory will transform our skills intelligence landscape and provide a more joined-up approach to data gathering and use. The observatory will act as a central repository for labour market and skills information in Ireland, facilitating improved workforce planning, stronger policy and decision-making, and improved lifelong learning and workforce reskilling among other benefits. This will provide a valuable source of data and insights on the labour market and skills, including in relation to artificial intelligence.

My Department is currently considering an observatory focused on enterprise adoption of AI. Together with the national skills observatory, this would inform Government in shaping future AI-related enterprise and jobs policy. The establishment of an observatory on the enterprise adoption of AI is a deliverable in the new national digital and AI strategy, which was published yesterday.

AI is evolving rapidly and its impacts are difficult to predict. The Government is committed to strengthening our capability to understand and respond to the opportunities and challenges ahead through the AI observatory. It will be a key piece in supporting our actions.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister for the priority he has been giving to this proposal. As he says, the advisory council has strongly recommended it, as have those of us on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence. Change is happening at pace and things are happening quickly. We saw the recommendations within the Government's strategy on AI and digitalisation, which was published yesterday, but we also had a report from the Department of Finance yesterday that identified that Ireland is potentially most at risk from rapid changes resulting from AI that will impact on the labour force, particularly in the areas of IT, professional services and financial services. It is therefore critical that we are equipped and that we see what these real-time changes are going to be. I welcome the moves by the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy Lawless, to provide microcredentials for skills and the whole-of-government approach through the skills observatory and AI observatory so that we will be prepared for the opportunities that will be presented and for the significant levels of job displacement we are going to see.

Deputy Peter Burke: As the Deputy has pointed out, it is critically important that risk is managed in this process. That is why the IDA has set out under its five-year strategy to train 40,000 people. In the first year, we reached 33,000. That is transformational. It makes jobs sticky and ensures that people are upskilled and ready to grasp the opportunities artificial intelligence presents. We have a skills base in the Irish economy. We have double the EU average number of ICT graduates. We also have double the EU average number of STEM graduates *per capita* in the 20 to 39 age category.

On 14 October, we will hold our AI summit. The Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, is doing huge work on that with the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and myself. That will be a key opportunity to showcase Ireland at the application stage. It will give us the opportunity to show what we can do and deliver in our economy. We look forward to driving the public trust and simplification agendas, which need to go hand in glove if we are to be successful and have a very strong model.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am hugely supportive of all of that. It is very welcome. It is unfortunate the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, cannot be here today but I welcome the fact that she is at the global AI summit in New Delhi. It is critically important that Ireland takes a leadership role in this space. There is already anecdotal evidence that we are seeing significant changes in the jobs market so I welcome the fact that we are looking to be ahead of this. It is critical that there is an understanding within the Minister's Department and across the broader public service. I suggest that civil and public servants be encouraged to undertake the new programmes being launched through the Department of further and higher education so that they will understand the potential of AI. It would serve us well for all Members of this House to have the opportunity to avail of some of these courses to understand the real impact of AI and other new technologies on the employment market and on society more generally.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is absolutely necessary that we track the changes in the jobs market. We are all aware of jobs that have been displaced and replaced. It is a matter of being able to react and being agile. That is something that goes without saying.

We have already discussed issues around the regulation of artificial intelligence, which is absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, I have to agree with Deputy Byrne. We need training - and we could do with starting in here - on what AI can do. In this entire conversation, we need to ensure we do not lose out on the possible benefits and innovation. If we talk about the health sector, we have seen in many other states that huge improvements and streamlining can be introduced. That is a necessity. We must ensure that element of innovation while offering protection and remaining agile in relation to changes in the jobs market caused by AI.

Deputy Peter Burke: I assure the Deputies we are very much responding to the huge challenge presented in the jobs market, but also the opportunity. The opportunity is very significant. The key pieces include skills, on which we have done a huge amount of work, and having our energy policy correct. The Deputies will have seen our large energy user policy, which gives a huge opportunity for sustainable use. Power will be a significant challenge in financing our offshore renewables and our green transition, which will go hand in hand with our digital transition. Leadership is important and we are doing that through our AI summit, the work being carried out in relation to our AI Act, establishing our AI office in August, having a regulatory sandbox in place and driving that pro-enterprise, proportionate agenda across the European Union.

We have to be careful to protect jobs in our economy. I know that more than most because every week I get notifications of redundancies across the economy. I see a trend in relation to those exposed to artificial intelligence. On the other side, there is huge recruitment with some companies taking on hundreds of jobs to further their research and innovation in artificial intelligence.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We move on to Question No. 11. Deputy Byrne is again taking this one.

Artificial Intelligence

11. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment his views on whether action is necessary to mitigate against an over-reliance on the private sector with regard to AI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12956/26]

Deputy Peter Burke: AI has the potential to have a profound impact on society, as well as providing significant opportunities to ensure we remain competitive and future-proof our industrial base through its adoption. That is why it is equally important to ensure we address the challenges AI poses around safety, privacy and fundamental rights in the public and private sectors. Harnessing the benefits of AI must go hand in hand with protecting the people it affects.

The new national AI and digital strategy was launched yesterday. It will work across government and cover key pillars including the delivery of public services, enterprise, digital infrastructure and skills. As AI is a cross-cutting technology, the recommendations have implications across a wide range of policy responsibilities spanning a number of relevant line Departments.

Much work has been done by Government, and will continue to be done, to put a strong guardrail in place for the development and use of AI in Ireland. This includes development of regulations, standards, guidelines and codes of practice.

Our ambition in the new national digital and AI strategy is to enhance digital literacy and basic skills not only for the economy but across all levels of society. It is envisaged there will be an enhanced dialogue with the public and key stakeholders, including in the context of the strategy. Our goal is to build public trust in AI and ensure people feel included in its development. Most importantly, we want societal values and concerns to directly inform AI research and how technologies are adopted.

To help inform Government, the AI advisory council provides independent expert advice on artificial intelligence policy and helps to build public trust in AI. Our wider national governance framework for AI, including Ireland's implementation of the EU AI Act, is designed to uphold fairness, transparency and strong protections for health, safety and fundamental rights, ensuring the development of safe, ethical and human-centric AI systems.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister. This question is based on a recommendation from the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence. I am encouraged by the approach Government has taken, particularly the publication yesterday of the AI and digitalisation strategy.

The Minister correctly stated in response to the previous question that this is related to our investment in digital infrastructure plus our investment in the energy grid, particularly in renewables.

Our approach has to be precisely, as he said. It is about getting the balance right between supporting innovation in the sector and using those technological tools to improve processes while at the same time maintaining public trust and ensuring the necessary guardrails are in place. It will be critical as part of the EU Presidency, which is what some of this question relates to, to talk of the EU's and, particularly, Ireland's digital sovereignty. I hope that will be one as the issues addressed as part of our Presidency.

Deputy Peter Burke: I assure the Deputy of our continuing work in the areas he referenced. About 85 recommendations came from the joint Oireachtas committee. Three referred to our Department, which I am happy to speak about. They related to the establishment of the AI office, which will take place in August; to the AI and digital summit on 14 October; and to the work we are doing on the simplification agenda, which will be key to building public trust and to ensuring we are hiving out the opportunity. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, is doing huge work on the public sector piece, as referenced in the strategy published yesterday.

As Members across the House have said, this is general purpose technology by its nature. Its transformational effects are like those electricity had decades ago. This will have a huge impact across every sector and every area of society. That is why it is important we have the skills to deal with it and are sharp in our innovative approach.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I very much welcome the Minister's approach on this. It is critical we bring the public with us and, as he said, that it be cross-government. Will he consider public

information campaigns to make people aware of the possibilities and challenges? He and I will probably remember the famous ads, "I don't know what a tracker mortgage is", so that people could understand financial products. We need to look in a similar way at artificial intelligence and have people sitting on the back of a bus saying, "I don't know what an algorithm is", and to get an understanding and explanation of that. The more understanding there is in society of the potential of the new technologies, the more it will inform those in business and in the public services about the opportunities and challenges.

I welcome the AI summit this October. It is a real opportunity to show Ireland as a leader in this space. The Government is taking the correct approach.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his comments. We will work together on this. He is right that building public trust is a big challenge. Awareness will be central to that. I work closely with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, who has responsibility for the public service piece. We can work hand in glove on the private sector piece, protecting employees, giving skills as best we can to respond to this opportunity and also working through our tax code to incentivise innovation. We are happy to work in the coming months. As 1 July will come quite quickly, it will be important we hit the ground running. We have the building blocks and foundation already to capture a lot of this opportunity.

Flood Relief Schemes

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the supports currently available to businesses that have been damaged following flooding or other storm-related damage; the total amount under each support scheme that was allocated in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13205/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The question relates to supports available to businesses damaged by flooding. We have just been through Storm Chandra and, on some level, people believe the rain will never actually stop. It is about ensuring we have fit-for-purpose defences. In my county's case, we need the OPW, the local authority and Uisce Éireann to ensure works are done, both short term and long term. We will be dealing with more of this, so we need the supports in place.

Deputy Peter Burke: My Department operates the emergency humanitarian flooding scheme for small businesses and voluntary, community and sports organisations affected by flooding as a result of extreme weather and unable to obtain flood insurance through no fault of their own. The scheme is administered by the Irish Red Cross on behalf of the Department.

The Department has activated the enhanced emergency humanitarian flooding scheme for businesses impacted by Storm Chandra and the subsequent heavy rainfall from 26 January to early February.

The enhanced scheme is for small businesses of up to 50 employees or whole-time equivalents, and community, voluntary and sports organisations. It provides a contribution towards the cost of returning a business premises to its pre-flood condition. There are two payment stages - an initial payment of up to €5,000, and then a second payment subject to

assessment of the damages by an independent, professional assessor. Under the enhanced scheme, the total funding available is capped at a maximum of €100,000 per small business or community, voluntary or sporting body. These funds may be used to replace damaged flooring, fixtures, fittings, and stock with the aim of enabling businesses to reopen as soon as possible.

As of 18 February 2026, the Irish Red Cross has received 57 applications for the enhanced emergency humanitarian flooding scheme. Total funding disbursed to date is €52,000, which represents initial payments of up to €5,000. Further payments will be made, up to a total of €100,000, once independent professional assessments are carried out. Further information and application forms are available on the Irish Red Cross website. The closing date for applications is 6 March 2026. The standard scheme, where the maximum contribution is capped at €20,000, was activated twice in 2025. It was first opened in early November due to flooding caused by a severe weather event in the Bantry area, and it was subsequently reopened in mid-November to assist those affected by flood-damage in County Wexford as a result of Storm Claudia. All claims have been processed under it at that particular time have paid out €82,000.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is vital that we have a standing support scheme. As I said, a huge piece of work needs to be done to ensure we are not looking at this constantly from here on out. When I think of my own county and the town of Dundalk, it is not only the CFRAM flood protections that are necessary but the Uisce Éireann infrastructure is not up to scratch. Unfortunately, the dates we are looking at are 2030 and 2033. That needs to be sped up. We have also engaged with the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, from a point of view of those smaller works that can be done and personal property protections. They are absolutely necessary. In the long term, that will reduce the amount of moneys that would need to be paid out. It is vital that this is available not only to sport and community organisations but also businesses. We need to have a conversation with insurance companies. It needs to be a very strong conversation. Does the Minister have any information, even though it is still open to 6 March, in relation to the applications that are in at this point?

Deputy Brian Brennan: I need to bring up the treatment of staff in the Merck facility in Arklow. The Minister is well aware that there is a planned closure for 2028. I know that within 24 hours, the Minister was there on site-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Sorry, Deputy Brennan, is the question on flood protection?

Deputy Brian Brennan: It is in south County Wicklow, which is badly affected.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I am sorry; the supplementary question has to be related to the initial question.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I commend the fact that the Minister has significantly increased the sums available when it comes to the humanitarian relief under storms. He did reference Storm Claudia, particularly with regard to the impact that had on County Wexford and the humanitarian relief which was open to businesses and sports clubs under that scheme.

Unfortunately, one of the clubs that was impacted in a big way was Woodenbridge Golf Club but the problem is that because it is over the border in County Wicklow, it was not deemed eligible under Storm Claudia. Bizarrely, it escaped some of the worst effects of the recent Storm Chandra. My office has made a request to the Department that it would consider the case of Woodenbridge Golf Club and the impact that Storm Claudia has had on it. I ask that the Minister intervenes in this case because it was similarly impacted by the floods but because it is in the wrong county it was excluded from the scheme.

Deputy Peter Burke: We are making the scheme as accessible as possible. I am prepared to work with Deputies in any areas that they wish to raise. It is also important to point out that the minor works scheme has gone up to €2 million from €750,000, which also is a big asset to businesses in the sector. As I said, we want to progress. That is why we have increased €20,000 up to €100,000 to reflect the seriousness of it. I am happy to work with the Deputies in question.

On Deputy Brian Brennan's issue, Merck is a significant and an important issue for his constituency. I met with so many of the employees with him a number of months ago. I assure him that the full industrial relations machinery of our State will be made available to support them. I know he has organised a number of meetings with my State agencies. I commend Deputy Brennan on the work he is doing supporting the workers.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was an absolute necessity that the money was increased. We are going to be dealing with this from here on in, so it is about ensuring we can react. From the Department's point of view, it is absolutely necessary that there is engagement in terms of those works that can be done to ensure we have greater levels of protections, be they natural or unnatural protections. There is a huge number of areas that are still impacting on issues that have not been resolved over many years. I am thinking in the last while of some of those businesses that have been impacted. It is the likes of the Carrickdale. I know Councillor Antóin Watters has been working alongside them to try to get some of the short-term mitigations. When the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, visited Blackrock, he was in McQuillan's Pharmacy. We need to look at protections for the likes of that. Short-term mitigations can be introduced before the long-term CFRAM protections and everything. The likes of the Spirit Store in Dundalk was affected by one of the recent storms and was flooded. We all know the danger of flooding and the impact it can have. The conversation with insurance companies is absolutely necessary because they are getting off the hook.

Deputy Peter Burke: I hear what the Deputy is saying. We have made progress across 52 schemes over the past four years. Huge work was done in Athlone in my own constituency. Work was done in Bandon, County Cork, as well. A number of these schemes have been very complex and there have been very different challenges in respect of each, either through the planning code or the complexity of delivery of them. CFRAM is very clear. There are 150 schemes that face one in 100-year events, 1% risk, that we are working through as a Government. We had a meeting last week to progress and fast-track a number of these schemes. From the Taoiseach down, we have given the commitment that we are working with minor works in terms of some remedial works that we can carry out now that can save businesses in the interim while we are waiting for the delivery of the significant schemes. They are a

challenge. We have a record level of investment there to support businesses. We have to ensure that. I know that when a small family business is flooded, it is devastating. It has a devastating effect on their family. It is the same in the case of a club. We have seen the pictures and heard stories that paint thousands of words. We will be at the forefront of supporting them in the months ahead.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Early Childhood Care and Education

91. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she is concerned at reports of early years services and childminders receiving bills for commercial rates; if she will act to ensure rates are not applied; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13520/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: In recent weeks especially, I have been contacted by a number of ECCE providers, as well as a number of childminders. So too have a number of my colleagues, and I am sure the Minister is well aware of this. They have been receiving commercial rates bills and have been contacted in relation to such moneys owed. I would like to know if the Minister is aware of this situation and what she intends to do about it in her role as Minister.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I confirm that I am aware that a number of early years services and childminders have been receiving rates payable notifications from their local authorities. Given the importance of early learning and childcare for children, families and communities across the country, I am giving this matter my full attention. I have met with my Cabinet colleague, the Minister, Deputy Browne, on this matter. Additionally, officials in the Department are engaging with their colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and Tailte Éireann. I am committed to furnishing the Deputy with an update once the Department has clarity on this matter.

It should be noted that commercial rates payments for early learning and childcare providers, including childminders, do not fall, as the Deputy will appreciate, within the remit of the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The Department has no role in determining which properties are rateable.

The making of valuations for rating purposes is the sole and full responsibility of Tailte Éireann, formerly the Commissioner of Valuation. Tailte Éireann falls under the aegis of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Further to this, as I stated previously, I believe childminders should not have their homes assessed for commercial rates. My understanding is that childminders are only likely to be charged rates if they have space dedicated solely to their childminding business, and that the large majority of childminders who use the normal family rooms in the house for childminding are therefore unlikely to be charged rates. Again, we would like to absolutely clarify this understanding and issue a clear message to childminders.

I appreciate the enormous concern and stress this is causing on the ground. I assure the Deputy, although this does not fall within our remit and I am very conscious it is a matter for Tailte Éireann, which I appreciate is independent of the Department of housing, we want to bring this to an end. I know there is not consistency across local authorities either in relation to the matter. That is something that needs to be addressed too.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I appreciate that the Minister has engaged with the Minister, Deputy Browne. Clearly, this is something that needs to be sorted out as quickly as possible because, as the Minister acknowledged, there is stress and worry. A lot of childminders were shocked to hear from Tailte Éireann and then to receive such rates that they never had before. It is important this issue is dealt with quickly. I fully appreciate it is not within the remit of the Minister's Department, but I acknowledge she has reached out to the housing Minister. This is something that needs to be sorted out very quickly.

I hosted a number of childminders from various parts of the State yesterday, along with Childminding Ireland. This is an issue they raised and one they want sorted out. There are obviously other issues in terms of childminders deciding their future but, for a lot of them, this is very much the last straw. It needs to be sorted out and I acknowledge the Minister is trying to do that. Does she believe legislation is required in order to exempt the likes of childminders and early childhood care and education, ECCE, facilities?

Deputy Norma Foley: I know the Deputy has been very engaged and active on this issue. I cannot underestimate, as I deal with it all the time, and the Deputy outlined this too, how this is causing incredible distress for so many who are an excellent source of support to families on the ground. I want to be clear. It has been the understanding of my Department that there are two exemptions for early learning and childcare services provided for under Schedule 4 of the Valuation Act 2001 and the 2015 amendment to the Act. ECCE-only services, whether these are for profit or are not-for-profit, are exempt under paragraph 10 of the 2001 Act, and not-for-profit early years services are exempt under paragraph 22 of the amended Act. The Department has previously received confirmation from the Department of housing, including at ministerial level, that the intention and practice was for the exemptions provided for in both the original and revised Acts to operate in tandem. I will also be clear in saying that is not the view of Tailte Éireann. I have to respect its independence and that it has a different view, but we are seeking to do the best we can, from all avenues open to us, to ensure clarity is brought to this.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: If that Act needs to be amended to specifically state childminders in particular, that needs to be done as quickly as possible. There still is not clarity. While I appreciate the Minister has been engaging, we need to hear that update on what is actually going to happen. As I said, we are at a critical juncture for childminders in the State. I and colleagues heard yesterday from a number of them, who are deciding after 17 or 18 years as childminders not to continue. Commercial rates were raised by each one of them as the endgame. This needs to be sorted out quickly. It would be beneficial for the Minister and helpful for everyone concerned, particularly when we look at the low number of childminders registering, to meet with Childminding Ireland and hear from it directly on this and other matters.

Deputy Norma Foley: As I said, there is a clear divergence of opinion here between Tailte Éireann and the view of the Department. We would absolutely be supportive of any measure that would bring clarity. Legislation, as referenced by the Deputy, does not fall within the remit of our Department but if that is the necessary step, it is the necessary step. We are doing all we can to support childminders, particularly to come into the registration process. There are dedicated individuals in every city and county childcare committee specifically designated to work with childminders. We want them to be part to the process and to have every opportunity to benefit from being part of the process. There is currently a pilot with childminders in receipt of core funding by a grant or whatever, and a consultation process as regards the wider childcare elements. Through that, there is a lot of engagement with childminders. I would be very happy to engage with them as well through that process.

Child and Family Agency

92. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the amount of funding provided to each provider of special emergency arrangements in 2025; the amount of funding provided to each provider of mainstream residential care in 2025; the total amount of funding in State-owned provision of mainstream residential care in 2025, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13264/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising the important issue of funding for Tusla's residential care services in which the Government has invested significantly over recent years. Officials in the Department have received the detailed financial information he requested from Tusla and will share it with him in full tabular form. In terms of headline figures, the information provided by Tusla indicates that the total cost for statutory or State-owned children's residential centres in 2025 was €53.5 million. The total cost in respect of privately run centres was just over €131 million, while for special emergency arrangements, SEAs, the total cost was just under €38 million.

Both Tusla and I share a common aim to meet the needs of all children in mainstream alternative care placements and to reduce Tusla's operation of SEAs. We have invested significantly in Tusla to this end. In 2026, Tusla's overall funding was raised to €1.37 billion, an increase of 14% or €177 million compared to 2025, which was itself a year of record investment for Tusla. This increase includes an additional €53 million for mainstream residential care. This additional funding will provide for the full-year costs of residential places opened in 2025, in addition to 30 new residential places over the course of 2026. Tusla's capital budget has also been expanded to €35 million in 2026, which represents 100% growth since 2024. It is a significant uplift for Tusla in terms of its capital and capacity to build. As I said, it is €35 million, which is 100% growth.

While Tusla, supported by the Department, is working to reduce reliance on SEAs, the agency is facing significant and ongoing challenges in sourcing appropriate placements for children in the care of the State.

Deputy Mark Wall: The reason I am asking the Minister about this is that the Ombudsman for Children has raised concerns about the SEAs and their unregulation. Is she happy with the regulation of these SEAs, particularly the accommodation they offer? The accommodation can

go from hotel rooms to apartments. As I said, this has been highlighted by the Ombudsman for Children. It is a serious concern for us all on this side of the House, as I am sure it is for the Minister. The question I have for her relates to the regulation of these premises and providers. Is she happy with what is being carried out by Tusla, given what we have heard on the major cases that have happened, unfortunately, in this State over the last number of months? It is a serious concern for many people. I hope she can clarify those concerns.

Deputy Norma Foley: As I said, Tusla is working consistently to reduce reliance on SEAs. I know that is the Deputy's wish as much as my own. It is also working to reduce the costs associated with these services and promote the quality and safety of these placements.

The Department is supporting Tusla in these efforts and will continue to do so.

On the week of 8 February, 84 children and young people were classified as separated children seeking international protection in special emergency accommodation, representing a decrease of four over the previous week and of 35 over four weeks previously. The bulk of the children availing of the service are separated children seeking international protection.

Under the current procedures, special emergency arrangements are reviewed regularly and used only when they are the most suitable options available at the time. There is an inconsistency in the numbers of children arriving at different times. Tusla remains committed to moving children, as quickly as possible, out of special emergency arrangements and into long-term placements where they can be supported – for example, in the foster care system.

I will come back to the other points.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister. She mentioned that we would all strive for State-led accommodation. The money being spent on special emergency arrangements surely could be spent on State-led accommodation, whereby regulations would be reviewed more than regularly. My concern is over what “reviewed regularly” means. Is it monthly or weekly? My concern is shared by the Ombudsman for Children and many people I deal with. Have Tusla and the Department plans to move away once and for all from emergency accommodation provided by private operators and to use the money to build fit-for-purpose accommodation for those children who need it most? She might confirm what “reviewed regularly” means because we have had concerns. We have noted these concerns in the media and *The Journal* has reported very recently on its concern about children facing criminal damages in private accommodation. It is not on. We need to build State accommodation. I ask the Minister to confirm whether this is the plan of her Department.

Deputy Norma Foley: Specifically on funding for building, Tusla plans to invest a total of €286 million in expanding mainstream residential care in 2026, representing an additional €53 million in current funding compared with the amount for 2025. The additional €53 million for mainstream residential care will provide for the full-year cost of beds opened part of the way through 2025 and for an additional 30 residential care places, which will bring the number of residential places for children in need to over 800. It is planned that the 30 additional mainstream residential placements will comprise 19 State-run statutory placements and 11 privately owned ones.

Specifically on safeguarding procedures, Tusla has developed standard operating procedures for placements. These detail extensive checks that any prospective special emergency accommodation provider must adhere to, including in relation to records management and staff vetting. Tusla has advised that all special emergency accommodation providers should be vetted by the central compliance unit. The unit ensures that Garda vetting and appropriate qualifications are in order before any child is placed with a prospective provider. The unit also carries out spot checks to validate staff on active duty. Tusla uses practice assurance and service monitoring reports to support the provision of high-quality services for children and families. The monitoring extends across Tusla activity, including in respect of special emergency accommodation. Importantly, young people in special emergency accommodation are visited weekly by a social worker or delegated person to have their voices heard and to check on the care being provided.

Guardians Ad Litem

93. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the reason she will determine legal representation for guardians ad litem in childcare court proceedings; the rationale for this change under the new service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13521/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I want to raise with the Minister once again the changes being made under the new guardian *ad litem*, GAL, national service, and specifically the issue of legal representation for GALs in court proceedings and the change that will see the Minister determine whether such legal representation is allowed in court. Could she provide to us the rationale for the change?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022, which provides for reform of the GAL system, was signed into law on 19 July 2022. This is a very important consideration. The passing of this legislation enables my Department to establish the GAL national service as an executive office. This executive office of the national service carries out functions on behalf of the Minister.

A GAL is a qualified and experienced professional who meets the child, gathers their views and provides an independent report to the judge. GALs are expert witnesses in court. There is no requirement for them to automatically have legal representation in every single case. The GAL national service holds the view, supported by the Attorney General's office, that the legal advice provided to GALs is legally privileged. Legal advice will be available to GALs through in-house legal teams or procured legal services. Legal advice will be available to them at all times. The head of legal services unit will have responsibility for ensuring legal advice and representation are provided.

Section 35D of the 2022 Act sets out the grounds by which the Minister shall, in the best interest of the child, determine the provision of legal representation. These grounds include the views of the court, the GAL's intention to make an application for legal representation, and the opinion of the GAL in relation to any application made in the court proceedings. In regard to the latter, I refer to where a particular issue is being flagged or raised by the GAL. There are specific scenarios in which legal representation will be provided to a GAL, namely special

care applications and applications under the Mental Health Act. GALs may also make an application to have “such rights as a party”, and legal representation will be provided in these cases. The current measure, as set out in section 26 of the Child Care Act 1991, makes no provision for legal representation for GALs. It is interesting that there has been none whatsoever up to this point.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister. I want to be very clear that the national service is needed. I have no issue whatsoever with it and do not believe the vast majority of GALs have either. However, with regard to what is being proposed under the national service, legal representation has been raised by GALs. I take their point because they have decades of experience in some cases. It is really important that we listen to them.

I cannot understand why the provision exists. Is there an understanding that GALs are choosing to have legal representation that is not needed? Of course, it is not needed in every case, but I could not understand why a GAL would look for legal representation unless it was needed. This is all for the child; there is nothing in it for the GAL. It is all about the child and representation for the child in court. What is the rationale for what is being done now?

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that this was signed into law on 19 July 2022. At all times, legal advice will be available to GALs. If there are particular reasons for legal representation, such as its being recommended by the court or the GAL wishing to make an application where a case is particularly complex, it will be provided for. In the main, however, we have to be clear about the role of the GAL. He or she is an expert witness in the court proceedings. That is the bottom line. If, however, a GAL wishes to make an application, legal representation will be provided. It will be provided at all times outside these circumstances. It is interesting to note that until the new legislation was signed into law on 19 July 2022, there was no provision at all for legal representation. Therefore, the current provisions are actually a step forward.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome the fact that the Minister is to meet the GALs next week. My understanding from engaging with them is that legal representation always existed where they needed it. They could seek it and have it, and there was no issue in that regard. Now, however, they will have to seek it through an application to the service. If GALs were choosing to have or seeking legal representation without merit, it would make no sense because there would be nothing in it for them.

My concern is that a GAL who may be new to the role and who may or may not be an expert witness must face at least one or two legal representatives on the other side when in court. I raised this with officials of the national service when we met them. They were good enough to come in and brief the committee. I was told that if there is an issue in court and something happens, legal representation will be reconsidered. That is not to the benefit of the child in any shape or form. That is the concern being raised, and it is being raised in a genuine way.

Deputy Norma Foley: I absolutely accept that this is being raised in a genuine way. I 100% accept the Deputy's bona fides and the bona fides of the GALs and everybody else. At the end of the day, everybody wants the best outcome for the child. I have no difficulty with the concerns and the issues being raised. I 100% accept that. The Deputy has made the point that, heretofore, the practice has been that when a GAL required legal representation, they always

got it. That is not changing. When a GAL needs representation, in the first instance, they are an expert witness. If that changes, they need to bring an application where legal representation will be required, and legal representation will be provided for. If there is a particularly complex issue or whatever arising, and if the court or the GAL believes that the complexity requires legal representation, that will be provided for. We cannot conflate the issue that they are first and foremost expert witnesses. If there is a change in circumstance and legal representation is required, that will be provided for.

Child and Family Agency

94. **Deputy Aidan Farrelly** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she will provide an update on her engagements with Tusla regarding well-being checks of closed cases; if she has received a progress report or interim report from the agency and-or the independent steering group; if she has requested a broadening of the scope of these checks; and the workforce planning conducted in respect of ensuring that the checks can be conducted as Tusla implements its integrated reform programme. [12617/26]

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Will the Minister provide the House with an update on the Tusla well-being checks, which she instigated within her Department on foot of a number of very tragic cases last year, for all children and young people who had their cases closed by Tusla during the Covid years?

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising this as I know it is a hugely important issue to him, the House and the wider community.

As he is aware, last September I requested Tusla to conduct a series of well-being checks for children whose cases were closed during the Covid-19 lockdown period. The Tusla well-being project team began its work last October. I am pleased to say that the project is making real progress, thanks to the dedication of the chair and the steering group, staff and colleagues right across Government.

The project's steering group comprises Government Departments, key statutory agencies and stakeholders and, importantly, is independently chaired by Tanya Ward, chief executive of the Children's Rights Alliance. I thank her and the steering group for their work.

The steering group adopted the project methodology in December, taking into account the rights of the children and families involved in each of these cases. This approach enables the project to check each case against the most up-to-date information available on official registers and prioritise cases of significant or most concern. It ensures that the project operates in an effective but non-invasive or non-intrusive way.

Following an initial review carried out by Tusla, it was determined that 76,546 children had referrals closed between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2022. Approximately 42,000 cases had no new referrals or ongoing engagement with Tusla since the lockdown period. Following this review, approximately 18,000 cases were found to be of children who had since turned 18 years of age and were now deemed to be adults.

Following internal legal advice within the Department, there is no legal basis for Tusla to conduct a well-being check on a young person over the age of 18. On this basis, 18,000 cases are outside the scope of the project. That is a cause of concern, and I assure the Deputy that I have raised that matter with the Attorney General and sought his advice on it. We will await that advice because I am conscious of that cohort of over-18s.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister because she has pre-empted the piece I was going to try to discuss with her. To be honest, I have come around to the idea of this project. At the start I was quite cautious because my understanding and the meaning I would infer from "well-being" would suggest that you are getting a thorough understanding of how a child or a young person is, as opposed to what I called at the time a proof-of-existence check - ultimately, that we are just making sure that the child is still alive and still existing within the State. We had an opportunity to meet Ms Ward and her team this week, and it was really informative. I can understand now very clearly the methodology and Tusla's aspirations in this process. I still have some outstanding concerns about the resources it might have to complete these checks. The Minister will not hear criticism from me in terms of the timeframe. If this takes months, it takes months and should be allowed to happen. I ask the Minister to talk to us a little more about that piece. If I was 12 in 2020 and my case was closed, I am outside the scope of this project. Is there a way in which we can amend legislation to ensure we can broaden the scope of this project for anyone over the age of 12?

Deputy Norma Foley: I absolutely accept the Deputy's bona fides in relation to this as well. As I said previously in relation to other matters, we want the best outcome here. We want to be very sure and assured of the young people whose cases were closed. There is a specific issue around those who "aged out", to use that phrase, which I do not like, in terms of the sharing of information from Tusla's point of view. I would be very keen to ensure we would find a means to address that cohort of 18,000. I do not have the legal mechanism at the moment but I will rely on the expert advice of the Attorney General. I have spoken to him. We have engaged with him. That engagement is ongoing. He sees it as a priority as well. I know it is a priority for the chair, Tanya Ward, and the steering group as well. I absolutely assure the Deputy, if we can find the legal mechanism to do this, we will do it. I think it would be in the best interests of everyone. The Attorney General is working on that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for that update. I hear sincerity in her response and I give her my assurance that, from a Social Democrats perspective, whatever we can do to support the Government in trying to seek that legislative change in this instance, I think it would be really important. If we are going to do it, why not do it right in this instance in respect of 12-year-olds and 13-years-olds who experienced lockdown going through a very troubling transition between primary school and secondary school? It was a really troubled time. We need to hear from them in this process. Whatever we can do to support that, we will. I reiterate my thanks and commendation to those involved in this project because it is a significant undertaking. We have heard about the IT specialties that are required, the access to information and challenges. Before it even gets under way in real detail, I look forward to the recommendations that will come from this project in terms of future learnings for institutions of the State to make sure we have accurate information but also appropriate services to follow

up. I look forward to further updates on this from the Minister and her Department as this project progresses.

Deputy Norma Foley: I assure the Deputy that I am confident that learnings will come out of this, particularly cross-departmental, almost like eyes on a child and knowing where a child is at a given time, to support the child, in the best interests of the child.

Some €3.2 million has been made available to support the work of this well-being check project. I have been receiving regular updates on the work of the steering group from the chair.

The Deputy will be aware also of the press release that issued, I think, last week, which provided the public with details. I appreciate that Ms Ward and the team made themselves available to the Deputy as well because it is very important that here within the House there is an understanding of what is happening with the project. It was important that something would issue to the general public as well because the general public are interested too.

We will continue to support Tusla in the work it does. The chair is independent. I respect that independence and am happy for her to proceed as she deems necessary.

Question No. 95 taken with Written Answers.

Childcare Services

96. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to consider whether Laois will be given one of the first directly State-led, publicly-owned childcare facilities she announced on 21 January 2026 as Laois is one of the fastest growing counties in terms of population; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13846/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask the Minister to give full consideration for Laois to be given one of the first directly State-led, publicly owned childcare facilities. I say that in welcoming the new scheme that was announced on 21 January. Laois is one of the fastest growing counties in terms of population outside of Dublin, and there is real pressure on childcare places.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising this. It is an issue of huge interest right across the country, including in his constituency.

Improving access to quality and affordable early learning and childcare is a key priority for the Government. Early learning and childcare capacity is increasing. Data from the annual early years sector profile shows that the estimated number of enrolments increased by 25% over the past three years. That is quite a significant increase. However, it appears that demand for early learning and childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children. That is the real issue, that there are certain areas across the country where there is a dearth of provision.

I recently announced €135 million in capital investment in buildings for high-quality, accessible State-led early learning and childcare, which I know is the Deputy's key issue. The process will begin in 2026 with investment in buildings in what will be a ground-breaking initiative for this Government - never before done by Government, actually.

11 o'clock

Capital funding will be used to acquire and fit out buildings. This is a case of "and-or", in fact, because in some instances it might just be the fit-out of the building, depending on requirements. There will be a particular focus in the new State-led facilities on providing places for children between one and three years old, because this is where the need is greatest, with scope for these children to progress in the service until they start school. The aim of delivering additional supply of this type in suitable locations will include both rural and urban areas that are presently not well served. Additional supply in areas of disadvantage is another priority because early learning can have positive impacts on children at risk of disadvantage. Another factor to consider is the need to rebalance supply in some areas where there is a high concentration of private supply but very low levels of community childcare.

A suite of appraisal tools has been developed, including a forward planning model, in order to select projects that align with these objectives. Up to eight buildings will be selected for investment this year and the State-led initiative will provide thousands of places up to 2030 using the €135 million provided for in the national development plan.

Deputy Brian Stanley: As outlined, there is a chronic shortage of spaces in the county, including for one- to three-year-olds. We have the private model, but we are over-reliant on that. It has weaknesses in the context of having to have separate leases or ownership of buildings, separate insurance, separate administration and payrolls, etc. While many are providing a good service, there are weaknesses. There are also shortages. There are no all-day spaces in Stradbally or Mountrath, and there are shortages in larger towns like Portlaoise, Mountmellick, Portarlinton and Graigue and smaller towns like Rathdowney, Mountrath, Durrow, Abbeyleix and Stradbally. Some of what becomes available is unaffordable. I received a letter this week from one couple who live near to me, who said they were offered a space for €1,430 per month in one provider that is hundreds of yards from my house. The crèche wanted a €450 deposit within 48 hours, which they were not able to come up with. They lost the place, and that woman could not go back to work. That shows the pressure on just the market-led ones. We need that Government scheme. We have the fastest growing population. I know the Minister has announced the purchase of eight or nine buildings. Everyone will be looking for them, but Laois has a strong case.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the case the Deputy makes. The purpose here is, in the first instance, to acknowledge that there is excellent provision by private providers and community providers. Notwithstanding that, there are still areas where there is an absence of provision. The purpose of the State-led services is to complement what is already there and to step in proactively where there is not provision. I hear the case the Deputy makes for his constituency. There is a capital steering group in place in the Department. The Department is assessing sites and buildings and, where required, will seek expressions of interest from operators to deliver these State-led services. The emphasis for 2026 is on the purchase of buildings but we also have provision for some instances where we will build. However, in 2026, the emphasis will be on purchasing or fitting out a building. All areas will be considered. Eight is eight, but we will be hoping to grow that in the coming years.

Deputy Brian Stanley: According to the childcare committee in the county, Portlaoise needs four full-day facilities. Portarlinton needs one, as do Mountmellick, Mountrath, Graiguecullen, Rathdowney, Abbeyleix, Durrow and the Cullahill area. The pilot of eight to nine is obviously welcome. It is a small start. We could put all eight or nine in Laois, but I urge the Minister to put at least one or two there. The current model is not able to match the growth in population in the county. We are behind other European states that have private provision. As the Minister said, a lot of those providers are going good work - I would not take from that - but other European states also have strong state-led childcare systems. We do not have that in this country. The Minister is right in that this is a groundbreaking initiative, which I certainly welcome and will fully support. However, it costs €1,430 per month to mind a child. The wages in our area do not come up high enough for people to pay that sort of money. That woman has no childcare facilities now to allow her to return to work. The couple are in rented accommodation as well and we know the pressures that brings. Rents are sky high in the area. It is a huge issue, and I ask that the Minister's officials look around County Laois and contact the local county council and estate agents to see if a property can be secured for it.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. As for how we are progressing, the first port of call is the local childcare committee, and we ask people to engage there. It can then engage further with the Department. I do not at all take away from the case the Deputy is making.

We are very conscious of the costs of childcare. The premise of core funding is where fees were frozen. In return for that, operators were given core funding. The national childcare scheme is supporting parents by providing reduced costs but, again, more work needs to be done. The Deputy knows we have a target of €250 per week to be achieved by the end of this Government term. We are working on that. We have increased core funding year on year. The national childcare scheme is available to parents. We also introduced fee caps last year and we will be doing likewise this year. We are working towards the €250 per week.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 98 taken with Written Answers.

Pension Provisions

99. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she has engaged with the Minister for Social Protection on providing a State pension for foster carers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13216/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I raise again the need for a State pension for foster carers. I appreciate that this mainly comes under the Minister for Social Protection. However, in light of that, what engagement has the Minister had with that Minister with regard to the commitment in the programme for Government, which I acknowledge, to ensure a State pension for foster carers is delivered as quickly as possible?

Deputy Norma Foley: I have discussed this with the Deputy on a number of occasions and we are absolutely agreed on the importance of foster carers. There is appreciation of and

agreement on that across the House. Foster carers play a vital role in enabling our most vulnerable children to live in a safe, secure and stable home environment.

While eligibility for the State pension, as the Deputy said, is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection, I know this is a matter of genuine concern for foster carers. The programme for Government 2025 introduced a number of commitments relating to foster care. This included commitments to examine and develop a pension solution for foster carers in recognition of the enormous contribution they make to vulnerable children in our society. I have raised this matter directly with my colleague the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, and can confirm that subsequent engagement will now occur between the relevant departmental officials. This engagement will occur in accordance with my ongoing commitment to support foster carers and within the context of the related programme for Government commitments, which I have already outlined.

Work is under way within the Department on the development of a national policy framework for alternative care, which will deliver on a separate programme for Government commitment to develop a national plan on alternative care. It is in this context that we are also engaging with the Minister. Officials of the Department are developing the framework on the basis of evidence and robust consultation with stakeholders, care-experienced individuals and the public. I am informed that the consultation process has already included a number of constructive engagements with foster carers and their representative bodies. My officials and I will continue to listen carefully to what they say, including in relation to eligibility for the State pension and other key matters. I will continue to work closely with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and other Government colleagues regarding the progression of these programme for Government commitments. Significant work has already occurred in relation to supporting foster carers. It included increasing the foster care allowance by 21% in 2024, the introduction of the initial placement payment in 2025 and the announcement by the Department of Social Protection that foster carers are now eligible for the back-to-school footwear and clothing allowance, also in June 2025.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome that engagement between officials in the Minister's Department and the Department of Social Protection will take place. It is important that we get the State pension put in place for foster carers as quickly as possible. It is wholly unacceptable for any foster carer in this State, many of whom have provided decades of support to provide a loving and caring home to some of the most vulnerable children in the State, to be left at 66 without a State pension or relying on the means-tested State pension. That is not acceptable. It is also important to make the point that this would be a huge amount of money.

Money is always a factor because I know it will have to be within the budget or a coming budget, and I hope it will be. Many foster carers will have paid some PRSI contributions. In fact, I would imagine the vast majority will have, so this will be about topping them up to make sure they can access the contributory State pension in full, as they should be and as they are more than deserving of. Time is of the essence and this needs to be delivered as quickly and as early in this term of Government as possible.

Deputy Norma Foley: There is a commitment in the programme for Government. What is really helpful to us as well is the public consultation we are having. It is a great framework for us to engage with the Department of Social Protection regarding this issue because it is an issue

that is consistently raised by foster carers themselves. We need to do all we can to secure the foster carers who are involved in providing care to children but also to attract more into this space. I know it is one of the key issues, if not the key issue, for foster carers but I also have to point to other changes that have been introduced. Foster carers now receive additional funds between €3,796 and €3,900 per year compared with the previous allowance, depending on the age of the child. Foster carers now receive a weekly payment of €400 for children under 12 and €425 for children over 12. A revised mileage payment scheme is in place, while the cumulative weekly travel distance to qualify for these payments has been reduced from 300 km to 250 km. In June 2025, the Department introduced the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance, while Tusla funding of €152 million will be used to maintain and grow foster care capacity and expand the foster care peer support programme and foster care recruitment teams.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I acknowledge what has been brought forward to improve things for foster carers but none of that will matter if someone is 62, 63 or 64, does not have enough contributions to access the State pension and is approaching 66, as quite a number of foster carers are. Again, it is not acceptable that a foster carer who has provided a loving home to some of our most vulnerable children would get to 66 and not have a State pension. It is wholly unacceptable and it needs to be dealt with quickly. I have repeatedly said the pension solution brought forward for family carers has really worked. It was worked on, achieved and delivered and I welcomed it at the time. That could be done for foster carers because, again, we are looking at people who have some, if not nearly all, of the 520 contributions but there is a gap for a lot of them, as was the case for family carers, so I believe that through using that solution, this can be done a lot more quickly. It needs to be, so I ask that this specific solution be looked at.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy and I are not in disagreement on this. I have always been very clear that the work and service provided by foster carers is second to none. I have also been very clear that it is the optimal option for children who need security and support. In that respect, my Department is doing all it can to ensure that measures are in. I have already referenced the increases in the allowances and mileage. To be honest, it will never be enough to acknowledge the work that is done. I know this is the key issue for foster carers, so we will continue to engage with the Department of Social Protection. The current consultation is really helpful to us because it will inform alternative care policy. I acknowledge the openness of the Minister for Social Protection in engaging with me and he has discussed the issue with me on a number of occasions. It is in the programme for Government. There are always complexities of which we must be mindful but as a core objective, I absolutely agree with the points made by the Deputy.

Disability Services

97. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the steps being taken to ensure that disability supports adequately meet the needs of people with disabilities, including access to services and timely assessments, and if she will make a statement on the matter. [3476/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It comes as no surprise that I will be raising the north side of Dublin again. Regarding the care and work done for people with disabilities and the elderly in north Dublin, the teams are amazing but St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Francis Hospice, Beaumont and St. Michael's House need supports, particularly for the elderly and people with disabilities. Will the Minister give an update on what the Department is doing to support these great teams and to add to care in the north side? The north side has been neglected for too long.

Deputy Norma Foley: Like the Deputy, the Government and I recognise the importance of early intervention for children with disabilities and ensuring they receive the right services at the right time. That is the bottom line. I am pleased to say that progress has been made in this regard. Over the past few years, the roadmap for service improvement has provided for a series of actions being progressed to improve access to children's disability network teams, CDNTs. These teams provided support to 44,739 children with complex needs as at the end of December 2025.

The national CDNT waiting list has reduced by 43%. However, I also recognise that there is still more to do. The HSE national service plan has committed to a further 25% reduction in 2026. To this end, the HSE is developing the 2026 to 2027 service improvement plan for disability services for children and young people, further advancing the work begun under the roadmap.

In budget 2026 alone, more than €3.8 billion was allocated for disability services, which represents an overall increase of €1.8 billion since 2020. This is a phenomenal first-time level of investment by Government. The Government has provided funding for additional posts to CDNTs and to shorten waiting lists and waiting times in recent years. This includes further investment in budget 2026 to fund 150 posts for CDNTs. In addition, placements on CDNTs will continue to be expanded alongside the continued expansion in the number of places in higher education to develop the pipeline of future therapists.

While it is important to mention that good progress has been made, it is equally important to acknowledge that there are delays accessing supports and services. I am pleased to say, however, that significant activities are under way, both legislative and operational, to improve access to both assessments and therapies for children who need them. The HSE is developing a single point of access referral model, which will ensure that children are referred to the appropriate healthcare service, whether that is primary care, disability or child and adolescent mental health services, at an early stage. As a result, children will not be put on multiple waiting lists or passed from one service to another.

Targeted amendments to Part 2 of the Disability Act have been developed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the assessment of need process. This will result in a more streamlined process, which over time will help to reduce waiting times for assessment of need. A total of €20 million was also allocated under budget 2026 to continue the targeted wait list initiative.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím leis an Aire agus táim an-bhuíoch den airgead atá ar fáil do dhaoine le míchumas. An pointe atá á dhéanamh agam ar son na ndaoine i mBaile Átha Cliath thuaidh is that the families are struggling and I again call for more adequate funding for the facilities in the institutions I mentioned.

I also want to bring the Minister's attention to the case of Seán Horan, a resident in St. Michael's House in Ballymun. I would really welcome the engagement with the Department about it but the system needs to be changed. According to Seán's mother, he entered mainstream school and is in fifth year but is now being removed from St. Michael's House. His mother abided by all the rules but we are not providing adequate funding for the north side. Seán's mother is worried and he does not know where he is going to go next year. If schools such as St. Michael's House were not classed as junior cycle, it would enable Seán to continue to stay in the school and get support he needs. I would welcome any attention towards the case of Seán Horan.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister mentioned the change in the legislation around assessments of need and the Disability Act. We all know the pressure families are under - not being able to get an assessment, the therapies or the necessary early intervention. While we might all support that idea of a single point of access, it needs to work. Assessments of need waiting lists have skyrocketed. I assume they are anywhere between 22,000 and 25,000 at this point and constitute a continuing breach of the law. I can accept the argument that 29% of children are found not to have a disability and the idea that 35% need autism assessments, but the fear relates to who it is that makes the determination about this.

The assessment officer has the correct clinical background, which is a necessity. We need an update on what is going to happen from the Department of Education and Youth's point of view because teachers' unions, teachers and families also need to know how assessments will work in getting an appropriate school place. We need to ensure that we are not once again looking at a second-rate assessment because that is the worry at the minute.

Deputy Norma Foley: Ar an gcéad dul síos, tá sé mar aidhm agam féin agus ag an Roinn áiseanna agus seirbhísí a chur chun cinn, agus tá níos mó airgid againn inniu ná mar a bhí riamh chun é sin a dhéanamh.

The primary aim and objective of this Government and this Department is to ensure that we have the funding in place. We have a significant increase in funding this year - greater than we have ever had - to provide the services Deputy Heneghan referenced. I do not know the specifics of the case he referenced here as it is an individual case, but I am happy to take the details from him later and to revert to him. We have €3.8 billion available to us now, which is a €1.8 billion increase since 2020. It will not solve all of the issues; money does not always solve the issues. It is a combination of different things.

I appreciate the points Deputy Ó Murchú raised around the assessment of need. He knows that there work is under way to advance the assessment and to streamline the service to make it more accessible to people. There is also the single point of contact and the HSE's autism protocol. A total of 45% of all cases in the first nine months of last year had an autism diagnosis. This separate pathway under the HSE will be helpful as well.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Táim fíorbhuíoch as an airgead sin.

My predecessor Finian McGrath, a former Minister of State with responsibility for disability issues, would also be very proud and I spoke to him again this morning. One of my staff in the

Oireachtas has a disability. I have raised this issue in this House previously. We, as policymakers, should have people with disabilities as close to us as possible, but we cannot avail of the wage subsidy scheme. My parliamentary assistant is working as hard as he can but he needs additional support. If we can encourage the Government to bring the wage subsidy scheme into the Oireachtas, we would have people with disabilities closer to people making the policies about their lives. I have raised it with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, as well. He is looking into it and I would love some pressure from the Minister, Deputy Foley, as well.

Táim fíorbhuíoch as an airgead sin. Táim ag iarraidh St. Michael's House, St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Francis Hospice and Beaumont Hospital i mBaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh a lua arís. These institutions and their hard-working men and women need more financial support. I welcome the money the Minister has, but I would love that money to go towards these northside institutions. The staff are hard-working and they can deliver the supports that are needed on the ground. I thank the Minister for saying that she will investigate Seán Horan's case as his mother feels that she was penalised for trying mainstream education. The only way the application was set up was for failure because the State did not provide additional space for the school.

Deputy Norma Foley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Aontaím leis ó thaobh an sárobair a rinne Finian McGrath le linn a thréimhse anseo mar Aire Stáit agus an méid atá fós ar siúl aige chun na ceisteanna seo a fhreagairt.

In relation to the issues the Deputy raised regarding St. Michael's House and so many others, I want to recognise the sterling work of all the institutions the Deputy mentioned. I have met with representatives of many of them. I had a meeting last year with a group representing all of the organisations regarding funding issues that they faced. It was for that reason that we really pushed ourselves to move forward in terms of a budget that would significantly support all of these different organisations that are doing great work on the ground. People with disabilities being at the centre, in terms of raising issues and the implementation of policies, is the entirety of the national human rights strategy for disabled people. There is the implementation group that sits on different committees and the delivery committee is chaired by An Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin.

Disability Services

100. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on staffing levels and vacancy rates across the children's disability network teams; how these are affecting service access for children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13292/26]

Deputy John Clendennen: My question this morning is about referrals to children's disability network teams, CDNTs. Will the Minister of State provide updates on staffing levels and vacancy rates across teams and how they are affecting services access for children?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. The Government and I, like the Deputy, are committed to early intervention for children with disabilities, to

ensure they can access the appropriate supports at the earliest possible stage. Those services are delivered through our children's disability network teams for children with complex needs.

Recruitment and retention of health and social care professionals is a really big challenge, to be quite frank, and it is a challenge faced by the CDNTs across the country. I am pleased that progress is being made on the recruitment of staff to the teams and the HSE has reported a 28% increase in staffing levels nationwide from October 2023 to October 2025. This equates to an additional 448 whole-time equivalents, which includes 321 health and social care professionals. The overall CDNT vacancy rate has reduced from 29% in 2023 to 18% in 2025. That is a reduction of 11 percentage points nationally, but it is still a challenge and, as a result of that, there are still delays in accessing interventions for children with disabilities. However, it is important to thank our teams and recruiters for the progress that is being made.

Since the roadmap was approved by the Government in July 2023, the national CDNT waiting list has reduced by 43% as at the end of December. Despite staffing challenges, CDNTs provided supports to 44,739 children with complex needs as of the end of December last year. I thank all of our people who are working so hard on those teams. The HSE is currently developing a service improvement plan for disability service for children and young people, which will build on improvement works started under the roadmap with a key focus on recruitment and retention.

To maintain this progress, the HSE is driving intensive domestic and international recruitment efforts and will undertake a variety of workforce initiatives to support sustained growth of CDNTs and the wider disability sector this year

Deputy John Clendennen: I congratulate the Minister of State on her new Ministry and I wish her the best of luck with it. I agree with her on the need for early intervention. At the end of the day, we need results. Children and their families cannot wait and critical windows of intervention can be missed, which ends up with complex cases becoming more complex.

My concern relates to with families, who have seen a child diagnosed and put on a list. They are waiting for a CDNT and they are not getting that support. The longer that goes on, the larger this problem is becoming. I appreciate that additional resources are being applied and delays are being addressed, but I would like to see a level of accountability and efficiency in how these services are being improved and expanded with the additional resources that are being applied. How accessible are these services and these teams to these families? How can we improve it further?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am inundated with families contacting me who are having a real difficulty accessing the supports, services and therapies that their children need from CDNTs. The HSE data from last month showed a number of vacancies across the CDNT network in Galway. At that time, just one CDNT out of 15 in the broader west and north-west region was fully staffed. The result of that is that children are facing extreme waits to access the services they need. It is causing untold stress to families as well. One particular family in County Galway, who I know has been writing to the Minister of the State, is completely at their wit's end. Despite repeated requests, they cannot get individual speech and language therapy for their son who is non-verbal and autistic. It is heartbreaking for them as parents to see their child not getting the supports that they need and they are not the only ones.

Will the Minister of State explain this to that family? Will she also outline what she is going to do to ensure that our CDNTs are fully staffed and fully functional going forward?

Deputy Emer Higgins: In terms of staffing, this year's budget has allocated €8 million, which will provide for 150 new staff across our CDNTs. We will prioritise the placement of those new staff on the teams that have the highest vacancy rates. That is to make sure that we are providing more therapies to children who need them and who are waiting longer on lists. It is also to make sure that we are supporting the staff who are working with those CDNTs, which we need to do.

In regard to Deputy Clendennen and his constituents who have gotten assessments and then gone to their CDNTs, to be really clear, families do not need an assessment to go to their CDNT. They just need to be referred. Families can self-refer or they can get a referral through their school, public health nurse or whatever it may be. It is really important that people are referred as early as possible.

In Deputy Clendennen's own area, I know there are there CDNTs in Laois-Offaly. At the end of last year, there were 2,077 children who were open caseloads on the CDNTs. That means they have been in contact with CDNTs and there are 89 children on the waiting list.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister of State for that update. Where they are being assessed and availing of a service within the CDNT, generally the feedback is positive but where they are not, they are ending up in a private system and having to pay. Alternatively, they are ending up in the primary care system. Where there is complexity of need, more often than not the facilities and services they need with regard to the specialities may not be available through primary care. That ends up putting additional burden on the primary care setting.

I appreciate the additional resources. It is an area we are going to have to continue to be focused on. We need to try and meet the needs of individuals who are waiting far too long and get to a position in the whole area of service with CDNTs that is proactive in this space and not reactive. I appreciate the update this morning.

Deputy Emer Higgins: There are 45,000 children receiving support and therapies through our CDNTs nationally and that is really positive. We are embarking on a recruitment campaign to make sure we are bolstering our teams. Part of that will be international and national recruitment but it will also be making sure, for example, that we are expanding training places, which happened in June of last year. There will be up to 461 additional student places by the end of 2028 and the majority of those have commenced. New roles and training pathways are being developed to expand the skills mix and the pipeline of people we can hire. We have student bursaries and trainee programmes. We found them really successful in regard to people coming to do their student placements with CDNTs and, on graduation, being offered roles on those teams. We want to see more of that, and I thank all of our students who have taken up roles.

Pensions Reform

101. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the measures being taken to address issues with employer costs of auto-enrolment for section 56 organisation employees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13075/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Aindrias Moynihan is taking Question No. 101.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Organisations funded by Tusla under section 56 of the Child and Family Agency Act are delivering a huge range of vital services, such as youth services, in communities around the country. Cloyne Diocesan Youth Services, CDYS, is a typical example in my own community. Can the Minister outline the efforts being made to address the costs associated with auto-enrolment for these organisations?

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising this important question. I deeply appreciate the work performed by section 56 organisations and I would like to thank their staff and volunteers for the commitment and support they are giving in improving people's lives.

The Department welcomes the auto-enrolment retirement savings scheme launched in January 2026. The auto-enrolment system provides that all employees earning in excess of €20,000 and aged between 23 and 60 will be enrolled onto a new pension system and will not have to rely on the State pension alone on retirement. As such, it is of considerable benefit to many employees in section 56 organisations.

The auto-enrolment retirement savings authority will have responsibility for employer compliance, with Revenue providing support by supplying payroll data for identification and enrolment purposes. All employers are required to comply with the legislation underpinning MyFutureFund, regardless of their status or funding arrangements. This requirement applies equally to employers, including where employees are on short-term contracts or working multiple part-time jobs. MyFutureFund will be central to helping people increase their financial security in their retirement years.

Agencies, organisations and charities that will be covered by the new auto-enrolment scheme are generally funded under section 56 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013. These organisations receive a portion of their funding from Tusla to deliver services and generally have other income streams. Funding is provided to these organisations by Tusla through the grant process and the level of service provided is generally covered within the terms of a service level agreement.

These organisations are independent entities and, as such, employment contracts and obligations - for example, auto-enrolment, pay, pensions and all of that - are matters between the employer and their employees. As these staff are not public sector employees, responsibility for meeting obligations under the new auto-enrolment scheme rests entirely with their respective employers.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: These section 56 organisations, the likes of CDYS, are providing vital services such as social care services in the community, family support through the family resource centre and, in my own community, youth services and much more. While Tusla contracts them, as the Minister said, they are private organisations and their employees are not employed by Tusla. They are not-for-profit organisations delivering services in our

community. While the aim of introducing the auto-enrolment is to fill that gap between people who do and do not have pensions, which is very welcome, it is an additional cost on these not-for-profit organisations.

We need to review the situation here and I would ask that additional funding be made available to support those section 56 organisations. They are voluntary organisations that are not for profit and are delivering vital services in our communities.

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to second and indeed third what the Deputy had to say there about these organisations. They are really important organisations doing sterling work right across our communities, north, south, east and west. The work they do, and the breadth of it, is quite phenomenal. They are very much rooted in community and service to the community. I do not for one minute dispute that but I have to be clear on the funding mechanism. Tusla provides funding to many of these organisations, some of which the Deputy has referenced. In many respects, Tusla is providing part of their funding. They are funded through other means as well. Essentially, the issue here is that all of these organisations the Deputy referenced are independent entities. Tusla is not the employer. The relationship is between the organisation and the employee, that is, as employer and employee. Tusla is not in that space and it is important that we have clarity around that.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I am conscious that pay increases were agreed with section 56 workers in the past year and funding increases were agreed for the organisation to support an increase in pay. Has the Minister considered introducing additional funding to the organisations as was previously done to support the organisations' additional employee costs, and will there be assistance for these important services that find themselves in difficulty due to the increased costs of employment? They are providing vital services, including youth services and a broad range of services in the community. While they are not direct employees of Tusla, Tusla does fund and contract them and it provides funding for employment. It is not totally removed from the situation and is a vital cog in it. It needs to re-examine the possibility of supporting these organisations, as they are coming under pressure from the increased cost of auto-enrolment.

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be clear. I do not for one minute disagree with the points the Deputy made about the valuable work of these organisations. They are an integral service to communities and I understand the importance of that. I have to be clear: in the delivery of that work they are funded by Tusla. They are not employed by Tusla. There is a separate relationship in existence there between the employer and the employee, or whatever type of contract is in existence there. These organisations are entirely independent entities responsible for the care of their own staff or whoever is delivering on their behalf. It is important that we recognise that.

There are obligations in terms of auto-enrolment. It is very important. We are all agreed here on the importance of the auto-enrolment system but that must be catered for in the context of an employer-employee relationship. Tusla is not the employer. In regard to the broader funding being provided by Tusla, there has been a significant increase in funding by my Department to Tusla to increase the provision of services which, again, supports these organisations. That is the type of relationship that exists.

Disabilities Assessments

102. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of children on the waiting list for an assessment of need in counties Cavan and Monaghan, by county; and the number waiting more than three, six and 12 months. [13202/26]

Deputy Matt Carthy: My question is in respect of the unacceptable number of children who are currently waiting for an assessment of need in counties Monaghan and Cavan in my constituency. I ask the Minister for an update on the number of children who have been waiting more than three, six and 12 months.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The delivery of an effective, efficient assessment of need system is a priority for the Government, which is why we are bringing in reforms in this area. There has been intensive work by the Department and the HSE to address delays in the provision of assessments of need to children and their families. Children do not require an assessment of need to access health services, including primary care, children's disability network teams or mental health services. It is important that people are aware of this. However, demand for assessments of need has increased significantly in recent years, reflecting both the increase in population and families exploring all options to access services for their child.

The number of applications for assessments of need increased from 4,700 in 2020 to over 13,000 in 2025. Unfortunately, this demand is outpacing the capacity of the system to respond. As a result, HSE data shows that the number of applications over the completion date rose to over 20,200 nationally by the end of the year. This is unacceptable, which we acknowledge, and we will address it.

For Cavan-Monaghan LHO, in the Deputy's constituency, the numbers he requested are as follows: 520 applications in total were not completed within the statutory timeframe of six months, 31 of which were overdue for less than one month, and 36 of which were overdue for between one and three months. The remainder, 453, were overdue for three months or more.

These numbers are stark. Every one of them represents a child or young person. I want to see this situation change so that families do not have to wait so long for their assessment of need applications to be processed. That change is happening. We have seen a notable increase in the number of completed AONs nationally over the past two years, but there is a lot more work to be done. That is why, in December 2025, the Government announced a series of improvements to the assessment of need process, including new legislation, which will be coming through pre-legislative scrutiny at the Joint Committee on Disability Matters.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister of State started her response by saying this is a priority for the Government. I would hate to see it if it were not a priority for the Government. Some 550 children have been waiting over six months for an assessment of need in the two small counties, population-wise, of Cavan and Monaghan. That is 550 times that the members of Government have broken the law. They are obliged under the Disability Act 2005 to ensure that children receive an assessment of need within six months. Imagine that. We have a Minister of State saying they have broken the law 550 times in just one constituency, but they are going to do something about it at some point in the future, including changing the law so

they cover themselves and so they are not actually in breach of the law. How many children last year in counties Cavan and Monaghan actually received their assessment of need within six months, the legal time limit?

Deputy Paula Butterly: Will the Minister of State consider establishing a cross-Border assessment of need scheme, modelled on existing cross-Border dental and surgical treatment pathways, to ensure that children can access timely assessments outside the State when domestic waiting lists are excessive?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I want to be absolutely clear, and to reassure parents in particular, that proposed legislative changes will not in any way remove any right for parents to apply for an assessment of need for their child, and will not alter the six-month timeline in the Act. That is important to say, and I do not want parents to be misled on that.

The changes include changes to Part 2 of the Disability Act, which provides for assessments of need. These legislative changes include ensuring the assessment process focuses on a child's needs, so that more intensive clinical assessments are only used where required. They will also ensure the development of statutory guidelines to better support HSE assessment officers to do standard assessments in a standardised way, so that no matter where people are in the country, they get the same clinical approach.

With regard to the cross-Border scheme, that is definitely worth exploring. At the moment, we want to make sure that we are delivering more assessments of need. To that end, we have prioritised a waitlist initiative. We have set aside €20 million to provide for 6,000 assessments of need to be completed by private providers.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Regardless of what the Minister of State says changes to legislation will do, it will be of no comfort whatsoever to those people who are watching the Government break the law as it currently is. I asked her a specific question in respect of Cavan and Monaghan. How many children last year actually received an assessment of need within the legal time limit of six months? I will ask that question again.

Deputy Emer Higgins: We know that at the heart of this are children - children with disabilities who need access to therapies. Right now, they are waiting too long for access to therapies and too long for assessments of need. That is wrong. That is why, just in December, we outlined reforms. Those reforms include statutory guidelines, which will streamline and standardise the process. That will include decisions being communicated to parents.

Deputy Matt Carthy: How many last year?

Deputy Emer Higgins: There will be a new pathways option for children who are potentially autistic. They will be set up by in-reach teams, 11 of which will be created across the country.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister for State for that. How many children last year in Cavan and Monaghan actually got their assessment of need within six months?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I will revert to the Deputy with that exact number. I have the exact number that he requested in his question, which I read out, but I will get the number for last year too and give it to the Deputy. That is no problem.

We are also hiring more people for the CDNT teams. We have a new single point of access that ensures no child is on the wrong waiting list, and there is no such thing as a wrong door from a HSE perspective. In addition, we are supplementing our workforce by outsourcing a number of AONs as well.

Child and Family Agency

103. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the proposals her Department has to deal with the fact that Tusla has advised that 300 social workers, 100 social care workers and 500 foster carers are needed now to cope with demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13212/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Information was provided to us at the committee on children that Tusla is short of 300 social workers and 100 social care workers, and needs another 500 foster carers. In fairness, Deputy Kerrane spoke about the need to follow up on the State pension and other particular issues that will make it more attractive. We look after those who are doing absolutely necessary work. We all know the complexity. We know the issues that have been in front of this House in relation to Tusla. It is about ensuring it is fit for purpose.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate that the Deputy is raising a significant issue about the important work that is carried out every day by social workers, social care workers and foster carers.

With the prevailing high rates of employment and the range of opportunities across the economy, there is a great deal of competition for and challenge in attracting qualified and expert staff to carry out social work in the health, education and justice sectors, as well as in the area of child welfare and protection. The challenges in child welfare and protection are not unique and they apply right across sectors like health, education and justice. Notwithstanding that, we have to address this. The Department has supported the development of various schemes and programmes in Tusla to improve its recruitment and retention of social workers and social care workers. New programmes are expected to increase the number of annual social work graduates by 20%. That is a significant uplift, year on year, in the number of those who graduate specifically from social work and social care programmes.

The initiatives being taken by Tusla include: the introduction of a four-year tertiary degree, co-designed and co-delivered by Cork Education and Training Board and University College Cork; and the establishment of a two-year apprenticeship programme leading to a master's or postgraduate diploma in social work, developed by an industry-led consortium. Tusla accepted 36 apprentices under the scheme in 2024 and took on a further 77 apprentices in 2025, with further expansion in 2026. I would like to see that move closer to 100 in 2026, if at all possible, but we will see how it goes.

The Department funds and supports Tusla's recruitment and retention of social care workers through various Tusla initiatives and programmes. This includes a number of measures. Tusla offers incentives to existing staff to undertake training to become social care workers. Tusla offers a relocation and visa sponsorship package for social care staff from the Philippines and South Africa to take up contracts within Tusla special care. Tusla is in the process of developing a new internal training school to support social care candidates to develop the skills necessary to work in Tusla's residential and special care centres.

Tusla is also in the process of developing a new internal training school to support social care candidates to develop the skills necessary to work in Tusla's residential and special care centres.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all welcome initiatives in relation to workforce planning, although the easy refrain is that this should have happened earlier. The reason I am bringing this up with the Minister is the fact that Gerry Hone from Tusla spoke about unfilled positions. At the moment, there are 1,728 social workers. If we take in agency staff, the number is 1,754 but that is 300 short in terms of being able to deliver the work they do, which is phenomenal. As I understand it, there are 1,422 social care workers in the system but again, Tusla says that is 100 short of requirements. Foster carers do absolutely unreal work and we need to support them but if we are 500 people short, then we do not have the capacity in relation to delivering from a care point of view. We know the work Tusla is meant to do, involving everything from early intervention, supports for families and referrals to other organisations right through to looking after the most vulnerable who need to be in the State's care. We need a plan and I seek details, in a written response if necessary, on how this is going to be done and the numbers being included in the plan.

Deputy Norma Foley: In terms of foster care, we have had a very good discussion on the role and importance of foster carers and the contribution they make in terms of child welfare. I can inform the Deputy that 198 new foster carers came on stream in 2025, a 9% increase. Notwithstanding that, I want to do more in this space. I also recognise the demand for foster carers is increasing. We have a number of new children coming into the system every single year and it is ever increasing. However, it is positive to be able to say that 198 new people came on board, a 9% increase over the same period in 2024. That is a positive.

I absolutely hear what the Deputy is saying in terms of the need for an increased number of social workers and social care workers. It is important we have the mechanisms that will allow for that. It is projected that there will be a 20% increase year on year in terms of these schemes. I particularly want to congratulate the further and higher education sector for initiatives in this area. The link between Cork ETB and UCC, for example, is producing a significant number of social workers for us.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all welcome those initiatives, which are absolutely necessary, but we must make sure we fill the gaps. We must ensure the services Tusla is meant to provide are not put under more pressure. I am aware Tusla has a new resource allocation model and is talking of new models of care in relation to the more complex cases that are arising. I ask the Minister to come back to me in writing on the detailed plan in relation to targets, not only for recruitment but for actual employment. We must ensure we have a sufficient number of social workers and social care workers, particularly in light of the figures provided by Tusla itself.

We are all aware of the more complex cases. I refer here to Oisín Reddin, Kyran Durnin, Vadym Davydenko and Daniel Aruebose, to some of the cases referred to by the Child Law Project and the case of the ten year old who was heinously attacked. We need to be able to provide supports in those circumstances and we need to see that follow through I have spoken about before in terms of the recommendations. Legislative changes are also necessary in the context of the national review panel. We need to make sure all of that work is done.

Deputy Norma Foley: We are all very clear about the importance of having the appropriate staff and of having a sufficiency of staff in place to support children. I can share with the Deputy examples of cases that are so complex they require a 2:1 staffing level. That means 14 staff being made available for the care of one child. That is the right and proper thing to do and that is what I would want to have in place. I am just making the point that such are the complexities that, at times, a huge number of staff have to be dedicated - and rightly so - to one child. In some instances, 14 staff for one child is the required staffing level. Notwithstanding that, the Deputy speaks of a plan and I am very happy to send on a formal reply in terms of all of the different levers that we are pulling. I am a particular fan of the apprenticeship model, for example, because it means those who go through the apprenticeship system stay within the Tusla family, as it were. That proves significant.

Child and Family Agency

104. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of special care beds that are open currently; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13218/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I ask the Minister to provide details on the number of special care beds currently open. Across the three special care units there is capacity for 26 beds. I do not know if all 26 beds have ever been open but would like to know how many are open today.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy for her question. While the operation of special care and the provision of special care beds is the statutory responsibility of Tusla, the Department is actively engaging with Tusla in relation to the challenges impacting special care. There are four young people currently subject to a special care order who are awaiting placement in a special care unit. I am advised by Tusla that as of 16 February 2026 there are 15 young people in special care, with additional staffing of 2:1 required for at least one young person due to complex presentation. This means an additional seven staff, or 14 in total, are required to meet the needs of that one child. This is the equivalent of an additional special care bed.

Tusla has indicated that difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff are the primary limiting factor in capacity in opening special care beds. Officials from the Department continue to work with Tusla to support it in addressing the staffing shortages in special care provision. A new grade and pay scale for special care was sanctioned in 2024 in an effort to increase staff numbers and has been advertised since January 2025. This new Tusla special care worker grade offers approximately 20% higher pay at the top of scale compared to the social care worker grade.

The Department has also provided a substantial budget increase for Tusla in 2026, rising by 14% to €1.37 billion. This represents the fourth consecutive year in which Tusla's budget has exceeded €1 billion. In addition, €26 million has been allocated for special care in budget 2026. This represents an increase of over €6 million on budget 2025. This investment will increase capacity and enhance provision, including funding for the new special care staff grade, staff well-being initiatives and additional therapeutic supports.

Tusla has been allocated €188 million in capital funding for 2026 to 2030. Reflecting the priorities in the national development plan, €17 million is the indicative allocation for special care in Tusla's capital plan for 2026 to 2030. This will support Tusla in upgrading, renovating or purchasing special care and step-down units. In this context, the expansion of dedicated step-down provision from special care is progressing.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is really alarming to hear that four children in the State need a special care bed but there is not one there for them. I appreciate, understand and welcome the change to the payscale made in 2024 but we need to look at that again to see whether it is enough in the context of recruitment and retention of staff. I have raised with the Minister previously the report of the external review group on special care which raises the same issues around staffing and capacity. That report, published in April 2025, identified that since 2021 a total of 168 staff had been hired but 134 had left. There is capacity for 26 beds across the three special care units but I gather from what the Minister is saying that we only have staff for 15 of those 26 beds. We have four extremely vulnerable children who have no bed, so we need to look at the pay scale again. We need to look at that external report again and at the recommendations within it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Daly has a related question.

Deputy Pa Daly: My question similarly relates to vulnerable children. Following the Halpin report into CAMHS in north Kerry which showed deficiencies in care and a departure from standard operating practice, can the Minister confirm that the compensation scheme will be widened to include people who have had an apology already from the HSE and that the review will be widened to a much broader category of children who have been dealt with in the north Kerry area?

12 o'clock

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy attended the briefing with me provided by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on the north Kerry CAMHS report. He will appreciate that it is not in my remit; it is within the remit of Deputy Butler. It is my understanding that she will make further announcements as regards the extension of the look-back and issues around compensation. The Deputy will respect that it is appropriate that she as the line Minister of State does that.

On the points raised by Deputy Kerrane, there are so many complexities in this instance. As I previously referenced with Deputy Ó Murchú, there is one instance where 14 staff are required for the care of one child. It is right that we provide those 14 staff but in normal instances that is two beds being required, such are the complexities. There have been

significant improvements, such as the new pay grade with a 20% increase. It has yielded 27 additional people being recruited. Significant recruitment is taking place abroad in South Africa and the Philippines which is also garnering success. The work continues.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I would like to see a timeline for the implementation of each of the recommendations of the external review group. Fifteen special care beds are open but we should have 26. There are four extremely vulnerable children who have been advised, told and directed to special care but it is not available for them. The report is especially damning. It describes "severe challenges" and talks of a "crisis". The report makes it clear that it looks at "the immediate operational issues", or what needs to be dealt with immediately. It also goes on to discuss the children in dire need of intervention - our most vulnerable children - for whom there is no bed for special care. The recommendations of the review group need to be looked at. It is always important to say that this is not just a matter for Tusla. There are other agencies that need to get around the table on these issues. We need to look at what we can do in relation to special care because what is going on at the moment with beds not being open is just not acceptable.

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to be clear, in terms of the financial resources being made available, that €26 million has been provided for special care, with an increase of €6 million specifically in terms of the provision of beds. The financial resources are in place for staffing. There is an absolute challenge in staffing which is not unique to us. It has already been referenced that it is in other disciplines as well. There are new programmes. I outlined to the previous Deputy the types of the increases in places, in-house training for staff so they can step up into special care roles, and recruitment from abroad. There is a whole suite of efforts being made. It is an absolute priority. There is an absolute commitment that all of those recommendations for any Department or agency will be addressed and implemented in full.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá an Phríomh-Oifig Staidrimh anois ag rá go bhfuil an gnáthphraghas tithíochta i mBaile Átha Cliath tar éis dul chomh hard le €500,000. Tá an Rialtas i gcónaí ag rá linn go bhfuil praghsanna tithe ró-ard, ach tá siad ag ardú bliain i ndiaidh bliana faoin Rialtas seo. Ní fadhb í seo do Bhaile Átha Cliath amháin. Tá praghsanna tithe ag ardú níos gasta taobh amuigh de Bhaile Átha Cliath ná mar atá siad taobh istigh de Bhaile Átha Cliath. Tá praghsanna imithe suas €32,000 le bliain anuas ar fud an Stáit, agus níos mó ná 14% i gcontaetha ar nós Contae Laoise, Contae an Longfoirt, Contae Uíbh Fhailí agus Contae na hIarmhí. Ar fud an Stáit le díreach ceithre bliana anuas, tá praghsanna tar éis léim breis is €100,000. Cén dóigh inar féidir leis an Rialtas seasamh leis sin? Cén dóigh inar féidir leis seasamh leis go bhfuil tithe ag dul in airde le €100,000 taobh istigh de cheithre bliana?

The Central Statistics Office now tells us the typical price of a home in Dublin has reached €500,000. The Tánaiste repeatedly tells us that prices are too high, yet they are rising higher and higher year after year under his Government. In just four years alone, prices have jumped

by €100,000 across the State. How can you stand over this? To buy a typical home in Dublin now requires an income of over €100,000. People in the Tánaiste's own area where he comes from in County Wicklow need an income of €130,000. There are parts of this city where people need an income above €150,000 to purchase a typical home. The vast majority of workers are nowhere near that level. That is the reality. Even two solid, decent incomes are no longer enough. How is anyone going to live in Dublin? How is a nurse, a garda or a young teacher to build a life here? How is a couple who are working hard, paying their taxes and doing everything asked of them supposed to compete in a market that has spiralled completely beyond their reach?

The crisis is deeply personal now. When young people who are trying to buy their first home look at their parents' generation, they see that people of that generation were able to marry, buy a home and raise children in their 20s or early 30s. Now, those young people see a future taken from them. They are ten years behind that timeline. It is a lost decade for this generation. They cannot start a family, put down roots or plan their lives. They watch their 30s slip away while prices surge further out of reach. They feel locked out not because they have failed but because the system has failed them. This is a social emergency now. Just last night, the Government voted to allow vulture funds to bid against ordinary families who are trying to buy houses, further exacerbating the problem. Every single CSO release confirms the brutal reality out there. People are being priced out of their communities, the places where they work and their country. I am sure the Tánaiste will say again that supply is the answer. If the typical home costs €500,000, ordinary people will still be locked out. This is not just a housing challenge; it is an affordability catastrophe. I ask the Tánaiste directly a very simple question that so many young people are asking me and I am sure have asked him: how high do house prices have to rise before the Government realises that its policies are simply not working? Is it €600,000 or €700,000? Make no mistake - that is the direction of travel the Government is taking this country in. How is anybody supposed to live in Dublin given these prices? How high do prices have to go before the penny drops with the Tánaiste?

The Tánaiste: We all know that house prices are too high for too many but it is also important that we do not misunderstand what a median price is. A median price does not refer to every house or indeed a typical house, as the Deputy said, in Dublin. Anyone who searches online will see many homes available in Dublin for below €500,000. That is not to take away from the challenge in relation to affordability but it is an important point of clarification. The Deputy also chose not to reference a number of other statistics published in that same report by the CSO yesterday which speak to the very people the Deputy wished me to speak to. They speak to young people wanting to buy their first home. The figures yesterday also showed that 50,583 homes were purchased last year and that almost 40% of them were purchased by the very first-time buyers the Deputy referenced. The number of homes purchased last year was up from 48,775 in the previous year. It almost doubled the number of transactions in 2013. It is important when we pick reports that we look at all of the figures in that report. The report yesterday also showed that there were more first-time buyers in 2025 than in 2024 and more homes and transactions around homes in 2025 than in 2024. I was pleased to see in the figures that the proportion of first-time buyers was also up, to almost 40%, with 19,680 of that total being first-time buyers. I want to put those facts out there to have a rounded conversation on where we are at regarding housing, housing supply and first-time buyers. Yes, I will say that supply is the key to all of this because it is. We have got to continue every single day to see

what more we can do to increase the number of homes. There are some positive signs which are not often acknowledged. We are now seeing 600 first-time buyers every week drawing down their mortgages.

That used to be 500. It is now 600. These are real people every single week. We are seeing more than 60,000 applicants having availed from the help-to-buy scheme. Over 9,000 home buyers have been approved to use the first home scheme. I reference that because, of course, that reduces the headline prices.

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, it does not.

The Tánaiste: It ensures that people can actually benefit from cash through the help-to-buy scheme and from an equity share in relation to their first home. We are also conscious when we look at how we are doing compared with other European countries that we now live in a country that has one of the strongest rates of home completion in the entire European Union. For every 1,000 people in Ireland, we are seeing 5.9 homes being completed. In the EU, that averages at 3.3. Home completions were up last year, at 36,280. That is up 20% on the previous year, and indeed represents the highest number of homes completed since 2011. We saw very positive housing commencement figures in December, with 3,065 homes commenced, which was more than the previous month. We will continue to see positive commencement figures. When look at planning permission, we see that momentum has picked up as well.

I tell the very young people that the Deputy referenced that we are seeing more homes being built, we are seeing more homes being commenced, we are seeing more homes being completed and we are seeing more people every week being able to buy their first home. In the CSO figures yesterday, we are seeing more housing transactions last year than the year before and first-time buyers making up a greater proportion of that. I agree with the Deputy that this is a continuing housing emergency. That is why we are reforming the planning laws and why we are increasing zoned land. We really need all our councils to get on board here right across the country and zone more land. I appeal to all political parties to assist in that. It is why we are rolling out unprecedented levels of funding for infrastructure, such as water and energy. It is why we are strengthening the Land Development Agency's powers. It is why we have brought in some of the strongest tenancy protections in Europe. It is why we are cutting the VAT rate to activate apartment building, and we are seeing some positive signs in relation to that. We have a hell of a lot more to do. Objectively, the figures that we see show progress in relation to housing supply. We have got to drive that on throughout 2026.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: With respect, the Tánaiste just dodged the complete question. The question I asked him was about affordability. He talked about the first home scheme, for example. He knows that if the typical home in Dublin is €500,000, the first home scheme does not even apply any more. You cannot get it for €500,000 or more. You cannot get it in Greystones or Bray for the median home because the prices are €575,000 and €550,000. Let us get back to the crux of the issue. The point I have made to the Tánaiste - the CSO has said this very clearly, and I am sure the Tánaiste does not dispute it - is that house prices have gone up €100,000 in four years alone. In the past year, they have gone up €32,000. Is the Government listening to young people? Is it listening to young people who are telling me or my colleagues that their lives are being put on hold and that they have lost a decade as a result

of Government policies on housing? The social fabric is breaking down. Some people see no future here because of affordability issues. I am asking the Tánaiste what the Government is going to do about it. Where the Government is taking this situation is that house prices are rising, rising and rising. The policies of the Government, such as the policy it voted for last night - it had promised it would not do so - to allow vulture funds to bid against these same people who want to purchase their homes, are doing one thing only, and that is pushing up house prices. Answer me this: how can the Tánaiste stand over Government policies that have seen house prices increase by €100,000? Does he recognise the impact this is having on young people across this State?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Of course I recognise that house prices are still far too high for far too many, but I also recognise that the figures - the very same set of figures the Deputy has quoted - show more home transactions last year than the year before, and more first-time buyers last year than the year before. They are real people too. They exist in the Deputy's community and mine. Six hundred people every single week are getting their keys for the first time to a first home. That is progress. We used to talk about that figure as 500 people a week. Yes, there is more to do in relation to that, but we cannot selectively quote the figures. The median is not the same as every and the Deputy accepts that too. The help-to-buy scheme has significantly helped people. It has helped more than 60,000 people. Sinn Féin has a policy to cut it by nearly two thirds. The first home scheme has helped 9,000 people. Sinn Féin wants to abolish that scheme as well. As recently as yesterday, 24 hours ago, the leader of Sinn Féin lodged her objection to 249 student beds in her constituency. When Sinn Féin comes in here, it is a housing emergency in the Dáil and it is a housing objection in the constituency.

Deputy John Cummins: Absolutely.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Tánaiste still not going to answer about the €100,000? Is he just going to ignore that?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

Deputy John Cummins: Object, object, object. Object all the time.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. I call Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Fine Gael objected on Cork City Council. I refer to a former Lord Mayor, Des Cahill. Go away and check it out. Deputies are coming in here making statements around councillors, but its Lord Mayor did the same in Cork.

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

Deputy Thomas Gould: People in glass houses.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: On behalf of my colleague, Deputy Robert O'Donoghue, I welcome the Tidy Towns group from Rush.

Over the last number of days, there has been an absolute outcry of support for special needs assistants, SNAs, school communities, children with special educational needs and SNA provision for the coming academic year. This outcry and this stress have been caused by the Government and policy decisions that the Government has made. These actions and communications have been cruel; there is no other word for it. Is it any wonder that there has been such an outcry when the Department of education has made a decision to abruptly take SNAs out of mainstream environments? A person does not have to be an expert to know that taking SNAs out of mainstream environments genuinely affects children, and this is affecting the most vulnerable children in our society.

Last year, I stood on the streets of Cork city and outside Dáil Éireann protesting with parents who could not get access to special classes. At that time, I welcomed the fact that there was an allocation of special classes. While they may not have been fully appropriate, I welcomed the development. At budget time, I welcomed that there was a new allocation for SNA provision. I welcome improvements to our education system. What I do not welcome, and something I will never accept, is that provision of services would be taken from a child. I know from working within school environments that there are children who rely solely on the support of a special needs assistant. We are now, as a State, going to take those supports away from particular children because they do not fit into the rigid criteria that have been created by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and the Department of education.

It is unacceptable to imagine or think that we would have children in this country who currently rely on a SNA not getting that support in the next academic year because of decision making by Departments and politicians. As a society, we must accept that the level of resources has not kept up with the level of need. The Taoiseach and the Minister can come in here all they want and say that we have increased the number of SNAs, but if we abruptly pull SNAs from mainstream classrooms, it destabilises them immediately. If we must take these decisions, we must see genuine increases where all children are able to avail of the necessary supports if they need them. There should not be a sudden announcement of "You have it this year, but not next year." Will the Tánaiste confirm what this pause means? When will the pause be lifted? Will schools lose SNAs for the next academic year? Will he confirm for schools that have been told by the NCSE that they have an increase in allocation for next year that this will stay the same?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I join the Deputy in welcoming Rush Tidy Towns to Leinster House.

It has been an extraordinarily upsetting and difficult week for parents of children with additional needs, for SNAs, for the children themselves, for teachers and for school communities. That is why it was really important to pause and get this right. The first thing I want to say is that we will see more SNAs in our schools next September than this September. The second thing I want to say is that no SNA should lose their job or will lose their job. In fact, we need more people to be willing to put their hand up to become a SNA. We need to provide them with the job security that is required for that to happen. Any approach to any

review has to be child centred. There was significant feedback around the country that this was not the experience of schools on the ground. I say this to be constructive.

Like the Deputy in his constituency, I am aware of schools that sought reviews because they know they need more SNAs. This review cannot be some sort of one-way street. It has to be about identifying the care needs of the children in the school and matching the resource to the care needs. Also, and this should have happened quite frankly in advance of the review, it has to be done in conjunction with a redeployment plan for SNAs. This is something that I believe is almost there. I hope that is a fair characterisation. It is very nearly there. We need that redeployment scheme in place. It will be the first time that we have ever had one. It will put our SNAs quite rightly on a par with teachers, for example. Again, for the first time ever, there will be a proper special education workforce plan. They are two key components that have to be put in place to get any form of child-centred review right as well.

I fully recognise the vital role our SNAs play in supporting children with special educational needs. I fully recognise that there are children who would not have been in a position to complete their education successfully, whether in a mainstream school or a special school, were it not for the SNAs. I fully recognise the very valuable work they do. We are increasing the number of SNAs. We are going to see nearly 25,000 in our schools from September. We are also increasing the budget. However, I take the Deputy's point that this is at a macro level and that we have to see how it applies individually, school by school and child by child. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, listened this week. They listened to the upset, anxiety, concern and anger and they rightly took the action to pause. We are going to get this right over the next number of weeks in that the approach to the review will be child-centred, there will be an SNA redeployment scheme and we will finally have a proper workforce plan for special education. We will intensively engage with stakeholders in the weeks ahead to get this right.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: With all due respect, while I agree with the stuff the Tánaiste has said, he has not answered any of my questions. He raised the issue of care needs. Does he accept that the care needs system has become too rigid? I am putting on the record of the Dáil that those who are on the autism spectrum and those who have inclusion needs, social anxiety or academic needs, such as dyslexia, dyscalculia or dyspraxia, do not fit into the criteria you need to meet to get the support of a SNA. They will not have that support. That is the fundamental issue. I need an answer to the first question I asked the Tánaiste because I am meeting SNAs, teachers, principals, students and parents tonight. When will this pause be lifted? That is the fundamental question. The Minister, Deputy Naughton's office sent an email back to a school in Dublin 15 this morning saying that this issue was the responsibility of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan. Is this his issue or is it the Minister's?

The Tánaiste: It is an issue for the whole of Government to get right. We are absolutely determined to get it right. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, are working hand in glove, along with all colleagues in government, to get this right. There should be no change in the application of the care needs criteria. The Deputy asked me what my view is regarding what must come from this pause. That is my view. That is what needs to happen. We also need to get the redeployment piece right. The Deputy very fairly asked me how long the pause will last for. I will give him an honest answer, which is

that it will take a number of weeks to get this right. There is a short window. We need to provide clarity and certainty to schools so it cannot go on for longer than a few weeks. However, at the same time, it is about getting it right rather than doing it quickly. Some of what we have all heard about happening on the ground in individual school communities was not right. Let us make sure some good comes from what has been a very upsetting week for parents, children, SNAs and teachers. We are all fully committed to putting this pause to good use and to getting things over the line that have been an issue for too long, including that redeployment plan. We are happy to keep the Oireachtas updated.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Does the Tánaiste agree that there is a time to take a stand on sport and that the Ireland versus Israel soccer fixture is exactly that time? We should have a boycott supported by the State and the entire population. We should not be complicit in normalising a team that is integrally connected to a genocide, racism against Palestinians and the oppression of the Palestinian people.

Ireland has been in this situation before, going back to the 1980s, apartheid and the IRFU. At that time, Charlie Haughey called in the IRFU and told it that it would be incompatible with the State's interest to participate. I never thought I would be holding Charlie Haughey up as an example. John Robbie, a former rugby player has said:

I used to think: did I actually know how bad apartheid was? Of course, I did. I should never have toured. ... I consider it a stain that will never leave me.

This will be a stain on Irish soccer and on the young players whom the Taoiseach and, it seems, the Tánaiste are encouraging to participate in this.

Does the Tánaiste think the Israeli soccer team is a normal team? Some 1,007 athletes have been killed since the genocide began. Of the 421 footballers who have been killed, nearly half have been children. A total of 288 soccer facilities have been destroyed. In December, just a month or so ago, a football pitch at the Aida refugee camp in the West Bank was ordered to be demolished by the IDF. Six Israeli teams currently play in occupied Palestinian territory in direct contravention of UEFA and FIFA's own rules, although UEFA and FIFA do nothing about it, and three of the biggest teams in Israeli football, Beitar Jerusalem, Maccabi Tel Aviv and Hapoel, have horrendous histories of racism towards Arabs and Palestinians. A lot of the players who play on the Israeli team are involved in these clubs. A popular chant from Maccabi supporters goes "Let the IDF win and F-U-C-K the Arabs". "Why is school out in Gaza? There are no children left there." is a chant from one of the soccer teams. Those chants ended in riots when Maccabi travelled to Amsterdam. In its 100-year history, Beitar, the team supported by Netanyahu, has never allowed an Arab to play. Racism is very normalised.

I will also mention the Israeli women's football team, which made a disgusting propaganda video in 2024 in which players swapped their Israeli jerseys for IDF uniforms. Shon Weissman, who has played for the team, has said that Gaza should be wiped off the map. Manor Solomon has defended the genocide. The children's teams are separated by apartheid by the Israeli football league. Does the Tánaiste think any of that is normal? Does he think that our players should be forced into a situation where they must be play against a team that is integrally involved with oppressing Palestinians?

The Tánaiste: I do not agree with the Deputy's view in relation to the football game. Our position in relation to Gaza, the genocidal activity there and the horrors the people of Palestine have experienced is very clear, as are the views of the Irish Government and the people of Ireland in relation to the horrific terrorist organisation that is Hamas and the terrorist attack it carried out. We continue to take active steps almost every day to try to assist in practical ways. My colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, was at the Rafah crossing in recent weeks, where she announced on our behalf a significant increase in funding. That is an example of a direct action we can take. We have recognised the State of Palestine, stood by UNRWA and increased our support for it. We hosted a conference on the two-state solution in Dublin Castle only last month. We continue to work for a two-state solution. We continue to recognise the Palestinian State and support the Palestinian people in their legitimate aspiration to have their own state.

However, when it comes to sport, we also have to think this through logically. The FAI, the governing body of Irish soccer, took a view as to what should happen in relation to Israel's participation. It canvassed and conveyed that view, as is its right. I do not run sporting organisations. UEFA decided not to take that view on board. The tournament is going ahead. If Ireland pulls out, what does that achieve other than to damage Irish soccer and participation in sport? While I am not suggesting the Deputy has done this, I do not like what I am seeing happening now, which is that pressure is being applied to individual players. They are being asked whether they are going to play and told they should not. We should be supporting the men who are putting on the green jersey and who represent our country with distinction. They have a couple of crucial games coming up in relation to the World Cup. We have to go back to our childhood, or I certainly do, to remember when we were last this close to having that opportunity. Sport is sport.

I never expected Deputy Coppinger to reference Charles Haughey in an admirable light but she has. However, I believe this is a separate and distinct issue. I really do know that this is a challenging issue for many people. I know the depth of feeling in this country. I share that depth of feeling but this is about the Irish soccer team. I want the boys in green to put on the jersey and win. I want them to win the game. I want to support the soccer team. I do not want to apply pressure to the team or to individual players. I reckon there are many people, including people in grassroots community organisations such as soccer academies in the Deputy's own community, who also want to see the team play. If we pull out, we will feel better for five minutes but who actually suffers? It is not the Israeli football team. It is Irish soccer. It is not a wise thing to do.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: If we boycott this game, it could lead to a domino effect where other teams would also boycott.

The Tánaiste: It will not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is not just about being a sacrificial lamb. Russia was not kicked out of FIFA because FIFA had a moral backbone; it was because a number of teams refused to play. We could be giving a lead. By the way, this is not the World Cup, as the Tánaiste well knows. It is an inconsequential tournament.

The Tánaiste: That is your view.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is not the World Cup play-offs or anything like that.

I want to send solidarity to Joanna Byrne, the first woman chairperson of the League of Ireland. She has been asked to resign because Drogheda United, which happens to be owned by a US multinational, does not agree with her stance that this match should not go ahead. Last year at an AGM, 93% of FAI elected representatives took a decision about Israel and that they should be pulled out. The Tánaiste seems to think it is okay to state something but not to back it up with any action. Of course, the natural thing to do after such a vote is to follow it up with your principles that you will not play against Israel and then to put pressure on UEFA and FIFA, rather than putting pressure on individual players. By the Taoiseach's statement during the week, he put the pressure on the players to go ahead, and so, I feel, is the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: No. We are supporting the decision taken by the FAI to participate in the competition. We have enough to be doing running the country without running sports organisations as well. I do not run the FAI. I think it is a bit sneery of the Deputy to call it an inconsequential tournament. It might be inconsequential to her, but I do not think we should suggest to the soccer players that it is inconsequential. It is not for the Deputy to attach that value to this.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Compared with a genocide, it is.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy would not like people suggesting her participation here is inconsequential. Soccer players and young boys and girls across the country who play sport want to see our soccer team do well. They want to see our soccer team participate. I think we can and should differentiate in relation to this. I do not think we should apply this pressure to individual soccer players or our national soccer team in relation to a decision they should take. I gave up soccer when I was about nine years of age because I was appalling at it. I took up politics and I intend to stick to politics and allow the soccer players to stick to soccer.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: During Covid, the buzzword everywhere in every country was about food security and making sure that where shortages were showing up in places, we would learn from those mistakes. Ironically enough - in my opinion, it is because of Commission pressure - over the last couple of years it is worrying to see in Holland that regarding 10% of the land where farmers were farming, they had to sign a docket. They were basically turfed out and told they cannot farm in Europe again. They had to sign that docket. It is the same this week. The European Commission is after giving Denmark the go-ahead for a €1 billion fund which will take out 9% to 10% of its lands.

In every country throughout Europe, we see the pressures on land in the line of forestry, solar and wind. Also, we see new EU regulations. We have done it in this country, where farmers have set aside 10% for nature. They did not say anything about it, may I add, and they were prepared to do it. The nature restoration law is coming in and the interpretation of it will be known in the next few months. I will not make a hasty statement one way or the other in the line of that.

Stats tell us that throughout Europe in the last 15 years we have lost 5.5 million farms. That is 5.5 million families. That is a colossal amount. There is something wrong. It is not that we are against trade deals, but there seems at the same time to be a massive push - be it New Zealand, Australia, Mercosur or CETA - to make sure we hammer these deals fairly quickly. There seems to be an agenda driven by the Commission and Ursula von der Leyen. Steel and other heavy industries have been driven out of Europe.

On the figures relating to what we have to achieve in climate, it appears farmers are the next casualties, when you look at the reasons both Denmark and Holland have decided to do what they are doing. We seem to be now more content to bring cooked, vacuum-packed chicken in from China and feed people in Europe with it than to farm the chickens in Europe. We seem to be more content to bring in beef or other products because of the methane out of cattle.

I am asking the Tánaiste - and I am also asking the Taoiseach - whether, when European leaders meet, this madness that is going on can be halted. We are taking prime land out of production in Europe and we still think of Covid and self-sufficiency. At the same time, we are going to fly it or boat it. I thought we all lived in the same world, where the cow puts up the same methane and farts the same in some other part of the world as in Europe. Why are we doing this to the farmers of Europe?

The Tánaiste: I have always admired the Deputy's bluntness. I will make a couple of points. I say this respectfully. We have to be considered in our comments around trade. The Deputy knows this and I do not need to be telling him or his constituents this but we are exporting about 90% of the agrifood we are producing in this country. We need to understand that. Again, I am not suggesting the Deputy does not, but we need to bring it into the public debate. Do we want a trade situation where we can sell our product anywhere but no one else can sell theirs here? That is not what the Deputy said but it is a natural outworking. If we want to continue to sell Irish produce across the world, as we proudly do, we need to understand that trade is two-way and that will mean continuing to engage in trade agreements.

We have to start having earlier and honest conversations with farmers. It always seems the conversation with the farmer comes at the end of the trade deal and that is mistaken. I have said that to the trade Commissioner. We should be engaging much earlier with the farming community to understand and address those issues earlier. We also have to be honest. The figures have been or are about to be published. I think we made about €21 billion in agrifood exports in the last year. That is based on selling our stuff to other places. The natural outworking of that is that we need to allow people sell their stuff into the European Union. It is a two-way relationship. This country is a small, open economy that is extraordinarily reliant on trade. I still think we can do better in engaging with and addressing the views of farmers and agrifood producers earlier.

The second point I will make is on land in general. I agree with the Deputy that we cannot have a situation where the farmer is held up as the bogey-man for the climate emergency. It is not fair and it is not true. We see really good progress being made in agriculture. Instead of lecturing farmers, we have to work with them and incentivise them. We have to make sure they can continue to make a living and that we can continue to support the family farm. That brings me to things like the nature restoration law. Anything to do with that will be voluntary, voluntary, voluntary. It cannot use CAP funding, but it is up to farmers to choose whether they

want to pursue it or not. We need to support our farmers. We have come through a difficult flooding situation. The Deputy is very knowledgeable on this. Things like adaptation and using State lands, in the first instance, to provide better resilience will be important to rural, and indeed urban, communities. We have to support our farmers financially in making the transitions that need to be made; support them in participating, whether in ACRES or the areas of natural constraint scheme; support them in nature, biodiversity and environment; support the forestry sector, with funding of €93 million allocated this year - an increase on last year; and work with them in partnership and recognise farming is not some sort of discretionary extra or hobby. It is the crucial backbone of the Irish indigenous economy. I do passionately believe that. We will have the Presidency in the second half of this year and we need to make sure that is reflected in the priorities of the European budget.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I never said I was totally opposed to trade deals. We have to bring in bananas and other things from some other countries. There is no one saying otherwise. The question I am asking is whether it does not sound an alarm to all European leaders. By the way, if you look at the stats for Irish exports, most of them go to Europe and the UK, especially in the line of beef. Think about if policy was right in industry and agriculture. Figures have gone up in industry and people working.

We have lost 5.5 million farms in Europe. I will give the Tánaiste an example. I spoke to a farmer from Denmark yesterday. He is an organic farmer. He is a big organic farmer in my book because he had something like over 300 cows. He is doing organic. That is the best type of farming if you want to be the perfect student in the class. However, he is being taken out. We are probably going to replace him with someone who can shove a bit of a hormone or medicine into an animal that is banned in Europe. Does that make sense? This is what I am saying. Where is the focus? Can leaders reset the agenda? Countries are under pressure because they have to hit this target. Once we hit the target, we are the best kids in the class. That is what seems to be the thing. Whatever sacrifice we have to make, if we have to be the salesperson for it, it is sound, provided we do not produce it. That is the worry I have throughout Europe.

The Tánaiste: I have enough challenges answering for the actions of the Irish Government without answering for the actions of the Danish Government. What I assure Irish farmers is that the policies being pursued by different European governments will not be reflected in the policies being pursued by the Irish Government. Anything we do in this space in relation to nature restoration will be done in partnership, in collaboration and on a voluntary basis. I want to be really clear on that. I want to reassure farmers in Ireland that it is voluntary. I also want to say to farmers as we approach the next CAP, the CAP money cannot be used for that. I think this is a European-wide issue. The loss of 5.5 million farms is a serious economic issue of concern for Europe; I agree with the Deputy. This is our indigenous industry that we should be protecting.

We have to make sure that we reduce the bureaucracy around these schemes. As I talk to farmers in Ireland, and as I hear from colleagues across the European Union, one of the reasons people opt out of schemes is they feel it is not worth their while. There is too much bureaucracy, too many checks and too much red tape. Along with making sure we get a decent sized budget the next time in terms of CAP and other supports for farmers, we also have to make sure that

simplification is not just something reserved for foreign and indigenous companies but also is something that Europe applies to its farmers, including Irish farmers.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raise the provision of care for those with additional needs when their loved ones can no longer provide this care. This is a source of enormous concern for families up and down the country and within my own community. Families have a deep and persistent worry about what will happen to their family member or members when they are no longer able to provide them with the care that they need. These are families who have devoted their lives to providing care at significant cost to themselves, personally, financially and emotionally. It is often elderly people who are providing this care, with over 2,000 people over the age of 70 caring for their loved ones, 500 of whom are over the age of 80. Yet, despite their commitment, they have no certainty on what will happen to their loved ones, either when they are no longer physically able to look after them or when they have passed away. It is a constantly anxiety and a number of families have been in touch with me on this issue.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brabazon for raising this very serious issue. I fully accept that it is a huge concern for parents regarding what will happen to their son or daughter when they are no longer around. I was checking on my phone because my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, is due to meet the campaign group Before We Die. My notes state she is due to meet them next Wednesday. It is really important that we have that engagement as a Government and that we are willing to listen and plan.

I can tell the Deputy all sorts of statistics and he can tell his constituents, and we are proud of these facts, but there are other issues too. Yes, we have increased the disability budget by 20% - about €618 million more. That will see additional funding for specialist disability residential places, above and beyond what is already provided. I think the issue is more complex than that, quite frankly, because from the people the Deputy is talking about and the people I know in my own community, there is not one size that fits all. It has to be person-centred. There are many people - I can think of them and the Deputy can too - who are living successfully at home with their family. They may not require or want a residential place and they want to continue to live in their family home but if their parents are no longer with us, they may require a level of in-reach support or community support. There will be others who may require residential support, either as they age or as their parents age or pass on. We need to have a much more meaningful conversation that is not just about numbers, places and budgets but actually about how we plan earlier.

Transition points are always really important in all our lives but they are particularly important in the life of a person with a disability. We see it when a child moves from primary school to secondary school. We are doing work now when a child with a disability moves from secondary school to third level. Being very honest, the piece of work we now have to do is that transition piece that the Deputy is referencing. Thankfully, people are living to be older but what happens when they transition? How do we have those conversations in a respectful way but earlier, so we do not end up with this emergency situation? Forget us, as a Government, it is about the parent and we know these people in their 80s and 90s and that great sense of

anxiety they carry about what will happen. The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is determined to engage with this group. I thank the Before We Die group on the work it is doing. The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, the Minister, Deputy Foley, with the support of the Department of housing, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the whole of Government will have to look at how we can have informed conversations about housing solutions, about community supports and about additional residential places where they are required. I will ask the Minister of State to directly update the Deputy after she has that engagement.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. It is very evident that the care that these families provide to their loved ones is unmatched. It is not easy for them but they do it, get on with it and do not complain. They do not have a clear answer about future residential places and supported living options. They do not have clarity. That is what we have to bring to this whole space. The State must step up and give these families the peace of mind that they deserve. We need to ensure there is a clear pathway for the provision of care for those with disabilities and that their families know that they will be cared for when they can no longer do it. We need to give these families confidence and not fear. What steps are being taken to give these families certainty about the long-term care arrangements when they can no longer provide that support themselves?

The Tánaiste: My gut was right there. The Minister of State actually met the group last Wednesday. I look forward to hearing how that meeting went and I will ask her to update the Deputy directly in relation to that. That was to kick off a conversation in relation to how we can have that more holistic view. In terms of practical steps that we are taking this year, €65 million has been provided for new responses in respect of disability residential services. We are going to see funding for at least 152 new residential places. Beyond that, other residential responses that I am suggesting might not be the full required in resident places. That is not always required as well. We will continue to increase the funding to our disability services.

The conversation we have to have alongside that is, as we develop more housing developments and more homes for people with disabilities in their community, so if, as you and your parents age and want your own independence and your own hall door, that you can still live within your community. I have not seen enough examples of it but I have seen some small examples of it around the country. As part of our new housing plan, we are determined to have that conversation. We should not just be having a conversation with developers about building social housing. That is important. We should also be having many more conversations about building homes for people with a disability and for older people. That would be part of the solution too.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: "We have been left with nowhere to turn". These are the words of Máirín Nolan, mother of seven-year-old Roxanne Kelly. Roxanne was born with a serious condition affecting her joints. She was then diagnosed with scoliosis at the age of two. Máirín says she spent years going between her doctors but has been left in limbo. There is no solution for her complex needs. In that time, Roxanne's scoliosis has worsened. Her spinal curve is

now 80 degrees. The family are left to fundraise to take Roxanne to Florida, where doctors have agreed to carry out the scoliosis surgery. Roxanne is just but one child being failed. Hundreds of children are waiting. We know that 525 scoliosis operations for children were cancelled in the past four years. Nine years ago, the Tánaiste promised that no child would wait longer than four months for spinal surgery but children are still left in awful situations. When is the Tánaiste going to keep his promise?

The Tánaiste: I think the Deputy knows I gave that commitment in good faith after significant engagement with the HSE and it being given to me. While it did result in many more procedures being carried out and many more children getting their surgery, I think we have seen a number of very concerning developments in relation to this specialty. That is why I believe there needs to be that full inquiry. We have even seen as recently as last week significantly concerning clinical reports as well. I do not want to comment specifically on an individual case on the floor of the Dáil other than to say I know the Minister for Health is aware of the case of Roxanne Kelly.

She has asked officials in her Department to communicate directly with the HSE and CHI on the case and to follow up directly with the family.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are you keeping your promise any time soon?

The Tánaiste: I have answered that.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I read the report of the north Kerry CAMHS review last night. It paints a picture akin to a Wild West, with no oversight, accountability or support and incredible god-like decisions. There are very serious questions that need urgent answers. How can it be the case, that with such harm done there is not a single full-time psychiatrist in north Kerry at this point in time? How can anyone with confidence go the HSE now and say they want their case reviewed? When there are a number of psychiatrists contributing hours, how can people expect they will be treated seriously?

On the actions the Minister set out yesterday, can the Tánaiste assure us there is now a red flag system in real time that will flag anomalous prescribing patterns? On her talk of a new central referrals system, the reality is it excludes autistic children, assessments of need and children under the age of eight. There are serious problems with the central referral system. What assurances can the Tánaiste provide to the families who are currently engaging with CAMHS and the families who will need CAMHS in future years? There is huge concern about the quality of service at the moment.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this deeply and profoundly concerning issue. I join with her and everyone in expressing my profound sympathy and thoughts to the children and young people affected, their parents and their families. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is in Kerry as we speak and engaging directly. She briefed the Cabinet yesterday on this issue. She will leave no stone unturned in providing support and answers, and in making sure we extend the likes of the existing non-adversarial compensation scheme in place for families impacted by deficits in care. She has directed her Department to engage with the Attorney General's office and the State Claims Agency to progress this.

I will say more broadly, because lots of families are interacting with CAMHS, that it is important to stress the independent national prescribing audit did not identify the fundamental care deficits in Kerry anywhere else nationally. I wanted to say that. I also want to say that a number of improvements to the service have taken place since 2022 in Kerry, including the two teams that are working there. I am also conscious, as the Deputy will be, that a lot of people working today in CAMHS in Kerry are doing a very good job in a very difficult and stressful situation. Once the Minister of State is back from her engagements in Kerry, she will provide further updates on next steps in relation to this.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The Tánaiste is the Minister for Finance and the leader of Fine Gael. In the budget for 2027, there is a promised cost-of-disability payment. In budget 2025, there was a disability support grant of €400 but in budget 2026, there was no one-off payment. In fact, disabled people are €1,400 worse off as a result of the budget in 2026. Many disabled people have said they are choosing between heating and eating. One person with a spinal injury told me that since 1999, he does not remember it being this bad. When my party and I raised this and called for a modest emergency winter payment of €400 last month, we were met with derision by the Government. Disabled people were accused of being alarmist, misleading and dangerous. The Government is now forcing disabled people to take to the streets on 28 February to ask for their basic needs to be met. Will it reverse this disastrous budgetary oversight as a matter of urgency? Will the Tánaiste condemn or at least disavow the hurtful and disgraceful comments of the Minister for Social Protection?

The Tánaiste: What I will certainly do is accept the Deputy is quite rightly highlighting the issue of disability, as is his party. That is an important and good thing to do. No one wishes to engage in any sort of derisory view. These are important and legitimate issues. The next priority for the Government in terms of the work of the Minister for Social Protection is the development of a cost-of-disability payment. As it happens, coincidentally, the consultation on that payment is due to open tomorrow. I know the challenges people with a disability face. I met many of them in Galway and engaged with their lived experience only two weeks ago. They do not need to be on the streets protesting. We need them to be in the rooms engaging so we get this payment and structure right.

I will say more broadly, about any comment, when I hear of people saying they are choosing between heating and eating, I genuinely say to everyone in this House that no one should find themselves in that situation.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: They do.

The Tánaiste: Our community welfare officers, and the Deputy will know this through his office, are there. He will know the names of the people.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: They are there to provide exceptional needs-----

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: If anybody in the Deputy's constituency, or anyone in the country, is concerned about heating or eating, as he said, I genuinely encourage them to engage with our exceptional needs payments. No one should find themselves in that situation in Ireland. That is what those structures are there for. We just need to have that balance in the conversation. The cost-of-disability payment is a priority for the Government. The consultation will open tomorrow. We look forward to engaging with the Deputy and his party on it also.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will ask the Tánaiste about Connor Green, the surgeon responsible for inserting non-medical springs into children at Temple Street. He is also the subject of the Nayagam report, which recommended that two thirds of the children it looked at have a follow-up clinical review. I understand that he is seeking an injunction to prevent the publication of the Nayagam report. Is the State contesting that and seeking to publish the report? Why is the look-back review, which flows from the Nayagam report, excluding adult patients? Dr. Green had a substantial adult practice and very many of them have had significant complications, including at least one person who has been in touch me. He has a licence to practice in Maryland. How it got that is not exactly clear because the Medical Council has said it did not issue any certificate of good standing for him.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, you should not go there, please. You are out of order.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Has the HSE contacted its counterparts in Maryland to warn them about this surgeon and to explain he is currently under investigation by the Medical Council?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy should conclude. I do not have to tell the Tánaiste that if the matter is in the courts-----

The Tánaiste: I accept Deputy Murphy used Dáil privilege, as is his right, but because matters are before the courts, I am not in a position to comment further, other than to say the Government's position in general is it wants to see all reports published and to be transparent in relation to this. The legal realities as to what it is possible to publish or not are matters for the Minister for Health to work through, as she is doing. We also want to see a broader inquiry into the workings of a number of issues in relation to CHI and certain specialties. A lot of this work could be helpful to any such inquiry too, but these are matters for the courts to determine.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the announcement, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is here, in relation to the likes of modular granny flats and all of that coming in. I thank him for a meeting we had in the past few weeks. I have one question we are getting a lot of calls about, which is the modular unit or small shed at the back that people want to try to get done up. When does the Government envisage the legislation will go through the House so people can plan for it now?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for his comments. He will know I moved on the agricultural exemptions prior to Christmas. The next phase is domestic exemptions, which

will include modular to the rear. We are finalising those. It does not require legislation. It is regulation and has to go before the Oireachtas joint committee, which I expect to be able to do after Easter. We will get there as soon as we can. After domestic, it will be infrastructure. We are progressing that work. I thank everybody for-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Will it be ready for summer?

Deputy John Cummins: That is the aim.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to raise St. Luke's General Hospital in Kilkenny. It is a level 3 hospital with over 1,200 staff and is the seventh biggest medical centre in Ireland serving a catchment area of around 200,000 people. I am looking for an update on the new CT machine, which is vital to support patient flow. A second CT for St. Luke's will result in no downtime and allow specialised tests to be completed on-site reducing the need for patients to be transferred to another hospital, which results in long waiting times for appointments. A strong business case has been put forward and submitted for a new 86-bed accommodation block for the Dolmen wing, including 14 critical care beds, 72 single rooms, a laboratory and a pharmacy. I am looking for a commitment that this wing will be prioritised and delivered as a matter of urgency. St. Luke's is part of the HSE Dublin and South East region, but it currently has no dermatologist, no rheumatologist, no neurologist and no child psychologist, yet they all exist as part of HSE south east. I am looking for a commitment that the Government will engage with the HSE Dublin and South East for a realignment of some of those staff to Kilkenny.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for a comprehensive question on St. Luke's in Kilkenny. It is a hospital I know well and have been in many times. I note a number of works have been carried out there, from a capital point of view, including the extension to radiology, the provision of a new MRI, which was completed in 2022, and the new 72-bed replacement medical ward block. I am told the replacement of the existing CT scanner was completed in 2024. An acute inpatient bed capacity expansion plan is due to be completed this year.

The HSE capital plan is due very shortly, probably as soon as next week. There will then be an opportunity to update on what is next in the pipeline of projects. There are a number of projects, including mental health facilities. The new 50-bed acute mental health unit, ACHU, is at appraisal stage.

1 o'clock

I will ask the Minister for Health, once she receives the HSE capital plan, which will probably be next week, to update the Deputy on the specific projects he referenced. I will also follow up with her on the specific specialties the Deputy said are required in the hospital.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I want to ask the Tánaiste about the communication this week from Tailte Éireann on early years service providers and childminders receiving bills for commercial rates. As he knows, they quietly provide a very important public service through the early childhood care and education scheme and other childminding services right across the country. To date, they have not been liable for commercial rates. It is big change. There will

be a significant charge on different childminders, particularly early years service providers. I hope there can be engagement between the Tánaiste's Department, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this matter urgently to address it.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and for the engagement he had with the childcare sector this week. This is certainly something we intend to examine as a Government. We all know in this House that there is huge demand for childcare places. We need to support our childminders and help them to remain viable and in the sector, not making life harder for them. I am aware that there are legal issues to be worked out and there is also the matter of the Valuation Act, but the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, is engaging with the Minister for housing to seek clarity on how childminders who care for children single-handedly in their own family homes can avoid being disadvantaged. I thank the Minister for children for the work she is doing on this. She will keep the Government up to date as we make progress on it.

Deputy Pa Daly: Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Tánaiste mar gheall ar chártaí leighis agus cártaí leighis saorthoilteanacha. Tá bean i gCiarraí agus fuair a fear céile bás, agus i ndiaidh sin, fuair sí ailse. Bhí uirthi rud éigin a dhéanamh mar gheall air san ospidéal. There is a woman in Kerry who applied for a discretionary medical card because she had been refused one. Her husband had died in tragic circumstances. She herself then developed cancer and needed 16 or 17 rounds of radiotherapy at the last count. We applied for the card on her behalf and brought the matter as far as we could go. Her means were over the limit. The last thing a woman in her position should have to do is apply for a medical card. Discretion should have been used in her case, but it seems that decisions are limited on the basis of means alone. Will the Tánaiste do something about it?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this. My sympathy to his constituent on all she has been through and for her loss. If he wants to send the details to the Minister for Health, I will ask her to engage directly with the HSE on it.

As he rightly said, there are two ways of accessing a medical card. There are the means ground but, above and beyond those, the exceptional burden that illness and loss can place on one is also supposed to be factored in. Without knowing the details, one would hope this could be examined again. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to engage with the Deputy if he sends on the details.

Deputy Pa Daly: I might cc the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: Please do cc me on it.

Deputy Grace Boland: As the Tánaiste knows, Fingal is the youngest and fastest-growing area of the country. We are delivering houses but our education infrastructure needs to catch up. In December 2022, when he was Minister for Further and Higher Education, he visited Swords and announced a college of the future campus. Three years later, we do not seem to be any further on and do not have a timeline for delivery. He might update us and let us know

whether a preliminary business case has been concluded and when families in Fingal will see the delivery of the college.

The Tánaiste: How do I know Fingal is the youngest and fastest-growing area in Ireland? It is because the Deputy keeps telling me so it must be true. I know it to be true. I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and acknowledge that she and our colleague Councillor Luke Corkery are working closely on it. It is something I genuinely care deeply about. The population of Swords is huge, bigger than that of a number of cities. It is one of the ten locations the Government has chosen with SOLAS and the education and training boards to develop a college of the future. The idea that Swords would be without college opportunities is unfathomable at this stage. It has to change and this is the project that is going to change it. We said when we announced the project that such projects take a number of years. They genuinely do. We are trying to develop a campus that will serve 1,000 full-time students and up to 5,000 part-time learners so 6,000 people could benefit. The relevant Minister, Deputy James Lawless, is very committed to this and has given approval for the relevant site. I believe legal due diligence requirements need to be dealt with now. The acquisition of the site is the next aim. I will ask the Minister to provide the Deputy with a specific update. I look forward to visiting Swords with her shortly.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The findings of the north Kerry CAMHS look-back review are deeply concerning. Potential for harm was identified in respect of over 200 children's files. Behind each number is a child and family who trusted the State. In too many cases, their trust was not upheld. While the review relates to Kerry, the prescribing safeguards must be a national priority.

A young man recently came to me about his experience. He was prescribed risperidone at just seven years of age and remained on it for 15 years, with increasing doses and without any adequate clinical monitoring. He experienced significant weight gain and serious mood difficulties. He is now off the medication, thankfully, and his life has improved dramatically but his story raises serious questions about oversight and monitoring. The drug has a legitimate clinical role but the evidence shows that it was not just in Kerry that situations like this arose. We need more investment in primary care mental health services to intervene early and to have stronger supports, particularly for children with dual diagnoses, who are falling through too many gaps in the system. Their cases are very complex and the risks are far greater.

I want a review of the national prescribing audit, accounting for safety and standards, as the audit has highlighted areas of improvement in processes and monitoring, and to ensure the recommendations arising from the audit result in an improvement to governance, care and medication monitoring.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this and for her considered contribution on it. The first thing I want to say, which the relevant Minister of State, Deputy Butler, would also want me to say, is that the independent national prescribing audit did not identify the fundamental care deficits elsewhere nationally, but that is not the point the Deputy is making. I just wanted to say that because it is important. The Deputy is making a broader point, namely that we need to review the standards more generally. That is certainly worth considering. We

are very fortunate that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is passionate about and committed to this area. I will ask her to reflect on what the Deputy said and revert to her directly.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There is an active travel proposal for Knockfree and Knockpogue avenues, Farranree, in my constituency. The residents support the majority of the elements, including safety measures, the removal of roundabouts and the renewal of roads and footpaths, but they object to certain elements. At the moment they are protesting and have stopped the work. The Taoiseach himself said there needs to be more dialogue with the residents. Sinn Féin councillors Kenneth Collins and Michelle Gould brought a motion to Cork City Council that was supported by some other councillors but it was voted down by Government councillors. We believe the residents in the community must be heard and mediation is the best path. The residents have agreed to independent mediation. Will the Tánaiste intervene on behalf of the Government and ensure mediation goes ahead because the community is angry and frustrated that it is not being listened to? All it is asking for is mediation and that its voice be heard.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I say very respectfully that he will understand that I am not familiar with the details of the specific project, roundabouts or safety concerns. However, it is important that he has raised the broader issue of the need for consultation and engagement with communities, which is a fair one. It is a serious point. I hear, more than from time to time across the country, that there are many projects that the majority of residents support in the main but that have certain elements that residents have concerns about and in respect of which they feel they are not heard. What I will do, on foot of my not being familiar with the details, is ask the Minister for Transport specifically to examine the issues the Deputy has raised and revert to him directly.

Deputy Thomas Gould: What I will do is send the Tánaiste an email that he can forward on.

The Tánaiste: I will be very happy to do that.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: To follow on from the remarks of my colleague, the Taoiseach has publicly stated further consultation should have taken place on the active travel plan for Knockfree and Knockpogue avenues in Farranree, Cork city. Elderly residents, families, community groups, local businesses and sports clubs have raised serious concerns about the removal of parking and the impact on access to five schools, the parochial hall, Sam Allen Sports Complex and the local church. The main corridor is seriously affected, with 23 mature trees that are approximately 70 years old being removed. Residents, including the elderly and infirm, have taken to the streets to protest in the area every morning. They are not the usual protesters we tend to see in Ireland; they are protestors who are very deeply concerned about where they live, particularly the avenues, and their quality of life. Since the Taoiseach has accepted that the consultation was insufficient and he has stated he had concerns regarding the lack of consultation between the residents, local councillors and Cork City Council, will the Tánaiste formally direct the Minister for Transport and the National Transport Authority to engage immediately with the residents and Cork City Council to address the genuine access and environmental concerns about the works that are planned?

The Tánaiste: I certainly would not want to contradict or disagree with the Taoiseach on views he has given on this project in Cork but what I will do is speak to him directly about the issue. I hope this is a matter of common sense prevailing in terms of engagement. I say this respectfully, but even the idea of mediation having to take place sounds to me like a process that did not go well in terms of proper engagement. That is based purely on what the Deputy has told me here today. I do not have the details of the project. I will talk to the Taoiseach about it and we will engage with the Minister for Transport. I know the Deputy will send me on the details.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Wicklow parents pay the highest average weekly cost for childcare outside of Dublin at €235.90. It is an incredible amount for anyone to have to pay. In addition we have only 20 community centres out of 161. That is 12%. That can be compared with other counties like Leitrim and Monaghan, where more than 60% of their early learning providers are community centres. I understand that the Government is bringing in a pilot and that a number of community crèches will be established. I ask that Wicklow be very carefully considered as one of those counties. The need is there, as the Tánaiste will know. It is important that parents in Wicklow get support to access work.

The Tánaiste: I hope Wicklow is there too. I fully agree with the Deputy. We live in a county that is both young and fast growing. We know that through our own work not only on school capacity and the likes but also on childcare capacity. While I fully accept that childcare costs are too high, and we all have a similar view on the direction of travel that needs to take place on reducing childcare costs, one of the big issues we face in Greystones, Delgany, Bray and right across County Wicklow is access to places. I was pleased that the Minister, Deputy Foley, announced a fund to start intervening directly. I believe we must do that. We cannot just leave this to the market. The Department is going through a mapping exercise as to where the need is most acute. I will ask that Wicklow be considered as part of that and revert to the Deputy directly on it.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The image I am holding up is not a real image but an AI-generated image of the front of a house on *daft.ie* at the moment. Estate agents are more and more posting AI-generated false images on platforms like Daft. This is misleading. It is also predatory at a time when the housing situation is so bad. The response from the advertising regulator, however, has been effectively that it is fine provided there is a tiny label at the bottom. I am very concerned about this practice because it is something we have seen in other jurisdictions and is one of the growing challenges we have in terms of artificial intelligence. With the new AI office being set up in August, what will the Government do about the likes of this? We will see this with rental properties as well, where rental properties will be misrepresented on platforms as being essentially fake apartments or houses.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising an issue that has not come to my attention before and for bringing it to our attention. A broader point I will make, while not taking away from the seriousness of the issue, is that people generally view a house before buying or renting it, obviously. That is not the point the Deputy is making, though. It is misleading to people, it can waste their time and so on. I ask that I be allowed give some consideration to the matter with colleagues on foot of the Deputy raising it. I take the point that there are meant to be

labels about material being AI generated and so on, but we should not all have to squint to find those things. It is also very bad practice. Just showing us what the actual house looks like is a much more decent way of engaging with people. I will engage with both the Minister of State with responsibility for AI and the Minister for housing on the issue.

Deputy Emer Currie: I strongly welcome the Tánaiste's commitment to developing a national savings and investment strategy. It is the right direction, and there is obviously clear support for it. Irish households are strong savers, but too much of that money is sitting in low-yield accounts quietly losing value to inflation. If we are serious about building a culture of long-term investing, we must remove the barriers that discourage participation. The reduction in the exit tax rate on gains from 41% to 38% in the budget was a positive step. However, as long as the eight-year deemed disposal rule on exchange traded funds, ETFs, remains in place, long-term retail investors continue to be penalised. Taxing unrealised gains and interrupting compounding directly undermines the long-term behaviour we are trying to promote. If this strategy is to genuinely unlock investment, the eight-year deemed disposal rule should be removed.

This strategy is a really important step forward. I ask the Tánaiste to continue his ongoing engagement with the industry and to seriously consider removing the deemed disposal rule under the strategy.

The Tánaiste: This is an area I really want to get right. We have a very strong culture of saving in Ireland but not a strong culture of investment. That is not a criticism of anyone; that is just a reflection of the reality. We have €169 billion or €170 billion on deposit today in Ireland. Lots of people, despite the challenges families face, are trying to put a few bob away for their future, for a rainy day, for their kids or for whatever they are trying to do in their own lives. At the moment, not only are they not making money on this but sometimes they are losing money on it. We therefore need to look at how we can set up savings and investment accounts. I am absolutely committed to this. It is a priority for me in the two budgets I will deliver as finance Minister. As part of that, there are tax rates, tax sequencing and financial literacy. The issue of deemed disposal is valid and important. We just need to consider all of these in the round and how to move forward. The next step is to bring a roadmap to the Government before Easter and to set up a savings and investment forum to engage directly with stakeholders with a view to being able to move forward later this year.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I want to raise an issue under the Tánaiste's remit as Minister for Finance, namely the help to buy scheme and the property price ceiling of €500,000. Despite some reservations about this scheme, I am a strong supporter of it. It has benefited over 60,000 first-time buyers, to purchase homes since its introduction and given them their tax back up to the maximum of €30,000. However, the Tánaiste will have seen yesterday the CSO figures which put the median price of a house in Dublin at €500,000. That is both second-hand and new properties. Many new properties are much more expensive than €500,000. This is not just a Dublin issue; this is also an issue in places like Cork and other main urban areas. Therefore, we need to move the limit above the €500,000. In reality, many first-time buyers are now prevented from benefiting from the help to buy scheme because of the price ceiling. When it was introduced in 2017, nine years ago, it was set at €500,000. There has been 24%

price inflation since that period, so it makes no sense for us not to adjust the figure to reflect somewhat the inflationary pressures since then. I ask the Tánaiste to look at this. I appreciate that it probably has to be a budgetary issue but I am flagging it as early as possible.

The Tánaiste: There is indeed a commitment in the programme for Government to look at this. In that context, we will look at it, and I thank the Deputy for raising it with me. It is a fine balance and we have to consider all these things in the round, in terms of the quantum that may be available for a tax package in the budget and how we wish to deploy that while also making sure that we do not cause undue inflationary pressures on housing or the like. We need to think of all this in the round. There is the question of how the first home scheme operates too. I too am proud of the help to buy scheme. It has helped over 60,000 people. I am pleased that we have confirmed that it will continue for the lifetime of this Government, and there is a commitment in the programme for Government to review that scheme. We will undertake that review and I will revert to the Deputy then.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Disabled people have been protesting outside the Dáil on a number of occasions in recent weeks. They are having a national protest on 28 February. The Tánaiste said earlier in reply to somebody else that they do not need to be on the streets. They genuinely do feel they need to be on the streets. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. Disabled people tell us they feel their income is €1,400 less this year than last year due to the budget, which has been devastating not only for people with disabilities but for many other workers as well. We have record numbers of people in energy arrears. A total of 303,465 households was the last figure I saw and many of those are people with disabilities. People with disabilities have been telling us that they are choosing whether to heat the house or to buy food. I know that has been rejected by the Government, but that is what they are telling us, and I believe them now. There is a need for an energy payment or a disability payment. Will the Tánaiste, even at this late stage, consider doing that? Then they will not have to go on the streets.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I know how serious these issues are. The context in which I mentioned not being on the streets was not to suggest that people with a disability do not feel extraordinarily strongly on these issues or want to ventilate that. The point was that the consultation for the new cost-of-disability payment will open tomorrow and I want people to be in rooms and engaging in that and given the opportunity to do so. The Government is committed to developing a cost-of-disability payment.

The Minister, Deputy Calleary, is working on that and will engage closely with people with disabilities and their representative organisations with a view to getting this right.

Universal Access to Social Housing (Abolition of Income Limits) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 to provide for universal access to social housing by abolishing income-related criteria.

Why should we remove the income limits for social housing? I argue there are many good reasons to do it, and to do it urgently. Every week, every month and every year there is a constant and growing flow of households, which having waited sometimes in excess of ten years on housing lists, sometimes just before they are allocated a house are thrown off the housing list. This might be because they got a pay rise, an increment or a promotion. They get punished for that by being taken off a housing list they have been on sometimes for a decade or more. Then, in many cases they are left completely in limbo because their income is now too much to stay on the housing list after being on it all of those years, but too little to get a cost rental on income grounds, too little to get an affordable purchase home on any of the Government schemes and way too little to pay the extortionate rents and house prices out there on the market. You get punished for getting a pay rise or a promotion by being screwed on the housing front. In some cases, I have come across people left homeless and trapped in emergency accommodation because there is no chance they will ever get a social house as their income is too high.

This is also leading to segregation, when Government policy is supposed to be about mixed tenure. They go on about it. In reality, its failure to raise income thresholds means that every year social housing has become more segregated to those on the lowest incomes. It is concentrating the people on the lowest incomes and essentially ghettoising them. That also creates a problem for local authorities and the Government because it means the rental revenue coming in is less and is not enough to maintain the social housing.

Is what we are saying unrealistic to do? The answer is "No". Luke French, a transition year student from St. Andrew's College who was in my office last week, did the research. He looked at Vienna where the thresholds mean that between 75% and 80% of people are eligible for social housing. In Sweden and Denmark, there are no income limits at all. Anybody can access social housing. If their income goes up, then the rent they pay goes up. It means we do not have segregation. It means there is no stigma attached to social housing. It means that a large amount of revenue that is currently going into the pockets of corporate landlords who are profiteering from the housing crisis will come back to the State to maintain and build social housing. It is win-win-win for society and those who need housing. Of course, to build this level of social housing we need to State to start building. That is why we are in favour of a State construction company. This is a Bill the Government should support.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Our Bill is simple. It would make social housing universally available. It is the opposite to what the Government has been doing. The Government has effectively, for decades, been copying Maggie Thatcher by cutting the amount of social housing being built and then ensuring they shrink the pool of people who are eligible to apply for it. It has done that by refusing to increase the income limits in line with average wages. The result is that only the poorest and lowest paid households, those that are on social welfare, are eligible. It concentrates deprivation in social housing. It leads to social issues and contributes to a financial crisis for councils when they say they are not raising enough through rents to cover maintenance. Universal social housing would mean higher paid workers paying higher rents, easily covering maintenance. Instead, this is being used as a reason to hike up rents in Dublin City Council. They will try to do it in South Dublin County Council. It is happening across the country because it is being pushed for by the Government, which is attacking some of the most deprived communities by making them pay more. For HAP tenants it is hitting them

twice because they will pay more in a top-up to a private landlord because of Government policy and more to the council as tenants. It is all linked to a strategy of effectively getting rid of differential income-based rents. If you read the Government strategy, it is about merging council and social housing with cost rental over time. That is the opposite to the direction we need to go. We need universal access to social housing, which is the idea that people pay what they can afford to pay - they pay a percentage of their income, and they get decent quality accommodation. That should not be too much to ask.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Public Art Mural (Exempted Development) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend Planning and Development Regulations, 2001 (S.I. No. 600 of 2001) to provide for exemptions from planning permission for certain categories of public art murals where such work has artistic or cultural merit, has the permission of the owner of the building or structure on which it is displayed, is not a commercial advertisement and does not conflict with the Equal Status Acts.

Public art murals are good for our cities and towns. They transform the streetscape in many instances into beautiful, vibrant and thoughtful spaces, enhancing the urban experience for residents and visitors alike. Thankfully, we are blessed with wonderful street art in the Minister of State's own city of Limerick, Dublin, Galway, Waterford, Cork and many other urban locations. The problem is that our current planning laws are too restrictive in requiring planning permission for public art murals on private property. It is interesting because when you look at the exempted development regulations, this is in stark contrast to commercial advertisements. In fact, there is a huge number of exempted development categories for ads yet severe restrictions for public art. The problem is that these restrictions have meant in the recent past, in Dublin city for example, that the local authority initiated enforcement action against some of the most iconic murals in the city, including the horse boy mural in the north inner city and the David Attenborough mural off the South Circular Road. Thankfully, due to strong campaigning and advocacy in Leinster House, those enforcement and legal actions have been withdrawn.

The problem is that the planning restrictions remain in place. That is a disincentive for artists to do what they are best placed to do, which is to make our cities better places to be. It is for that reason that I am introducing this legislation, the Public Art Mural (Exempted Development) Bill 2026. The Bill seeks to create a new category of exempted development which will apply to "public art murals" on private property. It is important that we have a clear framework for such an exempted category. To avail of the exemption, the artwork must have artistic or cultural merit as defined in the Arts Act 2003. The work cannot be a commercial advert as set out in the Consumer Protection Act. Crucially, it must not conflict with the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2018. The exemption should not be available for murals during any electoral period because it is not an election campaigning tool. It also should not apply to protected structures or properties in architectural conservation or special amenity order areas.

If you look around the country, you will see the quality of the work we have. I refer, for example, to the outstanding public art by Maser in Dublin, including his wonderful collaboration some years ago with Damien Dempsey. I already mentioned the two wonderful murals by Subset, the horse boy mural and the David Attenborough mural. In Cork, Asbestos has done iconic murals on housing. Caoilfhionn Hanton, who is from Waterford but now resident in Dublin, is an exemplar of the finest work we have. In fact, we are bursting at the seams with this incredible creative talent. That is why we should be doing everything in this House to ensure those artists are able to bring their creativity and art to the widest possible audience. Where better to do that than in the streets and on the gable walls of our towns and cities?

I think this is a positive but measured contribution to ensuring that creativity and talent can flourish, and that everyone can enjoy and revel in the beauty of public art murals.

Therefore, I am introducing the Bill today. I look forward to introducing it on Second Stage as soon as possible. Crucially, I look forward to enthusiastic support from the Government to ensure this practical step becomes part of our planning code. Our cities and towns will be all the better for it.

Deputy An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): No.

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy An Leas-Cheann 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 1.30 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.

Flooding: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): Last week, during Private Members' business, I listened carefully to the views of colleagues. We discussed the Government's work on managing flood risk and responding to recent events. I welcome another chance today to continue that discussion.

Flooding has become more common and more damaging both here and abroad. We have all seen the distress it causes homeowners, businesses, landowners and entire communities. Other nearby countries have also suffered serious floods recently. I again acknowledge the hardship faced by everyone affected by the recent flooding. I have visited many of the impacted areas myself. I have spoken to residents and business owners and understand their fear and frustration. I assure them and the House that the Government is fully committed to reducing flood risk and supporting those who need help. I look forward to working with them to deliver real solutions for communities affected by flooding.

Reducing flood risk requires action across many Government Departments. The interdepartmental flood policy co-ordination group leads this work. Flood policy is built on three main pillars. The first is prevention, which involves avoiding or removing flood risk such as by stopping construction in flood-prone areas. The Office of the Planning Regulator and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage play key roles in this. The second is protection, which involves reducing the likelihood or severity of floods. This includes major flood relief schemes and, where suitable, nature-based solutions. The third is preparedness, which involves helping people and communities prepare for and respond to floods. This includes public information, emergency actions and early warnings. The co-ordination group also works to raise awareness and to encourage people and businesses to protect themselves and their property. Recent supports include an emergency response payment from Department of Social Protection covering eight counties with 137 payments issued by 13 February 2026 and the enhanced emergency humanitarian flooding scheme from the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. Funding for the latter scheme increased from €20,000 to €100,000 with 53 applications received by 16 February 2026.

In 2018, the OPW completed the State's largest ever flood-risk study - the CFRAM programme. It covered 80% of the primary flood risk in Ireland and identified solutions to protect 95% of that risk. Key outputs include flood maps for 300 communities and 29 river basin flood risk management plans detailing suitable flood relief measures. These plans guide Government investment in flood protection, which includes around 150 flood relief schemes, protection for 23,000 homes and businesses and a Government commitment of €1.3 billion under the national development plan to 2030. When complete, 95% of properties assessed will have flood protection. Other measures will address remaining risks, including minor flood mitigation and coastal protection projects, individual property protection, the voluntary homeowners relocation scheme and enhanced forecasting and community resilience programmes.

So far, the OPW has invested €580 million in 56 completed schemes, provided protection to 13,580 properties and delivered €2 billion in estimated avoided damages. Since 2018, the number of schemes at design, planning or construction stage has increased to 100 active

schemes with ten schemes at construction, five schemes at detailed design, ten schemes at planning stage and 69 schemes in development or preliminary design.

There are limits on available specialist engineering and environmental expertise. As a result, schemes are delivered in two tranches. A national pilot is under way to test a more efficient delivery model for tranche two schemes. Flood relief schemes take time because they require extensive surveys and environmental assessments as they must meet legal and EU requirements, they involve public consultation and judicial reviews can delay progress. Typical delivery time is about 11 years from start to finish.

Other measures include minor flood mitigation works and the coastal protection scheme. Since 2009, the scheme has funded 900 projects, provided over €70 million in investment and reduced risk for 8,000 properties. In 2025, the funding limit increased from €750,000 to €2 million per project. Following Storm Chandra, I asked local authorities with major schemes under way to list all possible temporary measures to reduce risk while long-term solutions are being developed. I expect these plans shortly. The OPW maintains 11,500 km of river channels, 800 km of embankments, 260,000 ha of agricultural land and flood protection for 20,000 properties, 2,400 km of roads and 77 towns and villages

I thank all those involved in flood preparations and response - local authorities, An Garda Síochána, the HSE, civil defence and many more. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage leads national co-ordination through the national emergency co-ordination group.

Stage I of the national flood forecasting and warning service was completed in 2023. Met Éireann now provides daily flood guidance to local authorities and State agencies. Stage II is now under the Government task force on emergency planning. It will deliver more detailed and accurate forecasts and community flood warnings.

Climate change will bring more storms and extreme weather and flood risk management must adapt accordingly. The OPW has published its climate change sectoral adaptation plan for 2025 to 2030. All new and ongoing flood schemes must now include a climate adaptation plan; nature-based solutions where feasible; an assessment of future sea-level rise scenarios, including rises up to 2 m; and consideration of tidal barriers for cities and major coastal areas. The OPW also supports planning authorities to ensure flood risk is properly considered in development decisions.

I know many communities feel anxious as they wait for flood relief schemes to be delivered. I assure the House the Government is doing everything possible to progress this work quickly and effectively. I remain open to all ideas that can speed up delivery or further reduce flood risk. I thank Members for their attention and look forward to the debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Minister of State for his statement and his work on this matter, in particular his commitment. The Minister of State has visited Carlow and Kilkenny but I have seen him and the Taoiseach go around the country to anywhere that was flooded, which is important. It is important that they see what is happening and are able to speak to everyone. It is safe to say that we have never seen rain as heavy or flooding as bad as that which we have experienced over the past number of weeks. I acknowledge the upset and devastation that has been

experienced by people across the country recently. Seeing one's home, business, housing estate or town under water and trying to manage the clean up and repairs has to be a very stressful and devastating experience.

I will highlight an area in my own county of Carlow that has been greatly affected by Storm Chandra. Clonegal is a small rural village in the south east of County Carlow. Over the past number of weeks, the village has faced what its residents are saying is the worst flooding they have seen in over 20 years with several houses and properties flooded after the River Derry burst its banks. Around 300 people live in Clonegal and at least eight houses were badly affected by flooding, which has greatly upset families. I know that across Ireland, many other families are feeling like this. I know the Minister of State visited Carlow town, which was also hit hard with 250 houses on Burrin Road faced with gardens underwater and near-damage to their homes and cars. We were very lucky with Carlow County Council, which monitored things, watched the water and had pumps out. That was a significant challenge because there was a risk it would go into their houses.

When I went around and spoke to many of the residents, I found that the biggest issue was the fact that people in a flood-prone area cannot get home insurance, an issue we have to look at. We need to make sure that people living in flood-prone areas can get home insurance.

Preventative flood measures in these areas and in communities across Ireland such as natural flood defences and permanent water pumps would help ease the anxiety of residents about further damage to their property.

Several areas were affected, including St. Mullins and Graiguenamanagh in County Kilkenny. Again, I thank the Minister of State and the Taoiseach for visiting.

My constituency is full of small independent businesses but, again, they are having issues with insurance because of the flooding. I welcome the decision by the Minister, Deputy Burke, to increase the threshold for emergency humanitarian flooding support for impacted businesses from €20,000 to €100,000. The assessment required for this grant needs to be completed quickly to allow our small businesses to get back up and running as quickly as possible. I know the Minister of State has been working with the different Departments and I thank him for that.

I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to everyone in Carlow and Kilkenny, the county councils and the local authority staff, including the outdoor workers, who worked on protecting homes and businesses. We need to take this opportunity to provide more funding to, and place more focus on, our flood prevention scheme - I had several meetings about this with the Minister of State - and to further support the fantastic work done by our county councils up and down the country. They have done a brilliant job. I thank the services the Minister of State thanked, including the Red Cross, An Garda Síochána, the HSE and the Civil Defence. I also thank neighbours and friends who came out to help. Anyone who was in a position to do so, came out to help. While we had these awful floods, and they were horrific, we saw great community spirit. Everybody was helping everybody. When people are there to help their neighbours and everyone is working together, that community spirit and engagement is really positive and lovely.

The Taoiseach visited communities. It was also important that when the Minister of State and the Taoiseach visited Carlow and Kilkenny they spoke to all the residents. They also spoke to the council staff and all the different people who were affected. The best one of all was that

our own Carlow weatherman, Alan O'Reilly, came to visit. Alan had a lot of ideas, which he spoke to the Minister of State about, and I have given some information. That was important as well.

I am aware the Taoiseach and Minister of State met last week to consider the State's response to extreme weather events. It was agreed that work on the flood relief schemes will be accelerated, and interim measures will be implemented in areas at the risk of flooding. The OPW will be given the authority to procure equipment for local authorities to manage this, which is really welcome and a good move. I thank the Minister of State for that.

Local authorities will also be given authority to start road repairs, and this is critical for those areas that have suffered damage. I have spoken to representatives and I have seen roads that were really affected. I also spoke to a lot of residents from affected areas. Again, we are looking at funding for this because we need to top up the normal road grant funding. The Minister of State has met with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, as I have, and all of these things are important.

For communities awaiting major flood relief schemes, the Government has asked local authorities to identify all possible interim measures to reduce the risk of flooding. It is expected that the Government will receive these plans in the coming weeks. We are keen to progress any work that will reduce the risk of flooding for communities that have been badly affected.

Flood forecasting and warnings are critical for preparation. I welcome that stage I of the national flood forecasting and warning service was completed in December 2023 and stage II is now under way, which is really important. It is critical that we are prepared and work on forecasting is done as soon as possible. This will focus on providing the flood warnings directly to communities and improving the detail and accuracy of forecasts. This work is being overseen by the Government's task force on emergency planning, which is really important.

Unfortunately, the reality is that our climate is changing. We are seeing more frequent storms and extreme weather events. In response, the OPW has published the sectoral climate change adaptation plan for flood risk management for the years 2025 to 2030. All flood relief schemes now require scheme adaptation plans to ensure they account for climate change impacts that can be adapted to future flood risks.

I want to acknowledge the Department of Finance because it is engaging with stakeholders, such as the Central Bank, the OPW, the insurance industry, which is critical, and other Departments on the development of a long-term strategic approach to the issues relating to flood insurance. There are so many issues and this falls to so many different Departments. This is about the different Departments working together and collaborating to make sure we find a solution. Solutions are needed to address this, and timing is important.

All the different Ministers are working with the Minister of State on this. Solutions are needed to address the nature of the protection gap that exists in Ireland, especially as the flood protection gap tends to be concentrated in different areas. As the Minister of State knows, we have to concentrate on these areas when we are working with the different Departments.

I thank the Minister of State and my colleagues across Government for their work and their response to the storm. There are areas that have been really affected but I know this will be addressed. The work the Minister of State's Department has done, and the commitment shown

by him, the Taoiseach and all the different Departments has been crucial and has played a huge role.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: As the Minister of State is aware, the floods in the south east were the severest in many years. Unfortunately, my hometown of Enniscorthy, along with Bunclody, Bridgetown, Our Lady's Island, Kilmore, Kilcarberry and Killurin experienced extensive flooding with some roads obliterated altogether. Sixty businesses were affected, some of which have stated they will not open again. Some 35 homes were destroyed by water and contaminated effluent. A local postman told me that he delivered letters to homes where the muck and dirt was up to the letter boxes. Most of these homes are occupied by old-age pensioners.

Island Road in Enniscorthy and the quays on both sides of the River Slaney took the brunt of the floods. This has occurred 16 times since 2000, not to mention the years in between when the people were put on full flood alert with their homes and businesses threatened again and again.

I thank the Minister of State for visiting those homes. I am sure he realises the anguish, the torment, the feelings of desperation and the sleepless nights these people have gone through. Generations have faced the same thing over and over again. They have not got a snowball's chance in hell of getting insurance. They must replace every stick of furniture, including kitchens, fridges, personal belongings and most of their white goods themselves.

Some businesses are facing bills of well over €80,000. This has been going on for decades. The people of Enniscorthy and Wexford will no longer put up with what can only be described as wilful neglect. It is only with the luck of God no one was drowned or injured. Thanks and gratitude must go to the units from Slaney Search and Rescue and all the other organisations involved.

Planning permission for the Slaney flood relief scheme was turned down because of the freshwater pearl mussel, a fact that is infuriating people. Surely this species can be translocated just like the Dublin Bay oyster. I plead with the Minister of State to act now. Under section 7 of the Arterial Drainage Act 1945, he can approve flood relief works independently of the planning system. Things need to happen and need to happen now. Climate change is not waiting for anybody. As sure as night follows day, flooding will continue and will occur again.

The people of Wexford need the Minister of State's full assurance that he will sort this out. He must rein in the OPW, the relevant Departments and Wexford County Council and get the planning application across the line once and for all and to immediately apply the interim measures.

Wexford County Council has completed an interim plan but I understand that it must be agreed on by the Ministers and the OPW. I ask that this be done and be treated as a humanitarian emergency and not be delayed any longer. It is the least the people of Enniscorthy and Wexford deserve after being left unprotected for over 25 years and denied their rights to a proper flood defence scheme.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for being here today. I am here again today to discuss flooding. I have been raising this issue since I was first elected back in 2016.

I have gone through four Ministers of State on this issue. Ten years later, the people of my town Midleton are still waiting for the flood relief scheme to be implemented. I acknowledge that the Minister of State visited, as did the former Minister of State, but I am giving him a synopsis of where the people of Midleton, in particular, are, but I am not forgetting the likes of Whitegate, Mogeely, Rathcormac and other areas that were flooded.

The failure to start any real work on the overall flood relief scheme planned for the town is one thing but the absence of progress on promised interim flood relief measures is beyond frustrating, especially for many of the residents of Midleton who are still living in fear every time it rains. Many admit to suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression after having their homes flooded.

Records dating back as far as the 1880s show Midleton, which is located in a low-lying valley at the junction of the Owenacurra and Dungourney rivers. These have flooded regularly, underlining the long-standing need for a flood relief scheme in east Cork.

Another one I raised here was the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, study. It was produced back in 2013. In that CFRAM study, there was hydraulic modelling, and other big fancy words they use when doing these models for predicting floods. It made a prediction. I refer to Storm Babet, the most recent storm and where I live in Midleton. This map shows the Mill Road. The thin blue line is the river. It predicted where the water was, how much water would come down and where it would come out. This was back in 2013. It also predicted that not too far from where my office is, there would be 1.4 m of water. It went up to the fascia board and soffit of a bungalow at the junction. It also outlined preventative measures on how this could be done.

We are possibly 16 years talking about this and the council has decided now that it is going to build a bank up beyond Moore's Bridge to stop this water flowing down the Mill Road and hitting Willowbank and Tír Cluain. That still has not been done. The Minister of State, in his opening remarks, spoke about what we would do and how he would do it. I know he said he had 150 flood relief schemes and so on and so forth but for the people of Midleton, east Cork and other areas that have been flooded - and this is not being disrespectful to the Minister of State - that is not the answer they want or need. They want to know why interim measures were not done ten or 15 years ago, and why they are doing these CFRAM flood studies with nothing being acted on.

Another one I flagged - I have not seen it - was the voluntary homeowners relocation scheme. Back in 2016, 2017 or 2018, I remember meeting the then Minister and the Minister for Social Protection with a family because their home was absolutely destroyed. There was never a mention of a voluntary homeowners relocation scheme. That family is still paying a mortgage for a three-bedroom semi-detached house that is totally uninhabitable. I will chase the Minister of State up on that one. I would like to know more about that because that family has been absolutely destroyed.

I appeal for urgency. I acknowledge the Minister of State's engagement on this but I am relaying what the people of Midleton and surrounding areas are saying. Whatever hoops the Minister of State has to jump through and whatever planning we have to do, in regard to those who are objecting, I think it is time for the hammer to come down and to say "No". The priority is people, their livelihoods and homes and that is what we have to protect.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to listen to the statements. For my part, flooding is something that happens occasionally. It is usually from the sea rather than rivers in my area but it is the impact and aftermath of flooding. The state of the roads in north County Dublin is shocking. They are the kinds of words people use. If you come around by an area like Blake's Cross, you will often see tyres and parts of tyres on the side. Added to that situation, which was already bad, we then had flooding on top of it. It is an area that floods all the time. You could set your watch by it. When there is heavy rain, there is flooding at Blake's Cross. There just does not seem to be any connectedness in regard to what happens after the flooding and once the water recedes.

In the recent flooding, we were very lucky. Yes, it blocked roads but it did not get into many homes. I know from talking to Deputy Buckley and others the damage and devastation that it can bring to a community but we are still left dealing with the aftermath of it in one way or another because we are dealing with the fact that the roads are in such poor condition immediately following it. Every single time there is a flood, that means the roads are going to get even worse and there is no mitigation. If there was going to be proper drainage put in place, all of that could be encompassed within a budget to not just drain the roads but also improve the quality of the roads and recognise the damage. Every single time there is flooding, the Minister of State and I both know that the aftermath of that for people in their homes is absolutely devastating but the aftermath of that for people who are driving on the roads, because they have no choice, is also devastating.

If you take Brook Lane in Rush, I know in advance when that is going to flood. The residents know in advance that it is going to flood. They might not know how bad it is going to be but they know it is going to flood and it happens every time. This time when it happened, it was particularly bad and there were people, including emergency service workers, who were stuck in their homes, which has a knock-on consequence.

What I want to say to the Minister of State today is that when the flood waters recede and you are no longer up to your knees or elbows in the flood, the damage that happens after that also requires attention. It is not just all about making sure the floods recede.

We need to look at the national flood forecasting and warning service as well because at least that can give people a little bit of a heads-up. We know rightly that it is a scandal that the millions of euro allocated for the national flood forecasting and warning service over the past eight years remains unspent. That does not make any sense. It does not make any sense to me but it most definitely does not make any sense to people who can tell you that if they have a warning, they will be able to put those systems in place. I would be critical, where it is due, of Fingal County Council but it has always been good in regard to the provision of sandbags and other mitigation measures. That is of no use to people, however, if they do not get the advance warning.

On the advance warning, it is very hard to explain to people how the money was allocated and yet, somehow, the Department could not find its way to spend it. People might be able to understand if it was a budgetary matter. They might be able to comprehend it if it was a case of insufficient funds allocated but in regard to the money being allocated and not being spent, that is very hard for me to explain to my constituents when they look at the flood events and they see they cannot use their roads or, as I have said to the Minister of State, when they have to use the roads afterwards amid the damage. The key surely has to be preventing this flood

damage but the fact that the State has money at its disposal and millions of euro allocated, and that somehow it is not being spent, does not make any sense. I certainly do not try to explain the actions of this Government - I am beyond doing that - but when you try to tell constituents who are in flood-impacted areas that, yes, it is possible that a system could have been developed but was not developed, that is very hard for them to stomach.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I will start by thanking all the emergency response workers, council teams and other staff who did their very best to help residents affected by the recent flooding incidents. In my own constituency, we had separate incidents of flooding. We had the tidal flood waters in Clontarf. Then there was significant flooding in the northern part of the constituency, in and around Clongriffin. We saw properties and underground car parks flooded. We had roads that were impassable and a number of rivers burst their banks. We also had recent flooding in Fairview, which was due to a burst pipe.

In regard to Clontarf, this issue has been ongoing for decades. We had sandbags sitting there for over a decade. There are new temporary barriers in place for the past few months but business owners and residents want a permanent solution and they want it sooner rather than later. We have been told by Dublin City Council that construction on the permanent flood defences will not begin until 2031. If that goes well, it will be completed by 2033. There is no sense of urgency here and this is the area identified as one of the most at risk of flooding in the State. We need to see the flood defences in place. We were told it would take three years before this planning application would be ready to be submitted but this needs to happen much sooner.

In regard to Clongriffin, where residents' properties and vehicles were left flooded, the residents themselves were left high and dry in terms of the costs they incurred.

Electricity was out for days, so all the food in their fridges and freezers was spoiled. Some residents did get temporary accommodation sorted by the management company, but it meant they were in places as far away as Tyrrelstown. Those either who did not drive or whose vehicles were stuck in the underground car park had to rent cars or get taxis to their workplaces or even bring their kids to school. I urge the Minister of State to make phase 1 of the emergency response payment available to those residents to enable them to recoup some of their immediate costs.

With regard to solutions, we need a national flood warning service that is fully up and running. It has been ten years since the Government said it was establishing that service, but the ground conditions are still not being taken into account. We all know that a lot of the flooding is due to high rainfall, and with sodden ground, the excess water has nowhere else to go. Drains were at capacity, rivers were swollen and culverts could not take any more water.

A much broader discussion needs to take place. It means not just flood protection measures. It means a proper strategy for rainwater harvesting and storage to reduce run-off during heavy periods of rainfall. It also means natural ways of reducing these impacts, such as planting trees beside rivers rather than constantly clearing them, and stopping the modification and straightening of rivers from their natural flow. All that does is cause more problems because it increases the river's speed and creates pinch points.

This extreme weather is not going away and is likely to become more common. We need solutions in the here and now, like flood defences. We need longer term solutions that look at the overall land use plan and how we can minimise and reduce the risk of these events happening in the future.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is not the Minister of State's first interaction with me in relation to flooding. I have thanked him for visiting Blackrock and for having conversations with some of the local elected representatives, including me, Councillor Sionainn McCann and a number of others from all parties. It was following what had made its way onto RTÉ, which was the coastal flooding in what is usually a very scenic area of Blackrock. Flooding had also occurred at the same time in Dundalk, where a number of businesses were flooded.

In fairness, the positive from the interaction with the Minister of State was that the local authority accepts it needs to ensure it is looking at everything from the point of view of the short-term mitigations that can be made operational. While that might be difficult in Blackrock, the local authority said a number of such measures might be available throughout Dundalk. That needs to happen. The Minister of State has spoken strongly about the need for private property protection. I have already called on Louth County Council to ensure that work is done. Unfortunately, it did not take very long until the arrival of Storm Chandra. I do not even know what we can call the current situation, with the never-ending rain. As someone said, it is probably time to build an ark.

We have had flood protection measures. Under the CFRAM scheme, major protection works have been in the offing for County Louth for a considerable time. While we want to see those works in Carlingford, Greenore, Drogheda, Baltray and Ardee, and we know additional work needs to be done in Annagassan - I get that this is not always simple - I will put a certain level of concentration on Dundalk and Blackrock south. We have also seen an element of flooding in areas like the Ardee Road and Mounthamilton, where residents are constantly in fear of flooding any time it rains.

I would add my voice to commending those who work in the local authorities and the fire service. In some cases, they literally kept the water from the door - just and no more - and in some cases, they actually chased it out. I have said before and reiterate that we were one major rainfall, one really bad day, away from hundreds of houses being flooded.

There is a specific issue in parts of Dundalk. While we need to see the works that are promised by Louth County Council for the River Blackwater, I recognise that what I previously called the “bunfight”, where Louth County Council and the OPW were not sure which had responsibility for the cleaning of the Blackwater, seems to have been sorted, as it should have been. We need to ensure that the Blackwater and the Ramparts area are cleaned. I am not saying that that would deal with every flood situation or every high tide, but at least it would provide some element of capacity in the rivers. If it saves a number of houses, it is absolutely necessary. Actions have been taken by the council to address issues with the Blackwater caused by what it termed over-pumping. It is about ensuring that the council has that pump capacity when necessary so that it can pump during high tides.

I could talk about the failure by multiple Governments over many years to deal with infrastructure, although we are dealing with those infrastructural deficits at this point. The local authority has told me, as has the Minister of State, that money is available and that there

will be no obstacles if the local authority needs certain things done with regard to those mitigations. We need that to happen.

As I said, there is a specific issue in Dundalk, particularly in the part where I live. It applies to everywhere between Saint Alphonsus Road and the Red Barns Road. It is particularly apparent in Cluan Enda, Bay Estate, Blackwater Court - aptly named - Ashbrook and Greenfield Court. For multiple years, if there have been heavy rains, Cluan Enda has had a huge amount of pooling, or perhaps we should call it a river, a sea or a swimming pool. The same was true of certain parts of Bay Estate, particularly Hazelwood Avenue, parts of Cypress Gardens, Willow Dale, Oakvale and Holly Park. Cherryvale, where I live, had some element of pooling, but not to the same degree. As I said, we were only one really heavy rainfall away from having severe issues.

The problem is that it is Uisce Éireann infrastructure. It is not good enough. At times, we hear the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, giving out about Met Éireann, but it is not good enough for him to say he has no operational control or responsibility in relation to Uisce Éireann. We have promises about CFRAM. We will probably know towards the end of 2026, or at least that is the date given, what exactly the flood protections will look like throughout much of County Louth. We are talking about Blackrock south and Dundalk going for planning in quarter 2 of 2027, around June. We need to make sure that those dates do not fall back.

The other dates that we need to make sure do not fall back relate to Uisce Éireann. The fact is that we do not have the necessary capacity in the wastewater system. When we have heavy rains, that water goes directly into the sewage system, which is a joint system. When people are dealing with what looks like heavy rain in certain places, it would not be the healthiest water you could be dealing with. I have seen what has been left behind in houses after the water has dissipated. It is not hard to imagine what that was. Let us just say there would be huge implications from a health point of view. At some level, it is disgraceful that this is happening in Ireland in 2026.

We are looking at an upgrade of the Coes Road pumping station. I am told the infrastructure works, which will also take in parts of Blackrock, will start at some point in 2027.

Those works in the pumping station itself, however, will not be complete until 2029 and I have actually been told by the council that it is more likely to be 2030. That is frightening. Many of the other pumping stations in Dundalk, while under pressure, can deal with the flow through them, but during heavy rains the Coes Road station cannot. It is dealing with everything coming from those housing estates that I have spoken about, which have all been added to what is very old infrastructure. It is also dealing with industrial units from WuXi right down and it just cannot deal with that. The wastewater treatment plant just beyond that is not due to be updated until 2033. That has a design capacity for a population equivalent of 71,000 and is to be upgraded to a capacity of 120,000. That is down to a change in the rules by the EPA because when the local authority handed it over, it was something like 169,000. Again, we do not have the capacity. We could be looking at houses being flooded with sewage because we do not have adequate infrastructure. It is a matter of short-term mitigations, long-term flood protection and dates that can be brought forward rather than put back, which is what we have seen previously. We must also ensure that Uisce Éireann infrastructure is up to scratch. The onus is on the Government to follow through.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): Before I go to the Labour Party slot, I welcome all of our visitors to the Public Gallery, particularly all of the members of Probus in Mallow in County Cork, guests of Deputy Eoghan Kenny. Deputy Nash is next.

Deputy Ged Nash: I certainly will not attempt to run through the names of local estates and roads the way in which my good friend and colleague Deputy Ó Murchú did in the context of County Louth. I thought that when he was eating in to that additional time, he was going to mention my own street in Drogheda but -----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I left that for you, Deputy Nash.

Deputy Ged Nash: -----he had the good grace not to and I have the good sense to live on the top of a hill, knowing that there are certain areas that are vulnerable to flooding and flood damage. The experience and topography in our respective towns is quite different.

We are in a new era and a new normal, dare I say it, when it comes to flood events. Over the last few years and certainly before 2020, we got used to describing flash events as one-in-100-year rainfall events but the reality of climate change in 2026 is that the kinds of events and experiences we are encountering now are permanent. They are much more frequent, much more damaging and are putting a huge strain on already stressed infrastructure, road networks, flood defences and so on. We can expect more of this. The severity of the storms and the impacts we are experiencing are going to become ever more complicated and we need to do more to adapt, mitigate and manage. That is not to say that we do not need to do more to ensure that we halt, moderate and mitigate the climate change effects that we are experiencing. We need to do that but we know, unfortunately, that when it comes to the performance of this country, we are way behind in terms of meeting our climate targets. That is not an abstract thing but is having a very real impact on the day-to-day experiences of everybody in this country, and we are all in the firing line.

According to an article in *The Irish Times* last weekend, dozens of flood protection works that have been deemed critical to protecting thousands of homes across the country have yet to progress to planning. Some have been in the system for almost a decade. Out of 54 large projects where some work has begun since they were prioritised for development back in 2018, the majority - 31 - are only at preliminary design stage. Some of those are in my own region. The target completion times for many of the projects run well into the 2030s but those who are suffering annual, and now more frequent, deluges simply cannot wait any longer. That said, I believe the Minister of State is genuinely committed to ensuring projects are expedited in the best way possible.

The people I represent in County Louth and east Meath are very much in the firing line of this problem and of the tardiness, dare I say it, of the collective national response to this crisis. At this point, I want to join colleagues in putting on the record my appreciation of the outdoor staff, engineers and everybody across the spectrum in the public service in Louth and Meath for their actions in recent times, their preparedness and their professionalism in dealing with the very real problems that householders and business are experiencing. Homes and businesses in Blackrock, with which the Minister of State will be familiar having visited recently, have

been particularly badly hit, and areas on the Cooley Peninsula are continually finding themselves quite literally in the eye of the storm.

I welcome Louth County Council's commitment to making an application for €1.2 million in additional funding from the Department of Transport to try to cover at least some of the damage caused to roads in County Louth in recent times as a result of recent flooding. I hope that application will be looked upon favourably by the Government when it lands and is being considered. I am really not sure that €1.2 million is going to cover it, though. The problem is not confined to Dundalk and north Louth; severe damage has been caused in the south of the county as well. When we speak to local authority engineers, as we do almost daily, we hear reports of roads being flooded and a growth in the number of potholes over the last period of time. That in itself is a complex issue. Many of the potholes that engineers or contractors wish to fill and resolve are actually full of water and the recent icy conditions in parts of the country have only exacerbated the problems. As physics tells us, when water ingress becomes a problem on roads, damage is done to the tarmac, the tarmac expands and that creates more problems. Hopefully we will get a period of finer weather that will allow contractors to do the work that is necessary. There has been extensive damage to the road network around Termonfeckin, for example, and I tabled a series of parliamentary questions recently in relation to the flood response issue and the need for the OPW to prioritise minor flood mitigation in that area, as well as coastal protection scheme works. I am told that €1.9 million has been allocated for coastal protection works in County Louth across some 26 projects but much more is needed. We also need to see that multifaceted response that we all speak about.

The Minister of State will also be familiar with problems in the Baltray area outside of Drogheda and, as Deputy Ó Murchú referenced, in the Annagassan area in mid-Louth. Frankly, the list goes on, but these problems are predictable. The Minister of State visited Blackrock recently. The main street in Blackrock, facing onto the beach, effectively became a kind of canal in recent times, something that I have certainly not experienced in a long time. We know that when rain persists and we have these flooding events, places like Wellington Quay in Drogheda, beside the River Boyne, are very vulnerable indeed.

I will make two further points before passing over to my party colleague Deputy O'Donoghue. I have always found the response of the Department of Social Protection to be excellent, in terms of the management of the humanitarian scheme. Members of my own family in east Meath had to benefit from that scheme in recent times in a vulnerable area around Bettystown. The response of the county council, working with the Department of Social Protection to provide basic resources to people who need them to get through difficult periods, has been excellent but we can always improve the planning in that regard, given the permanence of the kinds of problems we are experiencing. I have said time and again over the years in this Chamber, and to successive enterprise Ministers, that we need to put the business support scheme on a statutory basis and the fact that we have not done so is not acceptable. There were plans to do so three or four years ago, when I raised it with the then Minister, Simon Coveney, in response to flooding episodes that caused serious problems in the Cooley Peninsula. It is not sustainable that for each event a new memo has to be brought to Cabinet to provide for a new scheme. I know it is not the Minister of State's direct responsibility but I have no doubt he is engaging on all flood-related matters with all relevant Departments and Ministers. Those kinds of schemes need to be put on a permanent, statutory basis so that they

can effectively be taken off the shelf and introduced in short order to address the needs of businesses.

3 o'clock

I acknowledge increases have been made in the financial schemes available but they need to be put on statutory basis because, back to the earlier point I made, these events are becoming more frequent and permanent. It is a permanent feature of the system. We need permanent statutory responses on the Statute Book in primary legislation to ensure the response is quicker and more effective.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I will add to the issue of ongoing flooding and the wider impacts recent extreme weather events have had across Ireland which are becoming more frequent and more severe as our weather grows increasingly unpredictable. Over the past number of weeks, flooding in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West has wreaked havoc. Homes, roads and local infrastructure have all been badly affected and communities have once again been left dealing with the consequences after the fact. This highlights a serious flaw in how we approach extreme weather. We remain locked in a cycle of crisis management, reacting after the damage is done rather than planning ahead. That approach is no longer fit for purpose. We need to move towards a dedicated national weather and flooding response team tasked with planning, co-ordination and preparedness so that when severe weather hits, a practical and fully resourced policy is already in place and ready to be implemented. I acknowledge the dedication and professionalism of the staff in Fingal County Council who worked around the clock in extremely difficult conditions to support communities during the recent floods. However, they are being asked to do far too much with far too little. I contacted a member of staff before 8 a.m. last Friday and they were already dealing with multiple flooding issues in the Rush and Lusk area. This is not a reflection on the staff but a chronic lack of resources, funding and support provided to our local authorities. Our council workers are stretched to breaking point, responding to increasingly severe weather events without the staffing, funding or infrastructure required to do the job properly. That situation is not sustainable and must now be addressed at a national level.

I will also speak about something that might not always make national headlines but has a real and very damaging impact on people's daily lives, the shocking state of our local roads. The recent flooding has pushed an already fragile situation into crisis. I will give some examples from my constituency of Dublin Fingal West. On Brook Lane in Rush, residents were effectively trapped in their own homes. They could not get out and families were cut off. This is not acceptable in 2026. In Bowhill, conditions were no better. Our local boxing club, a place that provides the community with an opportunity for young people to go to was completely flooded, facilities were damaged and equipment was destroyed with volunteers left to pick up the pieces. Commons Lane in Lusk was cratered like no-man's land. Across Fingal West, many roads were already in poor repair. Years of wear, underinvestment and patchwork fixes have taken their toll but flooding has accelerated that deterioration at an alarming rate. What were potholes are now literal craters - tyre gobblers - tearing through rural roads, damaging cars and creating hazards for other road users. This is not just inconvenient; it is dangerous. Parents driving children to school, carers travelling to vulnerable residents and workers commuting long distances are all navigating roads that are not fit for purpose. In rural parts of Fingal West, the damage to vehicles has become routine. People are paying out of their

pockets for repairs caused not through recklessness but through neglect of the infrastructure. Meanwhile, Fingal County Council like other county councils is being placed under increasing pressure. It is expected to maintain an extensive network of approximately 1,340 km of roads with limited and insufficient resources. That is simply not sustainable.

No local authority can be asked to stretch funding thin and still deliver the standard of infrastructure our communities need. We need to be more honest about the scale of the challenge. This requires a national policy response that recognises we are facing not a series of isolated incidents but a systemic infrastructure crisis intensified by extreme weather. We need additional ring-fenced funding, technical support, drainage systems and flood mitigation particularly in areas that are now clearly flood prone which may not have been previously. Extreme weather is no longer the exception; it is our new reality. The response must match that reality with forward planning, resilience built into every project, and resources that reflect the scale of the network which varies from county to county. Communities across Dublin Fingal West cannot be left to endure this cycle of flood, damage, patch up and repeat. They deserve safe roads, reliable infrastructure and a Government response that recognises the urgency of this matter. I have no doubt the Minister of State is well aware of this and he will rise to the challenge in this matter.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for being here for this debate. In fairness to him, he is not afraid to roll up his sleeves. He is passionate about trying to address this issue that has impacted so many communities. I too pay tribute to local authority staff and emergency services which have had to deal with these adverse weather events we face with increased regularity. I asked this question of representatives of the Department and Met Éireann when they were before the Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy and they indicated they work on the basis that we will have eight of these types of events every year. It will randomly impact the country. It is something we need to address. Support schemes need to be put on a statutory basis. It cannot be addressed every time we have one of these incidents. Learnings from previous events particularly around community hubs and making generators available are critical and need to be done.

Storm Chandra had a particularly profound impact on the Wicklow-Wexford constituency I represent. I know the Minister of State was in Aughrim, County Wicklow, where the flooding was caused by water coming down from higher ground and running through the houses. Some of that may be about working with nature and adapting forestry practices but I am sure the Minister of State would join me in paying tribute to the work of Councillor Pat Kennedy and Aughrim Tidy Towns who were on the ground. It brought out in many ways the best in people to be able to respond to the crisis.

Bunclody faced the first serious flooding in 60 years when the Slaney burst its banks. It was horrific visiting some of the homes and business impacted there. The concerns when I met Councillor Barbara-Anne Murphy and local residents were that a sufficient plan was not in place. The big challenge there for a lot of residents is while many had flood insurance until now, they will not get it again. We need to look at some sort of State guarantees until a permanent flood defence system is put in place in these communities. I would be grateful to hear the Minister's views on that.

In the case of Castletown in north Wexford, on more than one occasion every year the River Ahare bursts its banks, making a road impassable. It is an issue Councillor Joe Sullivan has been raising regularly in terms of how to address this challenge. For this coastal community, it is cut off in many ways and people have to drive the long way round because the Ahare bursts its banks any time there is heavy rain. Coastal erosion is another huge issue. I am fortunate to represent a constituency that has arguably some of the finest beaches in the country, running from Brittas Bay in Wicklow down as far as Morriscastle in Wexford. Every time there is an adverse weather event, we see parts of our coast lost to the sea.

On this occasion in the floods, the Rosslare rail line was closed again, not that it is a great service anyway. Part of it closed again as a result of the flooding. The knock-on impact was more cars travelling on the M11 but because there was flooding on the M11, counties Wicklow and Wexford were in many ways cut off by the impact. I would like to raise, as colleagues have raised, the impact these events have had on our roads, in particular rural roads.

Many of the roads, which were in pretty poor condition, have been left impassable as a result of weather conditions and flooding that has happened. These include in areas around Woodenbridge, Shillelagh and Arklow, which the Minister of State is familiar with, but equally around places like Johnstown in north Wexford and crossing between the Wexford and Wicklow border. For Bearna Chlé National School, parents now have to travel the long way around to avoid craters that traverse the entire road. There is an application coming in quite soon from local authorities. It is critical that we provide sufficient funding. I am asking for it on behalf of Wicklow County Council and Wexford County Council to be able to address the problems with our roads as a result of these weather conditions.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I welcome the statements. I empathise with the many individuals, men, women, children, families and business owners who have been left absolutely devastated once again by the horrific impact of flooding. My constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny was hit badly again. I thank the local authorities in the area and roads crew in both Carlow and Kilkenny and the fire service for the incredible work that they did. Even up until today, they are still dealing with the fallout and the damage from the floods regarding the roads and the road repairs. It truly was a significant incident that occurred there in past couple of weeks. The Minister of State is 100% behind this, but the Government has to deliver big progress on flood relief schemes and flood warning systems. The past couple of weeks have seen huge flooding and significant flooding in some areas, including the flooding of homes and businesses. I am talking about places such as Graiguenamanagh, Thomastown, Inistioge, Freshford, Piltown and Ballyhale to name six in the Kilkenny side of my constituency that have been affected along with places like Clonegal in Carlow, which also have been decimated with flooding.

Last week, the Taoiseach and Ministers met to consider the State's response to the extreme weather events. It was confirmed that local authorities would be given the authority to commence road repairs. The importance of these contingency funds has been mentioned by previous speakers. There are roads down my way and the Ceann Comhairle would be familiar with down in Drummond, Glynn, Ballyglisheen, Newtown and Dungarvan over to Knockroe, Clashganny and Inch. Driving on some of these roads is like being in a boneshaker. Vehicles are rattling on them. It is a pothole-ridden nightmare. Funding needs to be made available. I welcome the fact that funding is going to be made available. I would like to see the speed of

which this funding can be made available to local authorities increase. The roads funding announcement was fantastic news during the week with over €1.5 billion nationally. We did well in my constituency with over €40 million, but we need this additional funding to sort out the serious damage that was done to roads during the past couple of weeks in addition to the funding that was recently announced.

Graiguenamanagh Tinnahinch flood relief scheme is in tranche 1. It is progressing, albeit it has been very slow to progress the scheme. Funding was announced in 2018. Consultants were appointed in December 2020. It only managed to go to planning in December 2025. That is an awful long time to go from appointing design consultants to putting in for planning. I implore the Minister of State to try to speed up the planning process to get these schemes approved. It took five years to get to that stage. I know there are environmental studies to be done, and I get all of that. Human life is more important than fish life. Human life is more important than a snail's life. We can have all studies in the world, but when we sit down with somebody whose home has been ravaged by water. While the rain might have subsided, the smell and the damage lasts for weeks and weeks. The Minister of State knows that because he very kindly came down to my own hometown of Graiguenamanagh and he saw the damage that has been caused first hand. The people affected are still dealing with that today.

I acknowledge and welcome the funding and humanitarian aid that a lot of people are applying for. The fact that it was increased as well is a positive step. However, we need to make sure that we put flood defences in place that mean these issues are not going to happen again. The Graiguenamanagh flood relief scheme is with An Coimisiún Pleanála. I ask the Minister of State to try his best to speed that up and pull out whatever stops he needs to do to get this scheme over the line so that construction can start and we can get the flood relief scheme in place to sort that issue out. A big challenge I have if I look at the OPW and Kilkenny, we have two people appointed by Kilkenny County Council to deal specifically with flood relief schemes. I would love to see a situation where schemes can run parallel. For example, we have Graiguenamanagh in tranche 1. We have six schemes in total identified in Kilkenny but they are not running concurrently. I understand that there is a financial commitment required in terms of the capital infrastructure, but surely there is a way we can progress these schemes with the consultation part and the studies part. This is not to get to the construction or to finality but to get them going meaning that when the funding is there these projects can start straightaway. For example, Thomastown is stuck in a rut. It is not going to get sorted any time soon. These schemes take a while. I ask the Minister of State to consider starting to get the ball rolling on these schemes in terms of the consultation piece to get them to a stage where they are ready to go to tender.

He is familiar with Inistioge. He visited it in 2018 while he was Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW. The hurling pitch in Inistioge and the village once again was flooded along with Thomastown and Graiguenamanagh. I visited Inistioge and I spoke with a lot of the locals. I looked at the hurling pitch. It was like looking out into the Irish Sea. The water was up nearly as far as the crossbars. We cannot have situations where this continues and continues. The Minister of State's heart is in the right place. He is doing everything he can, but we need to see speed and delivery on these schemes. The people, families, homes and businesses who are affected by flood relief are sick and devastated. They are living in fear. Every single time there is a shower of rain coming or a couple of days of rain they are thinking, "Oh my God, are we going to get flooded this time?" I want to pay tribute again to both local

authorities in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny for the tremendous work they did providing sandbags, making sure that people were looked after, helping people evacuate their homes and helping them to save as much furniture and so on as they could. Funding constraints are not the biggest problem here. The Minister of State has strongly come out pointing out that there is €1.3 billion put aside for flood relief schemes until 2030. The money is there. We just need to see a little bit more speed. I acknowledge that there are processes that need be followed but we need speed and urgency. We need to bypass some of the stuff because human life is more important than fish life.

There has been huge community engagement over the past number of years on some of these schemes. I implore the Minister of State to ensure these schemes to run concurrently and to get to a stage. We can worry about the specific funding and allocation once we get approval. Let us get these schemes agreed, designed and ready to go, then we can look for the funding. There is a lot of co-ordination among different agencies required but let us start the ball rolling now and let us not be in a situation in a couple of years where we are back here.

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes sustainable development practices, adequate funding for infrastructure, active community engagement and effective public awareness campaigns. However, these schemes are so important. These schemes are giving hope to people in Carlow, Kilkenny, Thomastown, Inistioge, Graiguenamanagh, Ballyhale, Piltown and Freshford, to name just a few. We are looking for the Minister of State's support to get these over the line as quickly as possible.

Deputy John McGuinness: I acknowledge the very serious flood issues in Carlow. I visited a number of the businesses and households there. Of course, it is the same everywhere else that is affected by flooding. There is devastation after the flood. There is the attempt on more than one occasion to rebuild a life and a home. They are fed up of waiting for the schemes that have been talked about by us in here for years and years. In Carlow, for example, when some of the businesses and residents applied for support, it was too slow in being delivered. Regarding farmers losing livestock, one man lost 14 sheep in the flood. He is having difficulty being included. He is not included in the Red Cross or the business fund. I have made a case to the Minister. He and anyone else who lost their stock should be looked after. After all, it is a business that runs on a small margin. They need the money quickly to replace the stock and get back into business. I went through the houses in Inistioge yesterday. I was shocked when I drove through Inistioge during the flood prior to the most recent one.

The water was literally running over the crossbar on the GAA pitch. After that, I saw the devastation in the homes. I do not know how they tolerated it. I listened to the cases of the people living right beside the waterfront in Graiguenamanagh. Older people were desperately trying to get the money to get their homes back in order. I ask that in each and every scheme, for those who are in the system and those waiting to go into it, the Minister of State insists that Government pull out all of the stops and address all of the obstacles preventing the schemes from getting to the point of construction. I have heard the arguments about nature and so on but, when the scheme in Kilkenny city was being finished before 2005, I saw the trucks drive up and down the riverbed. I saw that scheme finished. It is an excellent scheme and one that is worth looking at.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I thank the Minister of State for his recent visit to Donegal and for meeting families who are affected face to face. I really appreciated that. We missed the Minister of State when he was out of the Dáil. I will be straight about that. I said it in front of the residents when we were in Donegal. He really cares about this issue. He has experienced it in his own community and seen it at first hand. We missed him.

I am going to go back to 2017. There is always flooding at certain points. Unfortunately, some very poor planning decisions were made in the past and houses were built on flood plains all across the country. That is exactly the case in the worst areas. Terrible planning decisions were made, houses were built on flood plains and we are left with the repercussions. The Minister of State came up and saw what happened in August 2017 at first hand. It was absolutely devastating. The damage done in my home peninsula of Inishowen and into east Donegal was shocking. It was a wake-up call. It is interesting. I have always worked hard as a public representative but I never put in a shift like I did in the weeks after that. I was working from literally first thing in the morning until last thing at night trying to put my arm around the community and deal with government, including local government, to try to get everything done to address families' flooding issues and the bridges, parks and football pitches that had to be repaired. It was unbelievable. I always think of that when I see other communities flooded. I have been there. I have seen it and understand it.

That is why we missed the Minister of State. If he had been there during that period, we would have been on schedule now. He would have shepherded it over the line. I have no criticism of him whatsoever but the time the system takes is just too long and the interim measures that should be put in place just are not there.

For the remainder of my time, I will focus on Burnfoot. As the Minister of State knows, Burnfoot is just a wee village in the south of Inishowen, not far from Derry city. Burnfoot always flooded. The houses in question were on a flood plain. Everybody knows that there are council houses and private houses that should never have been built where they were built. For God's sake, the name of the village in Irish means "the foot of the river". Before the Minister of State's time, the OPW and the then Minister did not agree to fund works. They said it would not have been economically viable. That was a mistake. The Minister of State granted funding for it and rectified the issue. However, as he has seen himself, the problem is that eight families had to leave their homes, which were council houses. Some of those families were interviewed for the *Irish Times* in recent days. I spoke to some of them afterwards. He met Kathleen Molloy, a fine woman and a fine spokesperson for these families. I do not think Kathleen will ever be back in her house. It is just so sad. Those families lost that connection. Kathleen is still in the local area but a lot of them lost that connection and will never go back.

Somebody recently said that, when the floods come in, the media and everybody else focus on it, but, when the waters recede, so does the media attention and focus. The Minister of State is now back in the role and travelling the country. We really need to demand more of our local authorities and of the systems, including the OPW. We must drive it on as much as we can and work together with other agencies. We cannot leave people in despair for years and years.

My colleague Deputy John Brady introduced a Bill on flood insurance. That should be looked at again. It might give people a degree of protection. As the Minister of State said when he was in Donegal, his job is to try to protect communities from floods and to build flood defences. There are wider issues around insurance, however. That would give people comfort.

We need to look at the gaps that are lengthening the time it takes to deliver these flood defences. We need to make sure that the media attention that is on these areas for a few days never comes off as part of a drive to get things done. We need to ask local authorities all across the country to do better, working in partnership all across the country. I again thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I pay tribute to all of the workers in local authorities and emergency services for everything they have done. On Friday last, the banks of the Mayne river burst causing absolute devastation for residents living in apartments on Marrsfield Avenue, Clongriffin. Residents were left without electricity and the lifts were put out of action, leaving a disabled person who uses a wheelchair effectively cut off from the rest of the community. The flooding of an underground car park left several cars completely destroyed. This has had a devastating impact on livelihoods, including those of a number of people who drive professionally for a living, including taxi drivers. People in these apartments are paying €2,000 a month in rent for one-bed apartments. They simply cannot afford to lose their income or livelihoods. The emergency response payment must be made available to the residents of these Marrsfield Avenue apartments. Are the residents of these apartments able to apply for this emergency payment?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Yes.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister of State for that confirmation. It is very useful because there was no clarity on that. I appreciate that confirmation. These apartments were built right next to the Mayne river. Má chaithfimid súil siar, if we look back, there is a long history of flooding associated with that river. In June 1993, homes in Balgriffin, very close to the apartments that were just flooded, were badly flooded resulting in residents having to leave their home for two months. More than 30 years ago, in 1993, a resident affected by these floods said "The Water Table level in the area is extremely high, the ground having already absorbed as much water as it can." Downstream, at the Baldoyle Estuary, homes were badly flooded on 1 February 2002, when the banks of the Mayne river burst.

When homes were flooded in 1993 and 2002, this was a rural community on the edge of Dublin city and there were very few homes in the area. Since then, thousands of homes have been built in the area. In recognition of the flood risk posed, there are no buildings directly adjacent to the Mayne river at several locations. The decision made by Dublin City Council many years ago to grant planning permission for apartments with an underground car park right next to a river with a history of flooding was grossly irresponsible. The flood map for the area shows that lands close by are prone to flooding. The maps for the land the apartments were built on do not show the same flood risk. I assume this is because the land is slightly higher. However, the apartments were built on a narrow strip of land right next to a river with a history of bursting its banks, right next to lands that flood and right next to homes that had previously flooded in an area where a flood relief scheme is needed but has never been delivered. Excavating and digging down to put in an underground car park at this location could only ever lead to one outcome. The result has been devastating for residents who have their livelihoods destroyed.

In 2028, the Minister of State announced that there would be a flood risk management plan for the Liffey and Dublin Bay river basin. This included the assessment of a number of areas, including Balgriffin. In 2020, when asked about the flood risk assessment for the Balgriffin area, the then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, stated in a written reply: "It is understood that housing development in the area has likely altered the hydraulic conditions on site and/or resolved the flooding issue identified in FEM FRAMS."

He went on to say that this was to be reviewed. Six years later, we are still waiting on the OPW to produce revised flood maps for the area. The serious flooding of the apartments at Marrsfield shows, unfortunately, that the OPW got this completely wrong when it said it appeared the flooding issue had been resolved in the area.

In a written response issued to me today by the senior Minister about the flooding at Marrsfield in Clongriffin, he and the OPW do not even know who the relevant local authority is. They get this basic fact completely wrong. The suggestion from the senior Minister that Fingal County Council should apply for funding to carry out flood protection works for apartments in the jurisdiction of Dublin City Council, where Fingal County Council has no legal authority or responsibility, shows that the OPW and the senior Minister, in issuing this reply, are not in command of even the most basic facts and pieces of information. It is abundantly clear that there needs to be emergency flood relief works to protect these residents and a proper flood relief scheme to address the flood events that have taken place in the area over many decades. This must include protecting the apartments.

Is mian liom a rá go bhfuil an méid a tharla uafásach. Is drochscéal é. Tá sé uafásach ar fad. Níor cuireadh tús ach le 10 scéim as 150 - ten schemes out of 150. There is a need, as others have said, to progress these much faster and with urgency. Residents need timelines. Cad atá á dhéanamh ag an Aire Stáit chun é seo a shocrú? Níl aon fhógra. Ní foláir dúinn gníomhú anois. Caithfidh muid gníomhú go práinneach. Níl aon rogha eile ann. Ní foláir don Aire Stáit agus don Rialtas araon éisteacht agus gníomhú. I urge the Minister of State to address these issues.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I extend my solidarity to the people in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown who have been impacted by Storm Chandra and to everyone across the country who has been impacted by Storm Chandra and other recent weather events. Locally we saw incredible footage of damaged areas like Nutgrove Avenue and Enniskerry Road. I acknowledge the incredible work of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, not only the front-line workers who responded swiftly in the early hours of 25 January but also all the backroom workers who responded to over 500 calls. When the council met on 9 February to review responses to the storm, a number of productive measures were suggested, including the installation of additional cameras in areas of the river network, the expansion of the rain gauge network to include higher areas such as Three Rock and the improvement of drainage systems in areas like Loreto Park. These are all welcome suggestions but they reflect an individual council approach to a State-wide collective problem. The aftermath of Storm Chandra has exposed the hard truth that in an age of rapid climate change, our infrastructure and communication methods are failing. This is not something that individual councils and isolated improvements can fix; it is a responsibility which sits squarely on the shoulders of the Government.

In 2024, the Cookstown Lane social housing development was opened in Kilternan. All 22 homes on the estate were filled with families who had been on the social housing waiting list. In the aftermath of Storm Chandra, the estate was filled with water. It has been ruined, flooded by the Loughlinstown river. Those same families have been uprooted, with most unable to return for several months. No matter how strong local council efforts to drain the area and help residents may be, they cannot meaningfully reduce the damage in situations like this.

A concern repeated throughout the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council meeting was the inability to swiftly communicate with residents about the dangers of the storm. This issue has been pertinent to other extreme weather incidents across the country, including Storm Éowyn last year. It is something successive governments have been warned about for years. In 2018, the European electronic communications code made it mandatory for all member states of the European Union to deploy a public warning system by June 2022 using telephone networks to alert everyone located in a specific area of an ongoing crisis or upcoming disaster. That deadline was nearly four years ago but, if I am correct, we still have not launched a tender for such a system. We remain one of the few EU member states without a comprehensive public warning communication system, yet our exposure to extreme weather is set to increase in the coming years.

The Government must recognise that Storm Chandra should not be treated as an isolated phenomenon, but as a real part of our new weather pattern. Proactive steps must be taken to ensure extreme weather is treated with a co-ordinated, holistic and State-wide communication approach from the Government and that burdens are not placed on under-resourced individual councils.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I extend my sincere sympathy to everybody who has experienced flooding in the past few weeks and even going back months. In my constituency, Ballsbridge, Rathfarnham, Terenure and many communities and houses were affected by the bursting of the banks of the Dodder. It was particularly devastating for those people and families. I have seen the devastation that flooding causes to people's homes and livelihoods. It can be an extremely traumatic event for people, so they have my deepest sympathy in this respect.

On average, it rains approximately every other day in this country. Some parts of the country, like Dublin, are a little drier than others. The years are getting wetter with the advent of climate change. There is no better example than our most recent January, which was one of the highest rainfall months on record. This has devastating impacts on homes and livelihoods across the country and in my constituency of Dublin Bay South.

Our responses to climate change need to take a variety of forms. Unfortunately, it is likely that we will have to adapt. Nature will react, as it always does, but I have severe concerns that our Government is far behind. Nature-based solutions are often not even remotely a part of the response. We have chronic issues in sewerage and drainage capacity. Often, storm drain systems are interconnected with sewerage systems and result in overflows into our waterways, as in my constituency at Sandymount Strand, which I have raised several times. The ownership of the water systems is often confused between Uisce Éireann, the local authority and private owners.

When I was campaigning in the local elections two years ago, people at so many doors I knocked on reported flooding issues in their back gardens that I noticed a pattern of poor

drainage around the River Poddle, indicating an increased flooding risk. I raised that with Dublin City Council and it seemed like everybody was passing the parcel on the issue. At the general election, a similar pattern seemed to emerge around Ringsend Park. Furthermore, there is only one flood insurance provider available in Ringsend, Irishtown, Sandymount and Merrion in my constituency, as I have raised several times, including in the last week.

The breadth of issues with water infrastructure and flood prevention, mitigation, management and recovery are breathtaking in a country known for its rain. More breathtaking is that these issues of drainage, sewerage systems, water delivery, flood defences and mitigation are solved problems. In fact, they have been solved for millennia all around the world, yet for some reason they seem to be consistently beyond this Government.

Deputy James O'Connor: I am sharing time with my colleague, Deputy O'Connell, on the important issue of flooding. I represent the constituency of Cork East and have the honour and privilege to do so in Dáil Éireann. It is well known that Storm Babet in October 2023 did unmerciful damage to a huge number of homes and businesses across the constituency. Over 800 homes and premises were badly damaged. Many people's homes were destroyed and needed very significant reconstruction works. Housing estates were overrun by flood water in the town of Midleton and many other areas of east Cork including Rathcormac, Mogeely, the village of Killeagh and Castlemartyr. It also affected places in Ladysbridge and many one-off rural locations around that area. To put it in perspective for the Minister of State, in the 200 years of recorded history in my home village of Killeagh, there was no record of flooding taking place until October 2023. I concur with Deputy Hayes's comments. We are living in times when the climate is changing. These events, unfortunately, will become more common.

Killeagh has been made famous by the Kingfisher song, which mentions "the woods of Glenbower". One thing that personally hit me was walking those woods after the flooding took place and seeing bridges washed away and the landscape damaged through landslides and other physical changes. It is the first time in my living memory that I recall any event causing such damage and destruction.

The sad reality of water is that it gets in everywhere. It does irreversible damage and requires very substantial repair works at huge cost.

I will recap the public infrastructure cost of Storm Babet to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, who is in the Chamber. It was in and around the region of €60 million to €80 million when you factor in the community hospital in Midleton, the community Garda station, other public infrastructure, roads, bridges and things that were washed away and destroyed and needed subsequent reconstruction. The impact it had on families and people - human beings - in the constituency was absolutely devastating. I want to provide feedback to colleagues in the House. I am anxious for us to do everything we can, in the political system, as the public looks on. On this side of the Chamber there are the back benches, where Government-supporting Deputies sit, and the Minister of State's benches, where members of the Government sit. I am relaying the views and the frustration of the people of east Cork. They do not care about planning processes, Part 8 schemes or Arterial Drainage Acts. They want to see progress as quickly as possible so that their family homes are as safe as they can be. They want us to do all we can in respect of that. I want to reflect on that, which I think is also important to do.

From my engagement and experience with Cork County Council, I think it has been doing as much as it physically can in respect of advancing the individual property protection scheme. My understanding, now that over 700 applications have been assessed, is that the installation of that property protection scheme is ongoing and is happening. There are a few things I want to report back. If there is future ministerial engagement from the Taoiseach or a Minister, the TDs in the constituency need to get sufficient notice that it is happening. This is necessary to make sure that people affected by flooding get an opportunity for dialogue and engagement. That has been a point of particular frustration to me. I have not been given sufficient notice or opportunities to feed in on programmes when Ministers have come to visit. In fact, this was the case when the Taoiseach visited. I relayed that to him subsequently. It caused frustration in the community. It is important to ensure we keep that collegiality in terms of what we are all seeking, which is solution-focused.

The advancement of the main Midleton flood relief scheme is no easy undertaking because we are talking about tidal flooding, surface flooding and fluvial river flooding. There is a merging of three individual issues that are causing Midleton to become very prone to flooding at a time when we are adapting to the changing climate. I described the flooding that happened in 2023 as biblical. I really hope, in all sincerity, that this never occurs again as long as I live, but we cannot plan on that basis. We have to plan on the basis of what has happened to make sure we do what we can to protect the residents in that area. We must do everything we physically can.

I am sad to say to the Minister of State, in the politest way possible, that the tranche 2 schemes that are stuck in the Department for which he has responsibility are a little bit of a joke. I am fed up with trying to explain to people, particularly in Castlemartyr, why this continues to be the case when it comes to advancing the tranche 2 works that need to be done on the River Kiltha, and further up in Mogeely as well. We are trying to map solutions for people in those areas. I am conscious that anything that is done in Castlemartyr can have a knock-on impact on the village of Ladysbridge, which is further down. We need to see a better system where the OPW gets the funding. If it is the case that the Minister of State needs help, he should tell us and we can work together to try to make that happen.

Ireland is home to the European headquarters of many of the largest multinational companies in the social media and tech space. The world HQ of Meta, or Facebook as people would know it, is in Ballsbridge, with over 5,000 people working there. I am amazed that we still do not have a national emergency system where people get a text. I have been abroad in countries where text alerts have come in due to severe weather. An automatic notification is sent to people's phones to tell them to be alert. Pushing that burden onto local authorities is not fair. That is something the Government should look at. I genuinely feel it could easily be sorted in a couple of months. It has been done in other countries with great ease. We have all of the assets here to make that happen. Giving people time to prepare is important. I know it is horrible to say it but if it occurs again while people are working in their places of employment or away from their homes, at least they would have some chance to get back to where they live to get their valuables and do something. The Minister of State knows what happened in Midleton in 2023 during Storm Babet. I was told that in one case, hot meals were floating around on trays in a community healthcare space on that occasion. That is how quick it happened. People were in the hairdressers getting their hair done to find floodwater coming in

under their feet. We need to see a better solution that includes having a proper emergency system in place.

My time is coming to an end. As a TD, I am doing everything I can with the good faith of my Opposition and Government colleagues in the constituency. We want to make sure this happens. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to do everything he can to help and support us to achieve that. I know that what happened in Wexford was very regrettable, but what happened in east Cork a couple of short years ago was considerably worse. I do not want the people there to be forgotten about.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: As the Minister of State has been hearing, the rainfall we have had in recent weeks - it was raining when I was coming in here today, so we may not be past it yet - has caused considerable damage to homes and businesses, including in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown. This intense rain flooded areas including Clonskeagh, Nutgrove, Benildus Avenue, Aiken Village in Stepside and Cookstown Lane in Kilternan. The local wastewater systems were completely overrun. Those whose homes had not been damaged by the floods found themselves caught in gridlocked traffic, blocked roads and public transport cancellations. We all know it rains a lot in Ireland. We accept that, but we cannot accept allowing our city to come to a grinding halt every time there is heavy rain, no matter how unusual it is. Unfortunately, as several other people have said here today, it is not unusual anymore. Met Éireann is repeatedly warning us that due to climate change, storms and intense bursts of heavy rain are going to become the norm. Our Departments, State agencies and local authorities need to work together to figure out how to improve our flood defences now so that we are not all back here again next year having the same conversation.

Two weeks ago, I visited homes and businesses in Kilternan. They have already started to repair and rebuild after the heaviest rains have subsided. I spoke with the builders the day I visited and they told me they are working 12 hours a day to repair those homes to allow the families to come back. It was raining very heavily on that day as well. They are working really hard. The builders and the families are also frustrated because they are rebuilding what they had just built in the first place. These were homes in Cookstown Lane that people had only moved into in the last year. They had only decorated them in the last few months. Their frustration is accentuated by the concern that they could end up doing all of this again next winter if we do not have mitigation systems in place.

I acknowledge that the Government has done a lot to try to prepare for flooding. I particularly praise the Minister of State for increasing the maximum funding for a minor flood mitigation works project from €750,000 to €2 million last year. It is good to make the funding available, but money alone will not get the solutions in place without having boots on the ground and getting the works done. I was very disappointed to discover that my own local authority, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, has had just six successful minor works applications in the last ten years. This is despite the fact that many areas only escaped flooding this time because the most intense rain fell on other areas just a couple of kilometres away. It was just luck this time round. Areas such as Stillorgan and Kilmacud are recognised flood risks. I know there have been multiple reports both to Uisce Éireann and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council. Even with normal rainfall levels, wastewater systems have overrun on those roads and we have had water spilling out. This is a very real public health risk and is doing untold damage, repeatedly, to the local environment. I know other colleagues have

spoken about the unacceptable amounts of wastewater flowing into the Irish Sea after periods of heavy rain. These are localised issues, but they are feeding into the wider issue as well.

Are the eligibility criteria for the minor works scheme too restrictive, given that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has had just six successful project applications in ten years? I ask the Minister of State to review the details of the scheme. Maybe he could engage with the various authorities and relevant State agencies, which are now reviewing what they can do over the next year to try to alleviate some of these things, and see if some funding could be made available to do that. We need to develop, support and implement local flood mitigation systems. We need to look at creative solutions. We need to look at our parks, parklands and playing pitches for water attenuation schemes because these areas are becoming quite built up. My constituency of Dublin Rathdown is an area of high house building, which is what we need, but we are losing many potential water absorption areas.

In conjunction with installing these flood mitigation projects, our local authorities must be increasingly conscious of the disruption that construction works cause to our natural water tables and water run-off areas.

As I have said, some areas are already vulnerable to flooding but with these new developments under way, we should take a thorough look at how we can protect our new developments and prevent them from becoming vulnerable to more flooding in extreme weather conditions. We need to put in these safeguards now, as we are doing this building, so we can stop these new communities from becoming the next Cookstown Lane over the next few months.

As I said, I have no desire to be standing here in a year's time talking the same talk about flooded homes, damaged businesses and communities brought to a standstill by heavy rains. Likewise, I am sure the Minister of State has no desire to listen to me do so. The Government has rightly placed a very high priority on our infrastructure. Robust flood defence systems are an integral part of our national infrastructure. As we saw all too well in the past few weeks, if our flood mitigation systems fail, so too does much of our vital infrastructure. That includes our housing and transport systems.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the opportunity to raise this important matter. Doris, Gareth, Dennis, Alex, Barra, Eunice, Ciarán, Ashley, Éowyn and Chandra were some of the fiercest storms to batter our country in the past ten years. They brought strong winds, rain and flooding, and left a trail of destruction behind them. In light of recent severe weather events, and the flooding we have again witnessed across the country, particularly in my county of Laois, will the Government develop and implement a national river management strategy to mitigate the impact of future extreme weather events?

In recent months, communities have experienced devastating flooding with homes damaged, businesses disrupted, farmland rendered unusable and families left dealing with uncertainty, stress and significant financial loss. Portarlinton experienced major flooding events in 2008, 2017 and 2020. A detailed engineering assessment was announced in August 2020 to identify flood alleviation measures and prepare design documentation. However, progress since then has been far too slow. Residents and business owners are increasingly frustrated. Communities living with constant flood risk cannot continue to endure delay after delay. Last weekend, Botley Lane in Portarlinton was flooded yet again, a situation that has

become all too familiar. I welcome recent indications that flood defence schemes are to be treated as critical infrastructure under upcoming emergency planning legislation. The Portarlinton flood relief scheme must be included in any fast-track process.

In Mountmellick, areas such as Manor Road continue to flood in times of heavy rainfall. I welcome confirmation that its flood relief scheme, with a budget of €20.8 million, has progressed to planning and construction will begin in early 2027. Residents of Mountmellick have waited many years for progress since the significant flooding of November 2017. There is genuine fear every time heavy rain is forecast. Elsewhere across the county, flooding concerns have also been raised. A pitch at The Rock GAA club, which I hope the Minister of State will have an opportunity to visit when he comes to County Laois, is completely waterlogged and flooded over. Hard work, on a community and voluntary basis, went into maintaining and getting those pitches to where they are today. The club adjoins a river, which is the reason this flooding is taking place.

Local examples illustrate a broader national issue. At present, responsibility for flood mitigation, river maintenance and drainage is spread across multiple agencies, including the OPW and local authorities. Despite the good work being done under the existing capital programme, the system remains fragmented. Rivers do not respect county boundaries. Actions taken or not taken upstream can have serious consequences downstream. Issues such as siltation, vegetation management, land use change, outdated drainage infrastructure and inadequate maintenance have all made a contribution to the flood risk. Too often, these issues are dealt with in a piecemeal way rather than through integrated catchment-wide planning. Given the increasing financial cost to families, businesses, landowners and the Exchequer, the time has come for a national river management strategy.

A national river management strategy would provide three clear pathways: a long-term framework for catchment-based planning; a clear prioritisation of investment; and structured interagency co-operation. It would ensure that flood mitigation funding delivers maximum value for money, reduces duplication and integrates nature-based solutions alongside traditional engineering works. A national approach would provide certainty. It would allow local authorities and communities to plan proactively. We cannot continue to lurch from one flood event to the next and announce schemes after each crisis, without embedding them into a broader strategic framework.

I urge the Minister of State to commit to developing a national river management strategy that integrates existing flood relief programmes, accelerates delivery, strengthens governance and funding mechanisms, and uses modern tools for river basin management. Communities like Portarlinton, Clonaslee, Rosenallis, Mountmellick and others across County Laois deserve clarity. They deserve progress and they deserve to know that the Government is moving beyond reactive responses towards a co-ordinated, strategic and future-focused approach. Flooding is an issue of growing urgency. The financial, social and emotional costs are simply too high to ignore. We need a system that works, one where river management is co-ordinated, consistent and grounded in long-term planning rather than crisis response.

Will the Minister of State, in his own good time while on the public media, explain something that people raise with me on a continuous basis, day in, day out, no matter where I travel? In my hometown of Portlaoise, from where the River Triogue takes all our water out of the capital town of the county to Mountrath, Clonaslee, Rosenallis and Abbeyleix, and

everywhere in every corner of Laois, people are talking to me. The talk the whole time, especially among the older people in the community, is that I raise in the Dáil with the Minister of State why we cannot go in to manage and clean the rivers, as was done 40, 50, 60 and 70 years ago. People on the canals can still remember - the few people we have who are over 90 years of age - when the canals were dammed and cleaned all those years ago. They ask the same thing, which is to know, working with everybody on a river management basis, that surely some form of cleaning can take place in the river.

I am only saying to the Minister of State what has been said to me on a daily basis. One old lady said to me the other day that she is 88 years of age and cleans the shore in her yard every three or four weeks because if she does not, it fills up with silt and the water runs all over the yard right up to her door. These are people who have lived many years and know the facts about having to clean something and ensuring there is depth enough in our rivers, managed right, that allows us to ensure the water does not overflow the banks and does not flood people. Surely, we must act and act immediately when people's homes are flooded.

I acknowledge that the Minister of State has done more work on this. It was many years ago when I saw him on national TV working on behalf of the people of Athlone who were completely flooded. I saw him getting out of a rubber dinghy when he was helping people to move from one area to another.

4 o'clock

The Minister of State has walked the walk and I am not saying he is not talking the talk. I acknowledge we have a good person to walk the walk for us now because he knows at first hand the devastation. People whose homes have never been flooded believe flooding is like a sink overflowing in the kitchen, as experienced by most people, or a washing machine breaking down, with water coming out on the floor. Flooding is a different animal altogether, in that the devastation can be evident in the house for years afterwards. It is a matter of what comes with the water and what is left over when it is cleaned out with mops and buckets. That must take priority over everything else for those affected. Every winter, there is fear of flooding owing to rainfall. Flooding is devastating for those who live in flood-risk zones. We often hear that we need to be sure about where we buy or build a house. We should remember that there are people living in second-, third- and fourth-generation houses that were never flooded until now. This is where the huge problem is arising.

We can talk about climate change but in parallel we need to ensure our natural infrastructure is maintained properly. I remember being a very young councillor in my town, Portlaoise. I acknowledge the role of local authorities. I can speak only about my own one, in County Laois. I have been dealing with it for years and years. Sandbags were always available and councillors could pick them up and deliver them. I am sure the Minister of State did so himself in his time. I acknowledge that the councils were always very proactive.

What is more important is that we work together to ensure we do not experience this devastation again. I named all the storms in my opening address. Every time they happened, there were serious repercussions for everybody. After each one, we were talking as we are talking now. If we are prepared to put huge amounts towards flood barriers, we can also work in parallel by ensuring proper management where water flows out. No matter what you do, water still has to travel the one line out.

In my town, Portlaoise, through which the River Triogue flows, there was flooding at Bridge Street because the bridge was too narrow where the water left the town. We took down the bridge and straightened the river at the back of the convent school, meaning we never had flooding again on the street.

However, the problem is that we are not cleaning and dredging the river according to principles of good river management, as was done when I was a young fella, the whole way along from Two Mile Bridge to The Rock GAA Club. No dredger has been seen recently. I saw the dredger on the river when I was a young fella. People keep asking me how there could not be flooding if the rivers are not managed. I mean managing them in co-operation with everybody else. None of us set out to do something wrong. Those who went before us hundreds of years ago did not set out to do anything wrong. They managed the rivers. When I was a young fella passing the same river each day coming home from school, I would see huge eels in it. There are still some there but not as many. We should ask why. I am told it has all to do with not touching the river. I do not know; I am not an expert. I can only tell what happened to me and what I saw with my own two eyes when I was a young fella.

All those who lived along the River Triogue loved walking it, going out by Meany's and O'Donnell's. I recently asked an old man who lives along the river if there were many ducks. He said there are not as many as usual. Therefore, it is not all about not touching the river. There is something else at play. Is it that we need to have better management of rivers to encourage more wildlife to come? I asked the man when he last saw an otter. He said he does not know the day he last saw one. He is now 84. When he was a young fella, there were plenty of otters. He said he sees the odd crane standing at the side of the bank. The reason I am saying this is not to give a lecture here in Dáil Éireann but because all the talk about not doing river management must be balanced with what we saw 50 or 60 years ago, when there was plenty of wildlife along the river even though there was river management. The argument I am trying to put forward is that we need better management.

I praise the Minister of State again for the work he has done. I look forward to him coming down to County Laois. I will have his lunch ready for him on the day.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Flooding is a fairly complicated scenario. It might look simple to address and devastating for families but there are a lot of different parts to this. The first thing people need to understand relates to towns especially. When Dublin was being developed, a certain number of pipes were put in, maybe 12 in., 14 in. or 18 in. in diameter. Then it was decided to build more houses and buildings, which was good, but the pipes had to take more and more water from the new estates. This went on and on. No more than with what you put into your mouth, sooner or later it does not all fit in. You have to do things in proportion. That is one aspect.

Another aspect is cleaning out gullies. A lot of flooding is caused by simple things like gullies not being cleaned out.

I thank the Minister of State for liaising with me in the past few weeks on the River Suck and the Shannon.

The next aspect is drains. I remember when you could make, clean and do everything else with a drain. Now a farmer is afraid to make one because someone from the fisheries

authorities or Department might say it is not allowed. Councils used to deal with a certain number of drains but now it is the case that if there is a bush, they will go every side of it rather than remove it. That bush might be growing for only 15 or 20 years and might be what we call a sucker. It is in the line of a small tree. If you do not keep a drain or river maintained, you will cause problems because there is a build-up. Let us be clear: built-up material has to be removed but this is not being done. There is a problem because nearly everyone wants to stop you from doing everything. If this continues and we do not put a system in place, things will get worse in the currently affected areas.

Everyone looks to the OPW. It is but one part. The councils have to do their bit and Irish Water needs to look at the pipes put in years ago to take the storm-water. Joined-up thinking needs to take place. On bigger rivers, you have Inland Fisheries Ireland, the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland, the fisheries and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. In some cases, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing because everyone is trying to stop things. We need collaborative thinking, as argued for by Deputy Aird, and we also need to ask how we can speed things up.

I have referred before to rules and regulations and to the reports and, to be blunt about it, what I would call “rubbish” required because of European legislation. We have left the door open to people who want to see nothing happening in a country and who want to shoot down to the Four Courts to try to block projects.

That is not acceptable because if a Minister is trying to get works done, it is a cruel thing to see the likes of a job being blocked. Go out to Connemara at the moment and look at Rossaveal, where we are trying to deepen a port. That has been blocked. Why? Because it has gone to the courts. Go around the country and look at that. That is not tolerable. I have said it time and again: we have played into the hands of these people who do not want to see progress. Until we change some of this, we will be in trouble.

I remember we were down in Crossmolina years ago. I think that job has been done now, has it not? Was it in 2016 or something we were down there? It has taken seven or eight years to get all the paperwork right and to get that job rolling. It will be great for those people when it is done. You see the relief on people's faces. You will hear some people say the properties are built on a floodplain. If they were built 100, 200 or 300 years ago on a floodplain, we are hardly going to tell the people to move on to another place. We have to put in the measures to try to resolve the issue for the people at hand, Athlone being a perfect example, and go to different parts of the country. When those measures are put in, they are successful. We have to just think. I look at Lough Funshinagh, in Roscommon, and I saw what really good people in that area had to go through. I looked out a window one day, and to the top of my head the water was up higher on the far side of the road. That is frightening for anyone, and those good people live an ordinary life. They do not want to be saying anything or shouting or roaring, but the reality is that if that bank had pushed to the far side, they would have been in trouble. In fairness, pumps have been put in and an interim measure has been done, but we need to get long-term solutions, and not alone there. I am not talking about "If you do not do my back door" stuff. We need to get it in all the different parts, but it needs a myriad of joined-up thinking and speeding up. To be quite blunt, sometimes councils could be offered the money but they do not put in the gee-up into trying to get it done. That needs to be done as well. There is no point in saying it does not.

There is no one-fit solution or one thing that will solve it all, but we need to work collaboratively together. To be frank, in most cases it is not money that is the problem, which is an unusual thing to say in here. It is the paperwork, the bureaucracy and the blocking by outside interests. I say to those people, have a think to yourself. Would you like your mother, your father, your brother or your sister to be looking out at what I am after talking about - and I am over 6 ft - and to be looking out a window and seeing the water higher than the house you were born, bred and reared in or the house you built. Is that what Irish people who want to go down to the Four Courts and go blocking jobs are about? We should have respect for everyone in this country and for those people who are in situations where the State is willing to help them but where someone comes along in their own interest and goes blocking.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. Flooding is affecting so many lives and property right across the country. In my county there is seaweed harvesting in the coastal areas and an application in to MARA, which is the maritime regulatory agency. Seaweed has a very important role to play in coastal erosion and helps the coastal areas maintain their foreshore, and this is causing huge concern. I have studied in detail this application that has been submitted to MARA and it is incredibly confusing. It appears that the application process and the pre-consultation aspects were complete over ten years ago, in 2014. Much of this application is built on some of the consultations that happened during this period. I want to make it very clear and to put it on the record of the Dáil that seaweed is fundamentally important for coastal areas in terms of flood management. We need a coastal management strategy. We need to ensure that we do not grant a licence that could potentially harvest up to 40,000 tonnes of seaweed from the coast of Galway and Mayo, which is what is proposed. I believe very few people in this House even realise that, such is the lack of information about these applications.

I also want to raise the pace of the planning process for flood reliefs. I welcome the flood relief in Crossmolina, which will have a big impact on the town, but countless other towns still do not have a planning application even submitted - in Enniscorthy, Midleton and all those places. I urge the Minister of State to do everything necessary to streamline the planning process. Flood defences are critical infrastructure, and it is simply intolerable that a planning process can go on for so many years. There are families across Ireland who, in the depths of winter, in the nights of storms, cannot sleep, such is the level of worry and stress. I urge the Minister of State to prioritise the planning process, to adequately staff it, to adequately staff An Coimisiún Pleanála and to reform the planning process to ensure that bogus objectors are not allowed to submit. We have a Bill at the moment, which I urge the Minister of State to prioritise and support, whereby only those with a material interest in a planning application can make an objection. At the moment, if a farmer in Donegal is applying for planning permission for a slurry tank, there may be an objection from Cork, Wicklow or Wexford that has no interest. This is causing major delays in the system, and I ask the Minister of State to ensure that that can no longer be tolerated. It should not be tolerated.

It is also important to say that many of these planning applications are hundreds and thousands of pages long. We should streamline that because in such a long application, in an application that spans thousands of words, pages and documents, it is leaving us ripe for judicial reviews. That is another major aspect holding progress back on these issues.

I wish the Minister of State well and look forward to working with him on these projects over the years ahead.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I have been listening to the debate in the Chamber and upstairs for the past 90 minutes or so and can see that a lot of people are speaking from their own personal experience. I live near the River Glashaboy, in Glanmire, and living in the Cork city area with the River Lee, it is inevitable that our day-to-day lives are affected and shaped by the water around us. I have had to go into people's houses and kitchens, like the Minister of State, that have been affected by flooding, and they are some of the toughest days I have ever faced as a public representative. I think you can do it once, maybe twice, you can empathise with people truly, advocate on their behalf, lobby the council, lobby the OPW, lobby the Government for interventions, but unfortunately, as a number of speakers have said and reiterated here again tonight, sometimes you attend a person's home for the third or fourth time after it has been flooded and you reach a point where, as regards these inordinate delays in the planning system, we really have to question what the hell we are doing when we allow these schemes to go on for ten, 15 or 20 years.

I was very grateful to Michael McGrath, when he was Minister for public expenditure in the last term, for the first scheme he signed off on. It was thankfully the Glashaboy flood relief scheme in Glanmire, which started in the summer of 2023. It is due to be completed later this year. Just to give people an idea of the timeline of a successful project, that project started in its planning stage after the floods of 2012, it went out for public consultation in 2016, ministerial confirmation was initially given in 2021 and the contract was awarded in 2023.

Even for a scheme that did not have those legal challenges via judicial review, it has still taken the bones of 14 or 15 years to deliver, and that is one that faced relatively little opposition. On the face of it, we need to accept that the system there is unacceptable.

There are two other schemes in Cork I would like to mention, the lower Lee and the Blackpool flood relief schemes. The lower Lee flood relief scheme is a massive project. It has faced opposition in the city. Many people have concerns about the height of the walls and about preserving the historic and cultural aspects of the city centre. Nonetheless, the scheme has been devised over a long period and will protect up to 2,100 properties, of which 1,200 are businesses trading every day in the city centre and 900 are homes. Some €20 million of that budget was allocated specifically to maintaining and preserving the city walls, while the bulk of it, approximately €140 million, is for the actual flood defences. Unfortunately, we are again in this cycle where that scheme was initially mooted in 2009. Since then, I have lost count of how many times the city centre has flooded around the quays. I know that scheme and the Blackpool flood relief scheme are with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, at the moment.

The Blackpool flood relief scheme particularly irks me because there is local opposition. In the recent public consultation, 1,000 submissions were received. The vast majority of them, however, over 90%, were submissions in support of the scheme. Many political representatives in the area have used this as a political football, sitting on the fence, backing both horses and talking out of both sides of their mouth, but then you meet the people whose houses are flooded, whose businesses have been lost to this and who cannot get insurance. There is a stage in all of this where we have to prioritise property and people's right to live safely without fear of

flooding. We have to prioritise it over environmental considerations in this case. That is a difficult thing to say because we want to preserve the environment. We do not want to see habitats affected negatively, but when it comes to striking a balance, it needs to tip in favour of protecting property and people's livelihoods. The Blackpool flood relief scheme is on the Minister's table. I hope that in the coming months sense will prevail. The worse that can happen with some of these schemes is that the scheme gets approved and people expect earth to be moved, machinery to arrive and the scheme to start. It is often the case, as I said in reference to the one in Glanmire, that it has taken the best part of three years to deliver the scheme. The worst thing in the case of Blackpool, which is at regular risk of flooding, would be to approve the scheme and in the meantime see it flood again. That would be unconscionable.

The next point concerns the council response. Nine times out of ten, the council does a fantastic job and it is to be lauded. I live in a constituency that straddles Cork City Council and Cork County Council. I learned from a flood in Glanmire a couple of years ago that both have different responses. I would like to see a more co-ordinated national approach. They are simple things. One of the local authorities might fund skips going into estates to take out damaged property like floorboards or whatever the case may be, and the other local authority might not. Simple things like that really need co-ordination. There needs to be joined-up thinking. If national guidance is required for that, it needs to be issued and funded if necessary.

A bugbear of mine, which I have spoken about in here about half a dozen times in the last five or six years, is insurance. We have had successful flood relief schemes. The OPW takes its time doing things but when it implements a scheme, it is reasonably successful. We can point towards Mallow and Fermoy in recent years, where successful flood relief schemes have been implemented and have held up. In those cases, it is difficult when people cannot avail of insurance after the fact. There needs to be some common sense when it comes to areas that have been protected by the interventions of the State and the OPW. They should be entitled to avail of flood insurance where schemes are seen to be viable and are protecting the area. Unfortunately, it is one of those things that get lost between the cracks. We concentrate so much of our time here on an area that has got flooded, the emergency response, getting the Red Cross involved and getting grants out to people. The forward thinking for future incidents, particularly in the area of flood insurance, seems to get put to the end of the queue when we are having these conversations because we jump from crisis to crisis, storm to storm and flood to flood. I would like to see something like a State equalisation scheme like we have in other sectors. It can and should be pursued, and that is only fair and proper. As Deputy Fitzmaurice has said, in the case of Cork city, there are buildings that have been there for hundreds of years in many cases. Our life has evolved. We benefited from the river through trade, culture and commerce over the years. We cannot just get up out of the city, pack our bags and plonk down somewhere else. We need to instigate an insurance scheme that will give people reassurance.

Other speakers spoke about drainage, clearing drains, getting into rivers and taking debris out. This was probably one of the most frustrating things I saw over the years as a county councillor. You can visibly see fallen limbs, tree trunks and all sorts of vegetation overgrowth in the rivers. We are repeatedly told by the local authority that we cannot go in because of inland fisheries. I am not asking for a massive dredging plan of the Lee or anything. I am asking for simple things to happen to remove debris. This culture has evolved whereby we cannot do it because we are not allowed. The answer seems to be "No", before seeing how we

can go about getting into the river to sort out the problem. I made what was an inappropriate reference to somebody earlier. We have had incidents on a number of rivers in Cork in the past year where there have been fish kills. People have polluted the rivers, the Blackwater in one case, either knowingly or accidentally. A lot of the time people get away with it and do not face prosecution. If they do get caught, they get a measly fine of a few thousand euro. Our local authorities are afraid to go into the river because they might get reprimanded in some way. Again, there needs to be a common-sense approach whereby we would weigh up the merits and the pros and cons, in this case as to whether to intervene. I do not understand the reluctance of local authorities to get in to clear out debris when appropriate, or to clear drains or whatever the case may be.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I welcome this opportunity to address the subject of flooding. I want to express my absolute gratitude to the Minister of State. He was everywhere in all parts of the country. We look forward to imminently welcoming him to County Meath. I express my sincere gratitude to the engineers and outdoor crew of Meath County Council, particularly in the municipal districts of Ashbourne, Laytown, Bettystown, Kells and Ratoath. I also express my gratitude to the farming community. I do not know of one farmer in our area who was not involved in pulling cars, vans and God knows what types of vehicles out of ditches or through floods at a time when the weather was playing havoc with the farming calendar. I also thank the ESB crew members and the fire and rescue services, who were extremely busy pumping out and then dealing with *ad hoc* repairs that were required where different parts of the electrical infrastructure short-circuited, etc.

Listening to all of the contributions today, I am getting a fantastic lesson in geography from all parts of the country as represented by colleagues. Two things stand out in my mind. The first is that we really cannot cheat nature. We have to work with nature. We have to farm with nature, and we have to plan with nature and the climate. Another issue of high importance, which was referenced most recently by my colleague, is the huge wisdom and knowledge bank of our older people, our older residents, who know the way things were in the past, such as the course of the river, where the sluice was, where the mill of old was and how that impacted the topography of the area we now look to develop, particularly at a time of crisis in housing.

This also highlights an important area, namely, that we measure twice and cut once and that when we are dealing with planning and housing, the importance of having the land use review published as soon as possible.

It is also very important that we stick to the CFRAM maps. That was not the case in the past and we are now dealing with legacy issues where there has been flooding of developments in the past 20 to 25 years. It is so important that we adhere to those flood area maps. Other considerations include section 50 concerning the design of bridges and culverts, the placement and capacity of storm water attenuation tanks, the co-location of wastewater outflow and those attenuation tanks. We have had a couple of episodes in Ratoath, County Meath where the two collided and the outcome was not favourable. Thankfully, a public health emergency was averted.

Rather than labour those points, I will raise them as flags. Regarding possible actions we could take, colleagues have spoken about storm notification systems, delays to that and money that was previously allocated but I remind people of the local authority and the MapAlerter

apps that are very effective. As public representatives, we need to work with different WhatsApp groups and community groups to encourage as many residents as possible about the alerter maps.

There have been calls for additional funding for road repairs and all of us would welcome that constituency by constituency. As part of our circular economy efforts, we are using different percentages of recycled asphalt for road repairs. This needs to be looked at. Prior to flooding in Meath, I noticed that the longevity of those products may not be quite what we would like it to be - then add flood waters to it. There are opportunities in the area of rainwater harvesting, particularly in urban areas where run off can be redirected to supply water to tree plantations and shrubs. It could be beneficial to Tidy Towns groups and ease the burden on them so they do not have to go to and fro with watering cans but we have water stations and an adequate supply of water butts. These are simple, low-cost interventions that involve working with nature.

I wish to raise the issue of coastal erosion, although I know it is not specifically flood-related. County Meath has a very precious and short 13 km coastline. There is one particular area at Laytown where a substantial portion of the pitch and putt facility has fallen away on to the foreshore. The pitch and putt club there has been in existence for over 50 years. The volunteers have worked at a Trojan rate over the past couple of weekends to clear up the damage. I emphasise that there is a plan for the area but, again, it involves that overall piece of what was there historically, what was part of the heritage of the area and how is that interwoven with new developments. The Laytown-Bettystown district has seen massive housing development over the probably the past 27 to 30 years. It is about how it goes forward when there will be a sense of, pardon the phrase, "Build, baby, build". That will be what we need to do but we need to learn the lessons of the past, take on board the wisdom of our older residents and their memory bank and factor that into the actions we take. I thank the Minister of State for the work he has been doing. I hope he will not need his dinghy or canoe when he comes to County Meath in the near future.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I thank all the Deputies for their contributions. One theme emerged, namely, all of us working together. It is vitally important that we do not play politics because for the past number of weeks and years gone by, we have all seen the devastation flooding has caused families. While we talk about the water receding, people are trying to get their lives back together. The very thought of rainfall tonight brings back the fear that it may flood again.

There has been a lot of talk about what has happened. We launched CFRAM in 2018. When we think of times before then, there was very little money in the country to deal with flooding because we went through recessions and all sorts of problems but we dealt with them. We adopted the CFRAM strategy in 2018. I said at the time that it would be the bible going forward in terms of flooding where we could see the areas that were badly affected and the areas that needed protection the most based on population.

What we have seen is climate change. We have seen a severe change that is happening around the world. When I adopted those plans, I travelled the length and breadth of the country meeting local authorities. We achieved that and then had to look for the money. There is not

a county where I could not tell Deputies how much of the €1.3 billion that is ring-fenced for flood prevention will be ring-fenced for that county.

What changes have we brought forward after my return to Dáil Éireann? When I look at areas from Louth to Enniscorthy that have seen so much flooding over the past number of weeks, I see at first hand what interim measures can do. I know that we worked tirelessly to protect the town of Athlone and, thankfully, the flood defences are there and people see the reward. I have expanded the arrangement involving five local authorities to eight. They are coming to meet me on 2 March. I will work with them to look at interim measures while we deliver the long-term solutions.

We have also provided local authorities with staff to drive the delivery of these changes. We have made changes to the minor works scheme increasing funding from €750,000 to €2 million. People talk about blockages in rivers. For the first time, I provided a budget and I will appeal to local authorities to deliver on it.

Long before what has happened in the past few weeks, I visited Kerry, Clontarf, Portrane and Strandhill in County Sligo. Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned Lough Funshinagh, which is close to my home. We brought in interim measures in the space of three months to deliver protection for those communities. There is a lot that has to be taken into account. Members come in here and say we should do this and that and reverse the matter concerning the pearl mussel. We will not do that. We build 56 schemes by working with the land and all the bodies. That is how we do it. We do not say it is a matter of one thing versus another for political reasons. That is wrong. My job is as Minister of State and the job of my Department and the Government is to work together with elected representatives and local authorities to deliver schemes.

We have a plan. Deputy Fitzmaurice said that for once, we have the money. My job is to work with local authorities to deliver on these interim measures while we wait for long-term defences to be put in place for communities because people have suffered greatly and I do not like what has happened no more than anyone else in the House. We were lucky the two recent big events happened at night. If they had happened during the day, we could have been looking at something totally different. A 90-year-old woman in Dublin was taken out of her house in a brown bin to get her away from the floods. A man over 90 in Enniscorthy was taken out in a boat. Any human being would want to do more but despite what Members might say in the House, there are planning constraints and we have to deal with them and work together. I will bring in changes over the next number of weeks. The purchasing of equipment required to support local authorities was mentioned. This is happening. We are looking at ways of shortening the timeframe for delivering schemes.

This is us working together with the local authorities. Members on the different sides of the House come in and say that the OPW is not doing enough. I need every single Member to go to their local authorities and talk to its staff about the schemes and get to know what is involved in a scheme. They should even visit places where we have done these big projects because the one thing that people forget is that 95% of the wall, glass or embankment that we see finished is underground and sometimes under the water. That, in itself, tells us the engineering and everything else that is involved to get it that level.

We all talk about Enniscorthy and the way it was affected. In my county of Westmeath, I am thankful that the council's CEO Barry Kehoe acted efficiently with the local authorities working together to deliver the AquaDams. I heard people on the radio say that they did not know what an AquaDam was. This is not about me. It is about us all coming together to deliver for these communities. There is a lot more we can do. I hope to host the first flooding conference where I will bring local authorities from around the country together and we can talk to them, look at solutions and drive on. Together we can make it happen. We have to stop fighting and blaming nature. We have to deal with nature and we have to deal with what is coming upon us.

While we sit here and stand here, we also have to recognise the resilience shown by communities over the past 20 days. I spoke to some of the farmers who came out with slurry tanks to soak water off roads or pulled cars off roads. People in corner shops that were affected still went down to the road to help their neighbour next door. That speaks volumes. People want help and they want answers. The Government has not been found wanting for support for people through funding for the Red Cross and the other business fund that is available. I have met the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste on a great number of occasions to discuss other ways we can fast-track the delivery of flood defences for people. We talk about it being critical infrastructure and it is, but the critical infrastructure Bill will not fix everything, but it will help. The arterial drainage (amendment) Bill is ready to go into the House. That will halve the time in the planning process. When we put stuff into Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, or DPER as we call it, it could be two years there. We have now seen An Coimisiún Pleanála turn around schemes in six, eight and nine months. That is very positive, but it will not do everything. We will still need to put them into DPER, which will continue to deliver with the local authorities. The moneys I announced for the minor works scheme and channel cleaning is a bible to help local authorities up and down the country going forward.

I will work with every Member. My door is open. If they have suggestions, do not be afraid to come to me. People say that when there is a crisis, we come in here and talk about it. I am not going away from this issue. I am a hands-on Minister of State and I bring energy.

We have 100 schemes at different stages. One critical part of that is we were spending €74 million a year. On my return back to this House last year, €102 million was spent on flood defences. That will tell Members the energy that my Department, the Government and I bring to this issue. This Government wants to successfully deliver the flood schemes for the people up and own this country. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): 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 Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the shortage of mainstream school places in Dunshaughlin, County Meath for the 2026-27 school year.

Deputy Grace Boland - To discuss the national fare structure for train fares announced by the National Transport Authority in 2025.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss the operation of the double payment rule and illness benefit.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss calls for the FAI to not play Israel in upcoming Nations League fixtures.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss appropriate accommodation in Louth schools and the Department of Education and Youth's additional accommodation scheme and building unit.

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

Deputy George Lawlor - To discuss supports available to vulnerable children and adults in County Wexford who suffer from a disability.

Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Eoghan Kenny and Paul Murphy - To discuss the reduction of SNA numbers at various schools in Cork; to discuss the SNA review and SNA reallocations.

Deputy William Aird - To discuss the possibility of the HSE taking in charge a private nursing home (details provided) on a full-time, permanent basis.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss a full-time Garda station to serve Rush, Lusk and surrounding areas.

The matters raised by Deputies O'Rourke; Ó Murchú; Boyd Barrett, O'Sullivan, Kenny and Murphy; Butterly; and Lawlor have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

School Admissions

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this topic for debate and the Minister of State for being here. There should be no need to bring this issue, which is the annual crisis of school place shortages in Dunshaughlin, County Meath, before this House. I thank the parents who contacted me and my colleague Councillor Fionnan Blake. I also thank Councillor Blake for his hard work on this issue. The parents' stories are the reason I am standing here. They are the reason this debate is happening. No parent should have to spend their evenings worrying about whether their child will have a place to go to school in their local community. They should not have to talk to local and national media or have their case pleaded on the floor of the Dáil for what a basic, fundamental and constitutional right.

The families of Dunshaughlin have run out of patience with last-minute crisis management. They need action and they need it now. This time last year we were in a similar position with

scores of children on waiting lists and without an offer of a school place. This year is worse and significantly worse.

Last year, additional capacity was provided after much consternation, effort and energy and it was very welcome for the families it helped, but here we are again, and it is even worse. If no additional capacity is added beyond what is currently planned, we will have children without school places come September. One local school, St. Seachnall's National School, has already been unable to accommodate more than 80 children.

Dunshaughlin has experienced significant population growth, which is to be welcomed. It is a vibrant and thriving community, but the Department of Education and Youth has failed year after year to plan for this growth. People are astounded by this. We are sending our kids to school to learn their ABCs, but surely this is the ABC of government, management, planning and of delivery. These children did not fall from the sky. Houses were built and the community is expanding. The need for local services is apparent. They are literally in county development plans, which have set it forward, but the services are not there. Successive Ministers have been aware of the demographic pressures, but, again, we are facing a situation where families are in limbo, waiting to see if their child has a school place to go to in a few short months. It is not good enough. Every child has a constitutional to a primary school place. It is not a privilege. It is a right and it is a fundamental duty of the Minister to ensure that right is upheld.

I am asking for three specific things. The first is a commitment from the Minister of State for extra mainstream school places for Dunshaughlin for this coming September. I do not want a promise to look into it or a letter saying that it is something that will be reviewed or considered. We need a guarantee. These children are there and the demand is apparent. We need additional school places for the baby infant intake in Dunshaughlin.

Second, the Minister and the Department must engage directly and immediately with local schools. These schools and their principals are doing tremendous work, but the Department needs to work with them urgently to arrange the delivery of extra places whether that means additional teachers, resources or temporary accommodation.

Third, we cannot keep doing this every year. We need a plan for mainstream and special class provision for this growing community. We cannot be doing this every year.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I will set out the position on behalf of Minister, Deputy Naughton, regarding the shortage of mainstream school places in Dunshaughlin, County Meath. The provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including children and young people with special educational needs, is a priority for me, the Minister and the Department.

Preschool and primary school enrolments at a national level have been in decline for some years, which, in turn, is leading to a reduction in demand for primary school places in rural areas and many urban areas across the country. The downward demographic trend is now apparent for the first time at post-primary level.

While the Department is aware of the enrolment pressures and demand for additional school places in areas like Dunshaughlin, it is important to note that enrolment pressures can be driven by a number of issues, including applications from outside the area and schools of choice.

Notwithstanding the above, in some areas, demographic pressures and other factors are driving the requirement for additional school places. 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 addition 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.

The educational welfare services of the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, is the statutory agency that can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school place for their child. The local service is delivered through the national network of educational welfare officers. The provision of additional school places can be required in a very small number of areas. This can be facilitated by a range of strategies, some of which may involve additional accommodation but also by optimising the existing spaces.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Department has provided over €459 million in capital funding for Meath schools. Over this period, a total of 62 schools have been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation. There are currently 14 school projects in County Meath under construction. Another six school projects will go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027, and this summer, ten schools are approved to undergo works as part of the summer works scheme and the climate action scheme. In addition, since 2020, a total of 119 special classes have been opened in the county, 12 of which were sanctioned for September 2026.

With regards to the Deputy's concerns in relation to Dunshaughlin, a number of active projects at primary and post-primary level are in progress that will increase capacity. These include a new school building in Dunshaughlin, which will provide post-primary accommodation for 1,000 students and six special education classrooms. This project is at stage 4. In addition, there is a new school building project in progress for Dunshaughlin Community National School, which will provide eight mainstream classrooms and two special education classrooms. This project is also at stage 4. Furthermore, a total capital ceiling of €7.55 billion for 2026 to 2030 was allocated to the Department under the national development plan. This is a very significant investment in our education and youth sectors and will help deliver on our commitment to have a world-class education system that supports every learner to reach their full potential.

Our sectoral investment plan published last month sets out the Department's approach to prioritised investment in school infrastructure to ensure that every child has a school place and to support the overall operation of the school system and youth sector in terms of capital infrastructure. There is a strong focus in our plan on maximising existing capacity and prioritising project rollout to meet the most urgent needs, particularly in regard to special education and also areas experiencing huge growth in their student population.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister of State has spoken for over four minutes and not a single word is of any benefit to community in Dunshaughlin and parents who are without school places for this September. He talked about future plans and investment. What solution is going to be put in place for these students? There could be in the region of 80 or more, hopefully slightly fewer, who do not have school places for this September. I am seeking a response to that, not what is going to happen in the future.

Investment in the community national school is very welcome but the minute it is built it will be too small. We waited long enough for it. I welcome the diggers on the ground but the minute it is built, it will be too small.

I have specific asks. I ask the Minister of State to recognise there is a shortage of school places for this September, in significant numbers. That is without a doubt and the offers have gone out and the responses are coming back in. He will have a very clear picture of that if he makes contact with the schools in Dunshaughlin. He should identify where additional capacity is going to be delivered. In the first instance, commit to additional capacity for the town. It is needed, without a doubt. I ask the Minister of State to commit to it for this September, identify where he is going to deliver it and provide assurances to parents, in the quickest possible timeframe, that capacity will be there, the children will receive an offer and they will have a place in their local school. I have far too many cases I can talk to him about but he will be very well aware that there are no crèche places. There is no early childhood care and education programme. There is no after-school provision. Parents are faced with the challenge of not having a place for their child in their local area. It turns their lives upside down and lifts their children away from their local communities. It is deeply unfair. I ask the Minister of State to please address those facts. What is the solution for these families for September?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the seriousness of the point the Deputy is making in relation to Dunshaughlin. He has outlined the challenges in an area with a growing population of students and young people. I will take the point the Deputy made on the national school that when that is completed, the project will need to move on. I know other parts of the country as well where there are significant challenges in meeting second level education demand in particular but also in the primary sector.

I will go back and engage fully with the Department to ensure we do understand and there is a roadmap to try and facilitate every student. In regard to the number of places in mainstream schools, it is important that we have certainty on that. This month, there will be enrolment letters going out and whether they are accepted or not, that will add further pressure.

I will take the point the Deputy has made and I will certainly report back to him with a further response.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A considerable number of Members are here to deal with issues that relate specifically to education. As Deputy O'Rourke said, unfortunately we keep having to bring up these issues about finding appropriate places for children, be that in mainstream or in special classes and schools. We really need to not be trying to deal with issues like this on the floor of the Dáil but sometimes we have no choice in the matter.

This week, people were particularly exasperated about the reality of cuts to special needs assistant, SNA, numbers. We all know the huge work that is done by SNAs. I know even on a personal basis that my son Turlough would not be able to operate if it was not for the SNAs he has had in both primary and secondary school. It is more than a pause we need; we need a rethink on the criteria. That should be a demand from everybody on this floor not only in

opposition but even in government. While we welcome the pause, we need to see real movement.

When we are talking about appropriate accommodation and spaces, it is a question of where to start. I am going to deal with a number of schools. I will deal with St. Mochta's NS in Louth village. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach also received correspondence on this. Unfortunately, I have had significant correspondence over and back with the Department. It finished with: "Your email states that you endeavour to "ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes at a local level, where the picture can quickly evolve due to new large scale residential development." The school said that its situation has "evolved very quickly due to a new large scale residential development" but this was flagged last year and the enrolment has increased by 40 children in the past year due to construction in the area. A new development of 58 houses is nearing completion in Louth village but, again, the correspondence from the school states:

It is highly likely that we will once again reach developing school status, leaving us then with 3 extra classes and teachers, with no accommodation for them.

- Our SET teachers currently work in corridors, cupboards and staff room (which in no way is fit for purpose).
- Our school building, originally built for 5 classes, is expected to house currently 8 classes, and come September it will most likely be 9 classes.

5 o'clock

That is before I go near what the parents are sending in. The Minister of State can imagine that because I read some of it into the record previously.

I spoke to the Minister of State previously about additional autism classes for Shelagh National School. He came back to say there was interaction with the school, but I am sorry to say that we have not seen any real movement. The school principal is not happy in any way, shape or form, nor are a considerable number of parents who have contacted me.

It is not the first time that other elected representatives and I have brought up the issue of Monksland National School. Again, plans went in for a permanent extension in 2023 comprising two autism classrooms, one support room, one common area, a kitchen, a living skills room, toilets, a storeroom and an office. It was provided with two modular units, which are being used to their full capacity. We are dealing with teachers and SNAs who are having their lunch either in storage units or their cars. That just tells us what is happening. The school is making the most use of what it has, but it is not enough. I visited the school. We need to see action in this regard. The over and back from the Department is disgraceful.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The four issues brought to my attention prior to coming to the House concern St. Mochta's, Monksland and Shelagh national schools and car parking issues at the new build for Ardee Educate Together primary school. The Deputy raised other issues that I might come back to in my closing remarks.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Department of education has invested a serious amount of money in the sectoral investment plan for the period 2026 to 2030, which

involves a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. From the total of €7.55 billion being invested via this plan, it is envisaged that approximately €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings across the large-scale, additional accommodation, modular and annual September accommodation needs programmes. Over the course of this year and next, there will be construction work on some 10% of the school estate. These projects will, when completed, provide 57,000 additional and modernised school places. with a strong special educational needs focus in all projects.

The first school referred to is a co-educational Catholic primary school under the patronage of the Archbishop of Armagh. It has an enrolment in the current academic year of 182 pupils, including two special education classes. The school submitted an application under the additional school accommodation scheme in 2025. The application is under assessment, and officials are in ongoing contact with this school.

The second school is a co-educational Catholic school under the patronage of the Archbishop of Armagh. It has an enrolment this year of 139 pupils, including two special classes. The school applied for additional accommodation in 2022, and on foot of that application had modular accommodation comprising two special education classrooms and one special education tuition room delivered in May 2023.

The third school is a co-educational primary school under the patronage of the Archbishop of Armagh. It has an enrolment of 82, including pupils in its special education class, which was established at this school in September 2024. In October 2025, the school submitted an application for additional accommodation for two mainstream classrooms, and the application is currently being assessed by officials in the Department.

I can confirm that the fourth school has a major project for a new school building that was devolved for delivery to Louth County Council. It is currently at stage 4, construction, of the architectural design process. The Department is engaging with the local authority regarding a proposal on the provision of additional car parking spaces. Louth County Council has been and will continue to engage with the school authorities regarding this project.

At a national level, primary enrolments are projected to decline by almost 100,000 over a ten-year period. Given the general downward direction of overall enrolments in the area, the Department's focus for the assessment of such additional accommodation applications will be to analyse the extent to which enrolments at the school and neighbouring schools are serving the local area in the first instance.

We are looking carefully at all applications to ensure we maximise what we have in terms of additional accommodation for the four schools raised by the Deputy. Some of the schools are at the very start of the application process. I assure him that the Department is working through the applications and will be in contact with the school authorities shortly with further information.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: With regard to Ardee Educate Together, I met the design team and Louth County Council alongside the principal. In fairness, we were told there is a proposal. I accept that it is late in the game. The building project is fabulous, as I know, having visited the site. We really need to get this issue sorted or it will be chaos on the morning of the opening

of the school. There are a number of autism classes. We need to ensure that the children can arrive without a level of chaos. I ask the Minister of State to follow up so we can ensure that the communication on how those proposals are going happens straightaway.

It frightens me when I hear the term “under assessment”. I accept the Minister of State's point that some of these are technically new applications. However, some of that is after a considerable number of years of over and back between principals and the Department. The Minister of State can see the pile of papers in front of me. It is correspondence between the Department and these schools. There is absolute frustration among the schools. The communication from Monksland National School to the Department reads, "Do you think it is appropriate that staff do not have a staff room to have their break and lunch?" That is the reality at the minute. Talk of assessments and demographics is not going to help that.

It continues:

Do you think it is appropriate that pupils cannot access physical education and that their engagement with it is entirely weather dependent? Do you think it is fair and dignified that pupils are taught in corridors because we do not have enough special education teaching rooms to house our SET teachers?

A communication from the school in Louth village states that its special education teachers are teaching in a cupboard, the staff room and the corridor due to lack of space. As the school hall is out of bounds, children with additional needs are missing out on vital movement and regulation breaks.

We cannot be constantly dealing with these issues. We need to find a better way. I ask that there is better communication, and also that I be made aware of that communication. In the nicest way I can put it, the communication the schools have had has been subpar.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the point. There is ongoing engagement. On the Educate Together-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: They are not happy.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: That project has been completed. As for the other two projects, one is moving through. Both of the applications were made in the autumn of last year. I will ask the Department to ensure there is a timely discussion with them.

The Deputy made a point regarding school accommodation and children being located in buildings that are not fit for purpose. Children are in primary school for eight crucial years of their lives. We have to ensure that we have the best possible services available for them. The Deputy referred to movement breaks and so on. All of that is hugely important, as we all understand. I can assure the Deputy that the applications are being assessed. We are duty-bound to ensure that we are assessing them. We have to assess them to make sure we are doing the right thing.

Some €7.55 billion will be put into the education system over the next number of years, and a huge amount of money has been spent on it in the past five years. That has brought the education stock up right across the country. We will continue to invest in education.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The very angry and shocked protests of my former primary school helped to highlight the severity of the impact of the SNA cuts that the Government was planning.

The Minister of State may have seen the protest by Johnstown National School on Tuesday evening on RTÉ. Of course, it was just one of many schools that experienced these attacks. Fair play to the teachers, SNAs, and parents who came out and protested. In that school alone, the number of SNAs was going to drop from nine to fewer than four. I met with all of the teachers, parents, SNAs and the principal of my former school this week. They were absolutely gutted and shocked. They could not believe that this would be even considered. They want to know what will happen now. Pauses are all very well, but these people are now in limbo, waiting to know whether the Government is going to abandon these cuts, which would be very severe, damaging and detrimental to the welfare of children with special needs, other children in their classes, SNAs and teachers. They all want to know that the Government is going to abandon these cuts.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome the pause, but, obviously, a pause is not a permanent solution. It is not a binding decision and everybody in this House is going to be watching with interest what happens over the next few weeks.

We in Fianna Fáil have always prided ourselves on being the party of education. The number of SNAs in the country has increased by 45% since I became a TD. That is a good story but in the past week we have somehow upscuttled a lot of that progress and good work. I join Deputy Boyd Barrett in calling for a cessation of any cuts in this academic year. One thing I learned as a teacher was that SENOs always did reviews, and they were always ongoing. They were annual in nature, so nobody faced a cliff edge in terms of cuts to services. We have to go back to a scenario where the reviews are ongoing. Diagnosis takes place at various times throughout the year. The needs of a school change over the course of a year and we need to have built-in headroom in terms of the allocation of resources going forward.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: This is the second time today that I have spoken about SNA reviews. I raised the matter earlier with the Tánaiste on Leaders' Questions. The Minister of State knows that this is the most pressing issue right now. It is going to affect so many students across the country. I have lost count of the number of schools that have contacted me. Later, I will be meeting online with parents, students, principals, SNAs and members of trade unions in relation to what this SNA cut involves and what the pause actually means. We do not know what the pause means. Leaving people in some sort of limbo is not acceptable because it allows a dark cloud to remain over schools. Those who have received letters saying that they are going to get increases do not know whether they will go ahead and those who received letters saying they were going to lose SNAs do not know if they will actually lose them. The Minister of State is the line Minister, but there is also a senior Minister who has a budget for this. Is the senior Minister pulling her weight in respect of this issue?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The protest organised by parents for next Wednesday at 5 p.m. outside the Dáil is going ahead because they do not just want a pause; they want the cuts to stop. They want proper support for their kids. The other point I want to make is that this matter is being treated as if the cuts have come out of nowhere. The Government is shocked to hear that all of these SNAs are being cut, but this is the outworking of the policy. Ms Ciara Reilly has written really excellent pieces on her Substack outlining that effectively since 2024 the policy has been to move away from a model where the SNA's job is to facilitate children being included in education towards more of a healthcare assistance model. As a result, entitlement is being based pretty much only on significant primary needs or, basically, medical needs. All of the other stuff, like being unable to cope in a classroom, being autistic or being overwhelmed in a classroom, is not being counted. The fundamental issue here is the policy. The cuts need to be reversed but the policy also needs to be reversed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: A script will be handed around, but I will deal with the issue without the script. I thank all Members for their engagement and the seriousness with which they are treating this issue. I take on board all of the matters that have been raised.

I will talk about the policy first. Since the 2014 document, more than 12,000 extra SNAs have been recruited and are working in the system. We have expanded considerably. There is a view going around that we have gone back to the 2014 document and that this is where the cuts are coming from. However, the SNA workforce has expanded considerably over the period since 2014.

I take the concerns of parents, schools and children on board. I understand full well the importance of SNAs. In every school community that I go into, I have said that we have built special education on the backs of SNAs. I acknowledge the enormous work they do. We have increased the SNA population by 45%, to 25,000, in recent years. The SNA workforce is hugely valued.

I am constantly asked this week, "What is the pause?". The pause means that we have stopped in relation to the decisions that were taken and communicated to schools last week. To be fair to everybody, we have stopped all of it. In May or June, information on the allocation of SNAs would normally go out to schools. We brought that back this year because I firmly believe that we need to have earlier communication. We brought back the notification for families with additional educational needs to October. I firmly believe that we need to bring communication back to earlier in the school cycle. We want to communicate earlier, but we are pausing what was being done because we are looking at the totality of the issue of special education assistance.

To speak to the Deputy's point, we do not want the schools to be in limbo. We want to make sure that they have certainty as soon as possible. We have had a number of intensive engagements over the past 24 to 48 hours in relation to this issue. We will continue to engage over the coming days. We will be bringing clarity as early as possible as to the steps forward. I take on board what the Deputies said.

Deputy Boyd Barrett mentioned Johnstown and the cliff edge of the five SNAs being taken out of it. We cannot have that. We have to have a continuous enrolment and we have to ensure that the value that we have in the SNAs is following the children. We must ensure that the children with the greatest need and those who require the help have the SNAs. If they have the

SNAs, it will allow them to flourish and grow within their school communities and to have better outcomes in life as well. Many people would not be able to attend school unless they had the SNAs.

We need everybody on board. We need the Department, the school communities, parents, and unions on board and we need to have a system that everybody has faith in. One of the challenges that we are now tackling is the reviews. We should have been doing reviews every second year or every year so that schools would understand the role of the NCSE, there would be interaction with the school communities and families so that they would have better information. We have to make sure that we have confidence in what we are doing. Families and school principals have contacted me, and I have spoken to many of them in the past week in particular. I assure them that we will do the right thing by them and particularly by the children who need the support in schools.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is really not clear, but it seems as if the SNAs and, therefore, the children for whom they provide support and, consequently, all of the other children in their classes and all of the teachers, are still in the crosshairs. All we have is a pause because people expressed such outrage, anger and shock. I should mention another school in my area. All Saints, a small school in Blackrock, has lost its only SNA. There will be no SNA there at all now. That is absolutely unacceptable. The care needs of the children have not changed. They need the same support they had previously and we need that commitment from the Government.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I will leave the Minister of State with three points because I know he will be engaging with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and his senior Minister in the next few days. First, the cliff edge that I have spoken to him about regularly cannot be the reality.

The review I spoke to him about which happened every year needs to be consistent so we do not face this cliff edge in the future. At this point, the loss of any SNA is not tenable given the climate and context of what has happened and the lack of trust and the anxiety created. There were always minor movements in the number of SNAs over the years but given the gravity of what has happened and the scale of some of the drops, it is not tenable. I spoke privately to the Minister of State about the lack of a requirement of a diagnosis. That will create problems down the line. We need something clinical and that can generate statistics in order that people can be guided in making these decisions, particularly the SENOs.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I concur with all of my colleagues who have spoken. I presume the engagements involve the Minister of State, the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for education. If there is somebody else involved, I would appreciate if we were informed of that. In that meeting tonight, can I inform parents, SNAs, teachers and students that for now, this pause will be lifted in the coming weeks? Can I also confirm that the schools that received sanction of new SNAs will get those SNAs?

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a funny sort of pause because the cuts were not going to come into place until September anyway. The Minister of State said it is a review of suspending it but it is not like there were going to be cuts and now they are paused. Some of these schools may still face the same cuts come September. The Minister of State is not giving any guarantee

that will not happen. Can the schools that went through the wringer in this very difficult environment and were granted an extra SNA now plan on the basis that they will get an extra SNAs or two or whatever or can they not be guaranteed that at this stage? In the pause and the review of the process, is the fundamental toolkit, the basis on which the allocations will be made, being looked at or is it just the individual schools?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The basis on which we are delivering special needs assistants is under the 2014 circular, which has allowed us to grow the SNA workforce by nearly 60%. It is a whole-of-government approach. It is a very serious issue for families and school communities. We are all engaged. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I have had multiple conversations and meetings over the past number of days and weeks, right over the weekend. We are engaging extremely carefully as to how we will proceed. We had a number of meetings this morning as well.

The Deputy asked me to clarify a few points in relation to his meeting tonight. If a school has gone through an SNA assessment or gone through with the SENOs and it was clearly demonstrated that additional care was needed in that school, that has to be stood over. If the school demonstrates additional care is needed, we are about ensuring the SNAs are working towards that care that is needed. There was never any discussion that a school would lose its SNA immediately; it was always going to happen from 1 September, not now or at Easter or whatever. It was always within the school year 2026. That was very clear at all times. We are pausing it because there has been so much concern about the process. We have to be extremely confident in the process we put in place such that all school communities and education partners have confidence in it and that we can go forward with confidence in it. There was mention of the removal of diagnosis. We cannot remove that unless we have a robust process in place in which all education partners are confident. We are working on that currently. It will take some time to make sure we have a robust system in place. This is a significant policy change. We have to make sure we get it right. I assure the House and all Members that we are working extremely carefully with the National Council for Special Education, us as elected members and Department officials. We have seen a number of attacks of various different types over the past couple of days. I assure the Deputies that when we have this done, we will have it right. We take everything seriously. We understand the special needs assistants, the children, the families and schools.

Social Welfare Benefits

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this issue because it undoubtedly affects people in Dunleer, Togher, Drogheda and Dundalk and no doubt it also affects people the breadth of Ireland. I came in to the Chamber in October 2025 to talk about a constituency who had come to me having lost her husband a year prior. She was facing having to rear her four children, get back to work, get on with her life and with building a life for her children, only to find herself in a position in which she fell ill. It was cancer and she had to seek treatment. If things were not bad enough, because she was receiving the widow's benefit, she was therefore not entitled to illness benefit. At the time, I said this was clearly wrong. Our system cannot be devised to punish somebody when they are trying to do everything right. This lady was afflicted by a terrible tragedy in her family and was trying to put her best foot forward and build a life for her children but at the same time had to bear her

own illness. It was not just that but also the economic devastation this was going to have on her family. A year and half prior to that, she had two incomes coming into the household. A year and a half later, she was not only down the income from her husband, she was also going to be down the income from her husband which was substituted by a widow's benefit and because her employer did not make up her sick pay, she was not even entitled to that illness benefit. This is despite the fact that from the day she left school she paid her PRSI and made her contributions. It is grossly unfair. At the time, I was told the Minister would take a look at reviewing this process. My understanding is no review has taken place to date and there is no date to have a review of such practices. I understand the system of one payment, one person but if this was only for widow's benefit one would say it is grossly unfair and surely it could be reviewed. However, this also happens when somebody receives the carer's allowance. These are people who take care of others day in, day out. They receive quite a nominal amount of money yet if they fall ill, they are not entitled to illness benefit. No doubt the Minister of State will tell me in some cases they can be given half of a second payment but that is not enough to pay the bills. That is not enough in this day and age to carry on day by day. When people are hit by very harsh and difficult circumstances, which I hope are temporary, we should not be there to punish them or make their lives and circumstances even harder. We should lift them up and help them along, especially in these moments of crisis. I call for this situation to be reviewed swiftly.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question and will speak a little on the information I received from the Department.

In relation to widows, widowers and the surviving pension, we have done some work on expanding the scheme for civil partners or cohabiting partners over the past while as well. The challenge is when somebody is widowed, a man or woman, they work and then get ill themselves, going from two incomes to one.

Ordinarily, if they got sick, they would be entitled to illness benefit, with the PRSI paid. This issue has come across most public representatives' desks. We meet families who are doing the right thing and making sure their contributions are up to date. Often, the families have been doubly hit. A partner may have passed away, the person is on the widow's or widower's pension and maybe raising a family on their own and working outside the home, and then illness strikes. When we look for help for them, we find we are unable to get anything for them. That is very challenging.

A number of cases have been raised in the House, in particular, over the past 12 months. The Deputy raised one case very eloquently last October or November when a commitment was given to look into the matter to see what could be done. If we look at this in its totality, where a widow or widower is getting the pension because their partner has passed away, the pension is based on the PRSI the partner paid. The surviving partner has contributed their own PRSI and is looking for illness benefit at a particular time. The PRSI contribution system should be able to cope with contributions from both partners. A number of senior Government spokespersons gave an undertaking to look at it. We need to be more proactive in relation to seeing if we can do something for families, even in the short term. I can think of half a dozen of cases where I assisted but was unable to progress the application.

I will take the Deputy's concerns back. A commitment was given to look at this last autumn. I will ask that it be looked at again and I will relay the seriousness of the matter as well. The Social Insurance Fund is made up, the first instance, by PRSI contributions. We could make the argument that PRSI has been paid by the partner to generate the contributory widow's or widower's pension and PRSI has been paid by the surviving partner. I will ask the Department to have a look at this in more detail.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State. I am heartened that he has grasped the seriousness of the situation and by the fact that he is going to raise the urgent need for this to be reviewed. Let us review it and implement it. Let us find a timeline of many months but, rather, weeks or a few months. The Minister of State has grasped the seriousness of the situation, as has the Minister, Deputy Calleary. It is grossly unfair and does not just affect people who are getting the widow's or widower's benefit. It also arises in the event that somebody is receiving carer's allowance. It is the system itself. We have to grasp this. As the Minister of State said, one partner has paid PRSI and the other person is getting the benefit of that. The second person has paid their own PRSI but cannot get the full benefit of that. There is something wrong with that system. We encourage people to contribute, find their own feet and get on with life. Surely, when they stumble in life, we can help pick them up and help them along the way.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Deputy mentioned the carer's allowance. The half-rate carer's allowance was brought in. Former Deputy Joe Callanan from east Galway and I put a motion before the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party many years ago regarding the half-rate carer's allowance. We had been banging our heads off a stone wall for some time but Séamus Brennan, the then Minister, accepted our bona fides, particularly as regards cases where one person on a pension was caring for an adult son or daughter.

Illness benefit is paid for a short period. If it was the case that PRSI could be paid and that could generate a payment, it could not be done for the long term but maybe it could be done for the short term. I will take the issue back. I understand it. I have seen it with families and individuals who come in to me, particularly families who have had difficulties already because one of the parents has died. The surviving partner may be rearing a family or looking after a loved one at their most vulnerable time.

The Deputy mentioned illness benefit. Illness benefit is only paid for a short period. That may be something we can look at. I will certainly raise the issue with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Department to see if we can come up with any proposals.

Disability Services

Deputy George Lawlor: This Topical Issue is to discuss supports available to vulnerable children and adults in County Wexford who suffer from a disability. Families with children and adults with disabilities are in crisis in terms of the supports and carers that are made available to them. I was contacted by a distressed and exhausted mother who has three children with serious disabilities. She is literally at her wits' end. She has a 25-year-old, a 22-year-old and a 17-year-old. They all have very complex medical needs, including intellectual and physical disabilities.

A home nursing package was sanctioned by the HSE many years ago. First, it was through the Nurse on Call agency. It was then transferred to another agency, which I will not name. The woman in question said she has had the pleasure of meeting and working with many exceptional nurses. However, in recent times, the quality of nursing has drastically deteriorated overall. She puts this down to a number of factors, including nurses being put in positions outside their level of expertise. ICU neonatal nurses, following a four-week induction, are being placed to care for her three adult children with very complex needs.

The HSE passed the buck constantly. Any time she questioned it, it said the agency managed the package. The HSE will not interact in any way, shape or form. The management and the director of nursing in the HSE will not meet to discuss the issues with the parents. Instead, parents have to speak with a liaison nurse who then refers them to management. There is no governing body over home care packages. For example, she has been asked on a few occasions by different nurses how to turn on a portable bottle of oxygen, among other basic nursing questions. None of the nurses she has been supplied with through the agency - this is not the nurse's fault but the HSE's fault in terms of governance - have ever used a hoist prior to coming to her house to, as she puts it, "allegedly" care for her children. She provides the training.

The woman has made recommendations to the agency and the HSE in relation to the training of these nurses prior to coming to work in this area in terms of induction. Of course, the HSE is washing its hands. Believe it or not, the agency is paid €18,650 per week to provide the care package. The nurses get €18.50 an hour. The private company gets €74 an hour per nurse. That is just shy of €1 million per year for providing the care. When a risk assessment was done, the recommendation that came back from the agency was that it needed more nurses on top of the €18,650 a week it was getting.

This is indicative of so many of the problems in this country arising from privatisation, particularly of care. Here we have an agency that is literally creaming off the top and making massive profits. It appears to be the only agency providing this type of care in County Wexford. It is receiving just shy of €1 million per year for one home for three children, but it is not paying the nurses a proper wage. As a result, it is getting nurses who are not suitable or qualified in this specific area. They are excellent nurses in their own right and in their own areas, but they are not suitably qualified to provide the level care. This is replicated in many other instances across Wexford, according to the information I have been given. It is something that we have to investigate given the level of public money going into these private agencies. This case is indicative. The matter has to be urgently examined.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. He has outlined a specific issue on the floor of the Dáil. I do not have the exact details of the case, but I will speak to it.

If the Deputy could furnish the details afterwards, I will certainly do what I can to help. The woman the Deputy spoke about is doing extraordinary work. She has a 22-year-old, a 25-year-old and a 17-year-old. Looking at the sums the Deputy quoted, we seriously have to ask ourselves whether we are getting value for money. More importantly, are we getting the care for people that the State is paying for? That is the most important question here.

In my time as Chair of the disability committee in the last Dáil, I met many families and saw the challenges they face on an ongoing basis. Since my appointment to my current role, I

have sat on the Cabinet subcommittee on disability and we have had many discussions on funding mechanisms, the challenges that are there and the amount of money we are paying to private agencies to provide public care. The real challenge is determining whether we are getting the care required. We can talk about value for money after that but the most important thing is the care that is required.

I hear the Deputy's frustration in speaking about that mother, the hoist, the oxygen and the other challenges. He has described young adults who have a multiplicity of very complex needs. What that mother is doing is a vocation for her. I do not have the full details but I will certainly take the details from the Deputy if he will give me them. We have a shortage of respite and residential spaces across the country. We are spending a huge amount of money. Again this year, the amount of money being spent on the disability sector has gone up by a huge amount to try to make sure we are doing the right thing by people with disabilities. There is serious engagement at Government level on the matter. However, we also have to be mindful of the existing system we have built up. Is that right for families? We must stand back and ask what we can get for €1 million. The figure the Deputy mentioned is extraordinary.

Deputy Lawlor has outlined that woman's serious concerns about the level or quality of care. I will personally take up the matter. I will engage with both the HSE and the Minister on the Deputy's behalf. I ask him to forward me the details privately. I do not want to comment on the case publicly but I will certainly engage privately.

Deputy George Lawlor: I have not mentioned the family or the company involved. The Minister of State is quite right in saying that this lady's care for her children is a vocation. I have worked with her over many years and her dedication and commitment to her children, who have profound and complex needs, is just remarkable. She is now exhausted and distressed. She has been fighting for a long time. If the Minister of State will believe it, she actually did some of the training for some of the nurses who came in. She showed them how to work various pieces of equipment.

Given the level of investment, this is incredibly frustrating to this family. That level of investment could be justified if they were getting the quality care that figure demands. Without meaning to put a price tag on anything, we are paying an agency whose only aim is to maximise profits, as we have seen in myriad sectors across Ireland. The moneys involved, which are almost being demanded by these agencies, are off the charts. As the Minister of State has suggested, the money being invested in the area of disability has gone up hugely but that is because we have to meet these bills. Imagine what a proper caring agency run by the State could get for that €1 million. We would be able to pay nurses and train them properly to the highest standards rather than forcing people into these positions. In many instances, we have no choice because the nurses are not there. They are not there because we are not remunerating them as we should. As I have said, €74 per hour goes to the agency while €18.50 goes to the nurse. That is criminal in the context of what the State could get back if that money went into a properly structured HSE-run agency.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The case the Deputy has outlined is extremely disturbing. At the core is the care that is being provided and the concerns of the mother, who has a vocation, about the care she is getting. That is one side of it. The other side of it is the amount of money the State is spending and that figure of €74 versus €18.50. A lot of section 38 and section 39

organisations around the country have invested and provided care for people with disabilities for many years. They have provided massive value for money. Every cent they have is invested into either community facilities or the teams that work in them. People should not be financially benefiting from the care of very vulnerable people. The funding the Deputy has outlined has come up at a number of the meetings, as have privatisation and some of the organisations that are providing care and charging the State an arm and a leg for it. These things have come up because we need to get the best value for money. However, we also need a level of faith in the system and in the care that is being provided. We need families to have faith in that system as well. I will take up this issue. I will certainly engage with the Deputy on it because it is hugely important that we follow this up for the family the Deputy has mentioned, for the State and for other people who need the same level of care and who are experiencing similar engagements with private companies. I will certainly do that.

Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Martin Kenny: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

As the Minister of State will know, across the country, the issues facing family farms are very difficult for many people involved in farming. It has been a tradition in Ireland that most people came from a family farm. The mother, the father and maybe some of the children were involved in farm activity for a major portion of their lives and perhaps all of their lives. That has always been the tradition. However, in some sectors, that has moved on. As farming has become less profitable in some ways, it has become more intensive. Farms have therefore had to become larger. This has led to the model of a corporate farm replacing that of the family farm in some cases, particularly in certain sectors. That is not good for the image Ireland wants to portray to the world. We want to show the food we produce as being of the highest quality. We want most of the dairy, beef and lamb we produce to come from free-roaming, grass-fed animals on family farms where the animals are cared for and looked after by the people who own them. We use all of that as a means of marketing our produce worldwide, which we do very well. For that reason, it is important that this is real and not just a brand.

To make it real, we have to ensure family farms are profitable enterprises for those who depend on them. Very many people who have a small family farm unfortunately need to have off-farm income. In some cases, they may need more than one off-farm income if they are to survive. That makes things very difficult. That is why we have brought forward this legislation tonight. I know the Government is opposing it. That is very disappointing. Government seems to have a blind spot as regards recognising many people's realities. We want to put together a small group through which farmers' representatives would come together with experts to work out a system by which we can make family farms viable for the long term.

We recognise agriculture is at a crucial juncture. There are issues like Mercosur, trade deals and volatility in prices, and the way the marketing of food is going is more towards looking after the corporate sector, with less emphasis and focus on the primary producer. That is what we want to see change. We want to protect the primary producer. We want to look at the opportunities. The commission could look at harnessing those opportunities and at diversification, innovation and all the things that can happen on the small family farm.

Many years ago I had mushroom tunnels. They were used around the country on small farms where it was difficult to survive. They were an additional and alternative enterprise on the farm which made it more profitable and able to survive. It is much like many things in agriculture. I had five mushroom tunnels. To survive, you had to have eight, ten or 12. Today, I think there are about half a dozen mushroom growers in the country and they have dozens of tunnels. That is the way the system had to go because of the pressure. I suppose it is about economies of scale. The concept was probably developed by Teagasc way back at that time. To make the small family farm viable, you needed additional enterprise on it. Unfortunately, it became more important to develop that enterprise into an industry than to protect the family farm.

That is why we need to look at what we can do to make farming viable for many people. The situation with bluetongue at the moment is stifling a lot of people, particularly in the Border areas, where the market depends on buyers coming across the Border from the North. This is a difficult system to understand and to work out how to resolve. A lot of farmers in my part of the world and the west of Ireland in general lamb the ewes and calve the cows, then send them off to be fattened somewhere else. The suckler farmers are an example of that. They are finding it difficult to survive because they are small by nature. Because of the type of land they have, the farm is often broken up into parts and is not all in one area. It is difficult to come up with solutions. So far all the solutions have been driven toward the more intensive sectors. I have huge respect for Teagasc, the Department and much of the work they have done but, unfortunately, it has been focused on the large intensive sector farming. On the other side, and upland farmers are an example - the hill and mountain farmers - Teagasc and other organisations have done little or no research into what improvements can be done to make their farms viable. That is one example of it.

The proposal we bring tonight is to set up a commission on the family farm. The Minister would appoint a chairperson and there would be ten members of the commission. They would include experts from across the field, including from agencies like Teagasc, from the Department and from industry. They would come together to focus on the family farm and how it can be protected and made viable in the long term and sustainably. They would come up with recommendations within a one-year period. This would be a short period in which to come up with the recommendations. The Government would then put the recommendations into action. We are talking about something to move this forward at pace. The longer we drag our heels, the more people with small portions of lands go out of farming. Forestry is taking over in my part of the world. When forestry takes over, there is nothing left because, farm by farm, it becomes trees after trees and then there is no community and they die.

The Bill will maintain the viability of the small family farm, which maintains and retains the activity of the community. When in a townland or parish there are a number of people farming on small farms, the vet is busy and the local co-op is busy selling gates, manure, fertiliser and everything to keep it going. Bit by bit, when small farmers leave the sector, all the other industries close down afterwards. To keep the rural community vibrant, we have to keep the family farm in place. To do that, there has to be an emphasis on it.

The Government's proposal is basically saying, "Look, we're already doing this. Everything is great." Everything is not great. There were almost 276,000 fewer cattle in the country in summer 2025 than in summer 2024 - over a quarter of a million fewer. There were over 70,000

fewer sheep in the country in that year. That has not changed or improved since prices started to go up in the past six to nine months.

There is a crisis and Government is refusing to recognise that. That is why we are proposing this legislation. It will put a commission in place which will work with farmers and rural communities to make those communities vibrant once more. We are disappointed Government has decided to set that to one side and continue the road it is going. The road it is going has not worked and is not working. If the Minister of State is honest, he would recognise and understand that. It is not just me saying it as an Opposition spokesperson; that is what farmers throughout the country are saying. They fear for the future. They fear their children will not want to go into farming or to maintain the lifestyle of the past. That will be detrimental to rural communities - to our footballs clubs, our schools and everything. Obviously, the Minister of State will not support this legislation, but will he do something to maintain the livelihoods and opportunity people want to have in rural communities? It can keep them alive and sustained.

I strongly emphasise the opportunities people have in rural communities to maintain the lifestyle that has held communities together down the years. The Minister of State comes from a part of the country where that can be understood. The land in Connemara is poor but the people are rich in spirit, community and resourcefulness, and they are interdependent. That comes from having to do it in the past because there was little or nothing else. When we had a recession in this country 12 years ago, everything was finished, there was nothing, building was down the Swannee and everyone was bankrupt, but farming was still there. The rural economy and rural communities survived and thrived. That is why it is important we keep the family farm as part of that and that it does not become another corporate model based on high debt. That is what they all end up being based on, and when the problems come, what happens? The whole lot is sold out and gone. The fear many people have is that the model of agriculture we have in Ireland is going down the way it has gone in other countries. We do not want to see that happen.

The amendment the Minister of State will move basically says we are doing it, everything is good and we are flying. That is not people's experience. Please come back and look at what we have here. Look at the opportunity we have for people in rural communities to be sustainable into the future. If we do not do that, we will erode the very fabric on which we are exporting and modelling the markets around the world for our food and high-quality produce.

I am disappointed the Government has come in with this amendment but I ask the Minister of State to please look at the opportunity that is in the legislation put before him.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann declines to give the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024 a second reading, on the basis that:

— its objectives are already being comprehensively addressed through existing policy frameworks, in particular Food Vision 2030, the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, and the ongoing work arising from the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming;

- the family farm model is central to Ireland's agri-food sector and rural economy, and supporting its viability, sustainability and continuity has been a consistent priority of Government policy, reflected most clearly in Food Vision 2030, Ireland's stakeholder-led strategy for the agri-food sector;
- issues such as generational renewal, succession planning, gender balance, farm incomes, diversification, farmers' position in the value chain and climate action are key issues for the sector and are already central pillars of Food Vision 2030, and these issues are being actively progressed through the existing structures and funded policy instruments;
- Food Vision 2030 provides a long term, integrated and non-statutory framework, addressing the economic, environmental and social sustainability of farming, including the future of family farms, and the distinct advantage of Food Vision 2030 is that it was developed by the sector, for the sector, through extensive stakeholder engagement and continues to be implemented collaboratively, and it is underpinned by a robust governance, monitoring and reporting structure through a High Level Implementation Committee chaired by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine;
- a mid-term review of Food Vision 2030 is currently underway, to ensure continued relevance and responsiveness, and this review, which will include full public and stakeholder consultation, will ensure that it remains ambitious, focused, and responsive to evolving challenges and opportunities; and
- the agri-food sector has experienced significant policy change in recent years, and Food Vision 2030 provides a stable, agreed framework, with the non-statutory nature of Food Vision 2030 allowing Government to adapt policy responses more efficiently, including through the current mid-term review."

I commend Deputy Kenny on the intent of the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024, as the majority of issues raised are a priority for Government. However, its primary objectives are already being comprehensively addressed through existing policy frameworks, in particular Food Vision 2030, the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 and the ongoing work arising from the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming. For that reason, the Government has proposed a reasoned amendment to decline to give a Second Reading to the Bill.

The family farm model is central to Ireland's agrifood sector and rural economy. Supporting its viability, sustainability and continuity has been a consistent priority of Government policy, reflected most clearly in Food Vision 2030, Ireland's stakeholder-led strategy for the agrifood sector. Issues such as generational renewal, farm incomes, farmers' position in the value chain, diversification, gender balance and climate action are key for the sector and are central pillars of Food Vision 2030. These issues are being actively progressed through the existing structures and funded policy instruments. Food Vision is grounded in a food systems approach, recognising that agriculture, food, the environment, climate, health, trade and rural development are interconnected, with a clear ambition for Ireland to continue to be a world leader in sustainable food systems.

6 o'clock

The stakeholder committee which developed Food Vision 2030 included relevant stakeholders from across the sector including the presidents of the farming organisations. Food Vision 2030 sets out 22 goals and 218 actions, grouped under four high-level missions and encompassing environmental, economic and social sustainability. These missions address precisely the issues that matter most to family farms today. Mission 1 is "A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector"; mission 2 is "Viable and Resilient Primary Producers, with Enhanced Wellbeing"; mission 3 is "Food that is Safe, Nutritious and Appealing, Trusted and Valued at Home and Abroad"; and mission 4 is "An Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Agri-Food Sector, Driven by Technology and Talent". Mission 2, in particular, places primary producers, our farmers, fishers and foresters at the centre of the strategy with a strong focus on economic viability, resilience, diversification, generational renewal and well-being.

A high-level implementation committee, which is chaired by my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Martin Heydon, monitors delivery. Annual reports track progress and a new public dashboard provides transparency on environmental, economic and social indicators. The third annual report, published last year, showed that 79% of actions either have been completed or have had substantial action undertaken with the remaining actions under way. That is tangible, measurable progress.

As we move into the second half of this decade, we have initiated a mid-term review of Food Vision 2030. This review is not about replacing the strategy. It is about ensuring that it remains ambitious, focused and responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities. This review will involve comprehensive stakeholder consultation because Food Vision 2030 is, and must remain, stakeholder-led. Therefore, when we speak about the future of the family farm, we are not starting from scratch. We are building on an agreed national framework that already encompasses generational renewal, fair returns, diversification, gender equality, climate action and innovation. Food Vision 2030 provides a long-term integrated framework that addresses the economic, environmental and social sustainability of farming, including the future of family farms. The distinct advantage of Food Vision 2030 is that it was developed by the sector for the sector. Food Vision 2030 was developed through extensive stakeholder engagement and continues to be implemented collaboratively. The agrifood sector has experienced significant policy change in recent years. Food Vision 2030 provides a stable, agreed framework. The non-statutory nature of Food Vision 2030 allows the Government to adapt policy responses more efficiently, including through the current mid-term review.

On incomes more broadly, Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 represents an investment of €9.8 billion over five years, which is the highest funded programme to date. Approximately 60% of that funding is directed towards income support through direct payments and support for areas of natural constraint. Additional funding supports environmental schemes such as ACRES, capital investment through TAMS and targeted sectoral schemes. These supports are not abstract figures; they are critical to sustaining family farms across the country, particularly in more marginal areas. The negotiation of a robust and adequately funded CAP for the period post 2027 is a priority for the Government. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, will be in Brussels again next Monday discussing these issues at the AGRIFISH Council and progressing negotiations on the next CAP will be a priority for the Minister during Ireland's Presidency of the EU in the second half of this year.

Generational renewal is one of the most pressing challenges facing the sector. The demographic reality is clear. Only 4% of Irish farmers are under 35 years of age, while 37% are over 65. This is not unique to Ireland and reflects a wider EU trend. However, it is a challenge we must address with urgency and with practical measures. The programme for Government prioritises intergenerational farm succession. Food Vision 2030 recognises that generational renewal is critical to the long-term social and economic sustainability of rural Ireland. To inform policy, we established the independent Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming. It conducted a comprehensive analysis and made 31 recommendations spanning CAP supports, pensions, taxation, access to land and finance, advisory services, education, training, collaborative arrangements, gender balance and the overall attractiveness of the sector. An implementation group within my Department is progressing these recommendations. Some require action in the context of the next CAP. Others have already been acted upon. For example, in budget 2026, we extended the 100% stamp duty relief for young trained farmers to provide greater certainty, and agricultural relief has been retained to facilitate intergenerational transfer. These measures were worth approximately €325 million to farm families in 2024.

At EU level, a new strategy for generational renewal in agriculture will inform the next CAP, thereby ensuring that young farmers remain central to future funding frameworks. Generational renewal is not simply about financial supports. It is about making farming an attractive, viable and respected career choice. That means addressing income stability, work-life balance, access to land, access to training and pathways into ownership and collaboration. As noted by the commission, this is an issue for all of the agrifood stakeholders to address to support the environmental, social and economic sustainability of farming and to enhance its image as a career.

Income supports alone are not sufficient. Farmers must also occupy an appropriate position in the value chain. Under Food Vision 2030, we have taken steps to strengthen transparency and fairness in the supply chain, including the establishment of the Agri-Food Regulator and actions to enhance value creation and consumer trust.

Diversification is another key theme. Food Vision 2030 encourages diversification into organic production, forestry, bioeconomy opportunities, renewable energy, horticulture, tillage expansion and mixed farming systems. We have launched a €1.3 billion forestry programme, a national organic strategy, a national biomethane strategy and sectoral reports from the dairy, beef, sheep and tillage groups to ensure sustainable pathways for each sector.

Climate action, of course, is central to this discussion. Agriculture has a critical role to play in meeting national climate targets. Food Vision 2030's first mission is explicitly focused on progressing a climate-smart, environmentally sustainable agrifood sector with climate neutrality by 2050 and verifiable progress by 2030. Significant progress on climate action has been made through investment and application of research such as, for example, using genomic data to breed more efficient, lower methane cattle; promoting the use of protected urea, which has a much lower emissions profile; and helping farmers to reduce fertiliser usage by promoting the use of clover and multispecies swards. These are not imposed solutions but were developed collaboratively by the sector. It is important to emphasise fairness. Farmers must be supported to contribute to climate objectives in a practical and economically viable manner. That is the guiding principle of our approach.

Let me also address gender equality, an area where real progress is being made but where more remains to be done. Women play an essential role in agriculture and agribusiness, yet continue to face barriers in land access, finance, training and decision-making. Gender equality is embedded in Food Vision 2030 and in our CAP strategic plan. Following the national dialogue on women in agriculture, we launched a 12-point national action plan in 2024 addressing leadership, visibility, education, financial and legal matters and sustainability. Implementation is progressing under a dedicated working group. In addition, 2026 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of the Woman Farmer, highlighting the essential roles women play across agrifood systems. Ireland co-sponsored the launch at FAO headquarters, reflecting our national commitment in this area. Strengthening the role of women in agriculture is not a side issue; it is central to generational renewal, innovation and community sustainability.

In relation to the proposed Bill to establish a statutory commission on the future of the family farm, it is clear that its primary objectives are already being comprehensively addressed through existing policy frameworks, in particular Food Vision 2030, the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 and the ongoing work arising from the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming.

While Deputy Kenny rightly highlighted these issues, the establishment of a commission would represent a duplication of existing work that is well under way. Our priority must be implementation, delivering on the commitments already agreed, refining them through the mid-term review and preparing for the post-2027 CAP period. The agrifood sector has shown remarkable resilience in recent years through Brexit, Covid-19, market volatility and climate pressures. What it needs now is policy certainty, continued investment and collaborative problem-solving.

The future of the family farm in Ireland is at the very centre of Government policy. Through Food Vision 2030, our CAP strategic plan, the commission on generational renewal and its implementation, targeted taxation measures and a clear commitment to sustainability and equality, we have a coherent and comprehensive framework in place. Our task now is to continue delivering, ensuring that farming remains viable, attractive and sustainable, that young people see a future in the sector, that women are fully recognised and supported, that farmers receive fair returns and that Ireland leads globally in sustainable food systems. If we remain focused, collaborative and ambitious, I am confident that the family farm model will not only endure but that it will also thrive.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I support the Bill. I have known the Minister of State a good while, but whoever wrote his speech has never pulled a calf or brought lambs. I will tell him one thing; you would wonder what we are listening to compared with what we are talking about. He talked about the CAP strategic plan. The fact about the new CAP and Food Vision 2030 is that at this moment, farmers around the country are facing a 24% cut to their CAP payments. How will that protect the family farm?

The Minister of State talked about well-being. The average age of farmers today is 59. Most farmers out in the rain, snow or sun are on their own. Generally, the only person they see is the postman. We talk about well-being. What have we done for them when it comes to their well-being? How do we encourage young people in when we look at what Europe is doing?

Europe has decided that it will give Denmark the go-ahead, as I mentioned earlier, to get €1 billion together to get Johnny, Ludovic or whatever his name is off the farm and pay him, but he has to sign a docket that he will never farm in Europe again. He can go to Canada or Brazil, but he cannot farm in Europe. The same has happened in Holland. The nature restoration law is up in the air at the moment. We heard on day one that the State was going to be able to cover all the requirements. I have a question as to that, but I will not make a rash statement.

We talk about getting youngsters in, but if we had such good plans on the farms, and if Food Vision 2030, or 2020 or 2010, worked, would we be down 100,000 sheep? Would we be down 274,000 suckler cows in ten years? When we look at the stats, does it not tell us that the age profile is 59 and suckler cows will be down 250,000? Yet, we still go on with our heads buried in the sand believing everything is hunky-dory. The new CAP strategic plan - there will be a bit of toing and froing - will decrease by 24%. The poor old farmer in the west of Ireland is getting €4,000 or €5,000, if it is reduced. Is the next generation going to come on stream, particularly with the opportunities that are there at the moment?

Do we not look at the third leg of the stool, as I always do? If you are brought up on a small farm, in some counties at least, you might be able to build a house on the land, although some, with the way planning is going at the moment, are blocking that. You might be able to build a house. In fairness, if you have the site, you will build a house. For someone trying to buy a house in Dublin, it is €500,000 at the moment for what we call half a house compared with some of the houses we are looking at. If you get a job locally and, between the two legs of the stool, you do not need as big an income from one or the other, you will survive and make a living between the land and the job. You work hard but it is probably the greatest life you will ever have. There are times you are frustrated with it, but it is a great life to have, if you can make it work.

The knock-on effect of that, and this is where the rural economy has to be looked at, is a few people are employed in the local shop. As outlined by Deputy Kenny, there is also the local GAA club and local community centre, and there might be a local pub. If you build a rural economy, where Google, Intel and all these big guns do not exist, money circulates in that rural area and it brings prosperity, but what are we doing? The nature restoration law is about re-wetting some parts of the land. I listened to the Minister of State. He used the words "environment" and "climate" seven or eight times. This is about farmers. It is about farmers not diversifying but coming to the land, be they lady farmers or male farmers. If we look at what we have done, the stats will tell you it is backwards we have gone on age profile and in trying to get youngsters into farming. We need to encourage that or we will be in trouble.

We are looking at youngsters and talking about generational renewal. If you had 30 or 40 acres one time, you need more now. There is no doubt about it. Can you get that more, however? It is hard done when you go in as a young farmer. It is hard done when the solar company is trying to put solar panels on the fields beside you when it is for sale, or the wind turbine fella that is owned by a foreign company is trying to put wind turbines in another field, or the forestry companies - the vultures we decided we would bring in from England - come from another place and start bidding against you. It is not simple. We saw what happened in Leitrim. We see the number of trees that have been put into the likes of Leitrim. I know a certain number of trees are wanted, but where there are trees, whether we like it or not, there

will not be houses, farmers, sheep, cattle, horticulture or whatever. There will be the sawmill, which gives employment, but look at the ratio of it.

If we were doing everything so right in the whole of Europe over the last 15 years, why have 5.5 million farms been shut down? That is a queer figure. It is 5.5 million probably multiplied by 2.5; when we are doing an election that is how we tally up how many are in a house. It is 12.5 million people who are now not in farming. That should ring alarm bells for us that we need a commission. We can follow the European project. They are the whiz-kids. They want us to get rid of steel and bring in most of our products. Do you know why? Climate was mentioned many times, but it is that they want us to tick this box that we are the best kids in the world.

This is so we can tell America, China and everyone else, but at the end of the day it is about pounds, shillings and pence. How do we build a rural community? Is there an agenda to drive everyone to the city? All I can see in parts of this country is a certain number of farms that are getting bigger and bigger. The average suckler herd is probably 18 or 20 cows but many farms now have 5,000 to 9,000 cows. These are not family farms and I do not care who argues otherwise. We are letting this happen and forgetting the people who lived in the rural areas. Every one of us here comes from an area of family farms, small farms. We never grew up with much but we always had enough. We built the communities in our areas. Community centres were built, as were football pitches. There was a meitheal of people.

While education is very important, I fear the consequences if we do not put a floor under family farming to make it attractive for lads and girls to go into farming, and if they keep hearing about cuts and various things blocking them from farming. If you rewet your land, you do not need to live in the area. You can live in Dublin and can get your cheque if you want. If you have forestry on your land, you can live in America if you want. This is what we must consider. Are we going to try to keep the rural areas populated? This is bigger than just farming. The rural economy, which every one of us knows, is built around it. I encourage the Government, Teagasc and all the so-called experts who believe in visions and whatever to reconsider the vision they have had since 2010. They will need to get glasses to look at it and rethink the policy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have a certain amount of sympathy for the Minister of State. Clearly, the senior Minister could not be bothered to be here to participate in this debate, despite having had three weeks' notice. Not only did he send the Minister of State in but he sent him in to deliver a speech that completely misses the point, as does the Government's amendment. The amendment states that the objectives of the Bill have been comprehensively addressed and then refers to policy frameworks, Food Vision 2030, the CAP strategic plan and ongoing work arising from the commission on generational renewal in farming. I will come to the CAP strategic plan and generational renewal in a moment.

Food Vision 2030, just like Food Wise 2025 before it, is not actually a plan for farmers; it is a plan for food production, and that is why I say that the Government continuously misses the point and why we have statistics such as those outlined by Deputy Fitzmaurice. The drive has been towards food production rather than supporting family farmers, and that is what is at the core of the Bill before us. There is a difference between the two. Food can be produced by conglomerates. It can be and is being produced by the largest corporations in the world.

This is a societal choice. Do we want our food produced by conglomerates and the largest corporations in the world or by family farmers? Why would we want a future for the family farm model? When so many of our policies are being formulated at EU level, we have to recognise the implications for the family farm model. When most Irish people think about farming, they think of the family farm model. That is the model they understand because it is predominant in most of our communities. However, it is not the model that is predominant across Europe because Europe has largely moved towards a corporate form of farming and food production, just as North America did beforehand.

What is the difference between food produced by corporations and food produced by family farmers? First, the latter is of better quality and, I would argue, much more sustainable. The food densities and intensities are much more sustainable environmentally and in terms of biodiversity and every other measure. Also, food produced by family farmers has an added benefit for society and communities. When we are talking about the network of family farms in Ireland, we are talking about the nearest thing many towns, villages and entire regions have to an industry. It is the network of family farms that sustains towns, villages, GAA clubs and community life in general.

A point completely missed in both the Government amendment and the Minister of State's contribution is that the family farm is under threat. How do we know that? The numbers tell us. The number of farmers in this State has been reducing every single decade at a rate I consider alarming, as have the numbers of cows and sheep on family farms. The number of young people coming into farming on an ongoing basis is declining to such a point that I would now argue it is at crisis point.

I hear people talking about the need to encourage young people into farming. You do not need to encourage them. Everywhere I go, I meet young people who are mad about farming and want nothing more than to go into it. They love the farm, they love the land, they love the work and they love their tractors. They love everything about it but cannot see a future in it for themselves. Therein lies the problem and the need for this Bill.

The idea of the commission on the family farm came about on foot of work that a number of us in Sinn Féin had been involved in for a number of years. Included were Deputies Kenny and Kerrane, myself as an MEP at the time and others who had an interest. We were talking to farmers about what they actually needed to secure the future of family farming and how the Government could create a framework. What they said was simple but telling. They said they needed to be heard and that their voices needed to be at the centre of decisions made. As has been happening for decades, when decisions are made, farmers, who have to respond, are portrayed as backward for not accepting things foisted upon them. They end up trying to make the best of matters and to have some changes made. A Minister or backbench Government TD will say they secured the change but the manner in which decisions are made in the first place is where the problem lies.

At the heart of a commission on the family farm, family farmers' voices must be central. They have the answers. Bearing in mind all of the regressions we have seen in terms of numbers, the fact that Ireland still has a family farm network is not thanks to Government policy and certainly not thanks to the CAP. It is because of the determination of family farmers to stay on the land. They have the answers and want to be heard. The commission is about ensuring farmers are at the centre of deciding how we map out a future for Irish family farming,

not just so they can survive and live on their farms but so they can thrive and afford to us all the benefits we know of in terms of delivery. Why is that important? I have often used the phrase the 3 Fs. These are what farmers need. They need fair prices on an ongoing basis. Prices are fairly decent at the minute but we know there is considerable volatility and that as soon as there is any shock to the market, it is farmers who will take the hit. The retailers will hold on to their profit margins, as will the processors and factories. Farmers will get screwed time and again because the Government has not set a framework to protect them, and the food regulator has not got the teeth even to start the work that is necessary. Farmers need a fair CAP.

Every single year, farmers are being asked to do much more. They are asked that by us as a society. European farmers, including Irish farmers, have the highest regulatory, animal welfare, environmental and biodiversity standards in the world.

That is the service they are providing to society, and we are paying them less than ever before to provide that service. The current CAP is, in real terms, a significant reduction for Irish farmers on the previous CAP, yet we have a Government that insists that black is white. It keeps telling farmers they are getting paid more now than they were in the previous CAP. Now we have an existential threat to the next CAP in terms of potentially a 25% reduction.

The premise is simple. If we and the Government want farmers to do more, we pay them more, in the same way as we would pay anybody else providing us with a service more if they are giving us more.

The final thing farmers need is fair play. They need fair play as to how the Department deals with them. Farmers should never look at the Department of agriculture as the enemy or as hostile. Certainly, the Department should never look at farmers as the enemy. All too often, however, that is the culture that prevails. If we are talking about environmental standards and Irish farmers, we cannot then nod through, which is what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael essentially did, a Mercosur trade deal that sees the potential for hundreds of thousands of additional beef and other meat products coming into the EU at the expense of rainforests and then point the finger at Irish farmers and talk about reducing herd numbers and all the rest of it. The biggest hypocrisy of all this was the week before the vote on the Mercosur trade agreement, when I saw Eamon Ryan, someone who had spent five years in this Chamber lecturing Irish family farmers, writing an op-ed endorsing the deal. That said it all, as far as I was concerned. That type of hypocrisy needs to end because farmers need fair play.

This amendment is a joke, frankly. To suggest that the Government is doing what this says is completely disingenuous because the Government is not doing what lies at the heart of what an actual commission on family farming would do, namely, listen to farmers and find real solutions to ensure the model we should all be so proud of, the family farm model, is maintained into the future for young men and women all over this country. They want nothing more than to be able to farm their land, their father's land, their grandfather's land, or even new land that comes into the family. That is what they want, and they want a vehicle to be able to see a future in that. That is what this commission is about. The Government's amendment basically says, "This is as good as it gets". That is not acceptable, as far as I am concerned.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Noel Grealish): I will return to where we began, the central importance of the family farm to Ireland's identity, economy and communities. The family farm is more than a production unit;

it is a multigenerational enterprise. It is a steward of land and landscape. It is a pillar of rural towns and villages. In addition, it is foundational to our global reputation as a trusted producer of high-quality, sustainable food.

Nevertheless, we also know that the model faces real pressures, demographic change, income volatility, climate obligations, market concentration and changing societal expectations. Acknowledging these pressures honestly is not a sign of weakness; it is a prerequisite for effective policy. What gives me confidence is that we are not approaching these challenges without a plan.

Through Food Vision 2030, we have a clear, stakeholder-led roadmap for the sector. It is comprehensive and measurable, and it is being implemented. It places viable and resilient primary producers at the centre of policy. In addition, it is under active review to ensure that it remains relevant and ambitious as circumstances evolve.

Through our CAP strategic plan, we are investing €9.8 billion over five years, with the majority of that funding directly supporting farm incomes and environmental delivery. This is a tangible demonstration of the Government's commitment to the family farm model.

Through the work of the commission on generational renewal in farming, we have examined succession and demographic challenges in depth. We are progressing its recommendations, from taxation measures to advisory supports, to make it easier for farms to transfer from one generation to the next.

Through our national action plan on women in agriculture and our engagement with the International Year of the Woman Farmer in 2026, we are recognising that the future of farming must be inclusive, visible and accessible to all who wish to pursue it.

Through targeted sectoral initiatives, in dairy, beef, sheep, tillage, organics, biomethane and water quality, we are ensuring that environmental ambition and farm viability go hand in hand.

The question before us is not whether we care about the future of the family farm. We do. The real question is how best to secure that future. In my view, the answer lies in consistent implementation, continued engagement with stakeholders and policy certainty. Farmers need clarity and stability. They need to know that long-term strategies will be followed through, not replaced before they are fully delivered.

For that reason, the Government has proposed a reasoned amendment to decline to give a Second Reading to the Bill on the basis that its objectives are already being comprehensively addressed through existing policy frameworks.

The work ahead is substantial. We must continue to make farming attractive to young people; support orderly and fair succession; ensure a strong and well-funded CAP; strengthen farmers' position in the value chain; encourage diversification and innovation; ensure that climate and environmental measures are practical and economically viable; and foster equality and inclusion across the sector.

None of these objectives are stand-alone. They are interconnected economically, socially and environmentally. That is precisely why a food systems approach, as set out in Food Vision 2030, is so important. Ireland's agrifood sector has demonstrated extraordinary resilience and adaptability in recent years. We need to acknowledge and celebrate that achievement, rather

than constantly engaging in negative commentary. With the right framework, the right investment and continued co-operation with the agrifood sector, the agrifood sector will continue to play a vital role in the economic, social and environmental sustainability of our rural economy and rural communities.

The family farm model has endured for generations because it adapts. Our responsibility is to ensure that the policy environment enables that adaptation, fairly, sustainably and confidently. If we stay focused on delivery, maintain open dialogue and keep the well-being and viability of primary producers at the heart of our decisions, I am confident that the family farm in Ireland will not only survive the challenges of this decade but will emerge a lot stronger.

I thank the Deputies for their contributions and Deputy Kenny for bringing forward his proposal.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I was just reading through the Minister of State's list in his statement. "The work ahead is substantial", it reads. It refers to making farming "attractive to young people". The difficulty is that young people do not see a way of getting into farming because an awful lot of them cannot afford to buy the land when it comes up, if there is land beside them, or even to lease land because the bigger you are, the longer or better you survive. The very large dairy farmers are eating up any possibility for anyone else to get started. We have the same thing with tillage. The Minister of State mentioned tillage being something we needed to develop, and it is the same problem. We have one sector which is dominating. We know that the dairy industry in Ireland is extremely successful and doing extremely well but we need to be able to put some check in place to ensure that it does not smother out opportunity for everybody else. That is one of the things we need to do and one of the issues this commission would need to deal with.

The statement refers to "orderly and fair succession". Orderly and fair succession in most cases cannot happen because farmers do not see a future for the family to be able to maintain a decent income on the farm for a second generation to be able to live on it without having off-farm income, sometimes maybe several off-farm incomes, to do that.

The Minister of State mentioned "strengthening farmers" position in the value chain". The food regulator has been crying out for the past couple of years, since its establishment, for more resources and proper teeth to be able to deal with issues, and the Government has not provided them. The position of the farmer in the value chain is one of the key aspects of this.

The farmer takes all the risk. The farmer is the one who gets up at night, makes sure the cow is calving and checks the cattle. Earlier today, I was talking to people about rural crime and farmers who have their machinery stolen and all these issues. Farmers are dealing with all these things. They are the ones taking all the risk in all of this. Then, when they sell on their product, the processor takes its margin and sells it on to the retailer, and the retailer takes its margin. However, if things go wrong and get a little tight, what happens then? They will tell you about international pressures and global food chains and the way everything is connected around the world.

If there is a possibility of getting a portion of the product or an ingredient of the product somewhere cheaper, they will get it from there. Who suffers? It is the farmer, who takes all the risk, and the one without whom there would be none of it. We have the protests going down

at Bord Bia at the moment. Only for the farmers there would be no Bord Bia. There would be nothing to market anywhere in the world. That seems to be lost on those who sit around boardroom tables but it is not lost on the farmer because they know that without them there would be nothing there.

It seeks to ensure that climate and environmental measures are practical and economically viable. Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned some of these measures with regard to rewetting and climate change. There are more restrictions coming on farmers all the time to do more public good. We can debate the viability of them and all that but the ultimate viability of them is whether or not the farmer will be paid for that. The difficulty is that they do not see a future in it. They do not see themselves being paid for it, because it is all short-termism.

Forestry was also mentioned in the Minister of State's opening speech. Farmers who decide to go into forestry plant the land. They get a grant to do it. After seven or eight years they get a portion where it can be thinned and the thinnings can be sold off. At the end of it they can sell off the finished timber if they get that far and they get a decent price for it. It is tax free. That is all very good. The difficulty is that they have to replant the land again. It can never go back into farming. That is the only thing it can never be used for. It is gone forever. It is a permanent change of land use. Last year, we had a storm. Around me, hundreds of thousands of trees were knocked and are gone. Many of them had only been planted for between ten and 15 years. Going in to clear those trees out it cost more than they were worth and the farmer still has to replant the land. There is that possibility of that risk for them, and that is one of the key environmental measures the Minister of State is talking about. That risk is too high for them to look at. Some still are, but many people see a huge problem in that. The amendment put forward is looking at Food Vision 2030, CAP and all of these things as though they will be the saviour. The fact is they are not the saviour for the farmer. They are the saviour for the food processor and the retailer. That is who they are the saviour for. They are ensuring they can get a living, not the farmer. There used to be an old saying, "Wait, horse and you will get grass." That is what they used to say, and it is the same thing for this. If they wait long enough they might get a good year or two, but there are five or six bad ones. They might get another good year or two, and then they will have another row of bad ones. That is what is happening with farming. That has been the cycle up to now. We are saying there needs to be a commission that is focused on the family farm and not focused on the industry and on those who are already doing well, not comforting the comforted and the comfortable but looking after those who are taking the risk and without whom none of this would happen. Looking to that is why we feel there needs to be a focus and a listening ear to what they want, what they need, what their future communities need and what their future family needs to keep that farm sustainable and ensure that the small family farm is going to be there into the future. What will happen is what we see in some sectors. We have seen it across Europe and other parts of the world. The larger farmers and the food industry companies start taking over the farms. When they start taking over the farm, bit by bit they become the farmer. Farming becomes a corporate model. They keep buying more land and taking the opportunities and the farmer just becomes an employee of that industry. That is not a good way forward. That is not the way of the traditional agricultural sector we have in Ireland. It is going to be detrimental for the future, because when some global crisis comes that corporation is gone and all you are left with is debt. The whole lot is belly up, the same as when the building boom burst. We cannot see that happen. That is why it is so important that we get the re-emphasis back on making the family farm sustainable in

the long term. That may require support from the Government, which is only for that sector, not just for the big industry.

It is more than disappointing that the Government is saying that what it is doing is working. If people open their eyes they will see it is not working. It is not working for the small family farms around the country that are practically on their knees. In my county of Leitrim there are five cattle marts, which is unusual, because with so many of the cattle the weanlings are sold. We used to say the big farmers from the midlands and the south came up and bought them and brought them off to the good land and made money on them. That was the system. Many of those marts are now under pressure. In fact, one of them in the town of Mohill is talking about closing. Why is that? If you take the town of Mohill there is practically nothing else in it. There is a modular cold store factory I know many are employed in, maybe 100 or so, or maybe less. Apart from that there is nearly no other industry around it. It is depending on the people in the rural community for the seven to ten miles around it to come in to buy their shopping, do whatever they are doing, and the mart is the central part of that. If we continue to go down this route where farmers will have to get bigger and there will be less of them, it will eventually become a corporate model, and we will end up in a situation where we see whole communities left behind. People will say no-one shouted, "Stop." That is the opportunity we are saying is here. The Government can bury its head in the sand and say it is doing great because the guys around the boardroom says it is doing well. For the ordinary people on the ground, we are not doing well. The ordinary people who want a future in small towns and villages the length and breadth of this country do not see the boom in agriculture going back to provide a future for them. The Government put forward its amendment. That is fine. That is what governments do when they are in power but they have to be responsible to the people who put them there as well. Whatever differences we have politically, the Minister of State has to understand. He also comes from a rural part of County Galway. Many people in that area and in his county want a future in agriculture. That is why this Government needs to put a focus on maintaining and sustaining the family farm model into the future, and not allow it to go down this direction, which it clearly is, where it will be about the boardroom. We need to get back to sustaining the family farm and putting measures in place. If the farmer is profitable and making money the rural economy is vibrant. The small towns are doing well. At the moment, we need to ensure that happens. The Government must use the resources, possibility and energy of government to sustain that model into the future. That is why we ask the Minister of State to look again at this proposal we put forward this evening. It is obviously not going to go anywhere tonight. The Government should look at it again and come back to it in the future. It can put its own label on it if it wants to. I do not care but it must do something for the small people who need a future in the small family farms the length and breadth of the country.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Seanad Éireann has passed the Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 without amendment.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.48 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 24 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.48 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 24 February 2026.