



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 24 Feabhra 2026

Tuesday, 24 February 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government's plan to take away special needs assistants from vulnerable children was met with massive public anger. Last night, we held a public meeting against the Government's proposed SNA cuts and more than 1,000 people turned up - parents, SNAs and teachers all calling out Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for their cruel treatment of children. They are now determined to fight back against this, tooth and nail. Last week, in the face of this anger, the Government announced that it had called a pause to its plan to cut SNAs and late last night, it announced what amounts to an extension of that pause, acting only to buy itself time and alleviate pressure on the Government.

Of course, there is relief among parents and schools that there will be no cuts this September and that much-needed additional funding will be provided, but that is not the end of the story because parents see right through the Government's ploy. They know that the Government has simply kicked the can down the road for another year. They know that the Government's approach is a cynical bean-counting exercise and that the needs of children do not even come into it, which is shameful.

Parents and schools now demand fundamental change. They demand that the Government recognise, respect and value the full role of SNAs. By seeking to restrict the allocation of SNAs to a very narrow range of primary care needs like toileting and medicine, the Government is knowingly seeking to limit access to SNAs and to pull the rug from under children who desperately need support. The Government needs to accept that learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties are also primary care needs. This is the support SNAs provide day in and day out. Despite the Government's announcement last night, its threat to cut SNAs remains on the table. This is a tactical retreat, not a change of heart.

The stories shared with us at last night's meeting were utterly heart-breaking. One mother speaking through her tears said, "How dare the Government even consider pulling SNA support from our children?" Another said, "I'd like the Minister to come to my home even for one day to see what it's like when a child doesn't get the SNA support they need - the frustration, the

helplessness, the anger." Parents, SNAs and teachers have all said that the Government has crossed a line here. They do not want an extended pause; they want these cuts taken off the table for now and for the future. They want to know that no child will lose the SNA he or she depends on and they want the Government to deliver a comprehensive response to the needs of their children. They want respect.

Caithfidh an Rialtas fáil réidh lena phlean ciaradh a dhéanamh ar chúntóirí riachtanas speisialta. Ní sos atá ag teastáil, nó é a bheith curtha ar an méar fhada, ach scrios iomlán ar an bplean. Ní mór don Rialtas a chinntiú go bhfaigheann gach leanbh le sainriachtanais an tacaíocht atá ag teastáil uathu.

Comments today from Ministers have only added to the anger of parents and SNAs. Ministers lined up to say it was a communications, sequencing or cliff-edge problem. They are incapable still of accepting the Government's plan was wrong. It was wrong to treat children this way. Can the Taoiseach accept that a new departure is needed, not a temporary pause, but a child-centred approach, built on respect, security for SNAs and an end to the constant stress and worry endured by parents?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, ní aontaím in aon chor leis an Teachta. Ag déanamh áiféise atá sí. Má fheicimid ar an scéal ó 2021 amach, tá an uimhir SNAs sa chóras agus sna scoileanna ar fud na tíre ag méadú bliain i ndiaidh bliana. Tá an méid infheistíocht ag méadú chomh maith, bliain i ndiaidh bliana. Is léir, maidir leis an Rialtas a bhí againn roimh an olltoghchán agus an Rialtas atá againn anois, is é an meon atá againn ná i bhfad níos mó infheistíocht a chur isteach do leanaí le riachtanais speisialta. Sin bun agus barr pholasaithe agus aidhmeanna an Rialtais.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Ní leor sin.

The Taoiseach: I understand where the Deputy is coming from. She speaks of cynicism. She personifies cynicism in her approach to politics and issues. She does not deal with them substantively or in any considered way.

The bottom line is this. If we take special needs assistants alone, in 2020, there were 16,000 special needs assistants. Starting next September, there will be more than 25,000 special needs assistants. The number has gone from 16,000 to almost 18,000 in 2021, 19,000 in 2022, 20,000 in 2023, 22,000 in 2024, 23,800 in 2025 and more than 25,000 in 2026. That is not cutbacks or pulling back. That is not taking special needs assistants away from vulnerable children. That is allocating more resources.

It is the same across the board in terms of special education. Investment has been very significant over the past number of years. From a position where, prior to 2020, there were very few special schools and none at all in the previous five or six years, we have established 16 new special schools since 2020. Some 28% of the budget is now allocated to special education and we have up to 30,000 students in special classes and special schools. The investment made is very considerable and will increase.

One of the reasons is that there was a significant increase in the number of children and young people identifying with a disability in the most recent census, as opposed to the census prior to that. It is a very significant increase. That is impacting on our schools and demand. We are correct in that we need to finish off the work that has been done on the redeployment scheme. A lot of work was done on that with all the partners and stakeholders in education. That will give safety and security of tenure to special needs assistants, as we did for teachers many years ago. There was a redeployment scheme in place for teachers.

As regards the teaching allocation, as the Deputy knows, every September, depending on the numbers in a given school, teacher numbers will either increase, decrease or stay the same in that school. If there is a reduced number of pupils in September and the school does not meet a certain cut-off point in terms of pupil-teacher ratio, it loses a teacher. If it is above or at that level, it gains teachers. The same applies and has always applied to special needs assistants, insofar as the needs of children in a given school have to be assessed, and should be assessed, on an annual basis, because things change. Need either increases or it can decrease. That is logical and natural. What transpired here was there had not been a comprehensive review for quite a number of years and the National Council for Special Education embarked on one.

In our view, from a Government perspective, we believe the building blocks should be in place first - the redeployment scheme, the workforce planning and a new circular, and in addition to that then, continued allocation of resources to a needs-based approach.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What the Taoiseach has given us is a demonstration of a complete unwillingness to accept realities on the ground. In fact, I would say his response was gaslighting parents and SNAs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: Ah, stop. The Deputy spends her time at it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach needs to know that those parents, children and young people who rely on their SNA to participate in school life and learning, to stay at school, to build confidence, esteem and relationships and who require behavioural regulation need to have the security of the SNA. They cannot live on a wing and a prayer from year to year, hoping against hope that the SNA is not taken away.

The Government attempted to remove SNAs from schools. That is what it attempted to do. Parents and SNAs have fought back and they are telling the Government now very clearly that there needs to be a new departure and it needs to accept in full the role of SNAs.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It needs to accept the reliance of children and young people to function and to operate-----

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----within the system on those SNAs. It needs to announce not a pause-----

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----or a review of a review but a complete reversal of this disgraceful policy.

The Taoiseach: First of all, the Deputy has just articulated an empty soundbite - "a new departure". What does the Deputy mean by "a new departure"?

Deputy Matt Carthy: It was just set out for the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I am none the wiser as to the Deputy's new departure.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: If the Taoiseach listened-----

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

The Taoiseach: There is nothing to what she is saying. This is an opportunity to have a go; fair enough. That is what the Opposition tends to do.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Wow.

The Taoiseach: What we are saying is that we are coming forward with the redeployment scheme and a new circular. I am open to discussion on the role of an SNA but the role of the SNA is primarily for the child, not the school.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: Let us have these discussions-----

A Deputy: Tell yourself that.

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Would the Deputy please allow the answer?

The Taoiseach: -----which cannot be forever debated in empty soundbites.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Wow. The Taoiseach is arrogant.

The Taoiseach: The child comes first. Do not mind your "wow". The child comes first all the time. The Deputy is not in the Gaiety School of Acting now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: He is an arrogant man.

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please do not interrupt.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is one arrogant man.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is it is a serious issue for children-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Oh, it is.

The Taoiseach: -----and as far as I am concerned-----

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald has had her time.

The Taoiseach: -----we must focus on allocation on a child-based approach and a needs-based approach.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I am sure parents are watching this to see the Taoiseach's arrogance-----

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ivana Bacik. Deputy McDonald is out of order.

The Taoiseach: Everyone on this side of the House is as familiar with the issues as Deputy McDonald is. She does not have a monopoly on it and she should not pretend she does.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Before we begin, I again express the Labour Party's solidarity with Ukraine as we mark the fourth anniversary today of Russia's full-scale invasion. As Ukraine enters its fifth year under Putin's brutal bombardment, our thoughts today must be with all those bereaved, injured or displaced by this horrific war in Europe.

Last night was the latest climbdown in the special education saga. SNAs, principals, teachers and parents who spent a week in fear now know that their children will at least not lose SNA supports this year. That relief is thanks to them and their insistence that the Government must listen to their campaigning and advocacy. Unfortunately, our school communities are having to get good at campaigning. In a year, they have had to mobilise for their SNAs, caretakers and school secretaries and the Labour Party has supported school communities every step of the way.

These SNA cuts were first raised in this Chamber by my Labour Party colleagues, Deputies Eoghan Kenny and Mark Wall. While we welcome the news late last night that there will be no immediate SNA cuts this September, the Government's latest U-turn raises further questions about how such drastic reductions were signed off on in the first place. It was the Taoiseach's Government that directed the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to carry out this review. It approved the approach and so, as we know, schools received letters without warning telling them they were losing a classroom lifeline. Some were threatened with a cut to half

their SNA staffing. All were threatened with cuts without warning or consultation and only after a national uproar did the Government reverse course.

This is not a good look for Fianna Fáil. The Taoiseach's party used to have a good story to tell on education, with Donogh O'Malley's achievements, for example, which I have always acknowledged. Fianna Fáil used to have a vision on education but now when we think of Fianna Fáil, or indeed Fine Gael, we think of prefabs, paused renovations, poor pay for school secretaries and caretakers and now this.

While this €19 million buffer has bought the Government 12 months, schools have no long-term certainty because the Government has not actually fixed anything. It has merely kicked the can down the road. It has kicked the problem into next year, hoping, no doubt, that the anger will fade. I can tell the Taoiseach now, and we know it in the Opposition, that it will not fade. We already have a special education system lurching from crisis to crisis. We already have parents who are exhausted, worn out, having to fight so hard for the supports their children need.

They and the schools need certainty and clarity, but we have been coming up against brick walls in trying to get clarity from the Taoiseach. We have specific questions. Where is this €19 million coming from? Is it being pulled from the already stretched special education teacher allocation budget? What happens to the schools that are due an increase in SNA posts next year? Where are the additional SNAs coming from? How will this redeployment scheme work? Will the Taoiseach guarantee that these are new posts, not taken from other classrooms? A pause is not a plan. This is just an extended pause. Schools and children need clarity. Will the Taoiseach provide it?

The Taoiseach: First of all, as we have outlined already - I said it last week in response to Deputy Bacik - any additional SNAs that were identified by the council as being required by a particular school will get this in the context of that review, so they will get that. The funding is additional to the education budget and will not be taken from any other part of the education budget.

It is not an initiative without a plan. The Government never signed off on this at a governmental level, and I would just make that point to the Deputy. The Government did not sign off on this in terms of the 550, and the scale and the impact of it. When the Government saw the impact of this, it considered it and decided not to go ahead with what was being proposed, and that there will be no reductions in the next school year, and that prior to anything happening, there is a redeployment plan, which, by the way, was sought by the unions - in my view, correctly so. Teachers have had that since the late 1980s. I think it was Kieran Mulvey who negotiated that, with others, on behalf of the teacher unions back then. If schools reduced their numbers, teachers could be redeployed to other schools. If children with special needs are reduced by a natural process, and move on to second level or whatever, the SNAs, rather than being made redundant, will be redeployed to another school as close as possible to the school where they operate. That is a good, positive thing. It is very positive and progressive.

In terms of workforce planning, there is an issue, or perhaps not an issue, but we need to take care to protect SNAs and that they are not asked to do everything in a school. Normally, the process is that the school says it has such a cohort of children in the school who require care and support, and it will require so many SNAs. That gets reviewed or assessed by the

National Council for Special Education, and it makes a deliberation on that. There is a process for doing that. It has a panel, which can hear appeals from schools. That is normal, and it has been happening.

What has happened in the last two to three years is that only schools that submitted for an increase were considered by the National Council for Special Education. There was not an overall review. An overall review was initiated, but before the outcome of that was comprehensively brought to a conclusion, action was taken in terms of what happened with correspondence going out to schools and so forth. Out of that, many schools gained, and some would have stayed the same and will stay the same. There will be no reductions next year. We will have the workforce planning, which has to happen, and is a good thing. There is also a new circular, which will have some changes compared to the 2014 circular, and the redeployment scheme. It is only then that we should look at a review process. Again, that is with a view to having consideration of the children who need the support. They have to be uppermost in our consideration.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is extraordinary to hear the Taoiseach say that the Government never signed off on this. It was Government policy. Government Ministers were out defending it all last week. The Labour education spokesperson, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, was on "Prime Time" last week against the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, on this very point. It is extraordinary to hear the Taoiseach now seeking to deflect blame and responsibility. It was Government policy. It got the NCSE to implement it.

There is a question here for special educational needs organisers, SENOs, as well. Where does this leave them?

There is a fundamental lack of coherence in Government decision-making that is so visible here. No matter how much the Taoiseach says this money is extra and schools will be reassured, there is a fundamental lack of coherence and vision. Meanwhile, there are nearly 200 schools that were facing a cut in SNA allocation last week and are now waiting to see if they will, in fact, be able to keep their SNAs and what that will mean for education planning overall. As the union Fórsa has said, this is a sticking plaster. This €19 million is a sticking plaster to disguise and mask the lack of coherence and the attempt to deflect blame to others.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy, Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Taoiseach needs to take responsibility for this fiasco, and take it now.

The Taoiseach: I will take responsibility for the fact that well over 8,000 additional special needs assistants have been allocated to our schools since 2020. Let us have a sense of perspective here. Less of the rhetoric and the doomsday language.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Oh no, we have not done that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Stop, please.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt the Deputy. I would appreciate if I had the same opportunity. Well over 8,000 additional special needs assistants - that is not cutbacks, that is expansion, at an exponential rate. There is huge, growing need. We need to analyse that and reflect on it. That is why we are bringing a therapy-based service into our schools. That is an important intervention and I think one of the more significant decisions that this Government has taken, that there will be a therapy-based service in all our special schools and then moving into the mainstream schools. Because SNAs will not be able to do everything, and let us not pretend they will be able to do everything, as has been suggested by the Opposition.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We never said that.

The Taoiseach: Yes, you have.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: I am very clear about this and very focused and I have a very clear idea because I have been working on this all my political life, so I know a fair bit about it. What I am simply saying is that we need additional supports, but we need to have multidisciplinary supports, in my view, in our schools, to help children in a more comprehensive and holistic way.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Can we get a medal for the Taoiseach?

An Ceann Comhairle: Just before I move to Deputy Cairns, I would like to welcome the members of Kinsale Men's Shed who have been with us for the afternoon.

Deputy Holly Cairns: At the outset, a Cheann Comhairle, I want to express that our thoughts are with the families, friends and communities of the seven people who lost their lives on a road over the weekend.

This Government claims that disability rights are a priority, but the Taoiseach's words on disability have not been matched by action. The Government has found €19 million to postpone the proposed cuts to SNAs, of course not before forcing exhausted parents to once again fight the State for the support their children are entitled to. If he has not yet done so, I encourage the Taoiseach to read Ciara Reilly's Substack articles on this issue. They are incredibly informative and they are from the perspective of a mum, a teacher and a tireless advocate.

What everybody needs to know now is what is going to happen next. Instead of once again reaching for a quick fix, is the Taoiseach going to deliver the structural reform that is needed? To do that, there first must be acknowledgement that the current approach has not worked, is not working and is not going to work going forward. I think we agree that the definition of the role of an SNA is too narrow, too restrictive and does not reflect reality. This needs to be acknowledged in the upcoming review and it needs to be fixed. Disability is not just physical and disability supports should not be allocated on such narrow grounds. We know children's

needs are complex and that there needs to be a level of discretion baked into the system in order to provide children with the support they need.

We also need to look at the bigger picture. This issue is part of a much deeper problem. The average adult to child ratio in our primary school classes is far above the EU average. Large classes compound the needs of children and result in less one-to-one time for kids. It is clear it is time to focus more on the recruitment of teachers. Also central to this are special education teachers. Complex needs must be reintroduced into the criteria for SET allocation. The removal of this criterion was a step in the complete wrong direction and has put children, teachers and SNAs in an untenable position. Crucially, special classes must be central to this discussion. The future of many special classes was brought into question when these cuts were announced. This pause has not given parents and teachers the certainty they need. Schools that need special classes, whether it is their first one or additional ones, need to be supported to open them and keep them open.

The Department of education is responsible for realising the constitutional right to education every child in Ireland has. It cannot continue to foist responsibility onto individual schools or the National Council for Special Education. What is the plan? Will the Taoiseach reassure children, their parents and school communities that the Government recognises that bigger picture and will change the approach?

The Taoiseach: When the Deputy says "change the approach", the approach has been of expansion. We have gone from 16,000 to 25,000-plus. Is the Deputy saying we should change that approach? I am not clear when she says we should change the approach. The Deputy said special classes were called into question. They were never called into question as a result of the letters that went out last week. We have 3,741 special classes - how in the name of God could they be called into question? Let us be factual about it. The number of special classes--

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not your question.

The Taoiseach: -----has increased significantly over the past two to three years and five years. The Deputy should just go through the figures - they are objectively there. They increased dramatically last year and will increase I think by 300 more again this year. I do not know how the Deputy can credibly put that out there that somebody was questioning the very existence of special classes when we are increasing them exponentially. As I said, the census data indicates significant increases in the number of young people and children presenting or identifying as having a disability. I see the same is happening in the United Kingdom. There are pressures there also. We have to deal with that and that is why the percentage of the overall education budget, which is now €13 billion and growing, is very high and rightly so. We have prioritised special education. Last year, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, did exceptional work in a very short space of time to try to close the gap in terms of the number of children seeking places. All of us on this side of the House meet parents of children with special needs, always. I never stopped meeting parents of children with special needs. I accept they have to fight a very hard battle for services not just

in education but more particularly in health. That is why we are bringing therapies into the school system. Ninety will be recruited this year. I made it a red line issue in the most recent election that we would have a school-based therapy service. I believe in a multidisciplinary approach to help children with special needs. That is something we will deliver on during the lifetime of this Government. I would have no issue in sitting down with members of the Opposition and working through some of these issues. We need to be very careful when we say the role is too narrow. We really need to think that through. We need more special education teachers. There needs to be more modules in training colleges in respect of special needs. There has been progress in that regard. We have a very comprehensive view of what we have to do in terms of expansion but the question is one of increased investment, not decreased investment.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Taoiseach asked what I mean by the change of approach and I will elaborate on that. I mean a change from this, where the Government comes in and uses language like "progress", "investment" and "increases" and all of these big, grand words whereas the reality for disabled people on the ground is a nightmare. The reality of the language in your own Government's reports is very different from your own - go from "progress" and "investment" to "wasted lives". That is the difference. The approach of successive Governments up until now has been piecemeal and threadbare and it has been ruining people's lives. That is the reality. The Taoiseach said he speaks to parents of disabled children all the time. If so, then he knows they are the people he meets in his constituency who are the most at the end of their tether. I sat on the disability matters committee in the previous Dáil term. Week after week, people told us how often impossible their lives were made by a system that does not listen to them, does not include them-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please, your time is up.

Deputy Holly Cairns: -----and makes decisions not with them but for them. That is the change in approach that is needed. We need an overall approach to changing the situation.

The Taoiseach: We do have an overall approach but there have been 8,775 new special needs assistants in the past five years since 2020, 16 new special schools in the past five years and a new therapy-based service in our special schools, and that will expand.

Those are not words; they are facts. They are on the ground. That is what is going to happen. We have an overall approach. We have established a Cabinet subcommittee on disability to look at all aspects. Today, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, had sanction to begin a public consultation on the cost of disability. Yesterday, at the disability Cabinet subcommittee, we had a presentation in terms of a new transport support scheme for people with disabilities. We have a disabled person human rights-based-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: After ten years and 15 years-----

The Taoiseach: -----national strategy and we have had meetings with all of the organisations in respect of that. I have established a disability unit in the Department of an Taoiseach to have that overall picture of all aspects of the life cycle of a child or a person with special needs. It

is very challenging, particularly in the health service side of it. That is why in the past number of years we took disability out of the Department of Health and created its own Department with the Department of children to have that overarching perspective on trying to improve----

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Deputy Rory Hearne: It is not working.

The Taoiseach: -----the lives of people with disabilities in the country from birth right through life itself.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We will move on to Deputy Seamus Healy.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Parents of children with special needs have to fight for everything. It is a rollercoaster of anxiety and stress. Early warning signs usually show around six months, but support of relatives and friends suggest it is a little bit slow and it will come right. However, at 12 months, things like a vacant stare or little or no baby babble spark real concerns. The anxiety, stress and sleepless nights for parents start in a real way. By 18 months, missed milestones confirm a problematic future and the fight for parents begins in earnest. The first hurdle is the assessment of need. Thousands of people and children, over 20,000 of them, are on waiting lists: over two and a half years of waiting at a time when a diagnosis and treatment is absolutely vital. Parents who can manage it deprive themselves to scrape together the fee for a private assessment.

Armed with that diagnosis, the fight begins again for services. The next hurdle is a massive waiting list for those therapy services, such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and so on. By now, parents are running on empty, stressed out, anxious and not sleeping. Despite the need for two incomes to keep a roof over their head, one parent frequently has to give up work. This is more stress - financial stress. The next hurdle is a struggle to get their child an appropriate school place. They may have to go to the High Court to get that. The eventual place may be anything up to 25 miles from home. However, then there is the huge relief of getting an appropriate school place. Trained special needs assistants and trained special needs teachers are angels. The child begins to respond and there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Last week, the Government turned off that light. It created fear, trepidation and confusion. The so-called pause last week was a smokescreen to buy time. Last night's climb-down is a sticking plaster at best. Parents of children with special needs and special needs assistants need to know that the criteria for getting a special needs assistant will include not just primary care needs but, for instance, a child with autism who is overwhelmed or an anxious child who is unable to learn without adult support and without help with communications and for social understanding-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Seamus Healy: -----or emotional distress or sensory difficulties. The parents-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy. You will be back in. The Taoiseach will now respond.

Deputy Seamus Healy: -----and the special needs assistants need a guarantee that criteria will be changed and widened.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is way over. Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: First, in respect of the assessment of the need issue, we need a changed approach. An assessment of need is not required for many services. It is our view-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: That is not the question.

The Taoiseach: I have three minutes. The Deputy started off with the-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: You are deflecting the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, allow the Taoiseach to answer. That is not how this works.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy started off by raising the issue of assessments of need. I was making the point that our view is that the therapists should be directed at providing services. That is the change that needs to happen in the system. That is why the Minister has brought forward legislation that is designed to do that and to release the resources to support children with special needs in a more direct fashion. That is the approach we are going to take.

On the issue of special needs assistants, well over 25,000 will be allocated for the next school year. That is a significant expansion on the 2025 figure and on where we have been over the last number of years. That is a story of expansion. The school-based therapy service is a further addition to the special schools. For the first time ever, about 90 therapists will be recruited in a comprehensive way for special schools. Additional special education teachers are being appointed. Thousands have been appointed. There has been a dramatic increase in their numbers and in the number of special classes. Thousands of additional classes have been provided over the last number of years. An objective analysis or assessment shows this expansion and this increase in investment. That will continue. Parallel to that, we want to develop supportive services for teachers in mainstream classes, in special classes and in the system more generally.

With regard to special classes, the ratio is well established and has been in place since 1998. It is one teacher and two special needs assistants for a class of six children. That is the ratio in the teaching schedule. That is accepted. On the allocation of SNAs more broadly, schools make submissions to the special educational needs organiser, SENO, and determinations are arrived at. These very often depend on the number of children requiring care and support in the school. Decisions are made and, if schools disagree, they can appeal those decisions. That is the structure. We are bringing in a redeployment scheme to give safety in employment to special needs assistants. A lot of progress has been made in this area compared with where we

were ten years ago or even five years ago. That redeployment scheme was well negotiated. It will give the security required.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Taoiseach has had four opportunities to answer the core question in relation to this issue this afternoon but he has refused to do so. He has taken the opportunity to deflect at all stages in the four contributions. As anybody involved in education, and particularly in special education, knows, the core question in this whole debate is the criteria that are to be met if a child with special needs is to get the assistance of a special needs assistant. The current criteria are too narrow. They are outdated and primarily based on primary care needs. They do not include children who have social misunderstanding, children with sensory difficulties or children who are on the autistic spectrum or some of the other spectrums. Everybody involved in education knows that is the key question. What we here, the public, parents and special needs assistants want to know is whether those criteria will be used and extended into the future.

The Taoiseach: It is a team-based approach. Special education teachers are recruited-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: Will the criteria be changed?

The Taoiseach: -----to deal with the very issues the Deputy has raised.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Will you answer the question? You are deflecting.

The Taoiseach: Deputy, I did not interrupt you. I am not deflecting. You are not even listening to the response.

Deputy Seamus Healy: You are refusing to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: The minute I stood up, you started shouting back at me. Would you listen so we can at least have a courteous exchange of views? Special education-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: Will you respect the TDs in this House by answering the question?

The Taoiseach: I think that is it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Healy, resume your seat. We will move to the Order of Business.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Fishing Quotas (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Special Needs Assistants, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements on Special Needs Assistants (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)
- Apology related to childhood abuse (hunger strikers): Statements (to commence no earlier than 3.37 p.m. and not to exceed 1 hour and 44 minutes)
- International Protection Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (Amendment No. 15, resumed) (to commence no earlier than 6.21 p.m. and to conclude at 11 p.m.)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Expanding Access to General Practitioner Care, selected by Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Homelessness (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Motion re Report entitled "First Interim Report" of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, sponsored by the Committee on Artificial Intelligence.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) private members' business shall be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on Fishing Quotas, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business; and

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

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF			
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

				Total	135 mins
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In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) Government business shall commence at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and the sitting shall stand suspended on conclusion of the Statements regarding an apology related to childhood abuse (hunger strikers) either for 1 hour or until 6.21 p.m. whichever is the later;

(b) in the event that the Statements on Special Needs Assistants conclude before 3.37 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 3.37 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Statements regarding an apology related to childhood abuse (hunger strikers)

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

(d) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the International Protection Bill 2026;

2. the Statements on Special Needs Assistants shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time

	Gov	SF			
Mins	25	15	10	10	3
	SD	Gov	SF	PTG	Gov
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	3	9	10	3	5
				Total	135 mins

3. the Statements regarding an apology related to childhood abuse (hunger strikers) shall not exceed 1 hour and 44 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) statements shall be in accordance with the sequence contained in the table immediately below (to be read across); and

(b) members may share time; and

	Gov	SF			
Mins	20	10	8	8	3
	SD	Gov	SF	IP TG	Gov
Mins	8	8	3	6	8
	SF	ITG	Gov	OM	
Mins	3	6	8	5	
				Total	104 mins

4. the resumed proceedings on Committee Stage of the International Protection Bill 2026 shall be taken no earlier than 6.21 p.m. and the proceedings thereon shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at 11 p.m. by one question which shall be put from the Chair and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for the Motion re Report entitled "First Interim Report" of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, Committee on Artificial Intelligence, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Homelessness shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	Gov	SF			
Mins	35	25	15	15	5
	SD	Gov	SF	IP TG	Gov
Mins	15	15	5	12	15
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	5	15	15	5	8
				Total	202 mins

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

Deputies: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take Deputy Mitchell first.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

We need a debate on the review into CAMHS in North Kerry. This is a deeply concerning issue that highlights serious failures relating to the care of children and young people. The lives of young people and their families have been turned upside down due to the failures of the service. We need a debate on this topic as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We are long overdue a debate on football in this country, not because of what happened in Oriel Park on Friday night, which, I trust, the league and the clubs will be able to handle, but because of the vengeful, over-the-top collective punishment response from the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan to that issue-----

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Duncan Smith: -----which portrayed an anti-football bias in the Minister that I hope is not reflected in the Government.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We need a debate on it.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Considering the level of upset, uncertainty and worry the SNA cuts have caused, and the screeching U-turn that was made very late last night when most education workers were asleep, this matter needs to be on the agenda in the form of a debate as opposed to just statements. It is important that the Ministers responsible give a clear outline of the plans relating to what happened in the past week in order to make sure that trust is replaced and that we can have plans going forward that do not make people uncertain.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In the aftermath of 75,000 people have been slaughtered by Israel in a genocidal massacre and the so-called ceasefire, hundreds of people, including more than 100 children, have been killed and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian territories continues. The Government has reneged on its commitment to bring the occupied territories Bill before the House and pass it into law, and impose sanctions on the regime that is committing these crimes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: When are we going to see the Bill?

Deputy Michael Collins: Over the past four weeks, I have been looking for a debate on short-term lets. I have also been asking the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, to come here for a question-and-answer session. People from that sector are meeting today in a packed room across the road in Buswells. They know that what is proposed is going to lead to the ruination

of short-term tourism in this country. The Taoiseach keeps nodding and saying "No", but if the Government brings in planning into this, it is going to finish those involved. They know that. The Taoiseach should go across the road and talk to them. They are not going to eat him; they are going to talk to him.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I would like a debate on this issue here today.

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

Deputy Mary Butler: I will respond.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. I call on the Chief Whip to respond.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have noted all the comments from the various Whips. I will facilitate an urgent debate in relation to CAMHS. I was in Kerry on Thursday and Friday of last week. I felt it was important to respond to the parents first. We will put that on the agenda for next week.

In relation to the other requests for debates, this week we are facilitating statements on fisheries and homelessness, which were sought two or three weeks ago. We can give consideration to all the requests that have been made at the Business Committee on Thursday, like we do every Thursday but, unfortunately, no matter what is put on the agenda, it is never agreed.

In relation to SNAs, there is a Private Members' motion this evening and the Minister will take statements in the Dáil tomorrow. There is also a Private Members' motion before the Seanad.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What about the occupied territories Bill?

Deputy Mary Butler: I responded to that at the Business Committee last Thursday. The Order of Business stands.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	

Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Peter.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Graves, Ann.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy, Seamus.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Nash, Ged.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lahart, John.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lawless, James.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	

McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McGuinness, John.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Smith, Duncan.	
Neville, Joe.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move on, I hope the Taoiseach will allow me to welcome a group of retired gentlemen from Killinick, County Wexford, who are here just for the history of politics.

The Taoiseach: The history of what?

An Ceann Comhairle: The history of politics.

The Taoiseach: How long have they got?

An Ceann Comhairle: They are here for the afternoon.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Rents across the State have risen above €2,000 per month for the first time ever according to the Daft.ie report published this morning. The biggest increases are in the four major cities outside Dublin. The cost of rent has risen by €168 per month in the Taoiseach's city of Cork. In Galway, rents are up €164 per month. In Waterford, they are up €163 per month. In Limerick, they are up €82 per month. Rip-off rents have almost doubled since Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael formed their partnership a decade ago. The availability of homes to rent has collapsed to its lowest level in 20 years. To make things even worse, the Government's rent-hike legislation will kick in from Sunday next. This will open the floodgates and allow big property funds to hit renters with massive increases never seen before. That is obviously going to devastate the lives of renters right across the State. Can the Taoiseach answer a straight question? How on earth does the Government expect renters to afford these massive rent hikes, which mean, as stated, that rents have risen above €2,000 per month, not to mention what is about to come as a result of his policy decisions?

The Taoiseach: I accept that the price of rent puts a lot of pressure on people, particularly young people, and that is why we are working very hard to increase supply. There were 36,000 house completions last year. The most effective way to deal with rent prices and moderating them is by means of supply.

The Deputy knows that but what is Sinn Féin's response? It is to oppose housing applications and to oppose apartment construction. Its leader has now opposed the most recent development in her constituency, of hundreds of apartments. If you add it all up, she now has a fairly unenviable record-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Taoiseach should talk to his brother.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, it does not work like that, Deputy Doherty.

The Taoiseach: -----of opposing, opposing, opposing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: How many has he opposed in Cork?

The Taoiseach: The only way we can deal with rent is supply.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Rents of €2,000 a month.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Every day reveals more about the true horror of Jeffrey Epstein's global ring of paedophilia and blackmail. The fallout continues. Yesterday Peter Mandelson was arrested and last week the former Prince Andrew was arrested. On Friday night, on "The Late Late Show", we heard the incredible testimony of Lisa Phillips, a survivor of Epstein. Lisa spoke out with great courage to expose the extraordinary power wielded by this brutal abuser. I had the honour of meeting Lisa myself in Dublin last week. I heard directly from her about her appalling experiences of Epstein's corrupt and depraved network. Now is the time for Ireland to take a lead in support of brave victims and survivors like Lisa. We know Epstein visited here. We urgently need release of all files related to Epstein's interests and activities in Ireland. We need to put pressure on the British Government to release all its relevant files too.

As the Taoiseach of a country which stands up for the rights of women and children, will the Taoiseach commit to acting proactively on this in the interests of the survivors of Epstein?

The Taoiseach: I salute the bravery and courage of Lisa Phillips in taking on what was a very corrupt and depraved network, as the Deputy has said. I am not clear on the files the Deputy is talking about. My understanding is that the Government does not hold any files in respect of Epstein, although I stand to be corrected on that, so we need to be more specific in terms-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We have parliamentary questions in.

The Taoiseach: I know there was an allegation in the Epstein files in respect of a young woman being brought to Ireland but I have no knowledge of that. I have asked the Department of justice if it has any. It does not but the Garda, which is ultimately responsible for the investigation of any allegations, says it will investigate all complaints received and all allegations of serious crime, particularly, of course, sexual offences, child abuse and human trafficking. They are treated with the utmost seriousness. I encourage anyone who has any information and anyone who has been a victim of sexual violence to reach out for help and to engage with An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have been talking about reforming GP services for years but have failed to deliver. The Government's strategic review of GP services, first promised in 2019, still has not been completed. During that time GP fees have risen to as high as €90 in some areas, and that is just to get in the door. Price, however, is not the only barrier. An increasing number of GP practices are oversubscribed and understaffed. We know there are no quick fixes. That is why the Social Democrats are proposing a comprehensive 20-point plan, which will be debated in the Dáil tomorrow. The proposals include GPs directly employed by the HSE, because not every GP wants to be a small business owner; a new DEIS-for-GPs scheme, in recognition of the higher health needs of patients in deprived areas; implementing the programme for Government commitment to expand GP care to under-12s; and, crucially, setting out a clear timeline for delivering universal GP care to everybody by 2030. These proposals are not radical; they are the European norm. Will the Government do more than talk about reform of GP services? Will it deliver it, and will it start by supporting our 20-point plan to transform GP services?

The Taoiseach: I do not accept the premise of the Deputy's argument insofar as we have been expanding access to GP care year after year over the past number of years, particularly over the past five to six years, and before then, in terms of access for children, access for those on median incomes and so forth. There has been expansion.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: To under-eights.

The Taoiseach: Also, probably one of the biggest transformations in the past two decades has been the move to primary care centres, which did take some time in the late 2000s to get going. They had been earmarked in an earlier strategy in 2001 but we have now invested very

significantly in those primary care centres. The strategic review will be published, I understand, before this summer. It will outline further the policy framework and the direction of travel in respect of GP care, as regards both recruitment and directly publicly recruited GPs, as well as an expansion of access to GPs.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: School communities and the organisers of the protest outside the Dáil tomorrow over the Government's threatened SNA cuts want the Taoiseach to know, and for it to be known, that those protests will be going ahead in many places across the country. Although it is clear that protests and the threatened escalation of those protests have forced the Government to do a U-turn on the planned cuts to SNAs, the principal of my former primary school, Johnstown national school where some of the most severe cuts were proposed, told me this morning that although the school is delighted the Government has backed off on these cuts, she has no real assurance that they will not be back there again next year. That is the feeling out there. Nothing the Taoiseach has said to date gives people the assurance that he has understood the problem that led to these threatened protests in the first place, and that he is going to make sure they will not be there again next year. What does he have to say to reassure them?

The Taoiseach: I said already during Leaders' Questions there will not be any reductions in special needs assistants in our schools in the school year beginning in September 2026. There will be increases, but there will not be any reductions in our schools. There will be well over 25,000 special needs assistants, which will be an increase of 8,700 since 2020. That is expansion. We will then have the redeployment scheme.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is still well short of need.

The Taoiseach: Workforce planning will be published and a new circular in response to that, which will give the template. No one has ever suggested to me that you have the same number forever in any given school. It depends on the need of the school at a given time in terms of the number of children it has who require supports and care. That has always been the case. The Deputy and everyone in the Opposition seems to be now suggesting there should never be any evolution.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Need is going up, not down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett, this debate does not work back and forth. Deputies get a minute each to speak. I respectfully ask them not to interrupt one another.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome members of Kinsale Men's Shed who are with us today. I also welcome those in the Gallery involved in short-term lets who are fighting for their very survival and were in Buswells Hotel earlier today. The people of Ireland, mainly in coastal communities, are genuinely worried about what the Government is about to do with these short-term letting proposals. In places like west Cork, from Kinsale to Castletownbere, Airbnb and short-term let hosts are ordinary families, mainly small farmers and women trying to keep the lights on. They are terrified that these new rules will wipe out Airbnb and short-term lets

altogether and, with it, the tourism that keeps our small towns alive. The legislation proposes to ask people to get planning permission. For many of them, that could cost tens of thousands of euro, which they simply cannot afford. I also sat in the committee meeting with officials from the Departments of tourism and planning on the short-term letting and tourism Bill. I say it straight. They are all over the place. There is no joined-up thinking with regard to the planning aspect of this Bill. These short-term lets, whether tree houses, pods, sheds, granny flat or tents, were built for tourism and tourism only-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Collins: They are what keeps rural Ireland going. Rural Ireland has taken enough hits. Will the Government step back from this?

The Taoiseach: I welcome the Kinsale Men's Shed. The Men's Sheds are wonderful organisations across the country generally. I also welcome the history of politics group from Wexford. It is a discipline close to my own heart, as both a student and a practitioner.

On the short-term lets situation, I have watched the odd Facebook presentation from Deputy Collins. He is having meetings up and down and is enjoying himself to a certain extent. The legislation is not requesting anyone to have planning permission. The Deputy knows this.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister said different today.

The Taoiseach: He has a duty to tell the truth about these matters. I am willing to engage. The Attorney General is clear that from the get-go, from the beginning, if you move from residential to commercial activity, that *de facto* requires planning permission. There are certain rules that if you are at it a long time, you do not. That is the existing planning status. That is nothing new. No one is creating something new. That is the position. You can register and the idea will be-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----that when the Government brings its proposals you can register without planning permission-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----but there will be an expectation that, over time, you would regularise your planning.

Deputy Michael Collins: In two years, it will be game over.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the publication last week of the Government's AI and digitalisation strategy, which balances supporting innovation with maintaining trust and having the necessary guardrails in place. The executive chair of Coimisiún na Meán was before the

Oireachtas AI committee today and he said that tougher laws are needed on AI-generated sexual imagery and further laws are needed on the misuse of intimate and other imagery of real people without their consent.

I would ask that this would be a priority as part of our EU Presidency. The Taoiseach will also aware that I have a Bill before this House around the protection of voice and image. Our voice image likeness is vital. The Taoiseach will be aware of financial fraud where indeed his own image was misused to do that. We do need stronger legislation in this regard and I ask the Taoiseach to either fast track my Bill or introduce legislation in this regard.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for producing that Bill. I want to engage with him regarding how I can fast track it. It might matter for the House to be of assistance in that regard. In terms of tougher laws on the generation of images, the Attorney General and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are examining that issue. We do have very strong laws preventing the sharing of intimate images and very strong laws in terms of child abuse online. There is no equivocation there. The generation of an image is a complex matter because an image can be generated online or offline in various contexts - what one might presume would be an intimate image. I am not going to go into the particular fields where that can happen. It is the sharing of the image that is the crime at the moment but they are examining it. I know that on the generation side Britain has introduced it but has not commenced it.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I am sure the Taoiseach shares my condemnation of the violent assault that took place in Temple Bar, which I know is before the courts so I will not comment on it any further. What we do know is that safety continues to be an ongoing issue in Dublin city, particularly as it relates to retail workers. Obviously, it is not just an issue in Dublin but is nationwide. Over 300,000 people work in retail in Ireland. One of the big asks of the retail sector is that we would introduce specific offences dealing with retail workers who are harassed or face threats. I know this is an issue that has been debated in the Seanad and that my colleague, Deputy Butterly, intends to publish a Private Members' Bill on it but could the Taoiseach update the House on how this is being examined by the Government and whether the Government is considering progressing this as an issue because the time has come for us to have a specific offence dealing with retail workers and assaults and threats of assault against them in the same way that we introduced hate legislation and harm in respect of hate legislation?

The Taoiseach: I will raise the issue with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, although there are offences and they are well provided for - any assault on any person. It gets a bit complicated if we start categorising. We have specifics for emergency care workers, bus workers and transport generally. The attack in Temple Bar was appalling. The issue is the behaviour of the individuals who do this sort of thing. We have to look at sentencing and we need to be very clear that the criminal justice system is in a position to apprehend those responsible for such violent acts and to put them away for a decent amount of time. Deterrence is required here because far too casually, people are using violence to carry out terrible deeds that kill people or create very severe impacts for and inflict very severe damage to people for the rest of their lives. These are life-altering injuries in some cases and it is reprehensible. I will talk to the Minister.

Deputy John Brady: Last week, the Government decided to cut the 2026 funding to Wicklow County Council for regional and local roads - a cut of over €300,000 when our roads are already deteriorating. It is unacceptable. Recent storms and bad weather have made a bad situation worse not just in Wicklow but right across the State. Potholes have multiplied and surfaces are crumbling. I have been contacted by many constituents facing costly repairs for blown-out tires, damaged suspension and cracked alloys. One motorist had his drive shaft broken because of the condition of Wicklow's roads. This is a road safety issue that is costing motorists and putting their safety at risk. Wicklow's population has grown and traffic volumes are rising. Wicklow County Council says it simply does not have sufficient funding to address the severity of the condition of the roads in Wicklow. The Government should be increasing the funding allocation not cutting it at this time. Will the Government commit to reversing the €300,000 cut and increase the funding to address the issue in Wicklow?

The Taoiseach: Wicklow got about €14.9 million, which is a very substantial amount. In terms of the storm damage, we have told the county councils to continue and work away at fixing those roads. Estimates are coming in from the councils separate from their normal road budget, although there are contingencies built into their normal allocation. Nonetheless we do accept that under Storm Éowyn there were particular impacts, so the Department of Transport is working with county councils, including the Deputy's county council, regarding the estimation of the damage done to the roads as a result of the recent flooding in particular.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Today, five brave young people - David McInerney and Emily Felix from Kilkenny, Eric Fitzgerald from Mayo, Niamh Ní Hoireabhaird from Kildare and Oisín Pollard from Carlow - and their families attended the AV room to raise awareness around the rare disease, Friedreich's Ataxia. These five young people all suffer from Friedreich's Ataxia and they need the Government's help with regard to approving funding for the drug Skylarys, which will make a huge difference to their lives. Today, their parents said, "Our kids don't have the luxury of time." They said, "Don't let the cost of this drug be the price of the lives of our sons and daughters." Young inspirational Emily Felix from Kilkenny, who is studying to become a solicitor, said that she had to record her voice on to an app so when her voice is gone, her family will remember what it sounded like. I am asking the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health to help these people and to urge the HSE to approve the funding for Skylarys drug.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I was very pleased to meet with Eric, Emily, Niamh, David and Oisín. I thank the Deputy for bringing them in. I have already followed up on the different physiotherapy and other supports that should be due to them and to get an assessment of what they should be getting and what they are getting. With regard to the drug, we have a series of different drugs that are coming on stream. The Taoiseach and I have discussed the increasing the drugs budget. We are very aware of how much we are already spending on that, how much we want to provide and where we need to go with that. Crucially, with regard to one of their asks, we are shortening the process for the assessment of the reimbursement process, which is going to be 180 days. We do recognise the very considerable the impact that many of these drugs - without speaking to any one of them in particular - would have on people's lives and the cost of that to the State. Reconciling that is something the Taoiseach and I are very aware of.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I raise the issue of Garda numbers in Longford. Of the past three attestations coming out of Templemore, we have been lucky to receive one probationary Garda in our county. Over the past number of months, we have actually lost nine members between retirement, resignation and those transferring to other units. While a number have transferred in, we are still down numbers. We are looking to make sure we are brought up to the same cohort and the same level of service and support as in any other part of the country. Could the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration contact the Garda Commissioner to highlight this imbalance in our area? We have had a number of issues in our local towns that have appeared in the national media, so we want to make sure we are able to support the very good work that is being done by the gardaí on the ground in Longford.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his commentary. It is a sign of the high esteem in which An Garda Síochána is held in this country that every part of the country is looking for more gardaí but I know it is also to have greater security and safety. The new Commissioner is very clear on the importance of the visibility of An Garda Síochána on our streets. It will get there. The through-put in Templemore is very good, with increased numbers all the time. There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government of up to 5,000 additional gardaí over the lifetime of this Government. A total of 223 trainees entered in November, which was the largest intake since 2014, and it was similar in the last one, so about 617 have come through in 2025 alone. That is manifest in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. I take the Deputy's point. About 94 members of An Garda Síochána are assigned to stations in Longford, which is an increase of 8% since the end of 2016 when there were 87 members. We will focus and I will talk to the Minister and the Commissioner.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The programme for Government commits to the timely delivery of school projects. St. Fintan's National School in Mountrath, which is my former national school, has been waiting for a badly needed ASD classroom, sensory room and general purpose hall.

The school and the staff are doing everything possible to utilise the existing space, for example, sub-dividing rooms, etc. The 123 pupils and the two ASD classes do not have enough and are going to be under further pressure in September. The extension works that were to be delivered by the Department of Education and Youth - this was first committed to more than seven years ago - were then to be delivered by way of a modular one under the framework agreement the Taoiseach and I are familiar with. However, this was changed in more recent years to a devolved project and was given to the school to lead. It is long past time for this project to be moved on. The principal and staff are very concerned about it. The project - and I checked this again the other day - is only at stage 1A. Will the Taoiseach implore the Minister for Education and Youth to move on St. Fintan's school in Mountrath?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Obviously, I cannot deal with every school extension and so on. However, I will raise this with the Minister. There is, again, record funding for school buildings this year, with a particular focus on school extensions for special classes and special education. I will see what we can do in this case.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I raise primary care centres in my constituency. The Taoiseach is aware that Swords has waited for a primary care centre for many years. It is the third largest

town in Ireland. After years of campaigning, we finally got news the HSE acquired the Hertz building, which is to be converted to a primary care centre. I ask for an update to be given on when a planning application will be going in for the change of use, and that a firm commitment be given that progress will be happening this year.

Furthermore, I ask the Government to make a U-turn when it comes to its abandoning of plans for a primary care centre in Donabate. Donabate has seen astronomical expansion due to huge house building with a population of approximately 20,000 is expected there in the next couple of years. It currently only has two GP practices. The Government previously acknowledged that there was a need for a primary care centre in Donabate and Portrane, and I ask it to revisit that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: In relation to Swords, I am pleased to announce today €1.4 million in the HSE capital plan to take the premises the Deputy referenced to design feasibility stage, which is positive progress. In relation to a primary care centre in Donabate, we have had to look at other options for delivering it because the tender did not work; it was not value for money for the State to progress with the tender that came into us. We are trying to see what other options are possible to cater for that growing population.

Today, I am announcing a total of approximately €25 million investment for Beaumont Hospital, which is of course relevant to the people off the Deputy's area. I will keep him up-to-date in relation to Donabate and what options are possible. That was not an appropriate price for the State for that project but we will do everything we can to progress it.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I want to speak with the Taoiseach about SNAs. I know he has been very involved with SNAs and everything to do with education, and I have praised his efforts in the past and will continue to do that because it is really important that we build bridges in this Chamber and work together. Earlier, the Taoiseach offered to work with Opposition. As he knows, tomorrow there are going to be protests throughout the country, and one thing the people from that campaign are asking for is that the Ministers facilitate a meeting with all stakeholders, that is, unions, SNAs, parents, and advocacy groups. Will the Taoiseach be able to facilitate that? Will he work with the Opposition to do that?

In 2019, SNAs launched a Respect for SNAs campaign because they did not feel valued. We have seen because of the outcry from the public that they are very valued. This side of the House also values them but we need to demonstrate that and work together to do that. Will the Taoiseach be able to facilitate that meeting?

The Taoiseach: To be fair, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, who was the Minister of State with responsibility for special education in the previous Government, would be more than willing to meet with the various groups. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, has been travelling the length and breadth of the country meeting with parents, schools and stakeholders in respect of these issues and continues to engage with both the NCSE and the schools. I will raise this issue with the Minister.

There has been extensive consultation with the unions in respect of the redeployment scheme. That was brought, more or less, to a conclusion. That should be issued fairly quickly. The workforce planning document is nearing completion. There is the new circular as well,

which builds on the 2014 circular and has changes included. All of that will have to be published and discussed.

Deputy Charles Ward: The HSE health regions were established to improve hospital and community healthcare services, empower local decision-making and support population-based service planning. I support this completely but I am concerned about the centralisation this may cause within the regions themselves. The north-west region often has to compete and fight over the same limited resources as we did during the hospital hub situation. Letterkenny desperately needs a diabetes integrated practice unit. Donegal, under the criteria, warrants its own paediatric endocrinologist - a full team in Letterkenny. Sharing resources with Sligo is not sufficient. Both counties have service demands and their staffing shortages are demographically different.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, recognised this and the individual consideration for each county when establishing surgical hubs. Will the Taoiseach please ensure diabetes care in Donegal will be given the same separate and equal consideration?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right. What we did in Letterkenny and Sligo was additional, and not instead of. It was not a regional spread but it was additional. That is very important.

In relation to diabetes, the Deputy is right that there is a very good hub, the Benbulbin hub in Sligo, dealing with diabetes, respiratory and cardiology. What we want to see is that replicated in other parts of the country, such as Letterkenny. That is what we are trying to do. The Deputy will be aware that Letterkenny has the very excellent virtual community care centre in the Errigal hub, which provides countrywide leading services for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD, and other respiratory illnesses. There is a clear opportunity to build on that in the Errigal hub, which is an excellent facility across the road from Letterkenny University Hospital.

Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill 2023: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy John Brady: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, Digitilisation, and Taoiseach pursuant Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 184(a).

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [10452/26]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [10454/26]

3. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the abinet committee on health will next meet. [11618/26]

4. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [11844/26]

5. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [11881/26]

6. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [69861/25]

7. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [69862/25]

8. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [69863/25]

9. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet [7694/26]

10. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [12129/26]

11. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [12131/26]

12. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9924/26]

13. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [9926/26]

14. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [10030/26]

15. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [12503/26]

16. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [14749/26]

17. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [14761/26]

18. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [14820/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions No. 1 to 18, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee oversees implementation of the programme for Government commitments in relation to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas, and considers health reforms, including Sláintecare, the reform of public health and health system preparedness for future health threats. It also receives reports in relation to programme for Government commitments in the areas of mental health and drugs policy. It is attended by the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and the Minister for Health.

As for Sláintecare 2025+, our latest Sláintecare strategy published in May of 2025, it aims to forge the way towards accessible, affordable, high-quality healthcare for the people of Ireland when and where they need it. The waiting time action plan 2026 published on 30 January, represents Government's continued commitment to improving access to hospital care.

Since commencement of the multi-annual action plan approach, significant progress has been made in reducing the length of time hospital patients are waiting. The new regional structures within the HSE have been established with the six new health regions and 20 integrated healthcare areas. Health and social care services are planned and delivered around the specific needs of local populations, leading to better co-ordination of care and access to services. Capacity in emergency services is continually reviewed. There has been an increase in the number of public-only consultants in emergency medicine and more senior staff are rostered in emergency departments during weekends and public holidays for better decision-making. The workforce will continue to grow through the recruitment of key roles, retention measures and additional college places for key disciplines.

Care is being delivered closer to home in 180 primary care centres through 96 community health networks, 27 community specialist teams for older persons, and 26 community specialist teams for chronic diseases, all now operational. There are 23 community intervention teams which are operational, with national coverage secured. A new era of innovation and digital transformation is under way.

The national patient app has been rolled out. The national shared care record will be developed throughout the year and the electronic health record, recently agreed by Government, will also be progressed.

Additional projects that are key to the increased digitalisation of the health service include a national system for electronic prescribing, remote health monitoring and virtual care solutions. In mental health, workforce and infrastructure in community-based services will be further supported. Budget 2026 sees increase in funding for mental health services for the sixth year in a row, bringing the budget to almost €1.6 billion, an increase of 50% since 2020.

The findings of the report on the review into child and adolescent and mental health services, CAMHS, in north Kerry are deeply concerning and unacceptable. Government's main focus has to be on the children, young people and families who have been impacted by this report. A public apology has also been issued by the HSE, including in letters to impacted families. A dedicated helpline and access to the clinical liaison support team remains open to all those affected. HSE South West intends to carry out a clinical review of files of young people who have accessed north Kerry CAMHS over a defined period and details of this further phase will be developed shortly. It is important to note that the issues raised by this report and more broadly by the 2022 Maskey report continue to be the focus of significant reform and service improvements in youth mental health services in this country.

Much has changed since 2022. North Kerry CAMHS has introduced new standard operating procedures, care planning policies, file systems and prescribing guidelines. The two Kerry CAMHS teams in place today have a significantly increased multidisciplinary clinical staff complement, higher than any of the other eight CAMHS teams in the region. Over the past three years, an additional €44 million, which is an increase of 32%, has been allocated to support CAMHS to increase core staffing, reduce waiting lists and expand CAMHS hubs to improve crisis cover for services. In budget 2026, funding has been allocated to develop a new CAMHS emergency liaison service, increase out-of-hours on-call, and to establish a new CAMHS eating disorder team and two new CAMHS mental health with intellectual disability teams.

Government recognises that recruitment is challenging. There is no denying that; however, progress is being made. Investment in national clinical programmes and models of care have led to significant service improvements, including the full implementation of a specialist perinatal mental health network and the ongoing expansion of specialist mental health teams for eating disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, in adults and dual diagnosis.

In older people's services, older people will be further supported to live at home within their own communities and we will also strengthen the nursing home sector. The work of the independent commission on care for older people is currently under way and the national policy on adult safeguarding for the health and social care sector, a programme for Government commitment, was launched in December.

In disability, budget 2026 allocated a record €3.8 billion to the HSE for the provision of specialist disability services. This 20% year-on-year increase will provide permanent and dedicated funding to essential disability services, including residential respite and therapy services, ensuring that disabled people continue to be supported. All these commitments build on the investment and reforms undertaken over the past number of years, including the delivery of approximately 1,480 acute beds; an increased workforce of approximately 32,000 since 2020; more affordable healthcare through reductions in the drug payment scheme threshold to €80; removal of hospital inpatient charges; extension of the eligibility for free GP cards for all children under eight and to all earning no more than the median income; State-funded *in vitro* fertilisation, IVF; free contraception for women aged 17 to 35; and free access to hormone replacement therapies, HRT.

The Government will continue to invest in reform, changing the way health services deliver this year and into the future. The HSE capital plan 2026 and the HSE digital for care plan were

approved by Government this morning. Funding of €1.54 billion has been made available to the HSE in 2026 for health capital expenditure. Building and equipment projects include surgical hubs, elective treatment centres, the National Children's Hospital Ireland and the National Maternity Hospital. Transformative digital projects include the HSE's health app, the national shared care record and the development of the national electronic health record. Disability capital projects include residential, respite and day services. In addition, in 2026, €43 million has been provided to support specialist community-based disability services, representing a €16 million increase in funding on 2025.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. As there has been a precedent set to diverge from Standing Orders on Taoiseach's Questions and there was no change at the Standing Order Committee, I propose that I will take the 18 Deputies, or those present, for a minute each, and the Taoiseach will respond. However, after the Easter session I will revert to Standing Orders at 15 minutes per question in the absence of agreement from the Standing Order Dáil reform committee. We will begin with Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If we are going to provide for children with special needs, for the mental health of young people and for mental health services generally, we need to rapidly recruit more people with the qualifications necessary to provide assessments and services. We are not doing it. Despite lip service being paid by the Government to the fact that it is, it is not actually doing it. I want to give the Taoiseach a dramatic example. I happen to know somebody who has a masters and a bachelor of arts, BA, in psychology and who applied to UCD to do a doctorate. There were 370 applications for nine places in clinical psychology. Everybody had to have a minimum of a 2.1 in a BA. Most of them had a masters and had experience but only nine got places in clinical psychology. There were 14 places in educational, I think, and a similar number.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Why are there not more places to allow the people who want to work in areas like psychology and allied health professions-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett is now in Deputy Murphy's time.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----to actually get qualified and provide the services we need in our health service?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Paul Murphy. We are not going to tolerate that either.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Over the summer, I met with Kirsty and Barry, who told me a heartbreaking and deeply troubling story about how their son Brody had been treated at Children's Health Ireland, CHI. He was diagnosed with diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, DIPG, in May 2024. This is a very aggressive brain tumour that is inoperable. Children are treated as palliative once they are diagnosed. He then had a very invasive and dangerous procedure of a biopsy. As a result of the biopsy, he had a massive brain haemorrhage. His brain swelled to

such a degree that the back of his skull had to be effectively cut off. He walked into the operating theatre in full command of the use of all his limbs and so on. After the operation and the biopsy, he could only move one of his eyes and he never learned to walk again. The biopsy was unnecessary. There was no clinical benefit to having the biopsy. The issue is that this is happening widely. We appear to be doing much more biopsies-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Liam Quaide.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----than other countries with no medical benefit in doing them. Will the Taoiseach examine this?

Deputy Liam Quaide: I want to bring the Taoiseach back once again to that cohort of workers who kept the health service going at our moment of deepest crisis in recent years. I refer to housekeeping staff, porters, nurses, healthcare assistants and other clinicians, some of whom contracted Covid at the height of the pandemic and went on to develop a debilitating condition known as long Covid. A small group of those workers was in receipt of special Covid leave with pay until 31 December. They were receiving that payment on the basis that they contracted the virus in high-risk settings and have been unable to return to work since due to disabling post-exertional malaise and a range of other symptoms. That scheme was cut because the Labour Court ruled in June of last year that it could not recommend further extensions until long Covid was classified by Government as an occupational injury for this cohort. The Taoiseach met a group of these workers in Cork around the time of the Labour Court decision. Would he meet them again to hear how they have been impacted by the termination of their special Covid leave with pay?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: A number of survivors of industrial and reformatory schools were on hunger strike last year. There were commitments on behalf of Government to provide health supports. Could the Taoiseach say when those health supports will be in place? Related to that, on the Dáil schedule tomorrow there is, "Apology related to childhood abuse (hunger strikers) (working title): Statements". Is that apology going to be for all survivors? Could the Taoiseach be specific in relation to that? Have they been notified of that apology?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: The oncology unit for St. Luke's Hospital is currently offsite at UPMC, and has been for almost six years. Since the Covid pandemic, it moved there and never moved back. Providing a safe and efficient service to the oncology patients is the most important part of the work in the oncology day ward. St. Luke's Hospital in Kilkenny treats patients from Carlow, Kilkenny and parts of Laois and Tipperary but being offsite for many years has had a number of implications, such as lack of quick access to labs, pharmacy, charts and a resus team in the emergency department.

These are causing delays daily in the unit. Lately, there has been talk of delays for oncology patients getting started on systemic anti-cancer treatment in both Kilkenny and University Hospital Waterford. I note that the UHW oncology day ward had been in UPMC Whitfield for six years and just moved back to UHW two weeks ago. Being off-site impacts the unit through delays in chemotherapy delivery labs and, in turn, impacts capacity in the day ward, and so

impacts the patients. We need to get back on-site to St. Luke's to offer a safer and more efficient service.

Over €1.3 million per annum is paid to UPMC in rent for the oncology unit to be off-site. Surely this money could be put towards a new oncology unit on-site at St. Luke's. Will the Taoiseach prioritise this with the HSE and the hospital management?

Deputy Martin Daly: I want to raise an issue in the west and north-west health region, which recorded 1,263 delayed transfers of care in 2025 due specifically to the absence of stepdown and rehabilitation capacity. Against that reality, a ten-bed rehabilitation unit, which was promised to Roscommon University Hospital in 2015 and had progressed to detailed design phase 1, was included in the 2025 capital plan. It has now been omitted again in the 2026 capital plan, having been absent in 2024 despite lobbying by me. This was a practical, deliverable project intended to support patient flow across hospitals in Galway, Roscommon, Mayo, Sligo and Letterkenny. Will the Taoiseach make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Michael Cahill: A new stand-alone oncology unit for University Hospital Kerry is vital for all cancer patients and their families in Kerry. I impress upon the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health the urgent requirement to have a stand-alone oncology-haematology unit on the grounds of UHK to provide Kerry patients with the dignity, privacy and comfort they deserve during one of the most challenging periods of their lives. The Comfort for Chemo Kerry committee, a wonderful organisation, has already raised over €1.5 million in funds, and a site has been designated for the purpose within the UHK campus. This project is extremely important for Kerry, and I am anxious that it proceed as soon as possible. The delays only mean an escalation in costs for an already costly undertaking. This vital project would lessen the need for many Kerry patients to travel to hospitals in Cork, Limerick, Dublin and abroad for cancer treatments, many in multiple trips. The temporary oncology unit in UHK could not cope with the more than 5,000 patients treated there last year.

I pay tribute to my great and loyal friend, and director of elections, Brian Sugrue, a wonderful human being, who passed away this morning, in the early hours, after a long battle with illness. Brian had a very special and personal interest in this project. I extend my heartfelt condolences to his wife Maureen, his son John, his daughter Eva and the extended Sugrue and Foley families. I commit to pursuing a new oncology unit for the people of Kerry in Brian's memory.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have received the following communication:

I am writing as a parent of deaf adults.

I ... am interested in your views.

My daughter and her partner were both born profoundly deaf and rely heavily on their hearing aid to be able to work and communicate their needs.

At present a pair of hearing aids cost 5,800 euro per person and must be replaced every 5-7 years.

While the treatment benefit scheme provides a 1,000 refund per pair, this leaves families like theirs a cost of 4,800 per pair. Simply to access sound. They were refused a medical card on income grounds even though their primary need is audiology care. Means testing does not account for lifelong disabilities with unavoidable costs.

I am asking for your support in:

Reconsidering eligibility for audiology only medical care access or

Developing a non-means tested audiology pathway for congenital deafness.

My daughter and her partner ... work ... They pay a mortgage, childcare and commute daily to Dublin in order to be part of the working community. The main barrier to their inclusion in the workplace is hearing ...

We know the issue with the underemployment of those with disabilities in this State.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Taoiseach mentioned the HSE capital plan announced earlier. I welcome the €50 million for the surgical hub adjacent to University Hospital Waterford. However, there is also a need for a new adult mental health unit in Waterford, a multi-storey car park at the regional hospital and a new medical school in South East Technological University, SETU. Unfortunately, plans for a primary care centre in Lismore have been put on hold. I also want to ask the Taoiseach about the need for 24-7 cardiac care, specialist care and emergency care. This is a long-running campaign. The Minister for Health announced last year that the Government was committed to it. Where is it? How long will it take? What is the timescale? What additional staff are needed to scale up to get there? We cannot have announcement after announcement, but still have no sense as to when that will be delivered.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Irish State was a real leader when it came to the smoking ban - I know the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, played a big part - but there are equally concerning issues in relation to other nicotine products. While work is being done on vaping, I want to raise with the Taoiseach the issue of nicotine pouches. I am not sure if the Taoiseach is familiar with them, but teenagers use these little pouches, which they put on their gums. They can pass ten times the amount of nicotine versus a single cigarette - they are really strong. Teenagers can use them in school because no one can spot them under their gums. They are marketed in a similar way to vapes, in really cool packaging, with flavours, and there is essentially no age restriction. They are really concerning.

We need to get ahead of these nicotine technologies. I ask the Taoiseach to look into it. The principals' association has twice requested guidance from the Department of Health on this issue, and I do not think it has been forthcoming.

The Taoiseach: Is it the principals of schools?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Yes, the schools want to deal with this themselves. They are looking for guidance from the Department of Health about nicotine pouches specifically, but the legislation also needs to incorporate this.

Deputy Mark Ward: We know that early intervention is key in a child's development. There is no earlier intervention than a newborn child receiving a developmental assessment from a public health nurse. According to the HSE, a child should receive a developmental assessment at the first visit, at three months, at nine to 11 months, at 21 to 24 months and at 46 to 48 months. In Dublin Mid-West, we have a postcode lottery of access to public health nurses. Only two health centres out of the 12 in Dublin Mid-West are able to offer the full range of developmental checks to newborns and infants. Babies from Adamstown, Deansrath, Palmerstown and Rowlagh are only getting first visits due to a shortage of public health nurses, prompting concerns that there could be a delay in diagnosing certain conditions. Infants from Rathcoole, Newcastle, Saggart, Citywest, Brittas and Fettercairn are not getting developmental checks after three months.

This is not the first time I have raised this issue with the Taoiseach and other Members in this House. When will all the babies and infants in Dublin Mid-West receive these vital developmental checks?

Deputy James Geoghegan: I acknowledge the HSE capital plan that was announced today by the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, and the Government, particularly the investment across all of our tertiary hospitals, but also in primary care. One particular primary care centre in my constituency, which I campaigned on as a councillor, is the Rathmines primary care centre. It is being co-located on a site where Dublin City Council is building age-friendly housing that will be supported by an approved housing body. I emphasise the impact on the community it is located in. I ask that we continue to invest in the roll-out of primary care centres. Terenure is another area that is underinvested in when it comes to primary care. I emphasise the positive impact those centres can have in providing services in the community they are located in, but also in supporting entry into adult hospitals and children's hospitals. We need to continue that investment in primary care.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Mixed messaging from the Government and the HSE has caused confusion and uncertainty about the future plans for an elective hospital at Merlin Park in Galway. The hospital has been promised for years. It is critical for healthcare in the west of Ireland and for taking pressure off University Hospital Galway, UHG. The people of Galway want immediate and full clarity on whether plans to build an elective hospital at Merlin Park are going ahead, and whether the funding to deliver these plans is in place. They want clarity on why there will not be any beds as part of this development, and if this will limit the number of procedures and treatments that can be carried out at this new elective hospital.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy referred to beds. It is an elective hospital.

Deputy David Cullinane: They would be recovery beds. If you have a hip replaced, you need a bed to recover.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The announcement of almost €26 million for healthcare disability projects in north Dublin today is very welcome. I have had ongoing engagement with the Government about these priorities at Beaumont Hospital, St. Joseph's Hospital, St. Francis Hospice, St. Michael's House and Chanel College in Coolock. I have consistently highlighted

how urgent this investment is for the northside. I really appreciate the constructive approach taken by the Government.

Nonetheless, the reality is that older people and people with disabilities in north Dublin are under serious strain. While this investment is welcome, what people really want to know is when the delivery will be. They want to know when the shovels will be in the ground. Will the Taoiseach commit to following up directly with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure clear timelines are in place for these projects?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for the questions.

We began with Deputy Boyd Barrett in terms of special needs mental health and basically the recruitment issue. Yes, recruitment is the issue. We have allocated resources and what has stymied our endeavour to expand capacity has been actual recruitment itself. In fact, going back over the last two decades, we have increased places fairly significantly in allied healthcare professionals, particularly in the therapists, for example. Of those who graduate, not all go into the health services. Many go elsewhere. Some go abroad, some go into different services. There is an issue there in terms of those additional places that we are creating in third level and have expanded places. Even in Northern Ireland we have procured places from the third level colleges there. There have been challenges in transforming that student cohort into a workforce subsequently. That is just reality. There is no point in nodding your head; that is it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There are not enough places.

The Taoiseach: The other key challenge has been clinical placements in terms of people pursuing various disciplines. We are expanding that too. This morning, the Minister received further sanction for additional places in all our third level colleges in respect of medicine and allied healthcare professionals. The Deputy had a specific query in terms of clinical psychology and the short number of places. Again, you cannot overnight turn nine into 25 or 30 because we need lots of capacities downstream to facilitate, both within the college and in terms of clinical placements and so on. I will raise the issue with the Minister for higher education in respect of clinical psychology itself. To a certain extent, if there was that many applying, we should see how best we can use that talent pool for the disciplines because we need more and more people and we need more multidisciplinary teams. Part of the issue with psychiatry was the absence of multidisciplinary teams historically in the mental health arena. I am very open to that and will talk to the Minister in respect of it.

Deputy Murphy raised what I consider to be a horrific story, a very sad story for the family, a very challenging and traumatic diagnosis. For it to be followed by the biopsy and so on - I cannot clinically call that. I presume that was CHI?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I am not clear but I would have hoped that there was a multidisciplinary team that would oversee the conduct of biopsies, either recommending them or not recommending them with a view to both the diagnosis and also the trauma on the child and the potential implications, negatively, obviously, as the Deputy has outlined and articulated.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was not in this case apparently, because it was a bank holiday. The MD team was skipped, apparently.

The Taoiseach: I might take that offline with the Deputy and we will see if we can pursue it.

Deputy Quaide raised the issue of long Covid. I would be open to meeting the group again. I did meet with the group last June, as the Deputy said. He knows the narrative in terms of the position in that the Labour Court made a ruling in respect of this. I will again engage with the Ministers responsible. There are complexities around consequential and so on like that. The healthcare service and the Department of public expenditure are saying that the public service sick leave scheme follows then, which is full pay for three months followed by half pay for three months. I get that the issue is the capacity of people with long Covid to participate in the workforce and the fact that it was, without question in my view, contracted on the hospital site. I do not dispute that. There can be a general argument as to where one contracts Covid, given the prevalence of Covid in society more generally. In the early part of Covid, there was no question that many healthcare professionals contracted it onsite in the hospitals. While one can never be totally definitive on that, it is a fairly plausible scenario that many did, particularly in the earlier phase when we had lockdowns and so on. Particular variants were more infectious than other variants. I will revisit this.

To Deputy O'Rourke, that is tomorrow and it is in respect of the issues. The services are going to be provided. My understanding is that they are available. Obviously there will be a lead-in. There was a list of issues that were raised in the discussions I had with the group. One of those was an apology in respect of the boarded-out and we are going to be faithful to the agreement that we reached. The survivors concerned had been notified in respect of this. We will proceed with that tomorrow.

To Deputy Peter "Chap" Cleere, the issue is that it is offsite. Is there a project in place to bring it back onsite or are we at a greenfield situation?

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: We have to wait for it to come back onsite.

The Taoiseach: Is there a project in the offing? I did not pick up----

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: We are waiting for the Dolmen Wing as well, which will free up other space.

The Taoiseach: I could not disagree with what the Deputy is saying. If you are onsite it is more seamless and faster, and better facilitates everybody working together on the situation. I will explore that and see what we can do. It is a good hospital, St. Luke's, with a very good track record in many areas and always was an innovative hospital in terms of how they do things.

To Deputy Martin Daly, I will have to investigate----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cahill would be next in rotation.

The Taoiseach: No, he is not actually; he is after Martin Daly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me, Taoiseach, you are right. It is wrong here.

The Taoiseach: I have my notes here. I do take notice.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Is that an apology?

An Ceann Comhairle: It is wrong here on the paper. Go ahead.

The Taoiseach: That auld bit of paper does not do you good but I would say it does not lead you astray too much.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is your paper.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Daly raised the issue of the failure to go ahead with a ten-bed rehab unit in Roscommon hospital, and that it was in the capital programme for 2025 and taken out in 2026.

Deputy Martin Daly: 2015 to 2023, taken out in 2024, back in 2025, off in 2026.

The Taoiseach: That is crazy.

An Ceann Comhairle: If all the Deputies do this we will never get home.

The Taoiseach: It clarifies the issue. I will pursue it. I do not think that should happen. I think we need certainty. If we are putting something into a capital programme in 2025, it should be in there in 2026 if it has not been progressed. I will pursue that with the Minister and with the HSE. Roscommon has proven itself to be a very good hospital for services. I remember the row we had back in 2016 on the emergency department. If we are all honest, once that row was dispensed with, the hospital got on with a whole load of services that have proven of real value to the people of the area and this clearly would be another.

I thank Deputy Cullinane for welcoming the €50 million for the surgical hub. He followed that up with a list of about four other projects that need to be completed as well.

Deputy David Cullinane: That we were promised.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate that he will be pursuing and advocating on behalf of them. On the 24-7 cardiac care, I will have to go back with the Minister. The commitment is there. I remember it going through Cabinet last year. We were told by clinicians for a long time and all the expert groups that it could not be done. Now it can be done, following the reviews, and I am determined that we pursue it and fulfil it. There has been progress made in terms of extension of the cover and all that. The commitment has been made and we will pursue that.

I jumped ahead there. Deputy Michael Cahill is saying there needs to be a stand-alone unit for Kerry hospital in Tralee. Again I would support that. I think there is a project in train there, as the Deputy articulated. I will talk to the Minister in respect of that. I want to join with the Deputy in expressing sympathy to the family of Brian Sugrue, who I met myself and knew. He was a very strong advocate for such a unit in Kerry hospital. I know he was a very close friend and confidante of Deputy Cahill. We sympathise with the Deputy too on his loss and the loss in the area.

If Deputy Ó Murchú could give me an extended note on that case, email it to me or whatever, it is an interesting case. I am very interested in finding out examples of where we are not looking after those in the deaf community or the visually impaired community. These are very serious, lifelong disabilities, to lose your sight or to lose hearing. I think we can do better, particularly on the employment front. It is great that this couple are working. The Deputy is saying that the cost for them for the hearing aid is €5,800.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Even with the €1,000 back it is €4,800 per person.

The Taoiseach: I will look at that because I think we should be in a position. Very often the health service is not responsive because it wants to do general approaches to supports but I have often had a view that visually impaired and hearing impaired should be carved out somewhat, particularly where it facilitates employment.

We should really support employment. We do not do that as well as we should. I will pursue the matter Deputy Whitmore raised. Was it health guidance? They should be banned from schools in my view.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: They should.

The Taoiseach: We have to get tough again on tobacco. In the manifestation of all these new technologies, we are witnessing the revenge of tobacco following the smoking ban and other smoking cessation initiatives. The Public Health (Tobacco) Act 2002 was comprehensive. It was not just about the smoking ban; it was about getting rid of ten-packs and the sale of single cigarettes and putting cigarettes out of sight in shops in order that they were not next to confectionary items or children's sweets. In other words, it came down to denormalising tobacco. Vapes and other products constitute a counter-move aimed at renormalising tobacco.

The health impacts are significant, serious and bad according to health experts. It bewilders me that products of this kind can get on the market without due diligence. We were talking about food and other stuff, and medicine has to go through the FDA and all sorts of other food safety authorities. This stuff gets on shelves very readily. It is doing terrible damage to our young people. The Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, is bringing forward legislation to ban the use of vapes for young people under 18 and other measures. We need to re-examine the whole area, because it is creeping back in.

Deputy Geoghegan referred to the primary care centre in Rathmines. He is right; it will have a significant impact on that community. We will continue to invest in primary care centres. As I said earlier, there has been somewhat of a transformation. It took a bit longer than people anticipated in terms of getting the finances right, be it private sector capital or

public sector capital or a marriage of the two, but now we have about 180 primary care centres, I think, as I outlined in my opening remarks, plus other forms of community centres and of healthcare. That is something we will continue to do.

I am not clear as to the mixed messages regarding Merlin Park to which Deputy O'Hara referred. My understanding is that the elective unit is going ahead. The Government committed to elective units in Galway and in Cork. They are at various stages. I am keeping a bit of pressure on for both, as well as the two earmarked for Dublin. These are commitments I want to see honoured. The sites are there. They are State owned, which should facilitate the development of the elective hospitals. The idea is to take all of that out of the acute then. It is not to be an acute hospital; it is to be an elective hospital. Not all but much of the work will be day-case procedures.

Deputy Heneghan welcomed a lot. Inevitably, however, when there is a welcome, there is a but. The Deputy wants a timeline - so the narrative goes on. I will follow through on that. We are committed to all of those projects.

I will check with the Minister for Health about the matter raised by Deputy Mark Ward regarding developmental checks in Dublin Mid-West more generally. He said a lot of children are not getting them until many months later.

Deputy Mark Ward: Ten out of 12 healthcare centres are not delivering them.

The Taoiseach: I will discuss that with the Minister for Health in order to see what we can do. Developmental checks are very important in terms of early diagnosis. We can prevent a lot if developmental checks are done earlier.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move on to Questions Nos. 19 to 31, inclusive. We are due to finish at 4.12 p.m.

The Taoiseach: I will go as fast as I can.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can we take the reply as read?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Can we formally take it as read?

British-Irish Co-operation

19. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [10446/26]

20. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the British-Irish Council summit. [10456/26]

21. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at a meeting of the British-Irish Council. [11845/26]

22. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [70935/25]

23. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [70936/25]

24. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [70937/25]

25. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [70938/25]

26. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at a meeting of the British-Irish Council. [70963/25]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit in Wales. [7695/26]

28. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at a meeting of the British-Irish Council. [9963/26]

29. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the 44th British-Irish Council summit. [13982/26]

30. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at a meeting of the British-Irish Council. [14300/26]

31. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the British-Irish Council summit. [14750/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 to 31, inclusive, together.

On 5 December, I attended the 44th British-Irish Council summit hosted by the Welsh Government in Hensol in Wales. The theme of the summit was a creative future and unlocking the potential of the creative industries across these island, with a particular focus on the screen sector. I was joined at the plenary by a number of Ministers. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I updated council members on latest political developments, including in regard to Ukraine and the Middle East. On the margins of the summit, I had bilateral meetings with United Kingdom Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, Northern Ireland First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, First Minister of Wales, Eluned Morgan, and Chief Minister of the Isle of Man, Alfred Cannan.

British-Irish Council work sector groups are structured around three pillars, namely climate and decarbonisation, culture and heritage and economic and social inclusion, encompassing ten individual work sectors. Ministerial meetings in 2025 included one on transport in Belfast in April, an environmental ministerial in London in May and an early years ministerial in

November. An energy work sector ministerial meeting hosted by the UK Government took place in London on 12 February. The meeting was co-chaired by the UK and Scottish Governments. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, represented the Government at that event.

I look forward to attending the next British-Irish Council summit to be hosted in Guernsey later this year. At the UK-Ireland summit held in Liverpool last year, Prime Minister Keir Starmer and I agreed a wide-ranging programme of new and enhanced strategic co-operation entitled UK-Ireland 2030, to be taken forward by both Governments through to 2030. At our meeting at Chequers in September, the Prime Minister and I discussed progress under UK-Ireland 2030 six months on from the summit. We discussed infrastructure delivery, protection of subsea infrastructure, emergency planning, cultural partnerships and achieving renewable energy targets including across this island, North and South, as areas of shared interest. The next UK-Ireland summit due to be held in Ireland next month will be a key opportunity to take stock of our bilateral relations and to identify areas for greater co-operation to benefit people across these islands.

As we continue preparations for the upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we are committed to working with all concerned to advance European Union-United Kingdom relations as set out in the common understanding agreed last May, recognising, in particular, the benefits that an sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, agreement will have for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland. We further welcome the agreement of the EU security and defence partnership. We welcome the joint statement by the European Commission and the UK in December signalling their intention to reach agreement on SPS, emissions trading systems linkage and an EU-UK youth experience scheme by the time of the next EU-UK summit, which is due to be held later this year.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On the question of the UK and Ireland, Prince Andrew - I will still call him Prince Andrew in order to not dissociate him from the royal family - and the former UK ambassador to the US, Peter Mandelson, have been questioned or arrested in relation to the widespread international abusive behaviour linked with Jeffrey Epstein against children and young women or complicity in same. The Prime Minister of the UK could potentially be brought down over this. Does it not raise the issue of how seriously violence against women and children is taken in society when not one man has yet been jailed for the wide-scale abuse revealed in the Epstein files? The Taoiseach has chosen to go ahead with presenting shamrock on St. Patrick's Day and to smile and nod in the Oval Office of the White House at a man who is named in the Epstein files more times than Jesus is named in the Bible. That is the reality, yet there have been no political repercussions in the US whatsoever. The Taoiseach may wonder why I am raising this issue. I am of the view that it should be discussed in every parliament in the world. That is how important it is. Is the Taoiseach going to go ahead and greet-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is taking time from the other speakers.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----someone who is clearly a paedophile and who has engaged in all sorts of other abusive behaviour he participated in? He is clearly a paedophile.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I presume the Taoiseach saw the news ten or so days ago about the UK High Court's ruling to the effect that the proscription and banning of Palestine Action as a terror group is unlawful and disproportionate. The court also directed that it should be overturned. It was heartening to see the scenes of many protestors being released from prison. They are heroes. They are not criminals. They are people who have put their bodies on the line to try to stop the war machine responsible for a genocide in Palestine, but there are still many Palestinian activists who are in limbo and in prison. The UK Government has maintained the proscription of Palestine Action and intends to appeal the ruling. In Ireland, many Palestine solidarity activists, including those in Palestine Action, are still being dragged through courts on trumped-up charges. What does the Taoiseach say about the slide into authoritarianism happening across much of the western world, which is driven by attempts to suppress criticism of the genocidal State of Israel, and the use of anti-terror laws?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I would like to ask about this from a cultural point of view. There are a lot of things that we can benefit from that can come out of the British-Irish Council. I see local opportunities, particularly in County Louth, to enhance our Irish language, arts and music between communities. Omeath District Development, for example, has led a project. It is doing incredible work unveiling and celebrating our last Gaelic speakers in north Louth. The last native speaker was Anne O'Hanlon who died in 1960. She was from Lislea in Omeath. We need to celebrate stories like that and celebrate our Irish language. There is an opportunity, particularly when we look at cross-Border co-operation and our history with the flight of the Fadgies from Omeath to west Belfast. There are cultural opportunities that we need to focus on cross-Border and between our two islands.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Mar aon leis an Teachta McGreehan, díreoidh mé freisin ar cheist na teanga agus céard is féidir linn foghlaim ónár gcomhghleacaithe sa Bhreatain Bheag ach go háirithe. I attended a number of engagements in Wales earlier this week where we saw first hand the approach the Welsh Government has taken with regard to growing and nurturing the Welsh language through its education system and different cultural system. What struck me was the sheer multiplicity of approaches that are being taken by the central Welsh Government but also by the local authorities in terms of the immersion in education. They have created a full pipeline - from primary through to secondary through to tertiary - ensuring that people have access to Welsh-language education. I encourage the Taoiseach to think about that in our approach to second level education and that it is not just the aonad model but we have full immersion Gaelcholáistí and an abundance of those, especially in the midlands part of the country as well.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It will not come as any shock to the Taoiseach that I believe we need to have a proper engagement with the British Government from a point of view of a Border poll. The Government needs to get real about the possibility of constitutional change and has to prepare for this. That is an absolute necessity. There is a huge level of cross-Border issues that we could deal with now, irrespective of those issues that there are failings on - for example, issues in relation to taxation, in that remote working cannot be done cross-Border at this point in time. It is quite a big issue for a number of people in my constituency and the constituencies that border it. We have people who are being impacted now in relation to social protection payments, for example, if they were in a term-time job and are working in the other

jurisdiction. There are a number of these issues. We need to find a means of dealing with them because we cannot just keep talking about them anymore.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: During an interview with TG4 last week, the Taoiseach was recorded as saying that there is not a lot of substance in the current campaign for a referendum on Irish unity. The Taoiseach's dismissive attitude is very disappointing, especially given the hard work that many organisations are currently doing to advance the case for a united Ireland, such as Ireland's Future. Unfortunately, these organisations are doing the job the Government should be doing in terms of actively preparing and planning for Irish unity. When will the Government finally begin to actively promote and work towards a unity referendum on our island?

The Taoiseach: On Deputy Coppinger's contribution, the one person who was convicted was Jeffrey Epstein, and rightly so in terms of the horrific crimes he was found guilty of. With others, such as Ghislaine Maxwell, it seems he ran a very depraved criminal network trafficking young women. The law must take its course on that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Children.

The Taoiseach: Yes, and children.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Not young women.

The Taoiseach: It was young women as well, and children. The Deputy does not have a monopoly of horror on what happened. I will simply say that the law must take its course. There should be thorough and comprehensive investigations before we arrive at conclusions in terms of anyone else named in that. That is what is happening in the United Kingdom, although it is on a different issue in terms of material that emerged in respect of the former Prince Andrew and the former UK ambassador to the US and former Minister, Peter Mandelson, who have been arrested. It is a matter for the police forces to pursue that. In our view, that is what has to happen. There is no doubt that people are shocked about what has been revealed. There are more files to be revealed. The sooner that they are released in a wholly transparent manner the better.

Regarding Deputy Murphy's case, in many ways what that reveals too are the checks and balances within every political system and democracies. The authoritarian governments have been long established. There is increasing authoritarianism. In the United Kingdom, the Supreme Court ruled, so the checks and balances worked at the end of the day. That does not happen in every other country. There is a growth and increase in authoritarianism in countries like Hungary, Russia, Belarus and some African countries including the Sahel, where Russia has intervened and established essentially puppet governments. There have been *coups d'état* in these places, getting rid of democratically elected governments. The increase in authoritarianism is a worry.

Deputy McGreehan point was very interesting even though she did not get enough time to elaborate on it. I refer her to a shared island initiative called Shared Home Place.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: We have a grant-----

The Taoiseach: There is an application in for support. That is designed to capture exactly what the Deputy articulated regarding the story of Omeath, the Irish language and the migratory pathway to west Belfast. That would be very interesting. I presume the county council or somebody has submitted this and it can be covered. We will keep an eye out for that. That is exactly what was envisaged by the Shared Home Place initiative out of the shared island initiative.

On Deputy Moynihan's point, the Welsh approach to the rejuvenation of the Welsh language is the gold standard template that we should all endeavour to emulate. We have, as a country, in terms of TG4, which was really inspired by Welsh TV. There is Raidió na Gaeltachta and the other initiatives we have taken. I fully support full immersion Gaelcholáistí but the aonaid have a place too. I do not think it is an either-or all the time. From an educational perspective, there are pluses and merits. In Cork, we have quite a number of full immersion and we have aonaid that have worked extremely well also. There is a strong tradition in our part of the country in the whole Gaelscolaíocht area and Gaelcholáistí. It has made a lot of progress.

On Deputy Ó Murchú's point on taxation and remote working, it is an issue that we discussed recently in the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, group, which is the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, group of unions, IBEC and the Government. We meet regularly on labour market issues but we discussed this. This is an ongoing issue - the taxation treatment of workers North and South - and I am concerned about it. If I am honest, we have not made a whole of progress on it. The Department of Finance is working on it. It is meant to be developing a paper for us. I will pursue that with it. It is a fair point.

On Deputy O'Hara's point, what I said as Gaeilge was that there was a lot more substance in the shared island project than the Sinn Féin platform. For decades, I have been listening to Sinn Féin saying that Government must do this and Government must do that. It has not even produced a paper. It has not produced a single paper on its vision other than slogans. The shared island-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will get them sent to the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I am talking to Deputy O'Hara. Deputy Mac Lochlainn did not ask the question.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will get them to the Taoiseach. He has asked for them now.

The Taoiseach: The shared island initiative is the most substantive initiative in 50 or 60 years in terms of investment in Northern Ireland by a Government in the Republic. Those are facts. I get on with the pragmatic connecting of people in every aspect of life. It is not just about building roads, which we are doing, building bridges, which we are doing with the Narrow Water Bridge, or the Ulster Canal. It is about the investment in research. It is about the investment in Cuilcagh, for example, and geopark. It is about investment in Irish language in terms of different traditions of music. The musical archive has been a wonderful, funded

project from the shared island initiative. A lot of people are responding very positively to it, without any prejudice to the constitutional future of the island, which is well laid out-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach has to deal with the constitutional issue.

The Taoiseach: -----in the Good Friday Agreement as how we proceed. Fianna Fáil has always believed in substance on the North. We had a critical role to play-----

Deputy Louis O'Hara: What about the preparation for unity?

The Taoiseach: -----in the Good Friday Agreement. Now, we are in a modern era. We are living out the Wolfe Tone ideal of connecting people and reconciliation. That is a very important thing to do.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I skipped a Member in terms of his question. With permission of the House, Deputy Hayes can ask it now.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Taoiseach for his indulgence on this. The trade between Ireland and the UK is worth about €100 billion, while our total trade is worth about €350 billion. The gross value added of our creative industries is about €8 billion whereas that of the UK's creative industries is £124 billion. That is a little disproportionate in light of our population. It is no wonder.

I have some concerns about our investment in the arts more generally. The basic income scheme is capped at 2,000 applicants and there are certain restrictions on people reapplying. As the Taoiseach will know, The Complex in Dublin was closed. There are also planning permission conflicts between hotels and nightclubs and the word "arts" has been removed from the name of the Department of culture. This can be contrasted with the success of individuals, particularly in the British market. I think of Jessie Buckley, who won a BAFTA, and writers like Sally Rooney, who was unable to receive her Sky Arts Award in person because of her pro-Palestine Action stance. I also think of musicians like Jazzy, Reggie, Damien Rice and Hozier.

At the summit we are talking about, the Taoiseach said he needed to reflect on developments in the wider European and international context that affect all of our jurisdictions. I would like to hear about how the Taoiseach will support creative industries in Ireland to diversify in terms of trade with the UK and other countries and about what we can do with other countries within the British-Irish Council to support creative industries.

The Taoiseach: Over the past five years, we have invested very significantly in the creative industries and in the arts. This Government will continue to do that. I believe passionately in the arts. The arts have a central and civilising role within society. They create opportunities for analysis, reflection, critical inquiry and diversity. It is wonderful to witness the flowering of talent and ability from generation to generation. A new generation is coming on the scene. It was fantastic to see Jessie Buckley recently being awarded a BAFTA. I also think of the success of Cillian Murphy. I am sorry; I did not mean to knock over Deputy Dooley's notes. It was just a creative flourish. The basic income scheme is a first. It has not happened in every

sector but it has happened in the arts sector. Overall, we have constraints but there has been a tremendous flourishing of writers and in the worlds of drama, film and music. We need to maintain, sustain and celebrate that. Britain has always created wonderful opportunities for Irish artists. I hate using the word "market" but it provides a very important opportunity for our creative people. It is very often a testing ground before we go further afield. Our relationship with the US is also important as regards the arts.

Fishing Quotas: Statements

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I will share my time with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. I thank the Deputies for seeking the opportunity for statements on the fishing quotas for 2026. The Minister of State and I welcome the opportunity to further discuss this important issue and the concerns that continue to affect our fisheries and seafood sector.

The reduced level of quotas available for 2026 has caused considerable concern not only for the fishermen and fisherwomen directly impacted by reduced fishing opportunities, but for the wider seafood sector. Nearly all of the commercial fish stocks for which Ireland holds quota are shared with third countries, predominantly the UK. Only two stocks for which Ireland has quota, the sole and plaice stocks off the west of Ireland, are exclusively EU resources. The EU negotiates with third countries in order to agree on fishing opportunities for shared stocks for the following year. The European Commission has sole competence to negotiate with third countries on behalf of the EU on the setting of fishing opportunities. This is done on the basis of a mandate from the Council. Ireland fully engages in the process of setting this mandate to ensure our priorities and concerns are highlighted with the Commission and with other member states. The conclusions reached in Brussels in December are a culmination of these bilateral, trilateral and multilateral negotiations with third countries.

The scientific advice issued by the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, ICES, forms the basis for setting total allowable catches, TACs. The outcomes of the 2025 December meeting of the AGRIFISH Council resulted in severely reduced fishing quotas for 2026. This was mainly due to reductions in the scientific advice for key stocks, particularly mackerel. This is in addition to a 41% reduction in blue whiting, a 22% reduction in boarfish and further reductions in nephrops, which are more commonly known as prawns. These reductions were further compounded by Ireland not receiving its Hague preferences. Ireland's fishing opportunities for 2026 amount to approximately 120,000 tonnes, with an estimated first-sale value of €205 million across the main pelagic, demersal and nephrops stocks for 2026. This represents a decrease of €100 million to €105 million on the estimated value of the 2025 quota. This reduction in fishing opportunities will present ongoing challenges for fleet planning, processing throughput and coastal communities that are highly dependent on specific fisheries.

While the scientific advice is disappointing and, above all, concerning, it is important that we remember that the science is a reflection of what is happening to our stocks. The reduction in the scientific advice for mackerel reflects the impact of overfishing of the mackerel stock by certain third countries. Ireland has long been critical of overfishing by other countries and has been vocal about the inevitable outcome that has now come about with regard to the state of

the stock. As recently as yesterday, the Minister of State raised this matter at a meeting of the Council and called for the EU to take a strong position to protect our critical mackerel stock. He has done the same in previous Council meetings.

The 2026 quota outcomes reflect the continued balancing act between maintaining viable fishing opportunities and protecting fish stocks in line with scientific advice under the Common Fisheries Policy. For Ireland, this reinforces the importance of maximising value from available quota and maintaining high standards of quality and market positioning. My Department will continue to provide a range of supports and services to the Irish fleet under Ireland's €258 million seafood development programme, which is co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Commission under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund 2021-2027. In addition, last week, the Minister of State and I announced the 2026 fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development fund, which allocates €27 million for capital projects in Ireland's publicly owned harbours. This funding will support critical works across the six State-owned fishery harbour centres, improving safety, operational efficiency, environmental performance and climate resilience, thereby ensuring they continue to serve and support our seafood sector and coastal communities.

Notwithstanding these investments, I recognise that our fishing and seafood sector must be additionally supported through this very difficult time. Given the level of the challenge we are facing, a whole-of-government approach is required for an effective response. Along with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, I have committed to engaging with colleagues across Government to assess what framework of supports may be available to the seafood sector and to explore options within the constraints of both EU and national Exchequer funding and the relevant EU and national legislation, taking particular account of the constraints imposed by EU state aid rules for the fisheries sector.

To facilitate this cross-governmental approach, the Minister of State and I established a seafood sector group under the auspices of Food Vision 2030. Food Vision 2030 is my Department's strategy to position Ireland's agrifood sector as a world leader in sustainable food systems. Our fishermen and fisherwomen and our aquaculture producers are fundamental to delivering on that strategy. While my Department has adopted the strategy, it belongs to all of the stakeholders who engaged in drawing it up at the very start. The establishment of the Food Vision seafood sector group signals the seriousness with which we intend to address the challenges facing our catching sector, both inshore and offshore, our aquaculture operators, our co-operatives and our processing sector. The group will consider the challenges facing all three components of the Irish seafood sector: catch fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing. It is also tasked with developing a framework of measures to respond to these challenges.

The Food Vision seafood sector group's membership includes industry representatives and relevant Departments and State agencies. Our aim is to draw on the collective experience and expertise of industry stakeholders to identify practical supports and develop a framework of both short- and long-term measures to help the sector navigate these challenges effectively. Solutions to be considered are in areas such as improving competitiveness and efficiency, developing existing market opportunities and considering areas where the sector can innovate. The group, which held its first meeting last week, is chaired by Michael Berkery. Mr. Berkery has been tasked with drafting a chairman's report by June.

I again thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for facilitating these important debates. I am happy to hand over to the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. I apologise in advance that I cannot stay for the entirety of the debate due to commitments in the Seanad shortly. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's office also for facilitating this important debate.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Minister, Deputy Heydon, for his continued support and the full stretch of his Department, in particular, in the area of marine and fisheries.

As the Minister indicated, the most significant element of the reduction in fishing quotas for 2026 is the reduction in the mackerel quota. It has had a very significant impact, not just on the catching sector but also on the processing sector because we control so much of that stock and have developed that fishery over many years. While there are many reasons a fish stock can fluctuate over time, for example, climate change and increasing sea temperatures are impacting on the stock's ability to reproduce, it is clear in the case of mackerel that the years of overfishing caused by third countries setting unilateral, unsustainable quotas is taking its toll on the stock.

In my time in this role, at every opportunity, I have called for action against those countries which overfish mackerel. We must be wider than that. We focus on mackerel but the level of overfishing by third countries is impacting across all species and impacting other countries equally. Given that Ireland holds the largest share of the EU quota for mackerel in the Western Waters area, Ireland's catching and processing sectors are the most exposed to the impacts of reductions in this stock.

On behalf of the Government, I have called for the EU to send a clear message that actions that threaten the sustainability of our shared stocks are not acceptable. I have raised this matter on a number of occasions at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, including in October and January when I called for urgent EU action needed on the north-east Atlantic pelagic stocks, particularly mackerel.

I have also emphasised the need for unity by way of a concerted EU response, including the option of triggering the unsustainable fishing regulation. Commissioner Kadis advised us at the December Council that measures would be explored by which action can be taken against third countries whose actions have caused such substantial damage to this shared natural resource. I reiterate that it is imperative that we do so. However, it is worth noting that not every member state agrees with the position we take on this. For geopolitical and other reasons, including relationships that exist between other countries in Europe and these third countries, there seems to be some resistance to invoke the unsustainable fishing regulation. It is well past time for that to happen. It has to be used as a methodology of ultimately getting a sharing arrangement that we find acceptable and that operates within scientific limits.

Even since the December Council, where the fishing opportunities for 2026 were adopted, we have seen questionable actions taken by third countries in how we manage the mackerel stock of the north-east Atlantic. In December, Norway, the UK, the Faroe Islands and Iceland agreed on management arrangements for mackerel for 2026 which excluded the EU. By the way, they excluded Greenland as well. EU countries were unaware that they were even attempting to put a deal together. They announced it as a *fait accompli*. It does not take a genius to figure out that they are not serious about an appropriate sharing arrangement or a

recognition of the necessity to conserve the stock for the future of all member states that fish that species.

The ICES headline advice for mackerel for 2026 is 174,357 tonnes, representing a reduction of approximately 70% on the 2025 total allowable catch. This advice figure is based on a 50% probability that the stock will recover to what is referred to as Blim, or biomass limit, in 2027. Blim means the level of spawning stock biomass, in other words, the amount of sexually mature fish in a population, below which recruitment, that is, reproduction, is impaired or the stock dynamics are unknown.

However, the four parties to which I referred - Norway, the UK, the Faroe Islands and Iceland - have based their arrangements on a total allowable catch of almost 300,000 tonnes, which is significantly greater and with less emphasis on conservation. This represents a reduction of 48%, as opposed to the 70% which Europe opted for. This figure is based on an alternative catch scenario given by ICES based on application of the maximum sustainable yield, MSY, rule, ignoring that the stock is below Blim and is based on a 57% probability that the stock will recover to Blim in 2027. I know that is a bit long-winded. It has taken those of us who are involved in this some time to understand the methodologies used in the scientific analysis. It is clear from a casual observation that the approach being taken by the third countries is excluding the science. They are suggesting they are accepting some element of it, but then they do not include Greenland or the EU in the way they have allocated that cohort of stock. It is using a bully-boy approach of grabbing all they can and leave the rest of us to decide whether we want to ignore science or accept it.

The EU has about 20% of the overall catch in the sharing arrangement for mackerel. At a European level, we are minded to follow the science, rightly so. We are trying to be good citizens and work towards conservation. These countries, which control potentially 80% of the catch, are ignoring the headline advice. The question rightly put to us on a regular basis by fishers in Ireland is why we would bother conserving when we are only in control of 20% and the others take a raw abandon approach to the other 80%. Are we, they ask, just saving it for those countries? That is a valid question that is asked every day, and one I continuously put to the Commissioner, as we did again just yesterday in Brussels. What we are trying to do is push the Commission, on behalf of the European Union, into a more energised approach to negotiations. We need to get this matter resolved because our coastal communities are impacted very significantly. It is a source of annoyance when they continue to see open and fair trade with Norway in particular, yet Norway is, to anyone's mind, misbehaving in relation to the conservation of this important stock.

A meeting will be held early next month in Copenhagen between the EU and the third countries under the coastal states arrangement. I am hopeful that we will see some advances there. There will have to be compromise on all sides, but it has to be fair for everybody. That is what most impacts our sector and fishers, men and women. The next round of those coastal states consultations will take place on 5 and 6 March in Copenhagen. If there is a decision or some outcome from that, we expect to see it before the March AGRIFISH Council, which will be held at the end of March. I will continue to highlight that in the coming months.

Yesterday, we raised a point on this issue under "any other business", and we got considerable support from a number of countries, in particular Germany, Spain, Portugal, Sweden and Belgium. They joined with us, and then we had positive comments from others,

including France, Poland, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and Denmark. Bit by bit, we are building alliances around a recognition of the importance of getting a deal done on a comprehensive sharing arrangement that would transcend the current position.

I hope we can get something that is lasting for the next number of years. When we talk to the scientists in the Marine Institute, it is very clear that they have concerns about the state of mackerel and other stocks. If we could get a comprehensive sharing arrangement over a number of years, we would have the potential then to see some recovery. That would give certainty to the fishing fleets, the processing sector and coastal communities. As the Minister outlined, we saw this right from the start when the fishing industry, the Minister, I and others met with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste back in December. We knew where the scientific advice was going. The Minister was very clear at the time that we needed to put in place a framework of supports to assist the fishing sector in all its guises through that difficult period.

What we have to see with these reduced quotas, which are in line with the scientific advice, is a timeframe for conservation. We need to see it almost in a positive light, but there is nothing positive for the people who do not have fish to catch and process and have to raise their kids.

The work the Minister outlined has begun, with the task force led by Michael Berkery. This is an opportunity for all facets of the sector to bring forward proposals and ideas. Of course, we will not be able to fund all of them and we will never have the quantum of money available to us to meet everybody's needs. This is about having a baseline and sending a signal to the sector that the Government sees the importance of it and is prepared to stand by and support it during the period of stock recovery. There is little point in us investing in that and bringing forward ideas if others outside the Union are effectively going to fish it out anyway. We are on a hiding to nothing if that is the case. The immediate issue is to get that arrangement and relationship back on track and get everybody locked into whatever the number is, whether it is the upper or lower figure, whether it is the MSY, the Blim or the approach we are taking or whether it is 174,000 tonnes or 299,000 tonnes. We have to figure out how to share it among all concerned, get on with it and start the conservation measures that are necessary. That needs to happen.

As the Minister said, the mackerel fishery for us is principally in the first half of the year, probably the first three or four months. As such, we need to know what the total allowable catch is for this year and give that information to our fishers in order that they can plan their activities. There are not too many other options for them. There was a time when other stocks were available and they could switch. It is the same with some of the inshore fishermen. They are struggling and need our support.

I thank the Members who sought this opportunity to have a discussion. I look forward to the rest of the contributions.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I had the chance last December to lay a number of facts on the table. I am going to repeat them. We need to speak out with passion about the rottenness of the Common Fisheries Policy and, I am sorry to say, the rottenness of the approach of the European Commission to all of this. Let us talk about the big five. These are the Dutch corporations that dominate so much quota across the European Union. The Common Fisheries Policy allows these huge corporations to legally buy up quota across the European Union. They control one sixth of the fish resource. That figure is probably even higher now, as it is from

the last documented figures we have. The influence these corporations have is absolutely extraordinary. I am very clear that the big five Dutch-based corporations had more influence over the Netherlands, France, Germany and Poland than our country when it came to the Hague preferences. That is a shocking moment. I am sorry to say this, but our Taoiseach has been absent without leave in relation to all of this.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Where the hell is he? How can he not speak out about what is happening? Everybody in the industry across Europe knows of the domination of these corporations and the control they have over policy. Everybody knows that they were able to influence those governments to stop the Hague preferences being invoked by Ireland. That has been our right for decades. It was a protection because of the access we gave to our waters. The UK was also able to avail of the Hague preferences. Now we are on our own. I believe these countries picked on this State of about 5 million people and utterly shafted us at the behest of major corporations.

It is not just the Common Fisheries Policy and what happens within our waters. These corporations are investing in the industries in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, and I am sure they are partnering with industry in Norway. They are industrialising fishing. They are recklessly overfishing and are benefiting on the double when they come back and remove the Hague preferences from Ireland. What has happened here is utterly scandalous. It is rotten and corrupt. We have to say it out loud as a country. What on earth is Germany doing backing this utterly reprehensible behaviour, which goes against all the principles the European Union is supposed to stand for? Climate change - forget about that. Protecting vulnerable coastal communities - forget about that. Rewarding people who are involved in low-impact fishing - forget about that. Standing up for the little guy - forget about that. Making sure there is fairness and equality - forget about that. That is what all of this has amounted to. It is of the utmost seriousness.

I find it deeply sad that, in a country that is surrounded by water, an island nation, there has not been more media focus on this. In fairness, with a couple of honourable exceptions, I am astonished at the lack of media focus in Ireland on this issue. What is happening here is devastating for our fishing communities. How on earth can they not investigate the big five? I have a report here from the campaign group Bloom, which produced it a couple of years ago. I have another report entitled, *Competing for Fish: How One Dutch Company Is Slowly Taking Over Much of Europe's Fishing Sector*. These are investigative journalists. Where are the investigative journalists in Ireland? Where is the spotlight on these companies and what is going on? Why are they not asking questions? Why are they not looking for who joined the Dutch Government in its lobbies to the German, French and Polish Governments? Who was at the table? Are there exchanges or freedom of information requests? Where are our journalists during such an attack on our national interest? I would argue it is an unprecedented attack on our fishery resource. We know that the Common Fisheries Policy has been terrible, but what happened last December was an absolute new low.

It is critical that this task force now adequately financially compensates our sector to get us through this, but there has to be a plan. I am sorry to say it, but our Taoiseach is not at the

table. He is not standing up for our interests. I know the Minister of State is doing his best, but the Taoiseach, whose job this is, is absent.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister of State does not need me to tell him that 2,300 jobs, at a conservative estimate, in our coastal communities are in jeopardy because of the quota deal reached in December 2025. The wider economic hit could reach €200 million. In ports like Dunmore East in my home county of Waterford, families are asking whether there is a future for them and their industry. When you step back and look at the decisions and attitudes of successive governments, their actions and, more critically, their inaction, it is impossible not to arrive at a conclusion that what we are witnessing now is the outworking of a managed decline and a slow, steady concentration and then reduction of our indigenous fishing industry. It is the hollowing out, decade after decade, of a noble, sustainable and economically vital way of life. What do we get then? We get acquiescence, silence and hand-wringing. We get Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael politicians offering tea and sympathy, promising to listen but failing to hear, saying something must be done while steadfastly refusing to do anything that would actually arrest that decline. Now, on this side of the House, the industry advocates for coastal communities are reduced to calling for life support. Even that is delayed, negotiated and made contingent.

Irish fishermen have abided by the rules. They have tied up their vessels when they have been asked. They have taken the quota cuts on the chin. They have invested in sustainability. Meanwhile, the Netherlands, Germany, France and Poland moved to block the invocation of our Hague preferences, protecting their interests and the interests of a number of corporations while ours were exposed. Did the Government even take legal advice on challenging this? That is an important question that has to be put. Was legal advice sought on challenging this? In advance of the December negotiations, I raised this directly with the Taoiseach and urged him to intervene, as Head of Government, at that level with other Heads of Government with national delegations. Freedom of information records show he did precisely nothing. He met with the industry but did not lift the phone.

Decades of deflection reached their pinnacle in the political abandonment of the Minister of State, his negotiating team and officials and our fleet and coastal communities by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste in December last year. Other member states fight hard for their fleets. Their Heads of Government pick up the phone, build those alliances and draw red lines but in Ireland, the Head of Government sat on his hands.

Let us take one example. Belgium can catch 450 tonnes of sole in Irish waters but the entire Irish fleet is left with just 28 tonnes. Belgium has less than half the coastline of Waterford but it has 450 tonnes of sole in Irish waters, while the Irish fishing fleet is left with just 28 tonnes. This is a recurring pattern across fisheries. It affects mackerel, prawns and other key stocks. This is not just about conservation. Conservation matters and is critical. Stocks must be protected and science must guide us but it is not a conservation crisis alone. It is about fair access and sovereignty. When our State provides some of the richest fishing waters in Europe but repeatedly sees its own fleets marginalised, people are entitled to ask serious questions. There are plenty of fish in our waters to sustain our industry and meet our conservation objectives but we are not doing that.

There cannot be any return to business as usual. An already fragile industry has been placed on a fatal course unless there is a radical reset in Ireland and in how we approach fisheries policy at European level. The Minister of State knows I come from a coastal community and county. I represent communities where fishing is not just an item or economic activity but a living tradition. Families in Dunmore East, Helvick, Passage East, Bunmahon and all along our coast have given generations to this industry. It is skilled, dangerous and honest work that underpins processors, hauliers, chandlers and small local businesses right across the south east.

It is now dangerously close to the point of no return; some would argue it is long past that. That is why we need urgent action. The task force the Minister of State has established should have been established before now. While we welcome that it is finally in place, it must not become just another talking shop. The terms of reference must reflect what the seafood sector has demanded and its recommendations must be acted on quickly. We need a commitment from the Government that its recommendations will be taken seriously. The Minister of State will understand the cynicism of coastal communities and the industry. Every time they see a task force, punishment generally follows.

We need adequate financial support for fishermen and seafood producers over the coming years. We also need a clear plan to secure a fair allocation of fish under the Common Fisheries Policy or we need to be done with it. We need to draw red lines and talk very seriously with our European partners about this. Crucially, and the Minister of State has heard us on this, we need to back our inshore sector. We support the demand by the National Inshore Fishermen's Association and others for income stabilisation and compensation schemes. It works in agriculture. We see farmers benefiting from similar schemes. We need to see something now as this industry is in crisis. For too long, we have this acquiescence, silence and hand-wringing. We need a new departure and we need it now.

Deputy Martin Kenny: Deputy Mac Lochlainn spoke about the "big five" and the big corporations that are out there, which have such power. They seem to have more power than countries and certainly seem to have more power than Ireland. That seems to be what the outcome of this is. We also have to recognise that their role in all this has brought us to where we are. It is these very corporations and their greed, where they put out these massive, big factory ships and absolutely decimate our waters. They just suck up everything and destroy the fishing beds and everything for the future. They are the ones that have caused the stock crisis and environmental crisis, but we now find ourselves in the position that the European Union is trying to salvage the situation and the very ones that destroyed it are the ones being rewarded for it.

While the Minister of State is obviously in his position, we need to recognise that this is a national crisis. The Taoiseach needs to step into the breach here and recognise it as such. We have a situation where fishing boats in Ireland, which people in fishing communities have invested their lives in, will go out to sea this year with a quota for possibly a week or ten days. Are they supposed to make a living from that? Factories may only be open to do processing for a few weeks, such is the low level of quota we are looking at. That will be decimation for the future and capacity of the industry, if things do improve. If this plan to get stocks to recover were to work, and I doubt very much it will because the corporations will continue to do what they have done, where will the capacity be in three, four or five years' time for our industry to be able to deal with a recovery in the fishery? It could not do it because it will be gone. Giving

some kind of dole will not solve the problem. While there has to be income support and we have to try to salvage what we can, it is so important that we recognise this as the national crisis it is.

We have a vast scale of fisheries in Irish waters that have been totally plundered for decades, not only by fisheries from outside the European Union but by ones within it as well. Belgium, the Netherlands and these companies and countries have totally taken away the potential livelihood, not just of Irish fishermen but of other small fishermen from other countries within Europe as well. It has been a case of the biggest and more powerful corporations coming to the fore, destroying everything for everyone else and then being rewarded for doing so.

Our statements on quotas are really statements on what we are going to do. What will this Government do to step into the breach to defend our national interest, the environment and fishing stocks for the future? What answers has the Minister of State got? So far, all we are hearing is there are meetings, the possibility of some little bit of negotiation to improve things and that we are going to give some little bit of money to fishermen. This is a crisis way beyond that. We have to recognise that there has been a failure. Ireland's big failure when we went into European Union, which was the Common Market at the time, has been the fishing sector. The fishing sector was sold out from the very beginning. That is widely recognised. Now is the time, when we are probably at the darkest hour of it, for the Government to step up and recognise not just that we have to do something, but we have a plan and we will put that plan on the table. We need to see the Taoiseach and leaders of Government step into the breach to ensure we can deliver because this is a national crisis that has never been before.

On the issue in regard to the Hague preferences, this was a guarantee going back to 1976. What happened to it? It was just tossed away at the whim of the big corporations.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Martin Kenny: We need to see an action plan. With due respect to the Minister of State, that action plan has to be driven by the very top of Government.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: It feels like *déjà vu*. We are back in the Chamber again discussing the ongoing crisis in our fishing industry. Somehow, it has worsened yet again. Our fisheries sector, for the nearly 17,000 people who work in it, who are just trying to do their best, make a living and support their communities, is completely swimming against the tide at this point.

I will speak on two deeply connected issues affecting our coastal communities. At the end of December 2025, the new EU fishing agreement was signed off by the EU fisheries Council. It will be catastrophic for Ireland. That agreement will result in an estimated €94 million in losses for the fishing industry in Ireland in 2026 alone. The second issue is the recent announcement of a €27 million investment under the fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme. Both these issues are deeply connected. Representatives from the Irish fishing industry, in the audiovisual room at the end of January, outlined how severely reduced fishing opportunities will result in utter devastation, with one saying that some vessel operators will be restricted to 20 fishing days per year, when other countries are still overfishing.

The deal reduces Ireland's fishing quota by 57,000 tonnes. Over 2,300 jobs in our coastal communities face immediate danger, with a wider economic impact potentially reaching €100 million. Communities such as Killybegs, Castletownbere and Howth are not just statistics on a page. They are towns built around fishing, processing, engineering and supply chains. The consequences for them could be devastating. Representative bodies have stated that Ireland's fishing quotas will have fallen by 94,500 tonnes within two calendar years by 1 January 2026. By then, Ireland's total combined fish quotas within our exclusive economic zone will stand at just under 120,000 tonnes, valued at approximately €140 million.

They have been pointing out that, by stark contrast, other EU member states, along with certain other countries, have overfished against scientific evidence or advice and that Ireland is now paying the price. Sustainability cannot be one-sided; it must be observed by all. For many coastal communities, the figure given is not abstract. It is not a negotiating position or a statistical adjustment; rather, it represents boats tied up, incomes reduced and generational fishing businesses placed under further strain.

I welcome that the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, will be raising the need for the EU to take a strong position to correct our critical mackerel levels and the setting of the total allowable catch for mackerel that allows the recovery of stocks while providing a level playing field for fishing communities. The timing of subsequent announcements has been particularly difficult to reconcile, however. Shortly after the quota reductions were confirmed, the Minister of State and Minister, Deputy Heydon, announced a €27 million investment in Ireland's publicly owned fishery harbour centres. On the surface, this investment is welcome. Our harbour infrastructure is critical. It supports fishing, aquaculture, marine tourism, tourism in general and leisure activity. It underpins local economies from Donegal and Cork to Galway and Wexford. However, when we examine the detail of the investment, we see that a serious imbalance emerges, one that repeats the same inequality we highlighted here last year. Of the total allocation of €27 million, €22.6 million is directed towards six State-owned fishery harbour centres. Only €4.3 million has been allocated for local authority piers and harbours, and that €4.3 million is provided based on a funding rate of just 75%. Local authorities must provide the remaining 25% themselves. That is not the full extent of the imbalance. Before local authorities can even provide funding in this area, they must first pay for the necessary surveys and licensing costs under the MARA regime. Meanwhile, for six fishery harbour centres, the costs associated with the same MARA process are borne by the parent Department.

State-owned harbours receive an overwhelming majority of capital funds, and their regulatory and licensing costs are centrally funded. Local authorities receive a fraction of the allocation. They must co-fund projects at a rate of 25%, and they must front-load survey and MARA licensing costs before eligibility is even considered. That is not parity; that is structural imbalance. In Donegal, for example, Donegal County Council has responsibility for more than 150 small piers and harbours. These facilities may not be designated as fishery harbour centres but they are the lifeblood of smaller fishing vessels, inshore fleets, aquaculture operators, tourism providers and leisure users. They are economic multipliers in fragile coastal regions.

How many local authority piers and harbours exist nationally? What is the total number across all coastal communities? How does €4.3 million nationally equate to meaningful investment, given the scale of need in our infrastructure? If we are serious about fairness, the first step must be transparency. I am therefore calling on the Department to publish the total

number of local authority piers and harbours so we can quantify the true scale of the discrepancy and have an informed discussion about equitable distribution. This is not about putting one county against another; it is about the principle that all coastal infrastructure contributes to the local and national economy.

At this point, the message has been heard loud and clear along our coastal communities. Quotas have been cut at European level. Supports are announced at national level but the bulk of supports flow to a small number of centrally controlled harbours while local authorities are left to stretch limited resources across an extensive network of smaller but equally vital facilities. That approach risks widening the divide between large port infrastructure and smaller community harbours. If the Department believes coastal resilience is a national priority, as I do, funding mechanisms must reflect that. Fishing communities are not asking for special treatment but for fair treatment. They are asking for it to be recognised that coastal infrastructure, whether State owned or local authority managed, forms one interconnected marine community.

At a moment when confidence in the sector is shaken by quota reductions agreed at EU level, the collapse of our fishing community is looking increasingly likely, and the fishing industry hangs in the balance, the Government must ensure the domestic funding model does not compound the pressure. The investment is welcome but equity is essential for all fishing communities.

I agree with my Sinn Féin colleagues that an action plan is needed to redress the imbalance from which we have suffered for the past 50 years.

Deputy David Maxwell: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to allow the dire situation concerning fishing quotas to be discussed in the House today. The more time that I, being from an inland county, spend studying this industry, its history, its policies and its recent challenges, the more I note the deep frustration that exists within it. I will be honest. Based on my own research and engagement, I must share the frustration. Fishing is not simply an economic activity; it is about identity, heritage and family. It is the backbone of many of our coastal communities. When we talk about fish, we are not just talking about quota numbers or regulations but about livelihoods from the sea to the shore. We are talking about fishermen and fisherwomen, processors, transport operators, engineers, net makers, fuel suppliers and the many small businesses that depend on a vibrant marine economy.

I am happy that the Minister, Deputy Heydon, visited Killybegs last week and saw first-hand what the lack of quota means, not in theory but in reality. He saw the direct impact on boats tied up, on factories that echo with silence and that are under pressure, and on service industries that rely on activity in our ports. That kind of engagement matters. Seeing the situation on the ground gives perspective that no briefing paper can fully provide.

Alongside the economic pressures, there is something that cannot be ignored. Over many years, a sense has grown within the industry that it is not always viewed as a partner in respect of sustainability and national prosperity but rather as a problem to be managed. Whether that perception is fully fair or not, it exists. That perception shapes trust. This perception exists because we are all part of one CFP in the EU. How can it be that it is applied differently depending on where a boat is registered? Take Irish boats compared with Dutch boats, for example. Ireland's pelagic fishing and production is compelled to have the following, from

what I can establish, under rules imposed by the European Commission: standard weighing equipment with a 30-minute zero-setting interval, state-of-the-art flow scales across the sector, and weighing systems that must be under CCTV, with footage live-fed to the competent authority. I saw the latter in Killybegs last year. The footage must be retained by each individual processor for six months. That involves a significant volume of CCTV images maintained by Irish processors. We are subject to a sampling plan, and weight estimation must be carried out under CCTV also.

Between bringing fish ashore, weighing them and processing them, over a dozen different sets of documents, declarations, stock returns or electronic transport documents must be filled in and returned to the competent authority. Our fishermen are subject to all the full inspections and audits routinely but when I examine the position on Dutch factory ships in our waters, which are supposedly operating under the same EU rules, I cannot find evidence of flow scales and CCTV. I do not believe there is image retention for six months, and the same applies to sampling under camera. I do not know about cross-compliance. The ships are definitely not subject to routine inspection by the Irish competent authority and to any audit while fishing west of Ireland. Despite this, Ireland and the Netherlands are subject to the same CFP, as are other EU countries.

In the past couple of weeks, the waters west of Ireland had a number of vessels from at least eight different EU and non-EU nations. What was noticeable was the lack of an Irish naval vessel monitoring all these foreign vessels in our waters. Also missing from our waters, from what I could observe this month, were European Fisheries Control Agency patrol vessels. However, they can appear in our waters in the couple of months when our own Irish vessels arrive to fish. When trust erodes between an industry and the institutions meant to oversee it, the consequences are serious. Morale declines, co-operation weakens and dialogue becomes strained. Ultimately, progress stalls.

This year, opportunities for fishermen have been drastically reduced owing to a quota reduction of 57,000 tonnes, or 70%. As the Minister of State said, the biggest reductions are to mackerel quotas. This is not because of our fishermen's activities but because of overfishing by third countries. All these reductions are impacting up to 2,300 jobs, not in big cities or towns but on the edge of this island, with an estimated sales loss of up to €105 million.

Many in the sector feel that the decisions affecting their future are too often taken without sufficient understanding of the realities at sea or how critical it is to keep the product fresh and in grade A condition when it reaches the processors. They feel that regulations can sometimes be introduced in ways that are rigid rather than practical. They feel that enforcement can at times appear disproportionate rather than balanced. These concerns deserve to be acknowledged and not dismissed.

The fishing community in Ireland has shown time and time again that it is prepared to comply with the rules and adapt to change. Sustainability is not the enemy of fishermen; it is their future. They understand better than anyone that without healthy stocks there is no industry, but sustainability must walk hand in hand with viability. One cannot come at the complete expense of the other. Where enforcement bodies such as the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority operate, they carry out an important and necessary role. Oversight is part of any regulated industry, but enforcement works best when it is seen as fair, proportionate and rooted in mutual respect. When that balance slips, it can create tension that serves no one. I have met

the SFPA in person for only two and a half hours in committee, and an old saying came to mind that day: You could not like them if you reared them.

There are genuine concerns being expressed about the operational impact of certain regulatory approaches, about quality implications when landings are delayed, about repeated audits disrupting processing schedules and about the reputational damage caused by cases that ultimately do not stand up in court. Even when matters are resolved, the stress and the costs remain. We cannot afford an environment where mistrust defines the relationship between regulators and the regulated, nor can we allow divisions to widen in ports like Castletownbere, Unionhall, Killybegs and the others across the island. What we need now is not confrontation but a reset: a reset in tone, a reset in engagement and a reset in how we view this industry.

The people working within our Departments are public servants. Their role is to serve the interests of the nation, and the fishing industry is very much part of our national interest. It combines economically, culturally and strategically. It supports rural Ireland in ways few other sectors can.

This Government has an opportunity and a responsibility to rebuild confidence. That means ensuring that policy decisions are informed not just by data but by lived experience. It means creating structured, meaningful dialogue between officials and industry representatives. It means ensuring proportionality, enforcement and transparency in decision-making. Most of all, it means recognising that the men and women who go to sea in dangerous conditions are not adversaries but citizens, taxpayers and custodians of a centuries-old tradition. The downturn we have witnessed in recent years has not been inevitable. Some factors are beyond our control: international agreements, Brexit and global market pressures. How we respond domestically, however, is entirely within our control.

I thank my Seanad colleague Senator Manus Boyle for all his work in trying to make fishing front and centre for this Government. We can choose collaboration over tensions. We can choose reform over stagnation. We can choose to see fishing not as a shrinking legacy industry but as a modern sector capable of innovation, sustainability and growth. If we take that path, we can restore confidence in our coastal communities, we can create a system where regulation works for all without suffocating livelihoods, and we can ensure that future generations still see fishing as a viable and respected career. The frustrations within the industry are real. They should not be ignored but nor should they divide us. This is a moment to correct the course calmly, constructively and with the national interest at heart. Our fishermen and fisherwomen deserve fairness, our processors deserve stability, our coastal communities deserve opportunity and Ireland deserves a marine sector that reflects all that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is not the first time we have dealt with this issue. It is fair to say the fishing industry is - I would like to say apoplectic but I believe it is actually beaten down by the situation and circumstances in which it finds itself. It sees the deal a number of months ago rightfully as a betrayal of the fishing industry. It puts 2,300 coastal community jobs in immediate danger. We are talking about 57 tonnes less quota to fish each year, a loss of €94 million to the industry. Wider economic impacts are up on €200 million.

We know exactly what has happened. We are talking about the closure of factories. We are talking about it not being viable in any way for fishermen and fisher communities to continue doing what they have done for centuries. We have often been in here talking about sustainable

farming, but I do not think anyone has even used the term "sustainable fishing" because we have not seen it in any way from the point of view of it being sustainable for those people and their families who have done this for generations. Again, it is not the first time it has been brought up in relation to the particular issues in Clogherhead, where we have had, let us be clear, illegal operators that have put real pressure on fishermen. We are talking about operators from abroad. We are talking about health and safety and every rule and regulation being absolutely overlooked. Not that long ago I was contacted by a man who works in the field. It was about another sunken boat. He said he rightfully has to go through the ins and outs of health and safety procedures. He needs to ensure he has a sufficient level of staff. He needs to ensure that everything is done absolutely by the book. He spoke to the people who were involved in this sunken ship or boat and then he actually went to Clogherhead Harbour and saw them in operation. There were no winches and no protections. There were a number of people doing really unsafe things without the proper gear. They literally laughed him off when he told them about the issues.

I brought up this issue, as did he, with Louth County Council. The council is aware of the issue. I believe it has happened in other ports and harbours. They are looking at ensuring that pressure will be put on to change this. We need to make sure that we have a full-time resource and that there is a full-time person with responsibility as harbour master. We need to ensure that all that is done. I ask first of all, however, that we revisit what has been an absolute disaster and betrayal of the fishing industry. There is a very specific piece of work that needs to be done in the likes of Clogherhead and throughout the entire State from the point of view of cutting out this illegality that is cutting away from those people who have fished for generations.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Today, in the fisheries committee, we had a very interesting meeting on the sustainable management of the crayfish fishery. The Marine Institute's latest four-year study on the tangle net crayfish fishery in Tralee and Dingle shows us with absolute clarity what is at stake if the crayfish fishery continues to operate as normal. The substantial by-catch of angel shark and flapper skate as well as grey skate and numbers of other protected species will push these species further towards extinction. It is not a hypothetical risk; that is what the data tells us. Angel sharks, a critically endangered species, simply cannot absorb additional mortality. If we allow the tangle net fishery to continue unchanged, we are effectively pushing this species closer not just to local extinction but actually to global extinction. While this issue is closely tied to tangle nets and inshore fisheries, it also sits within the wider quota context that frames every decision an inshore fisher makes today.

We had a very good debate today on this issue, and inshore fishermen want to do what they can. They understand. They, probably more than anyone else, know the difficulties that the inshore environment is in at the moment, the challenges and the pressures that are put on it. It is clear from talking to those inshore fishers that what constantly happens is that when we do not get things right at a more national level, when we do not get things right at an EU level, when we have countries fishing for species that would traditionally be Irish quotas, it puts pressure on those fishermen, which in turn is like a domino effect, and it in turn impacts our inshore fishermen, who are the ones getting squeezed out of existence here.

When we talk about the fishing industry, and if people were to close their eyes and picture it, it is the inshore fishermen we are talking about and that is what we see. It is where the

majority of the boats are and where the majority of the local involvement and the employment happens. Unfortunately, they are bearing the brunt of an EU-wide system that just is not fit for purpose at the moment and they are absolutely being squeezed by it.

The one thing I know from talking to them is that they want to be part of the solution, and they are putting forward solutions. What we need and they need is a fair share of the quota. We need to be looking at ways they can diversify. We know with mackerel being hit the inshore fishermen recognise that the chance of their getting a greater quota than 400 tonnes is probably off the table for a number of years. However, we need to start looking at other species. We have discussed bluefin tuna and I think there is a real opportunity with that. I know that this, again, is a difficult one because, as a small player on the EU stage, if we want to get a bluefin tuna quota we have to get it from another country. That will be really important. There has to be pressure, and we have to do everything we can diplomatically to get that because it is only through the diversification of the inshore that we will be able to address a lot of the environmental issues the inshore is facing. Inshore fishermen need alternatives and at the moment they do not have them. They are being pushed into crayfish and brown crab which has its own difficulties. That impacts our environment and means species like angelfish will be gone and we will be responsible for it. We are one of the few countries that still has this species.

If we do not get this right, not only could we potentially force these species into extinction, but I also think we will be forcing the fishermen themselves into extinction. If you are putting all of your eggs into one basket and fishing solely for crayfish, that fishery is going to come under pressure. It may not be obvious now but there is only so much that any fishery can withstand. If all the effort is being put on one particular species, that is just not going to work. We need to have sustainable management of this. The fishermen are certainly on board to work with the Marine Institute, the Department, which was in today, and with the scientists to try to get that done. I ask that the Minister of State give as much support as possible to that. It will require finances. This is not going to be free. I know there is work under way on an income stabilisation scheme, which is really important, and I absolutely support the Minister of State in that. We need to make sure there is a financial safety net for fishermen. If we are trying to encourage people to move from tangle nets to pot fishery, pots cost approximately €100. That is expensive. It will require funding, but it will ultimately be for the greater good.

I mentioned one thing in our most recent committee meeting. I do not know if it has really been discussed in the context of this, but €3.5 billion is being put aside for the climate and nature fund. That is a lot of money being set aside specifically for those issues. I ask that the Minister of State look into seeing whether there is a way to develop a programme for inshore fishermen using that fund whereby they can still participate in their fisheries but also perform more management functions and biodiversity protection and for that to come under a nature scheme. We obviously have the nature restoration laws coming down the road and there will be requirements on us from a marine perspective, but there is an opportunity there. There is money set aside in that fund. We tend to forget about it when it comes to biodiversity, but I absolutely think that is something the Minister of State should look into, and I ask that he do so. As I said, we need to ensure that the inshore fishermen are not pushed to the verge of extinction here, including our environment. I ask that he support that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I was encouraged to hear the Minister of State's commitment to using every lever available to him at European Union level to address this because we are at an absolute crisis point for Ireland's fishing industry. I also heard him couch that within the geopolitical pressures this Government faces as a member state of the European Union, but there are obviously concerns. The guarantees given to us during Brexit negotiations are not worth the paper they are written on. Fishing communities up and down the country are facing a cut of one third of our fishing quotas. When I say the fishing industry, it is important to remember that this is our heritage. These are our communities, coastal livelihoods and traditions that are under threat. We have heard that cut of one third in quotas potentially threatens thousands of jobs. We also face the massive knock-on impact of this crisis on those communities up and down the coast, which will see less money in their local economies as a direct result of this quota cut. They are no strangers to hardship in these communities that have walked on a cliff edge since the introduction of the Common Fisheries Policy. The Brexit deal, where their rights were further eroded in the interests of getting a deal done, further pushed them towards the edge. They are now simply in freefall. We need those communities to be protected and supported because right now they feel abandoned. Tá traidisiúin iascaireachta na tíre i gcontúirt. Caithfear dul i ngleic leis na fadhbanna atá roimh na pobail ar fud chósta na hÉireann. Ní féidir neamhaird a thabhairt ar a gcrúachas níos mó. Ní féidir le maireachtáil le dhá thrian den ioncam a bhí acu, agus níl aon dóchas á thabhairt dóibh. There has long been an understanding at EU level when it comes to fisheries policy that Ireland contributes far more than we get back. To allay concerns we were given reassurances that such drastic falls in quotas as we are seeing would not happen. The Hague preferences were first introduced in the seventies to acknowledge that when the overall total allowable catch falls, that our coastal communities are not left with an even smaller share, which threatens their ability to survive and their viability as a community. We have since then seen total betrayal of those principles and a betrayal of Irish fishers at EU level. We need to have confidence that fishing can happen at Irish and EU level in a sustainable way, which protects fishing stocks and allows small fishers to make a living. However, for that to happen we need to give these goals the priority they need in making deals at EU level. We have seen how those deals, be they quota negotiations or Brexit, have left our fishing communities behind. We cannot allow this pattern to continue.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate on the fishing sector. As we debate this today we look at the state of the fishing sector in Ireland due to the policies of various EU Commissions since Brexit. As a result of the Brexit deal, we lost 26% of the value of our quotas overnight in December 2020. For that we cannot point a finger at the Commission in total, but I can point a finger at former Commissioner Barnier, who came into this House. I have said this before, and I repeat it. He looked me straight in the eye when I said how concerned I was because he was negotiating on behalf of the Commission. He said we would have no difficulty with the fishing sector because fishing and trade would be inextricably linked. Perhaps I was naive enough to believe that when Brexit was signed off on. I can blame him, but I can also blame the Government of the day. I recommended that we should veto Brexit. It might have been a big call, but if we threatened to veto Brexit, we would have had a different outcome.

Reference was made to the Hague preferences. For many years I attended the council of fisheries meetings in Brussels, particularly the attacks on quotas. I was a Member of the European Parliament and a full member of the fisheries committee. I waited over those nights

and met with the industry. The Hague preferences were always and ever invoked. There were times we had to go away and negotiate. We are talking now about alliances. We could not form an alliance to ensure we could have the Hague preferences invoked. It would have been so important to us.

That brings me to the tax and quotas this year and the reduction in mackerel of 70%. It defies belief that 70% was recommended by ICES for the coastal states but, on the other hand, there was a 48% secondary proposal for Iceland, Norway, the Faroes and the UK.

That makes no sense. It does not say a lot for the European negotiators that they allowed this to happen, but all is not yet lost. I know from experience that the TACs and quotas have to be written in stone by 31 March, so we have another four to five weeks to do that. The Minister of State made the case yesterday at the Council meeting. He must continue to make it. He has to work with the alliances that are there in order to try and convince the European Commission that we should not have to accept a 70% reduction while the countries to which I refer only have to accept a reduction of 48%. That is the advice that came from ICES.

In all the years that I have been going to and coming back from Brussels, never once did I experience something where the proposals for TACs and quotas proposed by ICES became the actual measures. There was always room for manoeuvre. Before we left Dublin, we knew that it would not be the proposal but a percentage of that. That did not change this year. What happened? The big countries, the Commission and, I have to make a political charge here, the Commissioner threw little Ireland under the bus. It was wrong of them to do that. When I was in my office, I listened to Deputy Mac Lochlainn speak about the big countries. I knew all of those people. I phoned them and they said "Well, this is business". In fairness, their countries made the case and they have the large percentage of the TACs and quotas.

The task force established by the Minister of State must step up to the challenge. I have been involved in the fishing sector since I was a student working in Burtonport. Working in it helped me through college. From there, I progressed to managing the factory in Killybegs. We set up a fish canning factory in Dungloe. I have been involved in fishing all my life, but this is the worst year I have ever experienced. This matter could have been dealt with better if we had support in Europe, but there was no support. The coastal counties and areas where there is no alternative source of employment have been decimated. We have to ensure that the task force looks after the interests of all those who have been affected.

Let me now make reference to the bureaucracy that exists in this country. Between landing, fish processing and exporting, we are the only country in the EU where someone has to complete 14 sets of documents in order to declare returns. Everything is now on computers, and they have to do that physically from the time that they get in. Even the drivers have to be computer literate. They have to do that when they get into the trucks. We are the only country that does this. How can we say it is a Common Fisheries Policy when other countries do not have to do this? That is a question to be answered by the SFPA. We will have an opportunity to do so again in the committee.

There seems to be an anti-fisherman attitude in this country. Regardless of whether it is the Department or the SFPA, they see fishermen as rogues. I have been in this industry all my life and I will stand up in any place on any platform and put my hand on my heart to say that they are decent, honourable people-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Hear hear.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: -----who told me many times that they did not want to exceed the quotas because then they were selling black fish, which brings down the price of the others. They are honourable people who get very little funding from the State when they go out to buy their boats and provide employment. It is so sad to look at the ports where I worked and processed fish. I processed fish in ports from Clogherhead to Dunmore East to Cobh to Castletownbere and up the coast to Rossaveal, Killybegs and Burtonport and on the Isle of Man. The people I saw were all hard-working individuals, but there is an attitude to them in the Department and at SFPA level. Any Deputy who is a member of the committee will realise that there seems to be such an attitude towards fishermen. As long as I am here, I will stand up for the interests of fishermen. Fishermen invest heavily. I hope the task force that the Minister of State has established with the support of his colleagues in government is not a box-ticking exercise. There must be positive results coming from that.

The industry has gone through very difficult times, but this is the worst period I have seen in my lifetime. There is a real question as to how the European Commission allowed four countries to cancel the Hague preferences is a real question. Where the Minister of State finds himself is a lonely place to be. I have been there and done that. You are fighting an uphill battle. The Minister of State tried his utmost to secure the support of other countries to ensure that the Hague preferences would not be cancelled.

The Commission has a duty to protect small member states. What occurred in Brussels before Christmas breaches 50 years of good practice and good faith. How can we and the sector have confidence in the Commission? I have heard some people suggest that we should await the review of the CFP. I would not be holding my breath. I have been there and done that at the fisheries committee when I was its vice president. I led delegations to Iceland. There was a time I thought that the Commission and Commissioner Damanaki were representing Iceland. She was doing more to support Iceland than she was to represent the country she was appointed to represent as a member of the Commission. I would have to make the political charge that the Danish presidency was not impartial and did not assist Ireland. I do not know whether or not this has been done but I again recommend that a letter of protest be sent by the Minister of State or, if necessary, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to the President of the Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to express our disappointment at the way we were treated last year. Let us be positive, look ahead and say that the Minister of State has our support with a view to ensuring that the task force will take all the elements into consideration. I believe some time, but not that much, will be needed to come up with proposals before they are finalised. Everybody in the industry should have an input into that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The EU fisheries deal represents another serious failure on the part of the Government to adequately defend Ireland's fishing interests. While the impact will be felt right across the State, it is coastal communities in places such as Killybegs in my constituency, Kilcar and elsewhere that will feel it most acutely. The Seafood Ireland Alliance is warning that this could mean a €200 million hit for the Irish fishing industry. If the Minister of State thinks that jobs will not be lost as a result of this, he is living in denial. It is an extraordinary figure. The consequences for Killybegs and many other areas and coastal areas will be profound.

Under this new deal, the safeguards of the Hague preferences were not applied. Larger member states resisted and Ireland did not secure their activation. We now face a situation where factories such as those in Killybegs, which operated three to five months of the year, could see their activity reduced to as little as ten or 12 days. The knock-on effect of that in terms of factories and jobs will be significant. It is not sustainable for workers, families, the community or local businesses. Similarly, vessels that should be at sea for extended fishing seasons may find themselves fishing for less than ten or 12 days before being tied up and parked in Killybegs for even longer than they already are.

Our fishing industry is resilient. It has adapted to regulatory changes over and over again. Those in the industry have invested in modern vessels and processing capacity against all the odds. It is long past time that the Government stood up for the fishing industry and showed a bit of a backbone. The Government knew that other member states would defend their interests robustly. When the time came, Ireland did not secure the protections that exist precisely to prevent disproportionate harm. It is only right now to ask whether we are building alliances, preparing strategies or using every available lever to defend our national interests.

There needs to be a three-pronged approach of attack. First, the Government must clearly set out what legal and diplomatic avenues remain open regarding the non-application of the Hague preferences. Second, there must be an immediate targeted financial support package for fishermen and seafood producers. Third, we need a strategic plan to secure Ireland's fair share of fish in our waters under the CFP.

Fishing supports families who have worked Irish waters for generations, it sustains rural communities where alternative employment is limited and it contributes significantly to exports and food security.

Our fishing industry does not want special treatment; it wants fair treatment. It wants the safeguards that were designed to protect it to be properly used. It wants a Government that approaches fisheries negotiation with the same determination that other states display. There is still time to mitigate the worst impacts of this deal but what it requires is decisiveness, transparency and, most of all, political will. This Government needs to stop abandoning the fishing industry and stand up and show a bit of a backbone.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Hear hear.

Deputy Charles Ward: I stand before the Minister of State again. I have raised this countless times with industry representatives and every week at the fisheries committee along with all of my colleagues from Donegal. This is the time for action. We all know the issues in the fishing industry and what we need to do to address them but the issue is will. There is no will from the Government regarding this. There is an absence of will and we are left with this debate - a fruitless attempt by the Government to demonstrate to the public that we are addressing the issue when, in fact, we gave up on the fishing industry decades ago.

This is not a criticism of the Minister of State. He is genuinely doing his best, along with his staff. It is clear he cares about this industry. However, he has been given a poisoned chalice. This poisoned chalice has been given to him through decades of neglect by Government of the fishing industry. There is no doubt Government has allowed this decline to happen. It has been

happening for generations. I have seen it where I am from - Árann Mhór island - where my family fished. We had Burtonport, a thriving port that is now a ghost town.

We allow other countries to do what they like and get away with it. There is no equality here. It is unbelievable when it is laid out. In 2010, Iceland and the Faroe Islands increased their mackerel quotas without consulting the countries which had shared interest in these stocks. In 2013, the Faroe Islands that increased its allowance of herring by 229%. In 2021, the Faroe Islands and Norway raised their mackerel quotas without agreement from the EU, despite the fact that Ireland is most reliant on mackerel. In 2020, following the Brexit trade co-operation agreement, 40% of the total value of the European quotas were transferred to the UK from Ireland. We let Europe sell this on our behalf. This is clear evidence that Ireland's negotiating power in this was incredibly weak. These are marine resources and they are worth a lot more than what we have given away.

In 2024, the UK signed an agreement with Norway and the Faroe Islands, dividing 70% of the mackerel between them, again, without involving the EU. We can see a pattern emerging. Today's vessels from EU states as well as fleets from the southern hemisphere can fish bluefin tuna in our waters while Irish fishermen are forced to observe because Europe has not allowed us to access this stock. French and British vessels continue to fish for seabass on our doorstep while we have not been able to do this since the 1990s.

The recent mackerel quota assigned to Irish fisheries represents yet another blatant injustice for our industry, as countries such as Norway, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and the UK have agreed a 40% higher allowance catch than the member states. Not only are countries not being penalised for overfishing, they are actually being rewarded for it. No matter how often we present these facts, they never fail to shock because it keeps getting worse. Our industry is clearly in decline.

The Government keeps trying to operate within a framework that has never been designed with our interests in mind. It is a fact that we are at a disadvantage and are trying to please Europe above our own needs. It is clear that the policy holds us back, yet there seems to be no appetite to ensure this outdated policy is updated and our position is renegotiated. Instead, the Government keeps us trying to work within an unbalanced system that is meant to work for us but actually works against us. We need to wake up to this. We need to make sure we take accountability. The Government claims our fishing rights have been taken from us as if we are powerless. We are not powerless; we have surrendered those rights. We continue to take a weak negotiation stance. We cannot continue to do that. We must stand up and take back our waters.

Will the Government and public representatives truly stand up and fight for the fishing industry? We have to stand up and fight. We have constituents up and down the land depending on us. Right now, we are not providing them with any cover for the future. The fishing industry is dying. Every single week it loses people. They are leaving. The Government cannot talk its way out of this, no matter how many debates we have on this issue.

I want to bring this back to the fishing communities. Fishing communities are the heart of the debate, particularly in Donegal. These are the people impacted the most. I can confirm there is at least one trawler in Killybegs that finished up for the season last week. It finished up in mid-February. The boat is now tied up for the rest of the year. The fishermen are without

work until the end of the year. Eight weeks of work is hardly what you would call a sustainable job. These are fishermen on some of the biggest trawlers in the country. Traditional small-scale fisheries are experiencing even more difficulty. They have significant cultural, social and community importance and must be supported financially. There is a very real need to reduce the special local draft net licence duty for Loughros estuary. I ask the Minister of State to please consider this. At present, a special local draft net licence is priced at €545, which €147 more than the cost of an ordinary drift net licence, despite a significantly shorter season and more limited fishing opportunities on the estuary. A reduction in the licence fee would be a practical measure to help sustain the fisheries while having minimal fiscal impact and sustaining a tradition that goes back many a generation. The special local drift net licence fee should be reduced before a 2026 season, in line with the ordinary drift net licence and in recognition of fewer fishing opportunities and a shorter season to apply to the estuary. I would be grateful if the Minister of State would come back to me regarding that.

We need to support our fishers and the industry as a whole, and do the best we can. It takes an entire community to build a successful fishing industry, and entire communities will suffer as a result of its decline. The Government has to stand up. What is going on is a decline in the fishing industry up and down the country. I have seen it happen in my own island of Árainn Mhór in County Donegal, where we had a fishing industry that is no longer there. I am so worried this is going to happen to Killybegs, and all the way down to Castletownbere. The Minister of State will stand up and fight - I do believe that - but we have to take it to Europe that enough is enough. The Faroe Islands have been out of control for a long time. We have to stand up and say enough is enough.

Deputy Michael Cahill: At the outset, I acknowledge the tremendous work the Minister of State is putting into this area at a very difficult time. He has visited every single fishing community at this stage. He is working night and day on this, meeting all the people involved in the industry, visiting fishing communities, meeting fishermen and fisherwomen, and owners of processing plants which export our fish and shellfish all over the globe. This is an extremely difficult time.

The Minister of State has inherited a problem. The industry has suffered serious and savage cuts, going back to when we joined the EU, more recently during Brexit and with the 70% cut in our mackerel quota and 41% cut in our blue whiting quota. We have to tackle the issue of Norway, the UK, the Faroe Islands and Iceland. It is fair to say they are actually laughing at us and getting away with blue murder, which we call it in Kerry. We need to contact the Commission and the European Court of Human Rights with regard to this serious matter. Our fishing communities are going to be completely wiped out if we do not act now.

It is important to preserve and rebuild our stocks, but it is also important to protect the livelihoods of all those employed in the fishing industry.

We are, it is fair to say, a small island surrounded by water. We are surrounded by some of the very best fishing waters. The Minister of State's heart is in the right place. I know he is spending more than 24-7 at this. He has been to Europe and Brussels at high-powered meetings. We have to keep at this in order to try to reverse what is happening. We need to ensure a future for all those involved in this area. I know that the Minister of State will do his best, as will the senior Minister and the Taoiseach, in regard to this matter.

I am member of the joint fisheries and maritime committee. It is disappointing that on an almost weekly basis when the Dáil is sitting we are talking about the difficulties being faced by those involved in the industry. It is all very well to provide compensation, but I think we need to do more. Ultimately, fishermen want to fish. There is no real need to encourage the Minister of State in this regard, because I know he will do his best. However, I ask him to do everything he can to try to secure the futures of Irish fishermen and everyone else involved in the sector. That is what this is all about. It is a difficult job. The Minister of State is relatively new to the job. He has only been doing it for 13 or 14 months. I wish him well in his efforts. If there is anything we can do, we should all fight together to do it.

I am not an expert on the European Court of Human Rights, but would it be worth our while taking a case before that court? We should leave no stone unturned when it comes to this matter. We will support the Minister of State in every way we can. I thank him for his work to date.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I know the Minister of State is doing his best, but it does not take a genius to recognise that the fisheries of Ireland have been sold down the swanny. The latest cuts to Irish fishing quotas constitute the straw that will break the camel's back. With a massive cut of 57,000 tonnes, estimated to be valued at €94 million, and an overall loss of €200 million to the industry, how can the fishing sector and small coastal communities survive this huge drop in income and the loss of jobs that will directly follow?

Irish fishers need the Government to create a suite of financial supports as a matter of urgency. Why is the Government not mounting a legal challenge to the blocking of the Hague preferences and referring the matter to the European Court of Justice? The Hague preferences agreements have stood for over 50 years. They bona fide agreements under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. As mentioned before, big five companies are monopolising and making millions from our waters by means of the use of trawlers measuring between 80 m and 145 m in length. Some of these vessels are capable of catching 400 tonnes of fish a day. The companies involved have a combined fleet of approximately 230 of these vessels and roughly 400 subsidiaries worldwide. If that is not market dominance, then nothing is.

Surely the Minister of State must have the power to summon the Commissioner, on behalf of the people, to challenge the activities of such oligarchs under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, Article 101 of which prohibits anti-competitive cartels from fixing market sharing. Article 102, the anti-monopoly rule, of the treaty prohibits companies with a dominant position from abusing it to the detriment of competition or consumers. Under the mergers regulation, No. 139/2004, the EU Commissioner can review or block mergers that impede competition and strengthen dominant players in the market.

These are some of the tools the Minister of State can and must use to save our fishing and coastal communities. My county of Wexford has many such communities, like those in Wexford Harbour, Kilmore, Rosslare, Slade and Duncannon, which represent hundreds of years of fishing traditions. The Minister of State must listen to the fishing industry and the Seafood Ireland Alliance and implement the fishing industry's eight-point plan to avoid the collapse of our country's fishing and marine industries before we sell off enough of Ireland to be but strangers in it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I was at a funeral recently. What happened there kind of summed matters up very easily. I was going along the queue and shaking hands with people. There was a fisherman at the end of the queue. What he said to me - even though I knew it, it shocked me to the core - was, "Thanks very much. Can I just say one thing to you? One day out - quota caught. Jesus, it's over." There was no point in me saying anything different. I shuddered when I heard those words. Hearing them was like getting a slap in the face with a shovel. The person to whom I refer said he was a fisherman; I knew he was anyway.

The Irish fishing industry, or what is left of it, is being pushed to the wall. Every fisherman in the country knows that. These are the facts, and they are grim. We watched and listened as our Government and then the Minister handed over huge amounts of quota during Brexit. We watched as the French so-called negotiator, Barnier, did a massive deal for his country while our fishermen were left shocked at the deal they got, which was delivered to them on Christmas Eve. I warned the Taoiseach at the time, but he did not listen. In the Dáil in October 2025, I spelt out the warnings clearly. The scientific advice coming from ICES was not just a tap on the shoulder; it was a sledgehammer. ICES recommended a 70% cut in the mackerel quota and big cuts in blue whiting, boarfish, whitefish and haddock quotas. I said that if those cuts went through, it would make life economically impossible for pelagic operators. That was not speculation; it was what I stated outright in the Dáil at the time.

While these cuts were landing like blows, the reality in places like Castletownbere was laid bare. Seventeen Irish boats were permanently decommissioned. Gone for good. Meanwhile, the roads into the town were being torn up by fleets of Spanish trucks hauling massive catches from the south west. Those catches were taken from waters in which Irish boats should be able to fish. This is a grotesque mockery. Cork County Council's job is to keep the roads in good condition for the Spanish trucks to take Irish fish out of our waters in Castletownbere. That is a sad fact. Go up to Castletownbere and you will see that parts of the road have collapsed several times. That is exactly what has happened.

This is not the only issue I have highlighted. At a meeting of the Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, I said that more problems would arise. Other EU countries were getting fuel subsidies at the time for their fleets; Irish fishermen did not get these because we did not apply. Why bother? It is one thing on top of the other. There is no explanation or justification; just the simple fact that Ireland has not secured the same support for its fleet that other EU nations obtained for theirs.

Then there is the weighing system. The current regime forces random weighing at the quayside, which leads to inaccurate numbers, especially for by-catches. Those wrong numbers feed into our already squeezed national quotas. This activity damages the demersal fleet. That is only one side of it. There are bigger, long-running issues that keep coming up. For example, I have been asking here about Rockall but nothing is happening. On the Hague preferences, we all know they are not worth a damn any more. There is Ireland's shrinking share of quota, despite the size and richness of our waters. These are not small details. I have repeatedly raised all these matters because they directly affect both jobs and survival in coastal towns. When the Dáil held a marathon fisheries debate, I and multiple other TDs outlined the crisis in detail. The message was the same: the situation is at breaking point. We highlighted EU quota cuts, the pressure on the whitefish fleet, the warnings about mackerel stock, the economic threat

to processors and who can get raw materials. These all add up. The debate made it clear that the industry is not just struggling; it is fighting for its life.

When people talk about investment in harbours or marine vision strategies, which are always welcome, fishermen are not fooled. None of that puts quota back in Irish hands. None of that reopens lost fisheries. None of that reverses years of policies and negotiations that have left Ireland with some of the richest waters in Europe, yet a fleet tied up to the pier watching foreign ships take the fish. That is the plain truth of it. Fishermen do not want spin, more committees or to hear yet another line about ongoing discussions. They want fair access to their own waters. They are currently being denied that. They want the same supports other EU fleets are getting. They want a weighing system that does not punish them for things they did not do. They want a Government that goes to Brussels and fights with the same determination as those of other countries. Every quota cut, closed fishery or decommissioned boat means another family put under pressure, another community hollowed out and another coastal town losing the very thing that has kept it alive for generations.

The message has already been laid out in the Dáil, at the committees and in every report and debate. The Irish fishing industry - what is left of it - cannot take any more.

Ireland holds some of the richest fishing grounds in Europe, yet the people living and working beside those waters are not experiencing the benefits. If the industry is to have a future, the concerns repeatedly raised in the Oireachtas must be met, and should have been met, with direct and meaningful solutions that protect livelihoods, sustain communities and ensure that Ireland's marine resources are managed in a fair and balanced way.

One question that I asked after this recent hammer blow is whether there is going to be a legal review. The Hague preferences were there to protect us, but that did not happen. Is there going to be a legal review? Yes or no. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could answer that.

What are these fishermen, who have spent their lives working on the sea, supposed to do? They are employing many people. If there is no fishing, there are no jobs. Most of these people are not qualified to do anything else but go to sea. What does the Minister of State suggest they do? I acknowledge that the Minister of State travels to coastal communities, which is always welcome, but what is he bringing with him? Did he go back to get more quota or are the big Danish fleets still stripping our waters?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to say clearly here in the Dáil that fishermen are the backbone of these rural, coastal economies. They are fundamentally important. If we get rid of them, if we lose them, and they are on the brink, what will become of these coastal towns? What will become of our fishermen? What will become of this wonderful intergenerational industry? What will become of the skill sets that we have built up for so many years? The Minister of State knows that this is fundamentally important.

With Brexit, the Government sold the fishermen down the line. The Hague preferences came, and they were sold down the line. Now, they are teetering on the brink. I have met many fishermen in Erris, Belmullet and Achill Island. They have said to me very clearly that they do not know if they will survive. They do not know if they can wait until they get a reprieve or

until their quotas are lifted. They may be gone. One gentleman asked me what there is for him to stay for. That is what is happening. If we break that link, it will be gone for generations.

It is fundamentally important that the inshore fishermen are fairly represented on the Government task force. Inshore fisheries make up 90% of the vessels and the vast majority of employment in the fishing industry. Fishermen are very concerned that they will not get a fair shake in relation to the task force.

There are negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy. I believe it is unfair that fishermen are completely locked out of this. I ask the Minister of State to look into this with regard to the next CAP. He will be the Minister of State during this period. It is fundamentally important that fishermen can receive supports. It is hard to believe that farmers who have assets and are very successful business people are receiving CAP payments, while fishermen are asked to provide their bank account details in the Department's own survey. They are struggling to survive and struggling to sustain all of the costs of the fishing industry. How is that fair? The answer is that it is not fair. I ask the Minister of State to do everything he can, until we can ramp up the quotas, to protect the fishermen who still exist in Mayo and across this country.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Our fishing industry is not just an economic sector, but a backbone of many coastal communities. In 2026, those communities are facing an extraordinary challenge - a 70% reduction in mackerel, a 41% reduction in blue whiting and a 22% reduction in boarfish. These cuts are based on advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea and were formalised at December's Agricultural and Fisheries Council. We have to be clear. The science is not the problem. The science reflects years of overfishing by certain third countries. Ireland is paying the price for unsustainable decisions made elsewhere. We will continue to press at an EU level for strong action, which we need to do, including the use of the unsustainable fishing regulation where necessary. Ireland cannot stand by idly while shared stocks are jeopardised.

I want to place a focus and emphasis on what the Government is doing to support fishing families and coastal communities going forward. While the stocks recover, livelihoods have to be protected. I welcome that budget 2026 provided for €157 million to support fisheries and the marine sector. We have to continue to implement the €258 million seafood development programme under the European maritime, fisheries and aquaculture fund. It has to be said that this funding is not just abstract. It supports vessel modernisation, safety improvements, harbour infrastructure, processing competitiveness, environmental sustainability and young entrants into the industry. It is vital. Some €27 million has been allocated for capital projects in publicly owned harbours in 2026, and I welcome this investment. The Food Vision seafood sector group has been established to develop a structured financial support framework for catching, aquaculture and processing. A final support plan needs to be delivered by the end of the summer. That work is critical, and I commend the Minister of State on it.

The impact of quota reductions is not confined to vessels at sea. It flows directly into processing plants, ice plants, transport operators, engineering firms, fuel suppliers and small businesses in coastal towns. If we allow processing capacity to decline during a temporary biological downturn, rebuilding it later will be far more difficult. That is why these supports need to focus not only on survival, but on maintaining strategic capacity in our industry. We

have to remain committed to exploring incentives to encourage landing in Irish ports, examining taxation supports for the sector, supporting diversification in coastal economies, strengthening agriculture and streamlining licensing. At an EU level, negotiations need to be had for the next multi-annual financial framework. When that begins, Ireland needs to advocate strongly for ring-fenced funding for fisheries under the Common Fisheries Policy.

Our coastal communities need certainty, not an annual sense of instability. Even in a difficult year, Ireland's fishing opportunities still amount to approximately 120,000 tonnes, with an estimated first-sale value of over €200 million. This is a sector with strength and resilience, but there is a fear that it really is being tested this year. It is of paramount importance that the Government understands that when fisheries suffer, entire communities around them suffer. I ask that we defend sustainability, demand fairness at an EU level, provide practical supports at home and ensure there is a viable future for the next generation of Irish fishers. Fisheries cannot be just about quota. They are about families, heritage and the economic survival of coastal Ireland in the counties that we represent, like Clare and Galway.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is great to have this debate in the House. As the Minister of State knows, fishing is a very important industry for County Louth. It is a working industry, from Carlingford Lough right up to Port Oriel and at all the small landing points along our coast. These businesses are employing local people, sustaining families and contributing directly to the regional and national economy.

The reality is that, in many ways, we have let down our fisheries in this country, and that is exactly how our fishing communities feel. I understand that sentiment. We have seen Irish boats tied up while foreign vessels continue to fish waters that Irish fishermen have depended on for generations. We have seen intergenerational fishing businesses disappear, not because of a lack of willingness to work but because of a lack of fairness, certainty and confidence in the system.

Stocks must be protected. That is not optional. Sustainable management is essential. However, sustainability without equity is not sustainable in any meaningful sense whatsoever. Irish fishermen are asked to comply with quota reductions of almost 70% in key species like mackerel. Those reductions are based on scientific advice. They must be respected, but they must be respected by everyone, not just by Irish vessels and the small inshore fleets, but by all vessels operating in Irish waters.

The problem is that confidence in enforcement remains weak. I have spoken to many fishermen in Clogherhead. They are exhausted and feel incredibly disheartened by what they see going on in our waters. The Minister of State will hear from them in a couple of weeks when he visits Louth. Parliamentary replies have confirmed that landings have, in some instances, exceeded scientific recommendations, and that investigations and prosecutions are limited relative to the scale of the industry.

That undermines confidence. It creates a perception and, in some cases, a reality that compliance is uneven. We need far better focus on monitoring and enforcement. We need proper inspection of catches at landing, secure and tamper-proof vessel monitoring systems, and oversight of what is being caught, landed and exported. We also need proper enforcement of crew regulations. All crews must be legally employed. All licensing conditions must be respected. The law cannot be selectively applied. There must also be oversight and

management of our harbours and piers. Abandoned or derelict vessels create safety risks, obstruct access and reflect a wider failure of oversight. If we are serious about managing our maritime infrastructure, we must police and maintain it properly. This is not about over-regulation but about enforcing the laws we already have.

Irish fishermen and fisherwomen are not looking for special treatment. They are looking for fairness, consistency and a level playing field. They cannot compete if foreign vessels benefit from access while Irish quota shrinks. They cannot plan for the future if enforcement is inconsistent, and they cannot sustain intergenerational business in an environment of uncertainty.

The fishermen of Carlingford Lough, Port Oriel and right along the coast of County Louth operate in difficult conditions. They comply with regulations. They contribute to our communities. They are not asking for guarantees but they are entitled to fairness and to proper protection for their industry. I know the Minister of State agrees with all of this, and that we need sustainable and equitable fisheries management. That means protecting fish stocks, enforcing quotas, policing our waters effectively and ensuring that Irish fisheries are not placed at a structural disadvantage in their own waters. We must take advantage of our EU Presidency this summer to secure target supports specifically for our fishing industry. That is not an unreasonable expectation but a basic responsibility of the State.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I strongly welcome that time has been allocated to speak on the changes to the fishing quota, which will simply decimate our coastal communities. I come from a farming background, not a fishing one, but to me the parallels between these communities are clear. There is the same resilience, the same connection to the land and the sea, and the same feeling of being taken for granted. The recurring trend I am seeing time and again is a failure by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to stand up for our fishing and farming communities when it truly matters. We see it over and over from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We get all the rhetoric, the promises of standing up for these communities, but when it comes to action to take a real stand, they are nowhere to be seen. The decision by the Netherlands, Germany, France and Poland to block the Hague preferences goes against the very essence of the European Union, the principles of mutual co-operation and respect for other member states. This was not just a policy disagreement; it was a fundamental betrayal of solidarity. Where was an Taoiseach? Where was the strong, visible leadership to stand up for Ireland's interests after that disgraceful decision?

For decades, our coastal communities have been suffering death by a thousand cuts. Make no mistake, the new quotas are nothing like the cuts before. They gut what is left of Irish fisheries and leave only bones behind. How much longer will the Government stand idly by as third-country vessels operate brazenly in our waters, overfishing with few if any consequences? Our marine resources are being plundered before our eyes.

EU policies have failed our coastal communities, just as they are now failing our farmers. The outsourcing of our primary food production seems to be the driving force of EU policy at the moment. This race to the bottom benefits no one but our competitors. We and our EU partners should be striving to build strong, resilient and self-sufficient food industries, just as we have built world-class beef and dairy sectors. We should be working towards a meaningful level of self-sufficiency in fisheries and across other agrifood sectors. Given the global

insecurities of the present moment, the volatility and the uncertainty, this is more important than ever. We cannot stand by while the hawks in Brussels raid the CAP budget, with money that should be supporting our farmers and rural communities to be wasted on arms and bombs. A safe and secure state is a healthy and vibrant state. We cannot have a healthy, vibrant state with harbours and farmlands lying empty. True security is about food security and control over our own resources. It is about ensuring that our coastal and rural communities do not just survive but thrive.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to speak on this very serious and important topic. Every one of us knows that Ireland is surrounded by water. We should and do own our waters and I cannot understand for the life of me how the UK is entitled to fish in the coastal waters that obtain to the 26 Counties. All up the west belongs to Southern Ireland up as far as the tip of Donegal. We should be entitled to fish it. How have they a say on us having to shed 23,000 jobs? What are these fellas going to live in? Will they live in the wind or the sea air? God almighty, people are so hard at it, and people cannot keep a roof over their head even if they are in work every day and night as well. This is hurting the whole community. It is hurting the shops, the service men, the garages and every sector of the coastal community. There was something serious wrong before this cut in the quotas at all. For the last three years, 2025, 2024 and 2023, no mackerel came into the villages of Kilgarvan or Kenmare. They are not to be seen and not to be had. Who is taking them? Where are they going? Why is it being allowed? Have we anyone who can shout "stop"?

We hear now that because of the EU Presidency, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade is going to bulk up our Army or whatever it is. I do not know what that is for. These people are down on their knees. They went out bad days and good days to try to bring home a bit of a living and to keep food on the table, all the way from Castletownbere, in to Kenmare and out to the Iveragh Peninsula, all the way along the Dingle Peninsula and up to the mouth of the Shannon Estuary. The Minister of State spoke about a task force. I do not know what good this task force is going to do but I ask the Minister of State to do something, please. This is his time. He is the Minister of State with responsibility for the fisheries. I am calling him out now because we had fellas there before who did not do their job. He is there this time and he has a chance to do something about it. I ask him to seriously get down to work.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: First, I thank the Minister of State for the investment in Howth Harbour as part of the fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme. It is great to see him out on the northside again and it is great to see that investment in safety works. He knows how much dredging and accessibility will help the fishermen and coastal community that I represent. The fishermen, marine workers and the wider community were very grateful to see the Minister of State there. However, I am seeking clarity on what he announced. Will the Syncrolift in Howth, which is more than 40 years old, be included? It is critical that the fishermen know if it will be. On dredging and silt removal broadly, will this also be included in other areas of Dublin Bay where sand is building up and creating a much greater risk?

On fisheries, I have a similarity to Deputy Healy-Rae. My grandfather was in Ballinskelligs as a fisherman over 80 years ago. He spoke to my family about the amazing work that was

done there. That industry is really on its knees. Deputy Healy-Rae would not think he would have me here shouting for Kerry but I am here now.

During the election, I was endorsed by Seán "Dublin Bay" Loftus's family. I had them in to the Dáil last week and it was brilliant to talk to them. They spoke about Rockall and how their father hung out of an airplane screaming that it is Irish. Is there any update on the current status of Rockall, in Ireland's maritime interests? I have heard multiple Deputies talk about enforcement in our seas. I also recently submitted a parliamentary question in regard to the Defence Forces being properly resourced to defend key ports and monitor vessels travelling through Irish territorial waters. I would like the Minister of State to follow that up with the Minister for Defence. We need clarity on what is happening off our coasts to ensure we have the capacity to monitor them.

We need cross-departmental support to ensure we have the capacity to monitor them. We have enormous economic and environmental potential with ORE and everything else being built off our coasts. We need to have the resources to properly monitor it. Regarding communities like Howth, the investment is welcome but we need clarity on what that money will be used for so we know how to support fishermen, protect our coastlines and ensure Ireland makes the most of the opportunity. One of the most frustrating things for members of the public is when they see potential not utilised whether that is ORE, fisheries or renewable energy, it all comes together in the sense that we need proper supports to additionally resource them.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I genuinely thank everybody who participated in the debate today. There will be differences between us politically and some will seek to make political points. I fully understand; I know how that works but they are here because they care about the various communities they represent which, some greater than others, have a stake in the fishing industry. There are other counties that do not. We even had Deputy Maxwell who is from an inland county but has an interest in it. I appreciate the level of engagement and debate and the genuine understanding of the challenges the sector is facing. There is a historical context to all of this which some are more familiar with than others. In relation to the establishment of the quota available to Ireland, some of it relates to our track record and history and when we joined the European Union. I know it is a burden on the minds of a lot of people who say we have fish in our waters, other people can fish them, why should we not be finishing them principally. When we entered the European Union our waters became a shared resource of the European Union. Somebody made the point and it is often made to me by members of my own family, how is it that Belgium with a relatively small coastline has such a fishing opportunity in Irish waters particularly the Irish Sea for monkfish and others? Your fishing effort in the past, historically, and your boats in the water prior to joining the Union had nothing to do with how much coastline you had; it was how those citizens established an opportunity and went out and fished. There is no correlation. Until you get into that conversation, it seems like, God, how did Ireland fall asleep at the wheel. Historically, there are countries with relatively small amounts of coastline who are mariners at heart and had been commercially fishing. They were explorers back in the day, etc.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Colonialists.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): We could be here a long time if we got into that. They were ahead of the game in establishing their fishing rights and they were grandfathered in to the agreements that came. We are working off the back foot. When we joined the European Union our sector was very small and underdeveloped. It has done well. Some really great ingenuity went into it around the coastline in particular the pelagics and in other areas. They have really developed and now they are hit with the quota reductions. It is one thing having a quota but when the quota gets reduced then you are on the back foot. We fought hard on the Hagues. A couple of people spoke about the Hagues and whether we will take legal action. We are still waiting for the Office of the Attorney General to peruse that in detail. I was very upfront and direct previously - a case not dissimilar was litigated previously in the ECJ. It was found that the decision in relation not so much to the invoking of the Hagues but whether or not they are accepted it is a matter for the Council. The Council decided with a blocking minority to prevent them from going ahead. That decision is taken so it is hard to see a legal pathway. I do not want to be the one responsible for putting a further financial burden on the State taking a case until we see there is a pathway through or a possibility. If there is any chink there, we will certainly go after it. I am regularly in contact with other member states. We are trying to find diplomatic ways to engage with each other to see if come next year there is a less hostile environment. It is not obvious at the minute but we will keep all of that on the agenda. The work continues to get the allowable catch agreed by the end of March. We are hopeful there will be some positive in that for us. Positive would be an allowable catch agreed by all the parties - coastal states and the European Union - which we can stand over scientifically and leads to sustainability because that is critical. We cannot have a situation where we mind the fish and do everything right and others which have 80% of the opportunity operate with raw abandon. There is no point then in us then being best in class because it will not work. We have work to do in that regard.

A couple of other issues were raised. I have addressed some at committee previously. The SFPA regularly comes up for discussion. I cannot interfere with the SFPA. It goes before the committee and has a role there. It is like An Garda Síochána - Ministers do not engage on individual issues but there is work that can be done. Having had a number of engagements with the SFPA over the past number of months and hearing the response in here, there is a recognition that the activities of the past of a different generation of fishermen have changed and perhaps the SFPA in its terms and conditions or the way it views the world has to align with that. We have to try to build a culture of trust between the two sides but at the same time be clear that the SFPA has a legal mandate which it has to protect, which it is doing. There could be an engagement there. There is work that can be done in terms of the rules and regulations. I take the point - the Killybegs one is particularly arduous in the guesstimation of what is in the hold of the boat. You do the guesstimation based on all the principles and if it turns out to be a mismatch with what ultimately goes through the factory, which is all recorded anyway, there is a price to pay. I have not been able to figure out how that makes sense. We have work to do on it and we will. I want to encourage that. The SFPA was before the committee previously and I do not think it worked very well. The SFPA will have to look at its engagement with the committee in its understanding of what the committee does and seeks to represent. Perhaps then the committee will understand, if it is fair and open, what the SFPA has to do. The committee now provides that opportunity. I would like to see more open dialogue not in relation to individual cases but on how we can improve things while retaining

the rules, regulations and protections. If rules and regulations become undermined and are not properly enforced, we will end up in a situation with the auditors at European level holding the Government to account. I know that is not what fishermen want. They have seen the way things have developed and the systems now in place such as electronic tracking. We have taken a decision to proceed with the designation of Killybegs but we now have to go through a process of some further equipment that needs to be put in place which we are working on.

A good few people spoke about how we managed to get from here to the other side in terms of the reduction of quota. Others have rightly asked if it is going to be another task force that will talk shop. I have given it a time limit, stripped it back to the bare in what it needs to do and proposals need to come out of it. It will need to get a framework of financial supports. I made it clear to the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste from the start that this will need ring-fenced funding to assist in getting through. I have no doubt when it is published we will be here again and it will never meet the expectations of the other side of the House. I understand that. That is the way it should be. There should be that tension here to keep all our feet to the fire in trying to achieve the best we can for all concerned. My view is we have three to five years of trying to hold the industry through a difficult period to get the conservation measures in place and then hope to see a recovery in the stock, hoping it is not overly based on climate change and the fish have not moved further north or out of our waters.

Issues about bluefin tuna were mentioned. There is an evaluation of the CFP due to be published before June at the end of the Cypriot Presidency.

I am hopeful if there is a review thereafter - the evaluation and then the review - that it is at a time like that where we can look at other potential opportunities on quota. The Deputy is right. Bluefin is coming into our waters with great regularity. There was talk about representation for the inshore guys who are primarily guys, or gentlemen. We ensure they are fairly represented. There are six of the inshore guys represented on that. We have to look at that separately. There are a lot individuals, small communities and small boats involved. We have to look for a medium- and longer-term support structure for them too.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State very much. That concludes statements on fishing quotas.

Special Needs Assistants: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the invaluable work of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), who provide essential care and support enabling students with additional needs to access education, is under unprecedented threat;
- the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), acting under the restrictive and outdated "care model" criteria of Circular 0030/2014, has conducted reviews under Circular

0032/2025 that fundamentally fail to recognise the full, dynamic, and holistic role SNAs play in our schools;

- of the 584 schools who have received the outcome of their reviews to date, 194 are facing devastating cuts to their SNA allocations, with some schools losing up to six posts, directly threatening the quality of education and care they can provide;

- the long-standing policy of fostering greater inclusion, which had as its centrepiece the principle of supporting children to stay and thrive in mainstream education, is now being fundamentally reversed and the current removal of SNA supports will make it significantly more difficult, if not impossible, for many children with additional needs to remain in mainstream classes;

- the NCSE is acting as an unaccountable gatekeeper to educational support, operating without transparency, and applying rigid criteria that disregard the complex and individualised needs of real children;

- the Government's claimed "pause" on these reviews has proven to be a cruel illusion, offering no clarity, reassurance, or halt to the anxiety and confusion gripping school communities already notified of impending cuts;

- SNA numbers remain insufficient to meet existing demand, a crisis compounded by a statewide shortage of appropriate school placements, leaving countless children without an appropriate school place to learn and thrive;

- an online petition opposing these short-sighted SNA cuts has galvanised over 70,000 signatures, reflecting widespread public outrage and support for these frontline workers;

- the failure to implement the promised SNA redeployment scheme has left dedicated SNAs, who have already been notified of job losses, facing an anxious and uncertain summer, unsure of their future employment and livelihood; and

- this round of cuts is happening at a time when the new SNA Workforce Development Plan is under active negotiation;

condemns the Government for:

- inflicting profound distress and anxiety on vulnerable children, their families, and school communities through a rigid, clinical, and deeply flawed interpretation of care needs criteria, that reduces children to a checklist of tasks;

- heartlessly removing SNA supports from students whose needs have not diminished, effectively pulling the rug from under children who rely on this support to feel safe, included, and able to participate in school life;

- operating behind a veil of secrecy, by failing to publish the review criteria or provide any meaningful explanation for its devastating decisions, leaving schools and parents in the dark;

- wilfully ignoring the full scope of the SNA role, which extends far beyond basic care to encompass fostering independence, providing emotional support, facilitating social inclusion, and acting as a crucial link between the child, the teacher, and the family;

— applying Circular 0030/2014 in a manner that effectively strips SNA support from autistic and neurodivergent children, on the basis that their needs are not classified as "primary care needs", and by classifying these essential supports as "secondary care needs" the Government is treating autistic and neurodivergent children less favourably than other children with additional needs, and this approach is in direct breach of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, and potentially the Equal Status Act 2000, both of which guarantee fair and equitable access to services, including education; and

— creating a chaotic and deeply worrying environment for parents of children with additional needs by failing to provide an appropriate school place for every child with additional needs; and

calls on the Government to:

— immediately provide long-overdue clarity and a direct apology to every school, SNA, and family that has been informed of a pending cut, ending the cruel uncertainty they face;

— abandon the disastrous 2025/2026 SNA review in its entirety and immediately reverse all cuts, affirming that the needs of children, not bureaucratic spreadsheet formulas, will determine resource allocation;

— commit to a root-and-branch review and replacement of the outdated Circular 0030/2014, developing a new, fit-for-purpose framework, that recognises the evolving and essential role of the SNA in supporting the holistic needs of the child;

— urgently prioritise and publish a comprehensive SNA Workforce Development Plan, developed in genuine partnership with SNAs and their unions, that formally recognises and values the full, professional scope of their role, including their contribution to educational and social outcomes;

— immediately implement a fair and transparent SNA redeployment scheme, to provide job security for existing SNAs, and retain their invaluable experience within the school system;

— take immediate steps to significantly increase the number of SNA posts and special class places, to address the chronic and unmet demand, ensuring no child is left without a placement;

— guarantee that no future changes to SNA provision will be made without meaningful, constructive, and transparent engagement with schools, parents, and SNAs themselves, ensuring their voices and expertise are central to decision-making; and

— make a steadfast, whole-of-Government commitment that every single child with additional needs will not only secure an appropriate school placement but will also have access to the necessary Special Education Teacher support, SNA care, and therapeutic interventions they require to reach their full potential and participate fully in school life.

I welcome the very many visitors to the Gallery. Today, we debate more than a motion. We debate the future of special education in this country. We send a clear message to the Government that its late-night press release will not stop the momentum for change. Last night, under immense pressure from parents, special needs assistants and 80,000 citizens who signed a petition, the Government performed an eleventh hour U-turn. It announced that there would

be no SNA cuts in September and pledged an extra €19 million in funding. This reprieve is welcome for the schools, families and SNAs who have spent weeks in absolute turmoil but this is a victory won by the people, not a change of heart by the Government. The Government did not wake up suddenly with a sudden conscious. It retreated because it was caught. It retreated because it knew that tomorrow thousands would take to the streets and tonight this House would hold it to account.

We cannot allow a late-night rescue act to mask the fundamental truth. The system is still broken. The fundamental flaws and the hurt remain. The Government has offered a sticking plaster but let us look at what it has not done. For example, the outdated circular from 2014 - a rule book written 12 long years ago - is still on the books. The National Council for Special Education is still operating as an unaccountable gatekeeper. There is absolutely no guarantee whatsoever that this crisis will not repeat itself in 12 months' time.

The anxiety and distress caused by this fiasco cannot be erased by a Government statement. Families across the State were left worrying about September. SNAs have been left in limbo, their professionalism disrespected, and their dedication thrown into question by a rigid bureaucratic process. The Government owes them more than an apology. It owes them a guarantee that this reckless approach will never again be repeated.

Last night, Sinn Féin hosted an online meeting with 1,100 parents, SNAs, teachers, principals and people with disabilities. The anger and energy was palpable. Despite the Government's move, the momentum for change will not stop. It cannot stop. We need to see the circular from 2014 scrapped and replaced with a modern framework that recognises the full holistic role of a SNA, not just for primary care but for the emotional support, fostering of independence and social inclusion they provide. We need a fair redeployment scheme that protects jobs, not one that creates uncertainty. We need a cast iron whole-of-government commitment that every single child with additional needs will get the support they require as a matter of right, not as a matter of administrative convenience.

The motion before the Dáil offers this Government a chance to do more than just reverse course. It offers it a chance to get the policy right for once and for all. It offers a chance to reset the relationship with the SNA community, parents and schools. Tomorrow, protests across the State and outside the Dáil will go ahead. The momentum will continue beyond that. We are not here to accept a temporary reprieve. We are here to demand permanent change. We are here to ensure that every child with additional needs knows that we stand with them. We are here to ensure that every SNA knows that their work is valued, not by a press release but by a system that puts children first. I call on all TDs from every party to support this motion. Let us turn a reprieve into a reset. Let us turn momentum into lasting change.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The Government has finally woken up and seen sense on the SNA issue after what has been a policy failure of epic proportions. However, the question remains, why did it take two weeks to realise that stripping essential supports from some of the most vulnerable children in the State virtually overnight was wrong? This should have never happened in the first place. Make no mistake if it was not for the ferocious determination of SNAs and families who dug their heels in and refused to accept these cuts, this out of touch Government would have ploughed on. Maith sibh ar fad.

Cé go bhfuil cinneadh an Rialtais ciorruithe cúntóirí riachtanas speisialta a chur ar ceal tar éis an bhuairt i measc an phobal scoile a mhaolú, ní dheachaigh sé i ngleic go fóill leis na bunfhadhbanna atá againn. Caithfear ról na gcúntóirí riachtanas speisialta a leathnú. Níor chóir go ndéanfaí athbhreithniú ar aon leithdháileadh cúntóirí riachtanas speisialta go dtí go n-aithnítear riachtanais iomlána na bpáistí ionas gur féidir le páistí le dúshláin chumarsáide, mhothúcháinacha agus iompair rochtain a bheith acu ar an tacaíocht atá de dhíth. Tá na critéir atá ann faoi láthair as dáta agus níl siad ag coinneáil leis an méid atá ag tarlú sna scoileanna.

At Sinn Féin's public meeting last night attended by over 1,000 people, we heard directly from SNAs, parents, principals and disabled individuals who themselves have successfully navigated the education system with their SNA. Many spoke of feeling devalued by the Government's recent actions. SNAs described managing children's intense distress all while celebrating their little milestones - for example, a dyslexic child picking up a book independently and a child feeling empowered to start walking or to speak in class. One mother spoke of her son currently without the right support in school who returns home overwhelmed and frustrated due to having to mask his needs all day in school. We were all fighting back the tears at this meeting.

An apology is owed to the affected families. One woman made a powerful point that some children tuned into this conversation may have internalised the idea that they were somehow the problem. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the system that has failed these beautiful children. Confidence and trust are shattered. An awful lot of work has to be done now to repair. That starts with showing SNAs and vulnerable children the respect they deserve. That means embracing a genuinely child-centred approach. No amount of shiny policy documents or talk of inclusion can convince us that the Government's approach is child-centred until every child has the support they need to succeed in school to the best of their ability. No child should be left behind. There should be no more rationing when it comes to children's education not when we are giving tax breaks to the wealthy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This Government's treatment of SNAs has caused huge anger because the SNAs are already working hard day in, day out, alongside teachers to plaster over the cracks of a school system under pressure. SNAs are crucial, not just to the children with additional needs but to all the children in the classroom. What these workers, school communities, children and families have been put through is utterly and absolutely disgraceful. My colleagues are absolutely right that an apology is demanded and deserved.

All children, especially children with special needs, require routine and structure. They need predictability. With this Government's mistreatment of these children, it has ripped away that consistency, routine, structure and predictability. The greatest predictor of success in later life is independence with the activities of daily living. This is where SNAs play a key role.

Nowhere in all this debacle and crisis that the Government created was the children's voices heard. As Teachta Ní Raghallaigh mentioned, we have seen 1,100 SNAs, educators and parents come together pouring out their hearts story after story about the hurt, anger and frustration at what the Government has done. It has rightly done a U-turn on this issue but it has still left a serious question mark over what comes next.

What parents and schools are asking for is the most basic of respect. Pausing these cuts until September, when there will be another review, is not enough. The Ministers still left this threat

hanging over schools. No parent, child, SNA or teacher knows what is coming next. If the review is still to be based on primary medical needs, we will be back at square one. This is why we need a comprehensive response that takes cuts off the table and ensures that every child with additional needs has the support of an SNA, whether this year, next year or the year after.

Deputy David Cullinane: Over the last number of weeks, children, SNAs and parents were put through mental torture because of a decision made by the Ministers' Government. What happened was disgraceful. The Ministers had a plan to cut SNAs from schools and to deprive some children of the supports they had. They thought they would get away with it. Over the course of the last two weeks, I listened to both Ministers doubling down because they thought this would blow over and go away. They were asked time and again on national media whether any schools would lose their SNAs. They were asked whether they could give a guarantee that no schools would lose SNAs and that no children would lose their supports. They were not in a position to do so because they were hoping this issue would go away. It did not go away because SNAs and parents stood up and were not having it. It was only when protests were being organised outside Government Members' constituency offices in county after county, when an online public meeting took place and when it became clear and obvious that this was not going to go away that we saw a partial temporary climb-down from the Government. I have a message for the two Ministers across from me. Temporary solutions are not going to cut it. They have to show respect and dignity to SNAs. They have to give a guarantee that there will not be any cuts this year, next year or the year after. Where more capacity is needed, they need to recruit more SNAs. They need to value all of the work SNAs do in every school across this State.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Despite Government's best efforts to paint a picture to the contrary, what happened over the last two weeks was not an administrative hiccup. It was a Government-manufactured shambles inflicted upon children who depend on stability and support, children who need the support of an SNA to feel safe, to stay regulated, to participate and to feel like they belong. The Government's letters caused panic and left exhausted parents terrified that the essential supports their children depend upon could simply vanish in September. SNAs were demoralised and schools were scrambling for answers. What did Government offer in response? It offered verbal acrobatics worthy of a three-ring circus while children carried the weight of Government chaos. The Government was willing to preside over children with additional needs struggling to remain in mainstream classes, teachers overstretched and parents in crisis mode until the public backlash became very apparent to everybody in government.

Government talks of inclusion but inclusion without support is not inclusion. It is abandonment. SNAs are not optional extras or bureaucratic line items to be trimmed. They are the difference between inclusion and exclusion and between a child thriving in education or just surviving. The lack of respect and appreciation for the job SNAs do is absolutely staggering. The Ministers must get off their hands, get to the table and engage with SNAs, schools and parents. The outdated focus on primary physical care needs must be replaced with a model that takes account of a child's whole needs. As a very proud autism mammy, I ask the Ministers to please stop treating autistic and neurodivergent children as lesser because their needs are arbitrarily classed as secondary. The work of SNAs must be professionalised and valued. Their profession must be respected for the rewarding, although at times very

challenging, one that it is. Finally, the Ministers must own this omnishambles and apologise for the chaos they have caused.

Deputy Matt Carthy: What Ministers and Government have relearned over the past number of days is a lesson they should have copped onto long ago. You do not mess with children with special needs or with the people who care for them because they will fight tooth and nail to ensure the people they love have their rights protected. There is a familiar phrase that anybody who engages with families of children with special needs will have heard time and time again. We hear that it is a battle a day to secure what their children are entitled to, whether that is an assessment, treatment or the right class in the right school at the right time. One of the things that has been inspiring and that brought Government to the point of releasing its late-night press statement was that the response has not just been from the families of children with additional needs or from the SNAs who love those children so much. The response was from whole schools. Communities up and down the country stood with those children who needed support and forced the Government to make what should have been an embarrassing U-turn, although it appears the Government is not embarrassed because the Ministers are still defending the situation that led to this catastrophe in the first instance.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke and others have very clearly set out what needs to happen to deal with the issues regarding SNAs. The Ministers need to heed that advice. They also need to bring a bit of accountability into their Department and ensure accountability from the NCSE. The responses we received to parliamentary questions in respect of special needs education are absolutely unacceptable. They give no information. When we get no information, it means the families get no information. Countless schools in my constituency still do not know whether they will have sanction for special classes come next September even though they have the space to cater for these classes, the demand for them and the utmost determination to deliver them. The blockage is with the Ministers' Department and the NCSE. There has to be a level of accountability. We now have some certainty regarding SNAs. That is crucially important but we need accountability across the board. We need to stop treating special education as crisis management. These are our children and our schools. They deserve more than that.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. I especially thank them for bringing together over 1,100 SNAs, teachers and parents last night. They shared with us some of the most beautiful, moving and powerful accounts of the difference that SNAs make in our schools. Most importantly, they spoke of the profound impact SNAs have on the development and well-being of tens of thousands of children across the State. There were tears, disgust, outrage, hurt, upset, alarm and fear. One lady with Down's syndrome spoke about her experience of having the support of an SNA and how it made her thrive and excel. It was an absolute lifeline for her. Last night's meeting left me wondering how the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led Government could ever conclude that cutting the number of SNAs would result in anything other than a devastating impact on schools, teachers, families and children right across the country.

Schools still need clarity and SNAs still need certainty and not just a sticking plaster for another year. SNAs are not an optional extra. They are an integral part of our schools, woven into the very fabric of the school environment. They cannot simply be cut or relocated at the whim of the Minister or the NCSE. The fact is that children excel with supports. They deserve

better than to be the subject of some box-ticking exercise. The Ministers should not just treat them like numbers.

I would really like to know what is wrong with this Government. Why does it keep making a mess of everything? At the end of every mess it makes are real people and, in this case, real children. They deserve better.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I listened to the Taoiseach today. It was probably the most out of touch response I have heard. I was absolutely shocked. I got an email today that really encapsulates how all of this feels.

I am writing as a parent of a child attending Pelletstown Educate Together National School and as a member of the wider community. My daughter is autistic and attends a mainstream class in our school. She thrives in an inclusive environment but she requires daily access to an SNA's support for her well-being, emotional regulation and participation in school life. This support is not a luxury. It is essential to her ability to access education safely and meaningfully. Her SNA provides crucial assistance with transitions, managing sensory overwhelm, communication support and helping her remain regulated enough to engage in learning. Without this consistent support she would struggle significantly in the classroom environment and her confidence, independence and overall well-being would be negatively affected. The presence of an SNA allows her not only to learn but to feel secure, included and valued amongst her peers. The SNA plays a vital role in enabling children with additional care needs to access their right to education on an equal basis with their classmates. They also ensure that teachers can focus on teaching while students with additional needs receive the appropriate care and support required throughout the day. For families like ours, appropriate SNA supports are the difference between a child merely attending school and a child truly flourishing within it.

The next sentence is the crux of the issue.

We are seeing attempts to limit supports to children and young people in our schools. Our school has seen increasing complexity and needs over the years. All schools have seen increasing numbers of students with increasing additional needs and you have attempted to cut and move SNAs using an extremely limited set of criteria rather than give every child the chance of attaining the highest level of education and space to enjoy their school experience.

Last night we heard 1,100 students and parents and we will continue to fight with them and to fight for all children who deserve the best education that we as legislators can provide them with.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I welcome the opportunity to address the House this evening, to speak to this motion and provide an update on special needs assistants. At the outset, I want to be very clear: this Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this objective.

I want to state categorically that no cuts are proposed, or will be proposed, to the provision of SNAs to children and young people across our school system. Last night, the Government

met and agreed a number of measures that will give clarity to schools, parents, young people and SNAs. These measures are: all schools reviewed by the NCSE and allocated additional resources will receive them in the upcoming school year; no reductions will come into effect in the 2026-2027 school year; and the SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan, and changes to the 2014 circular outlining the role of an SNA will be advanced before any further decisions are taken.

At the forefront of our deliberations was ensuring that the child-centred approach to the provision of special education is retained and enhanced in these policy developments. Working alongside almost 22,000 special education teachers, this September will see almost 25,000 SNAs play a key role in our schools, supporting children and young people with care needs. I know from meeting SNAs, families and young people that many children would not thrive in school without them. Their work, hand in hand with special education teachers, is paramount to helping children achieve. That is why I fully understand why we have heard a lot of genuine concern and worry over the last week from SNAs, schools and parents on how they might be affected by any changes to school allocations.

We have also heard a lot of misinformation. It is important to bring clarity on some of the issues. This Government has nothing but respect for SNAs, special education teachers, schools, students and their families.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister can hear the response to that from the people in the Gallery.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I fully appreciate and endorse the need to ensure all special education policies are child-centred and designed to assist young people thrive in school and help them to reach their full potential. That is why the Government has provided more special education teachers and more SNAs, doubled the number of special classes, opened 16 new special schools in the last five years and massively increased investment in the summer programme, which has seen a threefold increase in its budget. To say that the Government is not funding resources for children with special educational needs is a mistruth. To say that the Government was proposing to make hundreds of SNAs redundant is simply wrong. To be clear, there are currently 23,179 SNAs working in schools across the country. Last year, there were 21,579. Next September, there will be 24,896 SNAs. Clearly, there was no proposal to make SNAs redundant. It is disingenuous of any party in this House to say so.

It is useful to speak to the role of the National Council for Special Education in this area. The NCSE has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision and care support for children and young people with special educational needs in our schools. This includes the allocation of special needs assistant support to schools. I fully support the NCSE in its work. It is important to give some context on how the NCSE reviews take place. Special educational needs organisers, SENOs, are from various professional backgrounds and include occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, school principals, special education teachers, early intervention specialists, SNAs and mainstream class teachers. These SENOs undertake school reviews. The NCSE has always undertaken SNA reviews. In the 2024-2025 school year, around 1,400 reviews were conducted. In the current school year, some 1,000 reviews were completed.

Schools are notified in advance of a review, and the NCSE undertakes a robust process to ensure that reviews are based on the care needs of an individual school because, as Members of the House are aware, SNAs are allocated to schools, and not individual children.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister should tell the Taoiseach that.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There is no mindset in the NCSE to cut resources. The NCSE appreciates the complexities of school life and deploys leniency in its outcomes, working to retain supports available to children in schools. Among the information the NCSE requires to conduct a review are student support files for each young person. These files, which are compiled by the teacher, document an individual child's needs and their progress over time. They help inform the school in providing an appropriate level of support. Parents know what is best for their child. That is why, in addition to the student support plan, the NCSE asks that parents complete a questionnaire outlining the care needs of their child. Parents who may have difficulty in completing this questionnaire are provided with contact details for the SENO tasked with completing the school review, so their child's needs can be documented.

The review process also includes consultation with staff in the school, including class teachers, special education teachers, SNAs and principals. As I previously said, the NCSE works to retain supports for children, but circumstances arise which mean that an SNA may no longer be required. These include cases where a student or students with highly significant care needs leave the school or where children in receipt of support move to post-primary level or leave school.

Deputy David Cullinane: That is not what was happening.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There are also the obvious and best outcome cases where children, with the assistance of their special education teachers and SNAs, gain independence and no longer require the same level of support. These outcomes are what our system is designed to achieve.

I reject the assertion that the NCSE operates, as one Member of this House has claimed, as an "unaccountable gatekeeper". Once a SENO has finished a school review, a national panel within the NCSE reviews this decision to ensure consistency and that care needs are being captured. If a school is not satisfied with the review, it can appeal it. This appeal is adjudicated by NCSE staff who were not involved in the original review. If a school is still not satisfied, it can request a further appeal from an independent panel, members of which are drawn from education stakeholder groups.

As I said earlier, the Government has agreed that three key documents are to be published in the near future which will provide additional clarity to the system. The first is the SNA redeployment scheme, long called for by SNAs and trade unions. This will provide a method by which SNAs can be redeployed around the school system to ensure we have the right resources in the right place. This scheme is near finalisation and was developed following significant stakeholder engagement to ensure it works for SNAs and schools.

The second document is the SNA workforce development plan, developed following extensive discussion and engagement with SNAs and trade unions. Development of the plan

involved 55 meetings of five working groups, each of which included two SNAs, one of whom was a trade union member. There were also bilaterals with trade unions and meetings with a dedicated SNA workforce development group.

Finally, a 2014 circular outlining the role of the SNA will be advanced and completed.

Deputy David Cullinane: It should have been done first.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: After these key documents are published, the NCSE can commence reviews of supports provided to schools for the 2027-2028 academic year which will uphold the integrity of the process, which allocates supports based on the needs of children.

As is the case at any stage of the year, and indeed for any school, the NCSE will be available to support schools and discuss with them the deployment of SNA resources allocated to support their students and their care needs. Schools can also request a review of their allocation if care needs change.

Deputy David Cullinane: This is an absolute joke.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I understand the anger and upset that arose this week, and I fully accept that the process and outcomes were not properly communicated. I will work to ensure-----

Deputy David Cullinane: Communication was not the problem; it was the Minister's decision.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: -----this does not happen again. We want an education system where every child and young person feels and is valued, and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. This Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs. No cuts are proposed, or will be proposed-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister is in denial.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: ----- to the provision of SNAs. I thank families, the school communities and the young children and assure them that this Government is listening-----

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Apologise.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister is far from listening with that speech.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: -----and we are committed to doing the right thing.

Deputy Máire Devine: I am a bit astounded by the Minister's response. I do not think it sets the tone. She is really doing herself a disservice. She is doing the Government a disservice. Most of all, she is doing all those people in the Gallery a complete and utter disservice. She

has attacked the vulnerable. Why is it that the vulnerable get attacked time and again? These people have fought, rallied, protested, camped out and demanded that each child who needs an SNA is provided with an SNA. She has come in, in her wisdom - I say that lightly - and put a pen through all of that.

The Minister said there have been misunderstandings and mistruths. That is pretty strong stuff coming from her when she got it wrong. She has severely attacked SNAs, parents, pupils and principals and families across this country. She caused an awful lot of embarrassment to herself. She has made a U-turn but is not calling it that. I think she needs to own it. It goes down much better and she will get over it a lot quicker because these guys are going to let her slide off with the nonsense she has just said, and neither will we.

Again, it is the most vulnerable. I keep saying that. The most vulnerable in our society are always the first to be targeted and this is what is happening. I do not oppose the re-evaluation of SNA allocations across schools. It is vital to ensure schools are properly resourced and children receive every support in order to get a full education. From speaking with staff of schools in the Dublin South Central constituency, St. James's Primary School in Basin Lane and Canal Way Educate Together also in Basin Lane, they all agree. However, parents and SNAs in my district believe that her advised toolkit criteria is unfair. Many children who previously qualified for SNAs, such as those needing emotional regulation and managing sensory overload, no longer qualify. How wrong and tone-deaf can the Minister be? She should own her own misguided, misleading statements and actions and please do it now.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Last night, I attended a meeting of well over 1,000 people. They were SNAs, parents and students. I listened to heartbreaking stories of fear and anxiety but I also heard stories of hope, of children who flourished, found their voice, were full of confidence because they had the support of a special needs assistant by their side. Today, after a brutal decision to cut SNAs, the Minister comes in here talking about no cuts and an extended pause. That is not compassion; that is a rowing back because of the public backlash. The very fact she even contemplated cutting this vital service in the first place tells families everything they need to know about where vulnerable children rank in her priorities. They are people. They are not just a diagnosis.

SNAs have said they face job insecurity every year. I have been contacted by schools, teachers, SNAs and students across Clare. They are shocked and angry, and rightly so. The SNA service should be used as a tool to empower children. Who does the Minister think builds relationships in classrooms? Who helps regulate and support children so that entire classes can function and learn? It is SNAs. They are not an optional extra; they are essential.

Children with additional needs deserve respect and dignity. These are two simple words that have life-changing impacts. Instead, what we have seen is disrespect. It is disrespect to students and to SNAs and an immense strain has been put on parents who already fight every single day for their children.

We face a shortage of special class places, growing waiting lists, children without appropriate placements and, at the same time, announcements of new classes where there is uncertainty about the infrastructure to properly support them. That makes no sense.

The true measure of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable. On this issue, the Government is failing that test. We know the value of SNAs. Families know the value of SNAs. The question is whether the Minister does. We need to protect SNAs, protect the rights and dignity of our children, parents, pupils and SNAs and schools need to see action, not big announcements when there are still not enough SNAs out there.

Deputy Mark Ward: I begin by congratulating the parents of children with additional needs, the school communities and the special needs assistants themselves. Many of them are here tonight. I have been contacted by parents, principals and SNAs in Clondalkin, Lucan and across Dublin Mid-West over the past couple of weeks in relation to this. I was at an event on Thursday in Collinstown Community College, where people in Clondalkin are trying to make it an autism-friendly town. Members of the Minister's own party, Fine Gael, were there, getting photographs with children and parents. Where are they tonight? Not one of them is here tonight. They are ashamed to come into this room and back up what the Government is trying to do to the parents around here. The Government has done that much of a U-turn I am surprised the Minister does not have whiplash.

I listened to the Minister's interviews in recent weeks. All she had to say was some of the stuff that was said in this statement, although not all of it. She stated that all schools reviewed by the NCSE and allocated additional resources will receive them in the upcoming year. That would have stopped anxiety and worry for the SNAs the Minister sees here tonight. She stated that no reductions will come into effect in 2026 and 2027. She could not give those assurances to parents and SNAs in recent weeks.

The NCSE, which the Minister talked about earlier, is not perfect. Nobody is going to say it is perfect but the Government is using it as a scapegoat. The NCSE is carrying out her instructions to the letter. It is doing exactly what it was told to do. It is following the 2014 circular the Government brought in. The Minister should not stand up here and say she is blaming the NCSE-----

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am not saying that.

Deputy Mark Ward: -----when the responsibility lies with the Government.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am not saying that.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Government needs to take responsibility. In her ten-minute speech, I did not hear an apology to the people in the Gallery - not once, not one apology.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Bad tone.

Deputy Martin Kenny: This has gone on for almost two weeks. The point was made earlier that it is a battle a day for the parents of children with special needs. All of us in this House know that because all of us are being contacted every day of the week by families who are trying to get an assessment of need, a place in a school or an appointment somewhere in the health service for their children but cannot get them. They are fighting continually and they

are worn out. Sometimes they have children who hardly sleep at all and they have to stay awake with them.

This is the one time they get something that actually works. I know a school with a number of special classes and SNAs in place and to which children attending were very difficult. Within a short period of time - a number of months - you could see improvement and advancement, mainly because of the work being done on a one-to-one basis by the SNA with those children.

To suggest that somehow or other, the Minister miscommunicated or that there was a misunderstanding is the greatest load of rubbish anyone ever heard in their lives. The reality is that for two weeks, the Minister has wrangled and tried to say this or that but she would not come out and say she gave an instruction to review the SNAs with an intention of removing them from children in certain schools where she felt she could get away with it. That is what she tried to do and she needs to own up to that reality.

There are schools in all our constituencies looking to open up additional classes but cannot get it done. There are a number of them in my constituency. There are also special schools that want to open up more spaces but cannot do it because they cannot get the resources. This entire system is a shambles and has been a shambles for a long time.

However, this debacle over the past week or two has shown where the Government stands. It does not stand with the ordinary people out there who need the help they absolutely must have for the most vulnerable in our society. The Minister and Minister of State need to own up to this and apologise for what they have done.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I wondered what the Minister would say when she came to the Chamber tonight. I was thinking about this all day. From what she said, I do not believe she has understood the stress, hurt and concern she has caused for families, schools and SNAs. The capitulation of the Government last night, while welcome, comes on the back of a campaign that was organised by SNAs, schools and parents. They should not have to do that.

One word was missing from the Minister's speech and that was "sorry". She did not say that. There should be an apology for the mess she caused in the last few weeks and the stress she caused for people who are dealing with some of the most vulnerable cases. Any TD or constituency office will tell her they never have a clinic without somebody coming to them with an issue around additional or special needs, children's school places, supports, SNAs, lack of SNAs, lack of school places, or projects being promised that have not been delivered. It goes on and on. There is never a clinic any of us go to where this issue does not come up. It is a huge issue.

I again thank the people who said they were not going to tolerate this and that it would not happen. Some of them are in the Gallery; fair play to them for coming tonight. There were 1,100 or 1,200 people at the Zoom meeting that was on last night. It was very powerful, as some of my colleagues said. They told their stories about their children. As my colleague, Deputy McGettigan said, there was not just sorrow and stress but hope in how kids thrive when they get the proper supports they need. The Minister needs to say sorry to people.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing the motion forward. I welcome the fact there will be statements on this in the Dáil tomorrow. I welcome any parents, SNAs or students who are in the Gallery.

The Minister and Minister of State will appreciate this has been a significantly difficult two weeks for SNAs, school communities, parents and children with additional needs. I have met and spoken with a number of school principals, SNAs and parents in particular across the country over the past two weeks as a result of the fact that supports were going to be taken from children. It has been said on a number of occasions in the House over the past number of weeks that cuts were going to take place. The Taoiseach refuted that on each occasion.

At budget time, I welcomed the increase in allocation of SNAs. I welcome developments in our education system. I always will but, fundamentally, we must ensure that resources are never taken for granted and never taken from children. That was what was going to happen. Although the fact is we were going to increase our allocation of SNAs, the rigid criteria created by the Department of education was ultimately going to take SNA provision and support from children. There is no refuting that because schools that had SNA provision got a review from SENOs and the NCSE and were told they were losing SNAs. That support was going to be taken from the child. That is exactly what was going to happen. The Taoiseach can state that no cuts were going to take place and jobs were going to be secured all he wants. Ultimately, provision of SNA allocation and resources were going to be taken from children.

Today, in response to my party leader, the Taoiseach said, "The Government never signed off on this [initiative]". This policy was created by this Government. The Department of education asked the NCSE to implement this policy. The NCSE did that. The SENOs went to schools, did the reviews and gave the letters back to the schools outlining X amount of SNAs they would lose or gain. They implemented that policy, so the Government did sign off on that initiative. I think the Taoiseach misinterpreted the facts. We did not ask him whether he signed every letter individually to each school but he has to stand over the fact, as do the Minister and Minister of State, that this was a Department of education policy implemented by the National Council for Special Education.

On the plinth this morning, I spoke about the fact I would hate to be one of the 120 or so SENOs in this country. Why? If I were a SENO asked to do a job, I might not have agreed with the policy. More than likely, because they are all human like us, the SENOs probably did not agree with the policy because they did not want to take resources from schools, but they had to go and have the tough conversations with principals of schools to say they were losing SNAs. Yet, this morning, they heard there was row back on it, and that the Government did not agree with the policy and was going to change it. All schools would keep their SNAs and the decisions the SENOs made, based on the policy the Government told them to implement, were no longer going to go ahead. I got a text from a SENO tonight who told me they were at home crying all day. Can you imagine that? That should not be the case.

In all these deliberations over the past two weeks, we should think of the number of people we as a State have failed. We have failed children with additional needs, SENOs and members of the NCSE who implemented a policy created by the Government. We have failed principals who had to have the difficult conversations with their SNAs to say they were last in and would be first out. I will also contribute on that.

In relation to the redeployment scheme, how did we ever believe it was acceptable to send letters to schools stating they were losing SNAs without ever having a redeployment scheme established? I understand the fact it will be done in a number of weeks. I welcome redeployment and understand it is necessary. I welcome it because, naturally, needs change in schools. I accept that, but how did the Minister and Minister of State ever think that sending these letters outlining cuts to SNAs in schools was okay, which would leave a cohort of workers in a situation where they had no idea where they were going to be working next year?

The Taoiseach assured us that no jobs were going to be lost. That is okay, but a person who has been a special needs assistant in a school for a certain number of years cannot be left in limbo. They cannot be left in a position where they do not know where they are going to be working. It could be 45 km away from their current place of work. I agree with the fact, which the Minister has said on a number of occasions, that the SNAs had a great say in this redeployment. That is to be welcomed. I will always welcome that all stakeholders be involved in creating different circumstances within the Department, but how did we ever think it was going to be acceptable to send a letter to a school to say it would lose SNAs, have principals bring those people into their office, tell them their job is gone, and that person having to go home not knowing where their job is going to be for the next year, or if they are going to be able to keep their job? So many SNAs have come to me and said that the job or position they have been offered is 0.25 hours or 0.5 hours. Realistically, there are naturally going to be cuts because nobody is going to take a position like that. Nobody will take up a position that is 0.25 hours. That could be 20 minutes of the week; I do not know how much it is. No one will take that, so naturally there will be cuts.

There are so many lessons to be learned from this. All of us in this House have to learn from this. We have abruptly tried to make a decision on taking provision of services from children. That should never ever be allowed to happen. If any child in this country needs a resource, money should never be a barrier. Whatever about that, it should never ever be incorporated into any policy that a child who needs a resource should not be given it. Why should we pit one child against another based on their individual needs? No child is the same as the other, so we should not pit needs against each other.

The Government must also accept that although it is a fact, which, as I said, I accept, that allocations have increased, the level of resources has not kept up with the level of need. There is a significant level of need in our country right now. I accept that there will be over 25,000 SNAs in our country.

It is wonderful and a brilliant achievement but it is not enough. We can do more. If we can get an allocation of €19 million overnight, what more could we do? I am here to help. Anything I can do, I will do, but when things have to be called out, the Minister has to appreciate that she has to own up to the mistake that was made. A policy decision was taken by the Department of education. The Department asked the NCSE to implement that decision, and it did so. That is the difficulty I have.

Does the fact that we are now going to review the policy mean that the Minister no longer has confidence in it? We allowed it to be implemented, and she knew it was being implemented. She took up her position and knew it was going to be implemented. Does she no longer have faith in it? If she does not, is it because there was such an outcry and a backlash

against the Government? We do not need to be lectured on the role of the NCSE. I believe it, and the SENOs have been thrown under the bus.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this important motion. I pay tribute to the thousands of SNAs, teachers, parents, school principals and those in the broader school community who have forced the Government to back down on the attempt to cull SNA supports for schools and children with additional needs across the country. It was the groundswell against this move and the national outcry of thousands of people that got us to where we are now. However, our already stressed and strained school communities should not have had to do this. The roll-back of the move is absolutely welcome but it cannot be the end point. It must be the beginning of something new. It must, we would hope, be the beginning of a fundamental reassessment of our special education system, from the role of the SNA to how levels of need are determined and how SNA support is allocated within schools.

I refer the Minister to Ciara Reilly's Substack page, as others have also done. Ms Reilly has written a series of excellent articles on how this debacle has unfolded. I will briefly refer to a couple of the points she made. The first is the issue with the SNA deployment toolkit. From what I can see, that is where all roads seem to lead in many respects. Under this mechanism, SNA support is allocated almost exclusively to children with the most significant primary care needs. The threshold for meeting those needs seems to be applied quite rigidly. The upshot is that children with perhaps less severe and often more behaviour-based needs can be excluded. However, those children, including children with sensory issues, attention issues and those who require emotional regulation, need and deserve SNA support too. Teachers who are already overburdened will be further strained without that support. Ultimately, this harms all students, be they children in mainstream classes, children in special classes or children in special schools, and their right to a decent education. We can debate technicalities and administrative matters concerning how we deploy SNAs but we cannot lose sight of the fact that beneath all of this is the well-being of children.

The second key issue is the 2014 circular that defines the role of the SNA. It evolved the role into one that seems to be much more focused on caregiving than supporting access to education. This means SNA support is granted only in acute circumstances, where care needs are considered at the expense of educational needs. This sidelines an entire cohort of children with special educational needs who do not fit neatly into the criteria or tick a very specific box.

The role of an SNA should fundamentally be about supporting a child's access to education. This may require some care-based responsibilities, but we cannot allow a situation to emerge where children who require additional support are denied it because they do not fit into the correct box.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion and the work it has done on it today and over the past while. The Opposition and several Members on the Government side are united on the fact that what occurred should never have happened. The Government has been forced to climb down because of enormous public anger. It is a victory for parents, SNAs, school communities, advocacy groups and others who have contacted every TD, Senator and publicly elected representative.

Unfortunately, the Government is now desperate to kick the can down the road for another year. I will come to that in a minute, because what happens the year after will also be a challenge. What has occurred has led to so much uncertainty for SNAs and the children they support. The handling of the issue over recent weeks has been disastrous and consequently it has caused huge distress among families, school leaders and, of course, SNAs.

The countrywide protest planned for tomorrow will go ahead. Perhaps the announcement very late last night was a bid to prevent it, but the reality is that it now needs to happen more than ever because this should never have happened. When the protest happens tomorrow, three things will be asked for, the first being that the circular, which is too narrow and outdated, be revised. Meeting primary care needs was what the SNA role was originally created for. However, that role, like many things in education, has evolved. The circular needs to evolve to reflect the reality of the needs of students in our schools now. I really hope the Minister can redeem herself by ensuring it reflects the reality in the schools and the needs of the children.

Second, the Department must bring forward all stakeholders. There are experts. One cannot know everything and the NCSE cannot, but there are experts who know many things and they need to be engaged.

Third, there must be a full understanding of how redeployment will happen. The reality is that the relationships SNAs have with the children they support are key. You cannot help a child to regulate if they do not trust you and it is not safe.

It is vital that redeployment is not treated as a numbers game. This will be the most important thing that happens. Redeployment is not just about one child leaving a school and about knocking off a few hours here and there; it is about relationships. It is as fundamental as any other part of the school system. You cannot just knock off bits of things because it makes sense to do so in a numbers game. The relationship aspect is so important. The Government needs to rebuild the trust that has been so badly damaged. I do not envy the Minister. I am sure that, from a personal perspective, things have been torturous for her over the past while, but that must not supersede the torture that families, children and SNAs have experienced. She will have to work very hard to restore trust.

The Respect for SNAs campaign started in 2019. I was a member of Fórsa at the time. The campaign started because SNAs were not respected and not valued or treated as they should have been within our education system. What we can see now is the respect that SNAs have among all parents, schools and those who contacted members of the Opposition. I am aware that the Minister has said she respects them, so she now needs to demonstrate that in action. She needs to prove herself to show she does respect SNAs.

In the background is the question of what will happen of foot of the change regarding assessments of need on entering special schools. How will allocation work? This year everything was supposed to be sorted out, but there will be another nuance to consider when children do not need the diagnosis. How will special education places be allocated then?

That brings me to special schools for mild general learning disabilities. How will these schools avoid becoming catch-all schools? How will they avoid the erosion of the specialised care they are excellent at providing to children with mild general learning disabilities? A one-size-fits-all approach is going to be a huge failure in this regard.

The Taoiseach said earlier that he will work with the Opposition and, as other Members noted, with whoever needs to be worked with to get this sorted. The reality is that this has gone wrong. We have to work together. We have to work with whoever has the knowledge. We do not need to be precious about it; we need to get it done. Therefore, I have written to the Taoiseach and asked, on the basis that one of the requests for tomorrow is for the protest, that he engage with the relevant Ministers and facilitate it. I think he gave me an answer in which he said "Yes", so I have written to him to ask how it can be facilitated.

There was no apology today. Tomorrow there will be an apology for another group of people who were harmed, many moons ago, in our schools. I hope an apology regarding SNAs never has to come. The Minister has time now to rectify the problem and ensure this does not continue to be an absolute disaster. What is important now is that lessons be learned from this. Nothing like this should ever happen again. I am asking the Minister and Minister of State to take stock in order to ensure that the necessary steps are taken and fully considered. I ask them to listen to stakeholders who have experience.

I also ask the Minister and the Minister of State to please bring humanity back into the classrooms because what we have seen over the past few days should never happen. We should never, ever have to apologise to children in the future. We will be doing that tomorrow for things that happened in the past and we cannot do it in the future for what is happening to children today.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I commend Sinn Féin on its motion. What we have witnessed in recent weeks on the issue of special needs assistants has been nothing short of a fiasco, one that has caused deep and unnecessary anxiety for families, teachers, principals and SNAs across the country. At its core this episode reveals a Government that still does not understand the daily reality of inclusion in our schools. Instead of planning properly for rising need, the Department of education attempted a crude "robbing Peter to pay Paul" exercise, shifting supports from one school to another as if children's needs were interchangeable and as if relationships, stability and continuity in the classroom did not matter. This was not meaningful, consultation-based workforce planning; it was spreadsheet management. It was based on a fundamentally outdated and narrow understanding of what SNAs actually do.

The Government continues to speak about SNAs as if their role is confined to physical care needs, but anyone who has spent time in a modern classroom knows that this bears little resemblance to reality. SNAs support children with emotional regulation and sensory overwhelm. They support communication, participation and belonging in education. They often provide the steady relational presence that allows the child to remain in school at all. Crucially, however, SNAs not only support the individual child with an identified disability or additional need; they support the entire ecosystem of the classroom. Their presence allows teachers to teach. It allows other children to learn without recurring disruption. They create the conditions in which inclusion works, not just in theory but in practice. Remove that support and the impact is felt across the whole class, not just by the one child.

We should also say something clearly about the people doing this work. SNAs are not highly paid for the invaluable work they do every day, which is emotionally demanding, highly skilled relational work. They are poorly rewarded. Yet, despite that, they remain one of the most committed groups in our education system.

If the Government is serious about inclusion, then the forthcoming workforce development plan for SNAs cannot be just another review exercise. It must deliver a secure, decent contract structure, proper career progression and the recognition of the full scope of the SNA role. Any future review of SNA allocations must be grounded in the full breadth of what SNAs actually do in schools, not in a narrow, outdated definition that ignores the relational, regulatory and classroom-wide impact of their work.

Once again, we see the same underlying mindset from the Government. Essential front-line staff are viewed primarily as a cost to be contained rather than as an investment in children, families and the functioning of the education system as a whole. When that mindset dominates, what follows is entirely predictable: short-term, politically reactive decisions and crisis management instead of forward-planning. We saw it in the rushed communications to schools, in the confusion over allocations and in the Government scrambling to reassure parents only after public anger became insurmountable and impossible to ignore. Now we hear talk of deploying clinicians into mainstream schools as if to compensate for future cuts to SNAs.

Multidisciplinary supports in schools are desperately needed. Educational psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy services should be embedded in our education system. However, where is the plan, where are the timelines, where is the workforce strategy and where is the clarity on recruitment, funding and delivery? At the moment, this looks less like a reform programme and more like a political holding statement designed to get the Government through the current news cycle. What families and schools need now is forward planning, transparency and a clear commitment that supports will expand in line with need and not be shuffled around when pressure builds and cost containment becomes the narrow priority. If we are serious about inclusive education, we must treat SNAs and school-based supports as core assets, no different from classrooms, transport or teachers.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I have a constituent who has a daughter with complex behavioural needs. She has severe ADHD and a mild learning disability. They recounted their story to me on Monday. It really drove home for me how much parents have to fight and advocate for everything for their children, the very real risk for too many families who are not equipped to do so and the subsequent gaps in how this Government and the State support children with special needs. In this particular case, it took nearly two years for early checks to be done on the child or for the child to get access to the CDNT in the area. It took another year to get involvement from CAMHS. This resulted in the family going privately for medication. All the while, the education supports were not forthcoming. The Department's approach on reallocation of resources has been nothing short of scandalous, a truly dispiriting display of callousness, ineptitude and neglect. It has been well established in this Chamber and outside of it that the criteria for allocation of resources for children with special needs are not comprehensive enough. They are simplistic. They do not recognise the principle of equity in addressing each child's experience and, as a result, are deeply unjust. As my constituent said to me, inclusion without adequate resourcing is not meaningful and we are storing up the problem for a much bigger one in the future. I could not agree more.

I also pay particular tribute to the teachers, schools and SNAs who take care of children with special needs so well, who go above and beyond, even if this Government is not willing to do so and even when resources are not forthcoming, and who do everything to help, even when the Government does not. In this vein, I implore both the Minister and the Minister of

State not to pit schools, parents or differing conditions against one another for those resources. That would be, as it has always been, an unmitigated disaster for everyone involved. Please do better.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The proposed cuts and review, as it was called, which were really cutbacks, were a total disaster and have generated a massive amount of concern. There has been a huge backlash to it from parents, SNAs, teachers, unions and families. In County Laois, two schools were going to have their SNAs, vital supports, cut. It has created all those concerns and uncertainties and fear in those schools and in the families who need them. The plan must be scrapped, not just paused.

In Laois, Timahoe National School and Rath National School were facing cuts in their SNA allocations. I had numerous letters, contacts and discussions with parents in those schools. If these cuts were implemented, it would have had disastrous consequences not just for the children with the additional needs but also for their classmates. Quite simply, a teacher would have to do the work of the SNA and would have to fill the gap. SNAs are vital to enable children who have a level of disability or some additional needs to stay in the mainstream classroom setting. The alternative is children falling away from school or going to an ASD class when that is not maybe where they should be, or going to a special school. SNAs provide vital assistance, not just with physical needs of pupils but also with the psychological, learning and emotional needs and they are a crucial support. Some of these schools now have classes where up to 40% or 50% of the children are from households in which English is not the first language, particularly in the Portlaoise area, and that needs to be factored in. This is a huge problem for families and for teachers trying to cover this.

The real problem with what the NCSE and the Government planned is that there is an obvious attempt to narrow the role of the SNA. The lack of any serious engagement prior to that with SNAs, unions, parents and school representatives is regrettable. The circular sent out - and this is where the difficulty arises - was clear. It states: "The behaviour should be supported holistically with whole school and whole class approaches and individual needs supported by the class teacher". The class teacher is then taken away from teaching the other 20 or 25 children each time there is some disruption with the additional needs of a child who needs this. I ask the Minister and the Minister of State to picture that situation and to explain to me how that would work. It cannot work.

The Government needs to shred this NCSE plan. This should not be just a stay of execution. The Government should get rid of it. There needs to be proper engagement with teachers, unions and SNAs. The Government needs to work towards putting improvements into the SNA system and ensure that children have the proper support they need in the place they need it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have witnessed a nationwide revolt against the cuts that were being implemented to SNAs and, as a result of that revolt and the threat that it will escalate, the Government has backed down.

That is a great victory for the SNAs, parents, teachers and school communities who stood up, fought back and refused to accept these misguided and frankly cruel cuts. However, as the Minister has been told, the protests are going ahead tomorrow. The reason they are going ahead, from talking today to my former primary school community and the principal there

today, and to others involved in the protests, is that they do not trust the Government not to have them back in a year's time where we were in the past week or two. That is basically it. The parents of children with special needs have spent every week, month and year of their children's lives fighting for adequate resources and for assessments, services and therapies they do not get most of the time. They do not trust the Government because it has failed them, and they cannot understand how it got to proposing the cuts it tried to implement last week.

Simon Lewis, the principal of Carlow Educate Together National School, put it very well to me about a year ago and I said it at the time in the Dáil. When I asked him how the allocation issue could be resolved, he said to trust schools. It is as simple as that; we must trust schools, not operate on the basis of organised distrust or fear. This is what was going on if you listen carefully. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, was in my former primary school, Johnstown national school. It was at the epicentre of these cuts and was to have its SNA numbers cut from nine to 3.8. All the schools in the local area were there at a meeting. The Minister was saying that an awful lot more people are being diagnosed with special needs and asking if it was because we did not identify them before or if it is because there are more. I thought to myself that while she was asking an interesting philosophical question, it did not make a damn bit of difference to what is actually needed, which the school knows. If you listen to the school, the SNAs and the teachers, they know what is needed. We should believe them because they are not making it up. If the Government had started with that, it never would have come up with the misguided policy. The misguided policy was because of fear that the Government might have to put more resources in. That was the actual reason, and now the Government has been forced to put more resources in anyway because of the revolt. However, schools do not trust the Government not to do the same in a year's time because they have been let down so badly. They need reassurance that the Government has learned its lesson from this, that it is going to trust schools and that it is not going to treat people like numbers when it is rewriting the circular. It is an insulting circular that talks about anybody who does not have medical needs as having challenging behaviour. That is like a throwback to the 1950s and the badly behaved children. The schools want educators involved in the rewriting of that circular. We need commitments on that, and we need a recognition. We need the therapies in schools, not pilots.

By the way, we need to create the places in higher and further education in order that people who want to be qualified can get qualified. I happen to know somebody who has a master's degree and a bachelor's degree and applied for the UCD course in psychology. There were nine places for 270 applicants, so she did not get it. There were 270 applicants but only nine places. We need hundreds of these people. Why are there only nine places in UCD for clinical psychology? There is about the same number for educational psychology and counselling psychology. Why are we rationing access to the education necessary to get people qualified to provide the services that children with special needs need, and that we need in the schools? It is unbelievable. Basic things need to be done, but if the Government trusts and listens to schools, does not see this as cost containment and does not see children as numbers, there might be some chance the schools will believe the Government is not going to have them in the same place in a year's time.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I am genuinely shocked at the Minister's response to this motion. Last week, the Government and the Minister spread fear, trepidation, confusion and chaos

across this country for parents, special needs assistants and entire school communities. There is not even a mention of an apology or an "I am sorry" in her contribution. That is disappointing, to say the least. It indicates to me that the Government does not understand what it has done to parents, special needs assistants and school communities over the past couple of weeks.

Parents of children with special needs have to fight and advocate for everything for their child. The minute they discern the slightest problem, there is anxiety, stress and sleepless nights. Then they have to look for an assessment of need for which there are huge waiting lists of over two and a half years, even though time and early intervention are absolutely vital. Many of them have to scrimp and scrape to go privately for an assessment and a diagnosis. Then they have to fight to get a school place. They may have to go to the High Court for that. When they get a school place it may be anything up to 25 miles from their home. I had a case of that only last year. Parents are under pressure from day one and are running on empty, with huge levels of stress, anxiety and sleeplessness.

Earlier today, the Taoiseach refused to answer the core question in this whole issue. Again, the Minister refused to address it in her contribution this evening. The core issue is the criteria by which a child with special needs is allocated a special needs assistant. The current situation is simply untenable and unacceptable. It is outdated, too narrow and does not reflect the duties currently being carried out by special needs assistants in our schools. The contribution of the Minister indicates to me that last week's pause was simply a cynical exercise to buy time, and that the climbdown last night, welcome as it is, was forced by protests on the streets and protests promised for tomorrow and the weekend.

The current situation, where a child with autism who is overwhelmed, a child who is anxious and unable to learn without adult support, a child who needs help with communications, a child who needs help with social understanding or a child who needs help with emotional distress or sensory difficulty does not qualify for a special needs assistant, simply has to change. That is what the protests are about, and those protests are going to continue until that situation changes.

Deputy Michael Collins: If Deputy Tóibín does not arrive, Deputy Flynn will probably take his time.

What has happened over the past few weeks with regard to special needs assistants has been nothing short of disgraceful. Families, schools and SNAs were thrown into turmoil because the National Council for Special Education sent out letters telling up to 200 schools that they would lose SNA support next year. In some cases, schools were staring down the loss of half of their entire SNA team, a blow no community could possibly absorb. It was not common sense from the Government that stopped these cuts. It was the people - the parents, SNAs, teachers and communities who stood up. Tens of thousands of people signed petitions and protests were being organised up and down the country. The pressure became too big, and only then did the Government finally blink and pull the handbrake. Now we are told that no school will lose an SNA in September and that an additional €19 million in funding will be provided to protect those posts. That is welcome but, if we are honest, this is an embarrassing, last-minute U-turn that should never have been needed in the first place.

One of the many emails I received from parents stated:

Dear Michael, I'm contacting you in relation to the national issue of reduced SNAs in our primary school. To say this is an issue of the utmost importance would be a grossly misrepresenting statement. As a parent of a child who for the last two years has been availing of the SNA service within our school - a local primary school - I find the prospect of reducing the very necessary numbers of assistants in future disgraceful. My son who's now aged six has been within the catchment of the special needs programme since he began primary school and has flourished with the help of an already under pressure service. Over the last two years, we have seen our son grow up in a system where he now looks forward to attending school in the morning as he is being equipped with the necessary skills to interact with students, teachers and parents alike. This has been a godsend for both my wife and I. To see my son benefit from the little extra attention that is most certainly needed on a daily basis has been eye-opening as to the benefits of the service. The benefits of this are making and retaining friends, coping under pressure, with social interactions, emotional support and regulation, academic performance and general mental health and well-being. These are but a few of the benefits that we as parents see on the most superficial level and are not yet aware of the long-term benefits that this will most certainly have on our son but are confident that the benefits will be massive. I'm asking you to help get the government to reassess and reconsider the proposed actions for the benefit of Ireland's future generations.

This is a generation that the Minister cannot and must not let fall between the cracks of society. SNAs do not constitute another luxury. They are essential. They are the difference between a child getting through the school day with dignity and support or being left behind. Anyone who works with SNAs, especially in rural Ireland, knows the enormous weight they carry. This should never have been treated as a line item that one can cut on a spreadsheet, yet that is exactly what happened.

We are told the measure has been paused but a pause is not a fix, as has been pointed out. The entire framework behind SNA allocation is out of date and unworkable and is leaving families in constant fear that their support will be taken away year after year. The Government should not congratulate itself on reversing a mistake it should never have made. It should fix the system, scrap the broken allocation model and give schools and families the certainty they deserve, not reviews, pauses or panicked letters landing on principals' desks.

I was speaking to a teacher over the weekend who has two SNAs in her classroom. She told me that there is no way she could teach her other students and help the two children in her classroom that needed help. Deputy Boyd Barrett said the Government should trust schools and teachers. That is where the breakdown is happening here. I was on a board of management for long enough, so I know how difficult it is to run a school. The Government does not trust these people and this was built on the back of untrustworthy carry-on.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I welcome that the Minister went into reverse gear at the last minute last night in the wake of threats of large protests. Members of this House and councillors, certainly Independent Ireland councillors, have received emails on this issue from various parents all over the country, including those in my own constituency, from Ballincollig to Whitechurch and from north Cork to east Cork to west Cork. People from Kerry have contacted me. A total of 200 schools are affected. One thinks of the number of parents, principals and SNAs who were affected. Last night's announcement by the Minister's office led to a sigh of relief from a number of people. These parents really do have enough on their plate. Someone

who is looking after a child with special needs or additional needs has enough to worry about without somebody from the Department drawing a line, making that child a statistic or figure and deciding whether he or she is ill enough or weak enough or whether his or her problem is big enough or acceptable. Deputies Boyd Barrett and Michael Collins said it; trust is now gone. The little line of trust that was there, between parents and the Department of Education, is now gone, as is the trust between the principals and the Department. Trust between SNAs and the Department has certainly gone, given the way SNAs have been treated. Rebuilding that trust takes more than a half-winged apology in the House this evening. As one Deputy said, the Minister did not even have the courtesy to say "sorry", put up her hands and say she got it wrong. It would have been better if she had done that.

The Minister confirmed that there are 23,000 SNAs working in schools. This is a lot of people who are working for a nine-month period and being paid over 12 months. They are low-paid workers who are sometimes treated well in schools and sometimes treated not as well as they should be. These people are at the front line. They make up a marginal workforce but they are the backbone of inclusion in this State. We find ourselves underpinning the State on the work of these people.

One thing the Minister did not mention was the 20,000 children who remain on waiting lists for an assessment of need. This is not an abstract figure. It involves children waiting for recognition and support and waiting for the State to respond. We cannot describe ourselves as a system that is child-centred with thousands of children on waiting lists at the front door of this Department.

Over the past two weeks, I have heard from people all over my constituency and beyond. The one message was that this cannot go on. This has been going on since Circular 0030/2014. Classrooms have changed and needs have become more complex. Diagnoses of autism have increased and population growth has accelerated well beyond the projected figures we had for 2026. We have now reached a certain demographic milestone that we did not expect to reach until the next decade. Instead, these numbers have arrived early in our schools and our education planning has not adjusted to keep pace with that. If we had shown the workforce any respect, Circular 0030/2014 would have already been modernised, we would not have to have this debate at this late hour and we would not have to have all these people in the Public Gallery. It is now 2026. The Minister is not unintelligent, so surely she should know Circular 0030/2014 is not fit for purpose. In fact, it is more of a handler's guide book than something that meets the needs that are there. Anyone who has a scintilla of knowledge, knows an SNA or has witnessed what an SNA does knows that the SNA takes the child with a little bit of dyslexia who is frightened of a book and encourages him or her to read and then takes the next step and encourages him or her to read aloud. The work of SNAs is unbelievable, from the soft touch to the word of encouragement. SNAs sit with children with eating disorders and encourage them to eat their lunch but, under Circular 0030/2014, they cannot open the lunch box. That does not make sense. It is not fit for purpose any more.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government announced its decisions regarding SNAs last week like a wrecking ball. It was an incredible situation where teachers, parents, SNAs and, of course, children were not spoken to. The manner in which the Government presented this information to schools around the country was incredible. It created a wave of stress and panic in many families and many schools last week. The ineptitude of the Government's approach

last week was startling and it showed the lack of centrality of families, SNAs and teachers in the Government's plans for this space, as if its plans are divorced from the people they are meant to affect and help in the future. I welcome the Government's U-turn on this but this is a result of that ineptitude.

The reality is that special education in this country is a national scandal. We have a system that does not support children. We have a system that battles children and parents. Just a few weeks ago, parents were forced to sleep outside Leinster House to protest and demand their children's right to education. These are families who have been locked out of education and have received up to 60 rejection letters from schools and children who applied at the age of four to start school and by the age of six had still not secured a school place. That the Department and the State would fail in their constitutional responsibility here is shocking.

What is the reward for those children who had to struggle? Once they finally kicked down the door and gained access to the classroom, the Department's first instinct was to pull the rug from under them and slash SNA supports in certain schools.

It is cruel to give children a seat at the table and then take away the support they need to sit at that table. The State has spent 22 years in non-commencement of the EPSEN Act as a shield against its own responsibilities. Section 2 is not an aspiration; it is a mandate that these children should receive their education in an inclusive environment. By withdrawing SNA support, the Government made an inclusive environment impossible in certain schools, for certain children. The Government is effectively carrying out a backdoor repeal of their rights, telling these children that their place in mainstream education is conditional on a Department spreadsheet rather than their legal entitlements. That is a massive mistake for this Government to make. Each one of these children is a citizen of this country, and the job of the education system is to make sure that each of them reaches their full potential, rather than have a situation where they are in a constant battle with the Government. I ask that we have a proper review of this system and match resources with needs throughout the education system.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome all the SNAs in the Gallery. I apologise that I could not stop to chat to them; I was running to a committee. I recognised some of them. I was not being rude; I swear. I thank the Minister of State for his visit to St. Michael's House today. I have often seen him in special schools in north Dublin. It is great to see him there, taking that hands-on approach. What we saw today was the SNAs at work, and the pride they showed could not be more topical for this debate. We saw that investment is needed in Baldoyle and St. Michael's House. It is needed in St. Michael's House and across north Dublin, especially, as I am always saying to the Minister of State, in Stapolin Educate Together National School, speaking of SNAs.

Regarding the SNA allocation, I welcome the announcement last night but, as we all know, it is far too often we are reactive rather than proactive. We are putting out fires. This should never have happened. The fear, terror and uncertainty that spread among teachers, parents and students in my constituency and across Ireland should never have occurred. That is important. Someone in the Department has acknowledged that already and I welcome that, but it should never have reached that point. The gap still remains, and I heard other Deputies speak about the 2014 circular which still defines the role of an SNA primarily in terms of care support. That circular is more than a decade old, however, and it is clearly not the case.

SNAs support everything and everyone. They support speech and language and occupational therapies. They facilitate everything. The Minister of State goes to schools; he has seen them. They do everything. They are the extra everything. They are integral members of the school community. I have spoken to some of the SNAs I grew up with, such as Audrey Byrne for example. When I was in the school I asked her what she wanted me to speak about. She was the heart of the school; she was in everything. She is still in the school. She mentioned the fact that it is very difficult for SNAs at the moment. Some of them must arrange voluntary contributions themselves rather than it being directly taken out of their pay. Two professions of teaching working side by side under the same roof and in the same classroom should not face different levels of payroll support when planning for their financial future. It may seem to be just an administrative issue but it speaks volumes about how we value this role. We need to extend beyond policy documents into employment practices. Going to the schools, as the Minister of State is already doing, is going to change that, and I welcome that. The most vulnerable pupils depend on SNAs, and giving a child the right to thrive is the bare minimum. One of the fundamentals of a Government is that we give every single chance to any citizen of this country.

Our schools depend on SNAs. The State depends on SNAs to make inclusive education a reality. There are huge commitments in the programme for Government. I welcome the announcement made last night but it should not have come to that. While I was campaigning before the election - it is the reason I am involved in politics - a woman named Eleanor Lanigan was on the door speaking about SNAs. She is fighting illness at the moment and I wish her a speedy recovery. I know she is watching these proceedings.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Whatever a Government may say and whatever it may have done in the past few days to try to stem the tide of parental fury on this issue, there is no disputing the key point put forward in this motion, namely, that this fiasco has inflicted profound distress and anxiety on vulnerable children through a rigid, clinical and deeply flawed interpretation of care needs criteria. We all welcomed the announcement that there will be no reduction in the number of SNAs for the next school year, and of course we welcome the additional €19 million in funding. However, as has already been noted, this does not address the fundamental issue around access criteria, nor does it make clear where the €19 million will come from - perhaps the school building budget or this summer work scheme; who knows. We need clarity on that. It certainly cannot come from either of those pots.

Indeed, when it comes to children's needs in this State, it seems there is a perpetual state of crisis. We need only mention the blight of child homelessness, the children's disability network teams in Offaly and elsewhere which are grossly understaffed, the CAMHS scandal of overmedicated children, and the school meals programme that is handing out poor quality and mislabelled food. This SNA fiasco is just the latest in a long line of issues where the State is actively failing our children. Trust has been shattered on this issue and it will take more than a severe U-turn, one that could have given Government Ministers whiplash, to repair that trust.

As a former principal and teacher, I see how invaluable the work our SNAs do is. It helps children with special needs to achieve their potential and it supports them. We must ensure SNAs are listened to, respected and given certainty and clarity. Those are the basics.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for giving us the opportunity to talk about this very important matter. I welcome all the concerned people in the Gallery. I thank all of the SNA teachers, ordinary teachers and principals we have in Kerry for the wonderful work they have been doing for the past great number of years. We all rely on teachers and need them very much.

I am glad the Government paused this case and problem that was raised among our schools in Kerry last week and, indeed, right around the country. A pause is not enough for me. We must get to know how a child deserves an SNA. That is not people arriving into a school like they did a couple of months ago and going into a room by themselves without going to the classrooms or to meet the teachers. They just said who they were and, after an hour and a half, they went off. That did not happen in every school but it happened in a good few of them. I advise the Minister of State of that. This is a real problem for me because we were always brought up with the idea that it is in the Constitution that the children of this country must be treated equally. Not alone are we not doing that now, we are hurting the more disadvantaged children. These are the children who need a bit of help. Different things can be a problem for different children. They can develop certain problems. It is a real issue for young parents when they find there is something wrong with their child and have to get the child assessed and do everything they can to make him or her as good as the rest of the children. That takes too long as it is.

Many other problems arise with little children when they first go to school. In Kerry we have quite a big problem where we have children from other countries who have language difficulties. If we did not have SNA teachers to help them, the rest of the children would be held back. Does the Minister of State understand that? That has to be looked at and brought into the equation to ensure every child gets what they need. Some children have to be helped to go to the bathroom. There are all these little things. Some of them have to be helped to be fed. After a while they get going and pass out other children. That is the truth of it. I am very disappointed and I apologise as a Member of Dáil Éireann for what happened last week. It should not have happened. Our teachers are doing their level best. There was no one of them idle. I do know that in certain schools-----

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

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have three minutes. These two people came into the school from the Department, talked and went around the classrooms. That is not right and it should not happen. The Minister and Minister of State have to take the blame and ensure that does not happen again. That is what I am asking them.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: There has been a lot of commentary tonight to which I have been listening. I welcome everybody in the Gallery. Some of the commentary I agree with while some of it I fundamentally disagree with and, in my three minutes, I will try to explain as much as I can.

As a teacher, I taught for 15 years in a school. I would have had interaction with our autism spectrum disorder, ASD, hub, which we had in Fermoy where I taught for most of my career. I challenge anybody, including the Minister and Minister of State, to find a better example of

where an ASD hub is integrated into the mainstream school setting than in Fermoy where I taught. It was right up there with best practice.

I disagree with some of the commentary over the past hour or so. Some people are alleging that we do not value SNAs. As I said, I worked in a classroom environment for 15 years. Some of the best professionals I have worked with over my career have been SNAs. When we were looking at professional development and people doing courses, in many cases, teachers would not do the necessary upskilling that was required. I think of instances where we had to start utilising EpiPens and so on in class. The SNAs were among the first to put up their hands to do many of those tasks. Let us be honest about it; they should not have been doing them. When the Minister and Minister of State are considering this over the next few months, I hope they broaden the circular that has been referenced here. I hope it recognises the reality on the ground in many schools and the practical examples I have just given.

Fundamentally, I have an issue with calling this a review in the first place because a review is something that is ongoing. There was clearly such a gap between the last review and this proposed review that I think we should just call it what it is and should start from scratch and build up again. I do not think a review is the right term for it.

I spoke to both the Minister and Minister of State over the past few weeks in relation to cliff edges in particular, and that is what we experienced here. There were schools, including in my constituency, where two, three or four SNAs were being lost because the gap between the reviews was so big. The Minister and Minister of State should consider some threshold or ceiling. Reviews have always happened. When reviews happened every 12 months, or when they were ongoing by the special educational needs organisers, SENOs, the changes might have been marginal. There might have been 0.25 of a gain of an SNA or 0.25 of a loss of an SNA, depending on the circumstances of the school. The problem, as I said, is the gap is so wide now that we are facing those cliff edges. There needs to be some mechanism built in where we do not face drops of such significance.

I have a serious concern, and I hope to speak about it again tomorrow night, in relation to assessment of need. It is very difficult for SENOs to quantify the need in the absence of diagnosis. We are creating a further problem for ourselves in a couple of years' time. It is quite clear the demands that will be required of a school. If we allow what is being proposed to happen, where resources could be agreed by principals, SENOs and school management, in the absence of diagnosis we are actually going to create another problem further down the line and that needs to be re-examined.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Sinn Féin for the opportunity to contribute to the debate this evening. Debates like these are essential to reflect on the deeply held priorities for our communities. I want to state absolutely clearly that this Government is fully committed to supporting children with additional needs.

This commitment is not merely a matter of policy but a matter of principle and is reflected in the continuing record-breaking increase in the number of SNAs in our classrooms, an unprecedented investment we are delivering for special education. My senior Minister, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is deeply committed to it and in her previous life as Chief Whip I know her commitment, on a personal level, to children with additional needs. I want to put

that record on today. Furthermore, as I indicated last week, there will be no reductions in SNAs in September 2026 to 2027, and for any school that has been granted an increase, that will be honoured as well.

To the SNAs, I say they are the heartbeat of our school communities. They provide essential care and support that allow students with additional educational needs to participate fully in the school life. Since my appointment 12 months ago, I have visited almost 120 schools across the country. In every classroom I entered, from Cavan to Cork, I saw first hand the transformative impact special needs assistants have. I have seen children who, without this dedicated support, simply would not be able to attend mainstream schools. I want to place on the record my immense respect for the SNA workforce. They are professionals who give their all to the children they support. They are invaluable. This is exactly why it is so important that we ensure we have the right support in the right place at the right time. I might come back to that point in a few moments.

On the redeployment scheme, I think we all agree that the needs of the schools are never static. They evolve as students graduate or new children enrol and as the individual needs of students change over time. Much like the way we see teachers being redeployed due to a drop in numbers of enrolments, the need for schools can change to a degree that the level of SNA provision is reduced or indeed increased. This was an annual occurrence up to 2020. I understand wholeheartedly that this can be difficult news for a school and we must ensure schools do not face a cliff edge. It is vitally important to have a redeployment scheme in place. We must make sure that the redeployment scheme is out there within the shortest possible time.

Much has been discussed in relation to the 2014 circular and there has been significant criticism of it this evening and across public discourse over the past while. While I hear those concerns, it is also vitally important to remember that this circular has been the foundation for the most massive growth of SNA support in the history of the State. Since its introduction in 2014, we have added 14,000 new SNAs to our schools, with a 45% increase since 2020 alone. This is a huge investment. We must be careful not to undermine the very framework that has allowed this support to scale so rapidly. I also assure the House that there has been no change in how the circular has been interpreted or implemented.

However, we recognise the landscape of education has changed in a decade. That is why, as part of our first ever SNA workforce development plan, we are reviewing the circular in the context of the evolving role of the SNA. This has not been a top-down process; it has involved wide consultation and engagement. A working group comprising the stakeholders, including union representatives, SNAs and school management bodies, has met over 15 times over the past number of years to progress this work. They have examined every nuance of the role - how the SNA interacts with the wider school community team to the specific range of support required by the students.

We have seen huge investment in special education. We have seen an increase of 58% in five years. We have to acknowledge that. While we take all the criticism, please accept that we have, at the very core, the idea of special education and we know the importance of it.

I want to talk about the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and I know many Deputies across the House work and engage with the NCSE and its teams individually on behalf of their constituents on an ongoing basis. I have always had huge respect for the work of the

NCSE going back over many years. We have seen a significant increase in its staffing to meet the rising demands across our system. The review process is not a cold, administrative task; it is a robust, professional assessment. It is important that we acknowledge the work of the team from the very top and the way they have worked over the past number of years to see increased special classes, special schools and enrolment. Their dedication and commitment not just at the top but right through the system is something that we have to accept.

We are going to continue to support children through the expanded summer programme, which has become a lifeline for families; a comprehensive review of the assistive technology to ensure we are using the best possible tools available; and the implementation plan for the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, ESPEN, Act, which has also taken place.

I, like Deputies across the House, come to this debate at an extremely personal level. I have taken some of the comments that have been made over the last week or so on the chin as a public representative. However, from my engagement with the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, over the weeks and months since her appointment as Minister for education, I know that she is somebody we can work extremely well with.

We understand the challenges facing families. To the SNAs, I would say that I have seen first-hand the massive work they are doing, the length and breadth of the country. We were in Limerick recently and I saw an SNA putting together a chair for a child. The chair had come in a box and the SNA was putting that chair together for the child. I understand the amount of work they do, the length and breadth of the country, in every single school. If anyone says we are disrespecting them, we are certainly not. We have at the heart of this what the SNAs are doing, but we also have at the heart of it the challenges that are faced by every single family with children with special educational needs. They have battles from day one in terms of assessments of need. The one thing that has arisen in the course of the debate, in public discourse and in commentary is that we have to make sure that our education system is built in such a way that the best possible outcome for the child is at its very core.

Children who were not getting supports heretofore went on to have a very difficult adulthood, or went on to day care or other challenges. They need to get the right support within the educational system. We have seen many changes within the system in recent years, and we are going to continue that. I can assure those in the Gallery, those who will be protesting tomorrow, those who have contacted us and the school communities that I have engaged with right through my political life, not just now, that we are going to work, day and night, to ensure this happens.

As I said in some of the public comments I made during the week, there is no point in my coming out with something that is not going to work. We have to come out with something that everybody has confidence in. That means redeployment and the issue in regard to the circular. It also means that we have at the very core of our education system the child who needs it. I know the struggles that families have because, like all Deputies in the House, I engage continuously with families. We have to make it easier, and we have to take the fear and concern out of it. I would ask everyone to work with us because we do not intend to let them down.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Government's decision to pause and reverse its recent approach is, without question, a welcome reprieve, but let us be absolutely clear - that is all it is. It is a pause, an easing of pressure, not a solution. Behind the belated U-turn lies a deeper reality. The Government's approach to special needs education remains fragile, stretched, unclear and *ad hoc*. In the middle of the system are the people who hold the system together - the SNAs, the teachers, the parents and the children, whose needs should be at the centre of every decision made. We recognise them. We recognise and acknowledge their determination, organisation and refusal to stay silent.

The first I heard of this was two weeks ago, when the whole school community from Fossa National School contacted me. Since then, pupils and teachers from Asdee, Fossa, Glenflesk, Portmagee and even Glasheen in Cork have contacted me. It was their voices that stopped the changes, which were unfair, unworkable and unacceptable. Families, schools and pupils deserve certainty, stability, clarity and continuity of care, not another temporary fix. That means returning to the drawing board, reviewing the outdated frameworks, halting the redeployment policies that created chaos and fear, rather than support and structure, and engaging in consultation with the schools, which understand their students' needs better than anyone.

I spoke to the principal of a school who said that children who are leaving preschool with their AIM workers are then left to swim in the mainstream without an SNA. He described that system as the height of blackguarding. Another teacher told me that there needs to be a serious review. She said the upset caused by the communication, and particularly the response by the Taoiseach, was very traumatic for all. She spoke of hours of teaching time lost to form-filling and appeals from May to December, with the most vulnerable left without SETs while the forms are being completed. She also referred to the offhand and dismissive comment by the Taoiseach. We need inclusive educational diversity, which is listed as a core value, but the Government's actions suggest otherwise.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí Ní Raghallaigh agus O'Rourke as an rún seo a chur chun cinn. Cuirim fáilte roimh na SNAs agus gabhaim buíochas leo as an obair atá ar siúl acu.

The past two weeks have been a truly worrying time for many parents, SNAs and teachers across the State. The uncertainty of the SNA allocations for September has shown that the Government does not value the work that SNAs do to support students with additional needs. Individual TDs might, but, collectively, the Government does not. That is the transparency that people are seeing.

It is the teachers who are already trying to do their jobs in the largest class sizes in Europe who will be asked to pick up the pieces should schools lose SNAs. I have spoken with parents, teachers and SNAs from Leixlip to Kilcock, and all the way down to Naas. We had almost 1,400 parents at an online meeting last night. We heard from anxious parents who say they feel the Government does not care about their children, and that their children are being stripped of their dignity due to the lack of respect. These are SNAs who themselves have children with special needs, and that is what brought them to that call. Most mams were almost in tears, and many parents succumbed to those tears.

Let us leave aside the genuine worries of SNAs, teachers and parents for the moment and think about who this is really damaging. This is about vulnerable children, citizens of this State. That is who is being punished here at the end of the day, just because they have additional needs. It would be a fundamental assault on their human rights and their constitutional right to education if we were to take the SNAs they have in school away from them. These are the children who rely on the hard, diligent work of SNAs every single day when they come through the gates of mainstream schools. They are already being badly treated. This is unacceptable.

A piece of advice for this awful Government: do not take on the parents of children with special needs. You will not win.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the SNAs. I welcome the pressure that was brought by SNAs and others on the Government that has led to this pause and reprieve, but it is not a solution. We need to see the ins and outs of the workforce development plan. We need to see a proper, workable redeployment scheme. We have to deal with the failures of the 2014 circular. This is clear to anyone who has heard the testimonies from schools where children were to lose SNA support if they did not fit into primary care. That is the reality. That is what was happening.

I can speak about my own son, Turlough. He is 17 now and is in transition year in Ó Fiaich College. He was in a language class in St. Joseph's and later in mainstream. He could not have done that without what the SNAs did. Let us say it. It was not always plain sailing. In fairness to my wife, she probably carried the slack for a lot of it. At this point in time, as I said, he is in transition year, working on business development projects and going away on trips. He would be able to do none of this, and he would not actually be in education to the same degree, without the SNAs. We need to recognise what they do. We need to put a proper framework in place. The nicest thing I can say about the communications is that they were an absolute mess. We need to look after those people because they look after our children.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We have heard a lot today from all sides of the House. I know there are Government representatives who respect the role of SNAs and have engaged with them. We have heard a lot about the various things they do. So much of this hinges on the idea of primary care, the limitations there have been and how that has constrained the approach the Department has taken. We know the many ways in which they are crucial in assisting people with movement breaks, with education and with all of those healthcare needs.

In so many respects, they keep the classroom together and keep the lid on so many behavioural issues. For a child who has ADHD and is under pressure, the assistance they get from an SNA ensures they are able to engage fully with their education. In all those contributions, I do not think anyone on any side of this House would say that we should go backwards or that we should constrain the SNA to the role they used to have at the outset of the proposal of the position. We all recognise that the role of the SNA has evolved a great deal in the past 20 or 30 years to what it is in this day and age. How absurd it is that the review was based on such tight criteria when we all know the role is far greater than that. That absurd approach led to a situation where schools such as that in Glasheen in my constituency were looking at four people potentially. As far as they were concerned, in terms of the way it was communicated, they would be out of a job and those children would not get the support they

needed. The Minister is shaking her head but that is how it was communicated. That is how it was understood. That is true right across the State.

Where do we need to go from here? A pause is not enough. I hope the Minister understands that from this debate. We need to fundamentally begin from the proposition of what the modern SNA does, how crucial their role is and from there decide the appropriate allocation.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I want to pick up on a number of comments from the Minister in my closing remarks. I am deeply disappointed with both contributions. The senior Minister who has responsibility said in her comments that, "At the forefront of our deliberations was ensuring that the child-centred approach to the provision of special education is retained and enhanced in these policy developments." No one believes that. The Minister needs to talk to and listen to people. She said, "This Government has nothing but respect for SNAs, special education teachers, schools, students and their families." There was an audible laugh from the Gallery in relation to that. The Gallery is made up of SNAs and some teachers. The Minister needs to hear what is being said there. She said that, "To say that the Government is not funding resources for children with special educational needs is a mistruth." Less than 24 hours ago, this Government could not confirm that schools would not lose SNAs in September. SNAs for children who needed support were being cut for want of €19 million. To say that is a mistruth is very far from reality. The Minister is not opposing this motion tonight. Is it because she supports it? Is it because she is going to implement its proposals? Is it because she is ready for a reset? No, no and no. She is not opposing the motion because she does not want to be held accountable for her position in relation to this. There is a step-change on this issue. Communities, parents, SNAs and school communities are organised. They will, and we will, hold the Government to account.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Prices

138. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures he is taking to reduce the price of energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14765/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: Every time I raise this, I am astounded by the lack of progress on it. We have the highest energy prices in Europe, according to Eurostat. The national energy affordability task force has only met three times since its inception. The only thing it has produced is an interim report. No steps seem to have been taken to reform the Irish energy market and to hold energy companies to account, measures we have been calling on for years. What is the Minister going to do to reduce the price of energy and will he make a statement on it?

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy. First, to correct him, we do not have the most expensive energy prices in Europe. Energy is still too costly and we have got to work on that. It is a priority for Government to bring about changes in that regard. Not all of it is within our control. That is why we need to continue to expand renewables, invest in our grid and drive affordability.

The programme for Government acknowledges the increased energy cost pressures on households and commits to bringing forward measures to contain energy costs and tackle energy poverty. Government has introduced a suite of measures already to help households and businesses deal with the cost of energy. For the record, in budget 2026, we approved an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity until the end of this decade, 31 December 2030, saving households up to €100 on average per annum. In January, the fuel allowance payment increased to €38 per week, equating to an increase of more than 15%. Eligibility for the fuel allowance was also extended to those in receipt of the working family payment. About 460,000 households across the country are receiving those direct support. We extended the €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration for a further three years to the end of 2028. A record €640 million will support the SEAI residential and community energy upgrade schemes. That is really important because we are driving permanent savings for families through retrofitting. We estimate that savings of up to €1,200 per annum can be achieved through retrofitting homes. We have revised those grants very substantially make them more accessible to households and particularly middle income families. We are going to continue with the warmer homes scheme as well and improve the outputs from it.

I also met our four largest energy suppliers, as the Deputy knows. I asked them to stand up hardship funds which, to be fair to them, they did. We will continue to make sure the resources go to helping those families who need it most. There is more that needs to be done and I will come back on a supplementary.

Deputy Pa Daly: The problem with some of the schemes that have been introduced is that they are not working. Some of them are deeply regressive and inequitable. Most low to middle income households have significant barriers if they have any hope of reaching a B2 standard. What about the solid fuel homes which are mostly rural and are mostly home to elderly people? They are punished by the Government rather than being helped, through hikes in the carbon tax, which are now supported by the Healy-Rae brothers, where there is no accessible, affordable alternative. The same is true for those who rely on home heating oil. On the retrofit loan scheme the Minister mentioned, fewer than 2,000 households have availed of these loans since the scheme started. When we tried to put questions about how far away we are from the 2030 target, I was told it was not the Minister's responsibility. Whose responsibility is it?

There is something wrong when the International Energy Agency has called into question the huge gap between retail and wholesale costs. What is the Minister doing to reform the energy market? It costs about three times more to buy energy here than it does to produce it. The ESRI is also saying prices are way above what they were on the eve of the election.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is more work that needs to be done. That is why I established the national energy affordability task force. On what it has done so far, significantly before the last budget, it produced its interim report which guided us in the last budget. That

work continues - things like looking at the structure of the bill and at how we actually pay for our grid investment. Critical to that, if we are to deliver permanent affordability, is to ensure that investment in our grid of €18.9 billion over just this five-year period actually takes place. There are 520 capital projects across the country that will enable us to bring more renewables into our system with cheaper, secure, green, clean energy. We need projects like the North-South interconnector delivered. That one project alone will deliver savings of about €120 on average per household on this island, and will improve grid resilience as well.

The Deputy can be assured that those who require assistance with regard to energy and energy poverty will receive the assistance they need in a targeted way. I would rather invest the close to €3.5 billion that was paid in energy credits into permanent changes in our energy system, which is what I am doing.

Deputy Pa Daly: The last time I raised this issue the Minister said he would look at network charges. What has he done since then to restructure them to make sure that data centres, for example, pay their fair share and take the pressure off households? In the next few months there will be a significant opportunity to bring about fundamental reforms to the energy market that could help households. A meeting is taking place in March. Ireland will hold the Presidency from July. This has to be the Minister's priority. The price of electricity is coupled with the wholesale price of gas due to the marginal pricing system. We have said for years that it has to be reformed. Will the Minister take steps to deal with that? Will he give the regulator the power to tackle price gouging? Is he holding it to account? Will he restructure network charges to ensure that data centres pay their fair share? Will he guarantee that the costs proposed for LNG and data centres are not passed on to households in the legislation for the strategic gas reserve and that relating to private wires?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: At every meeting of the Energy Council I have attended, I have raised the issue of affordability. This is an issue that is prevalent in most EU states to varying degrees. I would like to see changes to the regulatory framework happen. Most of that needs to be driven at EU level. Issues relating to, for example, the Spark app need to be dealt with as well. Those issues are being looked at European level in relation to affordability when it comes to energy, particularly for households and small businesses.

What the national energy affordability task force and I will be looking at this year is what we can control ourselves. We are still heavily dependent on imported fossil fuels. We need to reduce that dependency. We hedge and we buy forward. That is why when people see wholesale gas prices fall, there is a lag time before we see retail prices fall. We are focused on delivering price reductions over the course of this year on energy. It remains an absolute priority for me.

Electricity Grid

139. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will consider bringing forward a prioritisation framework for grid connections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14766/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: This question has come up in the past. Will the Minister consider bringing forward a prioritisation framework for grid connections, particularly as we have a crisis in the context of housing and the cost of living? We have all heard about the problems with the MetroLink, for example, and the energy that will be needed for it. There is a reckless attitude towards data centre expansion. Even the Minister's officials agree on that. The Minister knows that he needs to bring forward legislation to deal with the prioritisation framework. Will he bring it forward?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The CRU is responsible for grid connection policy. I will be working on reforming the CRU, something that is needed. We are also securing additional resources for the CRU, which I welcome.

The CRU was assigned responsibility for regulating the electricity sector following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999. The management of and matters related to connections to the electricity grid are functions assigned to ESB Networks and EirGrid under rules determined by the CRU. These organisations are independent of me, as Minister, in the exercise of their respective functions. Having said that, PR6, which is the grid investment I spoke about in my previous response to the Deputy, details what we need to do with our grid to be able to deal with the growth that will occur in the residential housing market, the industrial sector and all other sectors, including transport. Record investment of €18.9 billion over this period will deal with those demands.

We need to expand our grid by way of distribution, storage and generation. The last full year for which I have data on generation through renewables is 2024. In that year, over 40% of our electricity was generated via renewables. That is growing which is a good thing but we need to improve the resilience of our grid and expand it which we will do. That is why on behalf of the State we are investing €3.5 billion in equity in EirGrid and ESB. PR6 has been published. It details what those grid investments will deliver. There is no question of putting data centres ahead of residential developments. That has not happened and will not happen. We also need to grow our industrial base and create jobs for our people. We need to ensure that we have a grid which supports growth in our residential and enterprise sectors.

Deputy Pa Daly: A grids package was announced on 10 December. It gives the Government the green light to move away from the first-come, first-served model that gives rise to rampant data centre expansion that has displaced the delivery of housing and transport and led to the hiking up of energy prices for households. The Commission stated, "In areas with long waiting times for grid connection, the first-come, first-served principle should be abandoned". We will bring forward legislation on that in the coming months. The current model is broken. The Minister's officials will agree with that. The Secretary General of the Department has said that there are difficult choices to make between housing and AI. Instead of prioritising the corporate bottom line, I want the Minister to prioritise ordinary people who are going through a cost-of-living crisis. We have seen data centres expand to the point where they account for one third of energy demand. Dealing with this matter is within the Minister's gift. He cannot hide behind EU rules and regulations. Will he agree to support our legislation to put that prioritisation framework in place when it comes through?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When Sinn Féin publishes its legislation, I will certainly look at it in a constructive manner. Data centres underpin an important technology sector in this country that employs hundreds of thousands of people. We have not had a situation, nor will we, where a data centre is connected ahead of a housing development. That just does not happen. It has not happened. We need to be at the cutting edge when it comes to technology. We should not turn away either indigenous or foreign direct investment. We need to look at expanding capacity in order to accommodate that investment and deal with the increasing energy demand we have. That demand is going to increase by another 50% between now and 2035. This is why it is imperative that we invest in our grid at a rate we have never seen before and deliver projects like the North-South interconnector, on which the Deputy's party has different views north and south of the Border. The bringing forward of legislation might afford the Deputy an opportunity to clarify the position of the main Opposition party with regard to that important infrastructure.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister recently met the ESB and EirGrid to discuss house connections. There was a story in *The Irish Times* about that matter over the Christmas period. The Minister knows that under the current regulation, it is first-come, first-served model. He also knows that for this to change, he must empower the regulator by means of new legislation. He knows in light of the grids package and the new guidance for connections, there is nothing standing in his way in this regard. In the interview, which was published on 30 December, there was no indication that the Minister had any intention of bringing legislation forward. What took place in the meetings with EirGrid regarding connections? The Minister knows well that the ESB and EirGrid cannot do anything until the regulation is changed. Will he bring forward legislation in order for this to happen?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I should have said in response to the Deputy's initial question that I welcome the publication of the grids package. The package speaks to the issue across all member states whereby we collectively invest in our grid system and look at expanding interconnection and see where the EU can assist in the context of funding between member states and third countries.

I again ask the Deputy to clarify the position of his party regarding the North-South interconnector. Does Sinn Féin support it or not? Does it agree that it is a critical piece of infrastructure on this island? There is a 32-county, all-Ireland electricity market. If anything, one would have thought that we would collectively support improving the resilience of that market. The North-South interconnector is critical to that.

We will embark on drafting legislation in respect of the CRU. There is a commitment in the programme for Government that we will look to work with the CRU to reform its structures and examine its mandate. I will deal with the Deputy and the Oireachtas committee at the appropriate time. I would welcome his input.

Question No. 140 taken with Written Answers.

Electricity Grid

141. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment in relation to private wires, the charging methodology that will be implemented; and the safeguards that will be introduced to ensure that all of the costs of providing the original grid connection will be recovered by the ESB Networks, and that these costs are not passed on to other customers. [14767/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: This question relates to private wires. Will the Minister outline the new methodology that will be implemented? Will there be safeguards to ensure that all of the costs of providing original grid connections will be recovered by ESB Networks? Will action be taken to ensure that these costs will not be passed on to customers?

Under current proposals, any user taking all their energy capacity from a private wire will not be required to pay network charges to the system operator despite relying on the public grid for backup. We have been speaking about the energy costs and the price of the same. Will the Minister guarantee that households will not incur more costs?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is critical that we get the legislation on private wires through. The Deputy is broadly supportive of what is proposed. It will make a significant difference here. The general scheme was approved on 16 December 2025. Since then, my Department has been engaging with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government, OPC, to begin drafting the legislation required to bring forth the private wires regime. I assure the Deputy that introducing this regime is an absolute priority. From electricity generation to a point-to-point scenario, I believe that we can deliver further projects by using private wires. However, they are going to have to be up to the same standard that applies in the context of delivering our own grid.

The Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy, of which the Deputy is a member, will undertake pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of the private wires Bill this week. It is the intention that the eventual Bill will complete its passage through the Oireachtas as early as possible this year. I am aware that the committee is going to deal with the general scheme in a truncated manner. However, I ask those involved to note that it is critical that we get the Bill, when it is forthcoming, passed. I will be seeking co-operation from those on all sides of the House to see if we can do that as quickly as possible.

On the Deputy's question, the policy statement that was approved last July and that gave way to the introduction of private wires will require a review of the network recovery charges. The relevant methodology will be created in line with the private wires policy, ensuring that private wire entities will pay the full cost of the service they have sought from or that is provided to them by the national electricity grid. The general scheme introduces a licensing regime whereby the CRU can recover such costs and introduce a charging methodology. The specifics around that in the context of the potential for disconnection charges, a standby network charge and more will be outlined in subsequent regulations drafted by the Department. Effectively, there will be a cost-recovery mechanism in respect of those who deliver them and those who are using them.

Deputy Pa Daly: We will be discussing that tomorrow. The concern of many members of the committee is that the proposals will exacerbate the regressive and inequitable way that

network costs are currently distributed. According to Eurostat, Irish households have the highest electricity bills in Europe. As a result of the proposals being brought forward, households could be landed with a rake of new charges on their bills in addition to what they already pay.

The Minister mentioned about PR6 in reply to earlier questions. There is a new levy to fund LNG from increasing network charges on bills. Energy users and consumers are being hit from pillar to post with a host of new charges. They do not want to be subsidising the network charges relating to data centres, and we do not want to be obliged to do either. What will the situation be when it comes to mandating data centres that are proposing to have renewable energy when they are putting their own private wires in?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The large energy user policy is really clear when it comes to the future growth of large energy users such as data centres. They will have to bring forward 80% of that energy as new renewable energy. We are the first country to do this. It will not be a drain on our existing resources. It will be about providing additional renewable resources.

I have been clear with regard to private wires. Private wires should be and are a positive thing. They will unlock a lot of opportunities and investment. They will ensure the delivery of additional networks across our country that will be up to the same standard as our own grid. As already stated, the private wires entities will pay the full cost of the services that they seek from or that are provided to them by the national electricity grid.

In relation to PR6, which is the biggest investment that we have ever made in our grid, we are looking at, on average, about €18 per annum of an additional charge per household. That is about €1.50 per month. The North-South interconnector alone will deliver savings to households of over €100 per annum. That is why it is critical that projects of this sort are delivered. The cost to which I refer will be well offset by savings.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is the Minister going to ensure that the North-South interconnector will be underground? That is the fundamental issue for people who live in Border communities.

On the basis of what he said, is the Minister guaranteeing that there will be no new costs passed on to consumers as a result of the private wires legislation? Consumers cannot afford any new costs. There is a concern to the effect that the private wires legislation will undermine climate obligations by diverting energy. We have seen in the past few years the increase from wind and the new energy coming onto the system, but it is all being gobbled up by the data centres and other large energy users. A fundamental concern is that this will continue despite all the efforts the Government and people are making in the context of onshore and offshore energy. One Minister even admitted that the Government has been sitting on its hands and navel gazing when it comes to offshore wind. We do not want that to happen.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Who said that?

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Which one?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To be clear, there will be a cost recovery on private wires by those who deliver them. There will be no increase in costs. That methodology will be worked through. That will be discussed as part of the pre-legislative scrutiny that the committee will be going through tomorrow.

In the context of the advancement in renewables, if I go back 15 years, only 13% of our electricity was generated by renewables. At the end of 2024, it was over 40%. It is not the case that the increase in renewables is being gobbled up by data centres. That is simply not true. Our job is to accelerate the delivery of renewables, both solar and wind, and to get offshore into construction by the end of the decade, which we will do. That will be critical in the context of allowing us to meet our climate action obligations and targets. It can be done. Maybe not all by 2030, but there is real momentum in that space. There is real momentum across the renewables sector, both wind and solar. We are now seeing an advancement in biomethane, and work is also being done district heating. There is a lot to be positive about.

Energy Policy

142. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update on the work of the national energy affordability task force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14498/26]

Deputy Carol Nolan: Will the Minister provide an update on the work of the national energy affordability task force? The Irish SME Association, ISME, has published the results of its latest members' survey, identifying the priority issues facing SMEs this year and showing that business costs overwhelmingly dominate their concerns. Some 78% of respondents said that these concerns include energy and other overheads, all of which ISME rightly notes have been subject to sustained and significant inflation in recent years. Alarming, ISME also notes that despite easing inflation in some areas of the wider economy, these structural business costs have not moderated. What is the Government doing to address this issue for consumers and small businesses in Offaly?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this very important issue regarding energy affordability. The latter is a priority for the Government. I answered a similar question from Deputy Daly earlier.

In June of last year, we established the national energy affordability task force. Its job is to identify, assess and implement measures in the short term that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses, while delivering key renewable commitments, protecting security of supply and ensuring economic stability. The task force membership includes representatives from various Departments and key energy stakeholders. Its first report set out measures for consideration in the context of budget 2026. Its recommendations brought about a 15% or €5 per week increase in the fuel allowance, which will provide an additional €140 to over 450,000 recipients during the annual fuel allowance season. Eligibility for that has also been extended to those in receipt of the working family payment, which is about another 50,000 households. In addition, the extension of the reduced VAT rate of 9%, which applies to gas and electricity, has been extended to 2030. This provides real clarity to energy consumers and reduces bills for households by about €100 per year.

This year, we will also be investing in the region of €640 million to support residential and community upgrade schemes.

This includes €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides 100% grants, delivering permanent savings for households. The business support grants also deliver permanent savings. On a *per capita* basis, it is the most significant retrofitting investment that any European state is making. The focus of the task force has turned to the preparation of an energy affordability action plan. This will be completed in the third quarter of this year. That plan will include a review of the cost drivers within the energy sector and consideration of how the EU action plan for affordable energy and associated guidance can be implemented in an Irish context. The next meeting of that task force will take place in March. It is important to note that ongoing bilateral engagement and sectoral work also happens between meetings. There is more work to be done in that space and we are determined to do it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister for his response. The fact is that, while some supports were given to small businesses and consumers in general, to date, very little has been achieved in tackling the source of the great energy price rip-off that continues day in and day out for households and small businesses, many of which in my constituency have closed due to energy costs. The capacity to absorb these energy costs is just not there, as ISME has identified. The costs impact everyone from the owners of pubs and retail stores to the hairdressers and the farmers. This is why I can only agree with ISME on its statement that "the survey findings underline the need for Government to focus on structural cost competitiveness in 2026, rather than layering additional obligations onto small businesses already operating on tight margins." The profiteering that has gone on is simply scandalous. Perhaps we need to adopt the equivalent of the unfair trading practices directive and the approach of the Agri-Food Regulator so that we can see exactly how these obscene energy prices are calculated and why Irish consumers and businesses are so slow to see any meaningful reduction in their energy bills when wholesale gas prices reduce.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Energy costs are a real issue for households and small businesses in particular. I agree with the Deputy completely on that. We must do everything within our power to help to reduce those costs. With regard to real structural reform, she will know that the previous Government brought in energy tax credits. The State invested about €3.3 billion in that. That could not be sustained into the future. Instead of that, €3.5 billion is being invested in equity funding to EirGrid and ESB Networks so that they will be able to fund measures under PR6. That will be a step change. It is an investment in grid capacity and grid resilience and it will also drive affordability. I agree that we have to look at structural cost competitiveness. The national energy affordability task force, NEAT, I have established will be looking at the very make-up of our electricity bills. A lot of it does sit within the EU framework, however. Some of it is within our control and we will look at that. That report will be published in the third quarter of this year. I will look to bring further measures forward this year.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister mentioned tax credits. While the energy tax credits were welcome, they let the energy companies off the hook. I called for the energy companies to be brought in here a number of times. The profiteering was scandalous. We were seeing

businesses really grappling with costs. A long-term solution is needed. I hope this task force will produce proper practical solutions to get to grips with this issue once and for all and to send a message to the energy companies that their ongoing profiteering is not acceptable. Government needs to send that message.

A report on wind energy was published this week. It stated that energy generation costs for the State are over €1.5 billion. Again, where are households and businesses seeing the benefits of this trickling down? Small businesses are trying to operate on thin margins while being bound within an energy-cost straitjacket that is making it harder and harder to sustain financial viability. I am concerned about rural jobs in my own constituency of Offaly. We must do everything we can to protect jobs.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was in Offaly last week, where Bord na Móna is doing work and where Statkraft is developing new battery storage facilities, which are critical. We now have nearly 1.5 GW of battery storage across the country. This allows us to plan and to distribute our energy, particularly renewable energy, at appropriate times to deal with peaks within the system. That is being expanded further. Offaly has actually been a leader in the delivery of renewable energy. At the same time, Bord na Móna is doing really good work with regard to habitat restoration. It is about increasing the amount of energy we own. It is also about clean, green and cheaper energy. We are overdependent on imported fossil fuels. Only about 25% of our gas is sourced domestically. The rest is imported. We are always at risk from the vagaries of the energy markets. The reason for the gap between the wholesale price and the retail price and the delay in reductions trickling down to the customer is that, because Ireland is importing so much, we are buying ahead or hedging. Those decreases therefore take longer to reach households. That is why we need to expand our renewable capacity. We are doing that year on year. I predict that this year will be a record year for the delivery of renewables with regard to both new projects and consents for new projects.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Artificial Intelligence

143. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if his Department has carried out an assessment of the climate impacts of AI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14504/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Government is probably one of the most pro-AI in the world. The Taoiseach has compared AI to the invention of the printing press. The Government has swallowed the Kool-Aid of big tech seemingly with no assessment of the impact it will have on our ability to achieve our climate targets. I know the Minister has said we are not going to achieve them anyway even though they are supposed to be legally binding. Has the Department carried out an assessment of the climate impacts of AI?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government's new updated national digital and AI strategy was published last week. It sets out the Government's ambition and vision to 2030 to ensure Ireland remains a digital leader in an increasingly competitive

global environment. It aims to secure Ireland as a global hub for applied AI innovation, strengthening our profile as a location for investment. It will ensure our economy reaps the benefit of digital and AI for growth and competitiveness, enhance our public services and empower our people to thrive in a digital society.

In accelerating our digital and AI ambitions, it is important to acknowledge the significant energy and infrastructure challenges Ireland faces. To address these challenges and to maximise future opportunities associated with the twin digital and green transitions, the Government is pursuing a strategic medium-term approach for large energy users, as set out in the large energy users action plan published last month.

In response to the question the Deputy asked, there is no single stand-alone Department report quantifying the climate impact of AI. As with all sectors of our economy, the operation and development of digital infrastructure, including AI, are underpinned by Ireland's legally binding climate objectives and the need to maintain robust energy security. The Government continues to work to secure a decarbonised energy future that unlocks enhanced use of renewable energy sources, energy-efficient technology and energy-effective solutions to reduce our carbon footprint. Key pillars of the large energy users action plan will be the provision of a framework for the establishment of green energy parks in which to co-locate the most energy-intensive industry with the supply of renewables and other enabling technology and the establishment of a framework for near real-time greenhouse gas emissions reporting by large energy users.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The new digital and AI strategy is not about climate change. I think there are five references to climate in the entire document. It is not about protecting children or artists. It is not about any of those things. It is about a commitment to "strengthening Ireland's position as a digital leader", seemingly without regard to the negative impacts AI is having in our society. The Minister of State has confirmed the Department has not even done an assessment. The Government's approach is to go full steam ahead with AI. It suggests we have to embrace this technology and do what the big tech companies are telling us without even assessing the impact that will have on our climate. The emissions of all the big tech companies, including Google, Amazon, Meta and Microsoft, are through the roof. Not only are they far off their targets, which are going down, but their emissions are going up dramatically, largely because of investment in AI and the massive energy usage that goes with that.

They are also miles off their supposedly adjusted figures. The real figures are going high.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I do not agree with the Deputy's assessment on where we are in regard to ensuring that we meet our climate commitments, which are enshrined in law. They are very much part of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act. They set binding carbon budgets and sectoral ceilings. That means no sector is left off the hook, and that includes AI and digital infrastructure. Neither of these can expand without regard to emissions footprints. The Department has developed a threefold policy response to this. The planning regulation specifies that all large energy users must comply with the CRU's guidelines and environmental licensing regime. When we look at the integration with renewables, the new large energy action plan promotes green energy parks where AI, data and research infrastructure directly connect to renewable supply. That is very important because each of these data centres or AI data

storage systems will be required to meet at least 80% of their annual demand with new or additional renewable energy generation. That is driving down their emissions footprint.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I find it remarkable that Ministers and Ministers of State are still answering questions about climate inaction by saying "Oh, don't worry, we've got legally binding targets." The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, is sitting beside the Minister who said we are not going to meet these targets, so how can it still be an excuse to say that when we raise inaction by the Government or action in the wrong direction? His senior Minister has literally said we are not going to meet those legally binding targets. He is making a joke of these targets.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are close.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The truth is that the expansion of data centres has deepened our dependence on fossil fuels. They have outpaced the renewable deployment. They have strained the grid. They have hoarded power connections. They have built gas generators on site. More and more are burning fossil fuels directly. They have stalled decarbonisation and deepened their dependence on fossil fuels.

Sometimes we see greenwashing statements by the likes of Google and others claiming that AI is going to be a net climate benefit and that we should not be worried about all the fossil fuels we are burning as a result of it. A new Friends of the Earth report finds that 74% of claims about AI's climate benefits are unproven, serving the profits of tech and fossil fuel industries while downplaying the major climate harms of generative AI.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Let me be clear, as will the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. The Government has very clear objectives. It has twin objectives around decarbonisation, but also around digitalisation. That is very much what we are focused on. We have the policy regimes to back this up. We are looking to harness Ireland as an AI innovation hub. That presents huge opportunities for economic growth. Along with that, we are providing significant investment into our energy systems. Some €3.5 billion in equity will go into EirGrid and ESB Networks and that will enable the modernisation of our grid, which is capable of balancing the new demand while safeguarding housing, enterprise, SMEs and essential services. The combination of regulation on transparency and renewable integration will ensure that AI-related growth does not undermine the overall energy transitions we are trying to achieve.

Energy Prices

144. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures his Department is taking to acknowledge the increased energy cost pressures on businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14815/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question today is about the significant energy cost pressures that many have felt in recent months and the impact that has in particular on SMEs across the country. What measures is the Department taking to acknowledge the increased energy costs on businesses? Will the Minister of State make a statement in that regard?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Addressing energy affordability for businesses is a priority for this Government. We are committed to supporting businesses to become more energy-efficient, thereby strengthening competitiveness through reduced energy costs. In budget 2026, the Government extended the accelerated capital allowance scheme for energy-efficient equipment until 31 December 2030. It also approved the extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity to December 2030. This encourages investment in energy efficiency and low-emission technology. The Department also funds schemes administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, which provide various supports to enterprises that can assist businesses in increasing their energy efficiency. The 2026 allocation for these schemes amounts to more than €40 million.

The Government has also introduced measures to reduce energy costs and unlock greater decarbonisation of Irish industry and enterprise over the medium term. For example, under the national development plan the Government has approved a significant equity investment, valued at €3.5 billion, in ESB Networks and EirGrid to support the financing of their ambitious capital investment plans of over €18.9 billion in the coming five years. The increased deployment of indigenous renewables, such as onshore and offshore wind and solar generation, will help to reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels and the associated price volatility. We are also supporting further interconnection with neighbouring jurisdictions, including the 700 MW Celtic interconnector between east Cork and France.

In June of last year, the Department established the national energy affordability task force to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewables commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. The task force seeks to support the objectives of the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity, as well as other Government efforts and initiatives to alleviate the energy-related challenges businesses face, including through engagement with the cost of business advisory forum.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: As part of the engagement at the climate committee - Deputy Pa Daly will attest to this - we had representatives of the business sector in talking about the barriers they face in transitioning and achieving climate targets. One of the points they raised was how little consideration is given to cost proofing of climate plans and transition measures to get across to a low-carbon environment, particularly for SMEs. They mentioned low visibility of costs for all the different plans and the affordability of the energy transition. They said they have difficulty when looking ten years down the line to see where their companies are going in terms of getting to a kind of low-carbon future. It is really important that the Government and the Department are very aware of that. They need to be aware that for businesses in particular, it is a challenge to get across that bridge.

The Minister of State already mentioned the energy affordability task force. Is there a particular focus within that task force on SMEs, energy costs for business and priority measures? I accept the broader point about society at large, but I ask specifically about measures for SMEs that could be covered off.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy for raising these important matters. I am someone who has a dual role within the Department of enterprise, with responsibility for small

businesses. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has engaged with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities to undertake an independent review into the speed and level of wholesale to retail price pass-through. That is really important because we need to ensure that there is transparency and fairness, but also that there is fair competition in pricing.

We have had inherent structural challenges in Ireland such as our reliance on imported gas, our dispersed population and in other areas. It is important that through the national energy affordability task force we conduct a review on the cost drivers across the energy system, from infrastructure investment to market behaviour. That would feed directly into the energy affordability action plan because price volatility has never been as apparent, especially given the current geopolitical state. It is important that the Government identifies the structural barriers, but also that we bring forward measures around affordability for enterprises and SMEs and that they become a permanent feature of the Irish energy system.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I agree with that. The committee also looked at energy affordability in December. Interestingly enough, the ESRI was of the view that there was not a particular issue with price gouging because if there was, you would expect to see a lot of new market entrants into the Irish energy market if there was a lot of profit to be made. It did not seem to see that. It was an interesting observation from the ESRI at the time. Once again, I encourage a very sharp focus on the costs of the energy transition for small businesses in particular. The more we can do around bringing down those costs in the long term and keeping them down - for energy-intensive businesses in particular - the better. It is in everybody's interests to transition across for that kind of carbon-free future.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his remarks. I certainly hear that. During the engagements at the cost of doing business advisory forum. That is very much looking at the structural needs within the energy system, but also how businesses analyse and interpret their bills. We are looking to get more details in regard to how bills are calculated. I will point to empowering businesses to control the controllables. That is exactly why we have a suite of measures through the SEAI. They are readily accessible, be it the business energy upgrade scheme. We also have the support scheme for energy audits. That can give businesses up to €2,000 per site visit. We have other programmes, such as the EXEED programme, which funds on capital investment. Together, working with the local enterprise offices, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the cost of doing business advisory forum, we are very much committed to finding practical solutions and co-developing them to support our enterprise and small businesses.

Tax Data

145. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the way in which revenue from collection of the carbon tax is used to support his Department's climate initiatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14619/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for his question. The programme for Government commits to using the carbon tax as a key tool to encourage a shift away from fossil fuels and to invest in a sustainable future. There are three areas within my Department that

received funding from carbon tax revenue in the most recent budget. First, in the residential and community retrofit area, the budget allocation for 2026 is a record €641 million, including €558 million from the carbon tax. This will support over 73,000 home energy upgrades, including solar PV. This target also includes 11,500 fully funded home energy upgrades under the warmer homes scheme for households at risk of energy poverty. A record €340 million budget has been provided for this scheme for 2026.

There has been significant investment and year-on-year growth in home energy upgrades under the national retrofit plan. In the period from 2019 to the end of 2025, those schemes have provided almost €1.7 billion in support to homeowners for over 244,000 home energy improvements, including almost 32,700 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme, as well as approximately 18,000 heat pump installations. By any fair estimation, that is serious progress.

Importantly, within that, in respect of those retrofits that are made to households, you are looking at savings of up to €1,200 per annum on energy bills. That is significant. They are permanent savings. They are making homes warmer, safer, more affordable and healthier in reducing the emissions and energy use from homes. There are other schemes within the carbon tax, which I will come back to on the supplementary.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The recent carbon tax increases we have seen impact on the most vulnerable households. It hits them the hardest. As we know, households are facing rising costs across the board, particularly when it comes to filling the car with fuel and heating the home, yet the Government is set to plough ahead with these increases. They are scheduled until 2030 at least. Households are expected to take on this burden at a time when many households are struggling. The Minister says this is a tax that will contribute toward changing people's behaviour but the reality for the people I represent in rural Ireland, that is, people who have to drive their car to get from A to B, who do not have public transport they can rely on, who have to heat their homes and who do not have the alternatives, is that carbon tax is not going to change their behaviour. It is simply a tax that punishes them. While households face these increases, a report from the Comptroller and Auditor General found that just 61% of the carbon tax revenue could be verified as having been spent on the target schemes and programmes the Minister has mentioned. While the Government is making great announcements that the carbon tax revenue is ring-fenced and focused on these initiatives, this report demonstrates that the ring-fencing is not actually happening and that it is being treated the same as general taxation. Why are people being misled on this?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will agree to disagree because the carbon tax is ring-fenced and is due to bring permanent savings to households and to families. I have given the Deputy real, verified figures in relation to the number of homes. A total of 244,000 homes in this country have been retrofitted with the support of the grants, which I have just changed again to make them more accessible, particularly to middle-income families, by bringing forward a retrofitting passport. These include windows and doors grants, attic insulation grants and wall cavity grants. People do not have to go for the full deep retrofit and can access them. These measures bring about savings. People speak with their applications, that is, the tens of thousands of applications that we are receiving for these grants and the incredible interest in the new grant scheme that I have brought forward. I ask the Deputy not to lose sight of the fact

that nearly 33,000 homes at risk of energy poverty or in energy poverty have been fully retrofitted with 100% grant aid through the carbon tax and the climate action fund. They are permanent savings for those low-income households. I will turn to social housing and what we have been able to do there as well.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The whole argument the Government uses to justify the increases in this tax is that the increasing receipts are spent on climate initiatives. The Minister can say that it is ring-fenced, but this report has said that the reality is that 40% of the revenue is not being directed toward the intended measures. I outlined to the Minister the pressures that carbon tax increases are placing on households and that people do not have the alternatives. I do not know how the Minister can justify further increases when he is not actually spending the money on the measures that the Government should be funding. In fact, many of his Government colleagues from the regional Independents, when they were in opposition, spoke very strongly against carbon tax increases and the impact they would have on rural Ireland but obviously, ministerial jobs have changed their mind. Taxpayers need to have confidence in how a Government is spending their money. It should be spent in a way that has been promised by the Government. This report states that it is not. Most of all, the Government needs to stop fleecing ordinary households, who are up to their eyes with rising costs. Many households are in arrears on the likes of their energy bills and so on and this is just adding to that again. The Minister needs to recognise that as well.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are targeting about 73,000 retrofits this year. That will bring our overall retrofit figure to well over 300,000. We are targeting 500,000 homes by the end of the decade. These are bringing about permanent changes for people. When we talk about energy prices - and I have already said this in response to Government and Opposition Deputies - we still have an issue, like many European countries, in relation to energy prices. We need to reduce them further. How are we going to do that? We are going to do that expanding renewables. We are doing well on renewables in solar and in wind. It will also be done on delivering on infrastructure that will bring about those savings, such as the North-South interconnector, which is a critical piece of infrastructure in this country that the Deputy's party is for in the North of Ireland and is against, apparently, in the Republic of Ireland. I am not sure. I asked Deputy Daly what the situation was there. This will deliver savings of over €100 per annum permanently for households and improve the grid resilience for all 32 counties in Ireland on an all-island and all-Ireland basis. I would have thought projects like that would have received the support of the Sinn Féin party. Apparently in the North they are supportive, and in the South, they are not.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It would be fair to say that, at times, that the Minister's own party was not necessarily supportive of that particular project.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We fully support it now.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness to the people, what they want they want to see is a review and obviously, in the long term, undergrounding. Sinn Féin will not be very different North or South.

Wind Energy Generation

146. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update on the provision of wind energy; the targets for its provision in 2026; whether there are sufficient resources in place to ensure that offshore wind energy can be onshored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14751/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister provide an update on the provision of wind energy; the targets for its provision in 2026; whether there are sufficient resources in place to ensure that offshore energy can be onshored; and any other infrastructural deficits that need to be dealt with from the point of view of delivering on the wind energy promise?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. Onshore wind is the largest contributor to renewable energy generation capacity in Ireland, with approximately 5.1 GW of wind generation capacity installed. The Government is committed to achieving 9 GW of installed onshore wind capacity. Onshore wind remains Ireland's dominant source of renewable electricity and is second only to natural gas for overall electricity generation. In fact, we are among the world leaders for installed onshore wind capacity *per capita* and get a greater share of our electricity from onshore wind than anyone else across Europe. The Department recently launched a consultation on design features for the next onshore wind renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, auction scheduled to take place later this year.

The Government remains committed to having 5 GW of offshore wind capacity in development by 2030, with a long-range target of 20 GW by 2040. Five phase 1 offshore wind projects off our east coast, accounting for 3.8 GW of capacity, are in development at present. It is anticipated that the first planning determination will be made by An Coimisiún Pleanála by the end of 2026. The phase 1 projects are responsible for constructing the offshore transmission assets that will connect the sites to the onshore grid. These transmission assets will transfer to EirGrid after commissioning.

In December 2025, the Minister announced that the consortium of ESB and Ørsted had won Ireland's second offshore wind auction. It will develop an up to 900 MW project off the coast of Waterford, the first within the south coast designated maritime area plan, DMAP. The Department is currently developing proposals for an auction of the second site, Lí Ban, with potential capacity of between 900 MW and 1.5 GW. I expect the auction for that site to take place in 2027.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In a straightforward sense, we all want to see renewables. We might not have oil fields but we definitely have a large number of areas, offshore in particular, where there is a significant amount of wind for a considerable amount of time. It is that idea, which we often talk about, of becoming a wind superpower. Am I right in thinking that we will not see these particular offshore projects by 2030? Can we get a timeline for how far behind we are? What are we doing as regards the infrastructural deficit? Obviously, a large piece of work needs to be done by EirGrid, but we have constantly heard about the issues that exist in relation to ports. I think Belfast Port is the only port in Ireland that was capable of delivering in relation to offshore wind. I ask for an update on the timeline, on when the Minister of State sees us meeting those targets and on the infrastructural deficits.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Our immediate focus is to get these projects into construction. That is why we have established the accelerating renewable energy task force, alongside the Taoiseach's clearing house. That will provide inter-agency oversight to remove any barriers to grid planning or ports. We have very ambitious targets. In one sense, we are trying to put the resources in place financially, technically and institutionally because we need private investment, and significant amounts of it, to support connections on both the onshore and offshore sides. We are making progress in regard to previous and future auctions. We are also significantly ramping up investment in the CRU and EirGrid. They have agreed a new five-year programme with up to €18.9 billion being provided to support their plan in terms of building capacity within our grid.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am back to whether we can just get some sort of better notion of a timeline on when we will go from planning to shovels in the sea, for want of a better term. It is vital, no matter how far behind target we are, that we ensure we get back on track. We are hearing about an accelerating wind energy task force and the Taoiseach's clearing house. That all sounds wonderful. I just hope it does a better job than an awful lot of task forces have done to date.

When we get these targets, are we looking at something that can do something significant as regards that other task force on reducing energy costs, which are having a huge impact? I get that some of that is the connection with the price of gas. There is a need for greater oversight powers for the CRU and whatever else. We cannot just listen to answers in relation to hedging any more. We need to see a greater level of transparency. It is about delivering on renewables and then delivering not only on sustainability, but on capacity, storage and price in the long term for people who are suffering huge issues with high energy costs.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his comments. Confidence is growing within the sector. The Lifford project was the only project across Europe that was awarded last year. We are ramping up our investment, from the State's perspective, to try to ensure the key enablers are in place. While many of these projects are currently in planning, we hope many will go to construction before the end of the decade. Our responsibility is to guide and support many of these companies. Each phase 1 project is responsible itself for the construction of its own offshore transmission asset. For the Tonn Nua project, EirGrid will build the offshore grid that will link to the connection. The Government is focused on what we can control at the minute, which is building the network and ensuring that over 500 projects, including many substations and interconnectors, are delivered as part of EirGrid's and the CRU's project programme.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will they start construction in 2030?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Before 2030.

Question No. 147 taken with Written Answers.

Energy Conservation

148. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment whether funding schemes are available for communal heating schemes that wish to change from gas-fired to heat pumps in individual houses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14752/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There are funding schemes, but what funding schemes are available for a communal heating system that wishes to change from being gas powered, possibly to heat pumps, in individual houses? We spoke a bit about alternatives in relation to communal heating systems. It is about whatever works, whatever can be done and whatever is cheapest, particularly for those systems. I am talking about Carlinn Hall in Dundalk, specifically.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We discussed this particular estate before. I will go back to something the Deputy mentioned that I did not get to answer - the Minister of State was answering - in relation to the North-South interconnector. There will be no further reviews. We have had four independent reviews. The North-South interconnector needs to proceed as planned and as consented to in the North and in the South. We have got to get on with it.

To answer the Deputy's question, to support individual homeowners, and following Government approval last month, I published a new national residential retrofit plan with an enhanced set of measures to increase the delivery of home energy upgrades, including heat pump installations. The SEAI and I held a briefing last Tuesday attended by many Deputies across the House, which they found useful. These changed grants will be very impactful. I encourage all to make sure their constituents are informed of these new Government initiatives. The retrofit plan will continue to make home energy upgrades more accessible and affordable, making it easier for homeowners to undertake deep retrofits on a phased basis. That has been a big issue, particularly for middle-income families. While the grants are substantial, those families do not have the financial capacity to do all the work at one time. The new measures include new and enhanced attic and cavity wall insulation grants, an enhanced heat pump system grant of up to €12,500 and €4,800 for windows and doors, as well as other grants. These can be reintroduced and done on an individual basis.

The new recently announced heat pump system grant will reduce costs associated with a whole-house heating system upgrade.

The new maximum grant is €12,500 and that encompasses the existing maximum of €6,500 for the heat pump, €2,000 for upgrading radiators and pipework and a new renewable heating bonus of €4,000. That is a seriously substantial increase and will make heat pumps much more accessible for people. All eligible homeowners can apply through the SEAI for these supports.

With regard to converting from communal heating, individual homeowners, including those availing of a communal heating system, can apply for the individual heat pump grants.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: On the North-South interconnector, the Minister has laid out Government policy and stated there will be no further reviews, not even the one requested. There is no difference between Sinn Féin in the North and Sinn Féin in the South on this. As I have said before, the Minister's own party has had a significant number of people who opposed the interconnector over many years, but generally not while in government.

I appreciate the answer the Minister has given. I have discussed this a number of times with him. Some of the third-party companies that are considering it are now going to assess houses in Carlinn Hall. They will have to talk to the residents about whether they want to opt for these solutions. They have engaged to a great extent with the SEAI. It is just about making sure there are no obstacles.

I am aware of the €12,500 heat pump grant that is available. On one level, it does not matter whether the option is that or the support scheme for renewable heat. It is just a matter of delivering on what has been a problem. I realise that the Minister understands that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do. To be fair to the Deputy, he has raised the issue of Carlinn Hall residents, who find themselves in a very difficult situation. I will say two things on it. First, the enhanced grant for heat pumps is significant. Parking the politics, it has gone up to €12,500 and that might make the pumps more accessible. Second, at the request of the Deputy in the Dáil and elsewhere, and of Deputy McGreehan and others, we asked the SEAI to carry out a research project to provide assistance to residents in Carlinn Hall. It would be useful to examine the new grants to see whether they fit the residents' circumstances. It is a communal system.

Supports for geothermal drilling, which may offer another centralised solution for the Carlinn Hall development, have recently been approved as eligible under the SEAI support scheme for renewable heat. That is good news for residents. However, it is important to bear in mind that the Carlinn Hall heating system is privately owned and managed. The implementation of any recommendations from the report of the SEAI on Carlinn Hall, or indeed any premises wishing to switch to individual heat pump solutions, will be for individuals to decide on themselves. However, if we can continue to provide advice, we will.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that. Possible solutions for the housing estate have changed many times. Initially, the heating system was fed by biomass. It was then changed to gas but then the invasion of Ukraine sent gas prices through the roof. It is a deeply inefficient system in places and at times, and while there have been some attempts at improvements, we need a long-term solution.

I welcome the fact the SEAI and the Government are open to delivering on this. It may be that the easiest solution is not to replace the communal system with another communal system but to move to individualised solutions within houses. I am agnostic once there is a scheme that is affordable for the individuals and that works out as a better system environmentally and in all the given scenarios. In a perfect world, we would be able to switch it over to a district heating system that takes waste energy from elsewhere. That does not appear to be a possibility at this point, but it may be a solution in many other places.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Sure. We are drafting the heat networks (miscellaneous provisions) Bill. That will establish the regulatory model for district heating, including communal heating systems, to ensure consumer protections are in place and to support the delivery of a vibrant district heating industry. There is a genuine opportunity in Ireland in district heating. There is only one scheme in the whole country. We have a pipeline of

approximately 20 others that could be delivered in the near term and that could make a difference to affordability. Using waste heat or excess heat is also critical.

We will continue to provide any advice we can through the SEAI to residents of the estate. There is an opportunity for those concerned to examine the new suite of grants. The near-doubling of the heat-pump grant may make things more accessible for many households. Coupled with other grants available for housing estates of the age of Carlinn Hall, it might make things affordable. We will stay engaged on it.

Renewable Energy Generation

149. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the position regarding any further initiatives proposed by his Department to increase the support for offshore wind infrastructure in coastal communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13792/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: Bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an díospóireacht anseo agus an méid a bhí ráite maidir le fuinneamh gaoithe go háirithe. Wind energy as it applies to coastal communities, in particular, is such an important aspect of our drive to meet the targets that are so often spoken about, yet there is no operating offshore wind farm in this country. What are we going to put in place to support communities, particularly coastal ones, in delivering wind projects and ensuring we will have wind capacity into the future?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government is committed to increasing support for offshore wind infrastructure in coastal communities. This is being done in ongoing consultation with all stakeholders in the development of offshore wind energy generation. This includes our local coastal communities and our valued fishing sector, which the Department recognises as crucial to the enduring success of offshore wind energy.

The Department is committed to ongoing engagement with the fisheries sector under Ireland's plan-led approach to offshore renewable energy, ORE, development. The seafood and offshore renewable energy working group provides a forum to facilitate constructive engagement on the interaction between the seafood and ORE industries.

In September 2025, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and my fellow Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, announced the publication of the proposal and accompanying public participation statement for the national designated maritime area plan, DMAP, for ORE. The proposal outlines the Government's commitment to extensive and inclusive consultation with the public and stakeholders throughout the process. In recognition of the importance of coastal communities in the national DMAP process, a dedicated community liaison service has been contracted, with the sole focus of working with and providing information directly to coastal communities.

Furthermore, all offshore wind generation development projects under the offshore renewable energy support scheme, ORESS, are required to make contributions to their community benefit funds. The community benefit fund will be professionally managed on behalf of the local community, and a local community benefit fund committee will have full responsibility for its funding decisions.

Given the anticipated high level of offshore generation, the amounts involved will be substantial and transformative for communities. It is estimated that these will comprise approximately €25 million per annum from the 3.1 GW of capacity contracted under phase 1 of ORESS.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State. I have no doubt about the value of offshore wind energy to local communities, particularly, where it is being landed onshore, and about the benefits it brings. I am aware of the community benefit funds, which the Minister of State mentioned. Two major projects are being run from Dún Laoghaire in my constituency, the Dublin Array and Ocean Winds projects. RWE is a partner in the Dublin Array project. Their office is now based in Dún Laoghaire, so it has a close connection to the community. I am aware that it is working hard on the development of information. There is a lot of misinformation about wind energy, particularly offshore wind energy, and about the environmental benefits and clean energy generated. Can we put measures in place that empower locally elected representatives to get answers where they need them and to counter the misinformation? In particular, I am thinking about concerns raised about possible environmental damage where pylons are driven into the seabed. My understanding from the experience of places like the North Sea and the coast of Scotland is that this can create small ecosystems that would not exist without the pylons. How can we counter misinformation?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his comments. I agree on the challenge faced by many communities dealing with the prospect of planning consent for large offshore projects. In the Department, my fellow Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, is looking at the national DMAP ORE element.

The development of that, using the ecosystem-based approach, is really important. It is important that it is informative as to what impact it will have not just on the environment but also on the habitat and the fisheries. There is a job of work as to how we can work with local government, councillors and local authorities to ensure that awareness and that education piece is promoted and that the offshore renewable zones, which avoid ecologically sensitive areas, are incentivised and supported in a sustainable model to ensure that both can coexist.

Deputy Barry Ward: The Minister of State is absolutely right, and the value of the community benefit funds, in particular, is huge. We will not feel the effect of this until these things are up and running. Again, in relation to linking them into local communities and the people who are elected to represent those communities, he referred to the professional delivery of community benefit funds. Is there a role for local elected representatives or community councils or other democratic local bodies to have a say in how that money can be utilised and how it can be given best effect in the local community? As I said, these projects are good anyway, but what the Department has constructed here is a really good scheme to add benefits for local communities. They will see that once it is up and running, but there is a real benefit to allowing local councillors and local community organisations that have a democratic element to them to have an input into this rather than having it coldly and professionally delivered without the input of the local community.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I agree with some of the Deputy's comments. It is an important piece that we need to get right. MARA can play an important role as to how it engages with those who are being supported through the community benefit fund and those in the locality who may not sit on the committee that manages the development fund but who have a role to play as to how we look at these types of projects. That approach would be very important in looking at the ecology piece and the benefit through the fund in order that it serves as a practical forum, that exchange of views can be brought to a meeting and there is problem-solving, guidance and data-sharing. That is an important focus that we will possibly go back and look to implement.

Renewable Energy Generation

150. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to outline if his Department is giving consideration to the introduction of a land classification system that would inform the suitability of any proposed solar developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13391/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The programme for Government reaffirms Ireland's commitment to and our ambitious target of 8 GW of solar capacity connected to the grid by 2030, to assist with meeting the goal of 80% electricity demand supplied through renewables. Solar energy is now a growing source of electricity, with about 2.4 GW of solar power capacity in our grid and another 1 GW on rooftops. Going back 12 years, it was only 2 MW, so the growth is incredible. The installed capacity we have amounts to powering approximately 520,000 homes. As part of this capacity, as I said, there is already 1 GW of rooftop solar. However, further solar capacity is required for Ireland to meet its domestic and international targets. The ESB has indicated that Ireland could expect the 8 GW of solar in Ireland by 2030 to require an area equal to about 0.26% of all agricultural land, based on a similar study in the UK.

The statutory designation of lands for renewable energy development is undertaken by local authorities as part of the city and county development plan process, which may incorporate a local authority renewable energy strategy or a wind energy strategy.

The SEAI is undertaking an update to the 2013 local authority renewable energy strategy methodology. This provides a robust, evidence-based and consistent approach for local authorities for the identification, assessment and planning for renewable energy development within their jurisdiction.

Furthermore, I have been advised that the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is at the early stages of preparing a new national planning statement on solar energy under the Planning and Development Act 2024.

Under the accelerating renewable electricity task force, officials from my Department will continue to work closely with both the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and the Department of housing on these ongoing reforms, which will act to support and facilitate the deployment of solar, which is critical to the decarbonisation of Ireland's economy and greater climate resilience.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his response. Proposals to prime agricultural land for renewable energy proposals have become common in recent years. Rural communities such as those in my constituency of Cork East are seeing acreage that long provided quality food produce being changed to acres of solar panels in a very short period. Development permission for up to 40 years sees traditional rural communities transformed for decades on the basis of one application. I appreciate that an increased provision of renewable energy sources is needed nationally. However, we have a particular problem developing in Cork East given our proximity to the grid, and limited attention is being paid to the quality of land being used. As such, is the Minister considering any further measures to introduce a land classification system similar to what exists in the UK, which would see the most fertile agricultural land protected against renewable development?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I understand the points the Deputy has raised. Solar is a relatively new but growing source of energy in Ireland. It is clean, green, sustainable and cheap energy. We have fine agricultural land across the country too and we need to make sure that we can continue to sustain our own population and sustain the agricultural and horticultural sector through our exports as well. We export over 80% of what we produce, as the Deputy knows. However, the advancement of renewables is critical to our energy security and to reaching our climate targets.

The Deputy has rightly stated that any application that goes in for a wind farm, a solar farm or a biomethane plant is dealt with independently of the Government by the planning authority. I have seen applications approved; I have seen applications rejected. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is at initial stages of working on a national planning statement for the deployment of solar.

It is important we are honest with people too, as the Deputy is being, that solar will continue to expand and is a very good source of clean energy for our country. It will reduce our dependence on imported fossil fuel as well and will ensure that we become energy-sovereign.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister again for his response. I note the work of the accelerating renewable electricity task force and its engagement with local authorities on the matter. I also appreciate that a public consultation invited submissions between September and October last year regarding national territory mapping under the EU renewable energy directive. Was there an appetite for such land classification as part of this process? How far is this process advanced in finalising national territory mapping?

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I attended a public meeting in Abbeyknockmoy in my constituency last week. Power Capital is proposing to develop a very large solar project there. It is already developing one nearby in Grange. There are proposals to install a battery energy storage system as part of these projects. This has caused unease in those communities because in January of last year there was a fire at a separate lithium-ion system based in nearby Claregalway. Three fire fighters have not been able to return to work since dealing with that incident, and the local firefighters have said they are totally unprepared to deal with such incidents. These proposed solar farms and battery systems are in very close proximity to residential areas.

I have submitted parliamentary questions on the safety and regulatory requirements for these systems, but there has been very little information coming back and very little in terms of fire safety. On behalf of those communities, I ask the Minister to outline any compliance regulations that are there to ensure that these systems are monitored and operated in a safe manner. Does he have concerns about the ability of the fire services to deal with any potential incidents? Will we see specific planning guidelines in this area?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will respond first to Deputy McCarthy, who tabled the question. Most of us are for sustainable, clean, renewable energy to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel.

We have had a good discussion and questions here about energy affordability. How do we drive that affordability? We drive that affordability by investing in our grid, by delivering projects like the North-South interconnector, by expanding our grid and grid resilience, and by expanding our renewables offering. There are communities that feel they have a concentration of different energy sources in their area. As the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, said in response to Deputy Ward, it is about looking at things like community benefit funds. I visited two battery installations in County Offaly last week, which are fully compliant with EU regulations. We need battery storage to deploy our energy at the right times. We need more renewables. We need onshore and offshore wind and onshore solar, or else we will continue importing gas from third countries.

Grant Payments

151. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will provide an update in relation to SEAI grants for windows and doors; the length of time the grant will open for; if applicants have to pay upfront; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14361/26]

157. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the way in which the redesigned SEAI grant structure will support homeowners in progressing from initial insulation measures to more advanced upgrades; the way this sequencing is expected to improve overall retrofit outcomes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14769/26]

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Will the Minister provide an update on SEAI grants, the length of time applicants will have to apply for these grants and how the scheme will work up terms in relation to upfront payments and reimbursement?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 151 and 157 together.

We have a few questions on the SEAI grants, which we have revised to make them more accessible for families. More than 244,000 homes across the country have been retrofitted. We have invested approximately €1.7 billion in retrofitting to deliver permanent savings for households, to reduce emissions and energy use and to make homes warmer, safer and healthier. The national retrofitting plan, along with the new and enhanced set of measures I have mentioned, will continue to make home energy upgrades more accessible and affordable. That is the main reason we are breaking up those grants. We are going to protect the warmer homes

scheme, which provides 100% grants. We have done approximately 32,700 homes in that space. We are targeting more than 11,000 this year. Further work needs to be done on the lead times from date of application to completion of work. I have met the SEAI on that too.

Homeowners availing of the other grants we offer can take a step-by-step approach. Even if someone is waiting for the warmer homes scheme, they can apply for grants in the interim. They can apply for attic insulation, wall insulation and start to break the grants down. I want to see more people accessing it. I recognise that costs have increased since 2022. That is why we have upped the grant limits. We have upped the grant levels for cavity wall insulation and attic insulation. These higher fixed grants will substantially reduce costs for homeowners. To help first-time buyers of existing homes to get on the energy upgrade journey quickly and at minimal cost, I have brought forward a specific grant for attic insulation for these new homeowners. This will support first-time buyers who purchase an existing property and who might not be in a financial position to undertake a complete energy upgrade.

The new heat pump system grant will reduce the costs associated with a whole house heating system upgrade and accelerate the uptake of heat pumps. A fixed amount grant for installing a heat pump system will be introduced. This grant is significant. It is €6,500 for the heat pump, €2,000 towards the radiator upgrades and pipework and a new renewable heating bonus of €4,000. That brings the maximum grant up to €12,500. That will also apply to applications already in train and not already paid out. For the first time, homeowners can access a windows and doors grant as an individual measure for the installation of energy-efficient windows and doors to replace older ones that are performing poorly. That is for homes where the building fabric will meet, or already meets, a specified minimum performance standard. Many homes already meet this standard. We estimate that approximately 200,000 homeowners can apply right now for windows and doors grants of approximately €4,600. That is €800 per door and €3,000 for windows. They are significant amounts. The measure is designed to help homeowners to improve comfort and energy efficiency, while ensuring homes meet the building fabric standard suitable for our climate action targets.

I have been advised by the SEAI that the register of windows and doors contractors has now been published on its site. There are 104 contractors registered as of last week. When applying for individual measures, homeowners will now have the option of applying themselves and having the grant refunded once works are complete, or applying themselves and having the grant paid to the bank account of their contractor, who can choose to offer them a discount upfront. They can basically charge net, and they will claim it back. They can also apply through a participating one-stop shop or energy partner, which will carry out the works for the homeowners and pass on the grant savings as a discount on the works. All of that is now up on the SEAI website.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister. He has basically answered the next questions I had for him. I am delighted that the grants will be upfront, and people will not have to provide the money. That is what he said. That is correct. There will also be no loans required. People will not require a loan in order to get the grant. It will be paid upfront, and people can go to get their windows or doors, or whatever retrofitting is required. Is that correct?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There are options there. For some people this had operated already. They can apply for themselves and have the grant refunded once the works are

completed. They can apply themselves and have the grant paid to the contractor and have that net option. There are low-interest loans available as well. If someone wants to go for a deeper retrofit and to do more work above and beyond, they can apply for that also. What we will endeavour to do with this round of changes to the grants is break them up. Before, for argument's sake, to get windows and doors you would have had to do a whole house upgrade. Even though the grants were good, you would have had to put substantial money towards it yourself. Many families do not have that, or that may not be a priority for them. Importantly within this, once you get this work done, your bills come down permanently. Your home is warmer, healthier and climate friendly too. All of those options are now on the SEAI website. I have also circulated a draft newsletter, and we have done a briefing with Members that was well attended by Government and Opposition last week.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I thank the Minister and welcome it. If you require the State-backed loans, are these available to everybody in rural Ireland and has rural Ireland applied for these grants in large numbers before? Another issue I have is of a household that had received a SEAI grant previously for cavity bead insulation 30 years ago. Are people like this allowed to go again and reapply for the new upgrades?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: You can go in. If you have already received one grant for one cavity wall, you can go in for a second one. If you did not get window grants before, you can go back in for them as well, so you are not precluded. The low-interest loan is available in both urban and rural Ireland. It is available across all 26 counties of the Republic. I do not have the breakdown per county, but we could certainly get that information for the Deputy as best as we have it.

Questions Nos. 152 to 156, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 157 taken with Question No. 151.

Climate Change Policy

158. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his views on Ireland's resilience to extreme weather events caused by climate change; if consideration is being given to nature-based solutions to mitigate and provide resilience to the impacts of climate change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14622/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I ask the Minister about nature-based solutions to mitigate and provide resilience to the impacts of climate change. We all know what has happened recently with warmer and wetter winters bringing more flooding, with a cost of billions and more than 100,000 properties in the State at risk of flooding. We know this will continue. Drainage systems will be exceeded, and we need to slow the water down and use the land as a sponge to ensure the surface can have more involvement in resilience to flooding.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy started asking his question. I did not pick up the start of it, so will he ask that again?

Deputy Pa Daly: What are the Minister of State's views on Ireland's resilience to extreme weather events? Is consideration being given to nature-based solutions to provide resilience to the impacts of climate change?

Deputy Alan Dillon: In addition to our efforts to mitigate climate change, it is critically important that we plan ahead for a climate-resilient future. Over the past number of years this has become even more evident as powerful storms including Babet, Darragh, Éowyn and most recently Chandra have significantly impacted Irish people, our infrastructure and our economy.

Ireland's whole-of-government adaptation policy response to the impacts of climate change is set out in the second national adaptation framework, NAF, published in 2024. The NAF sets out the national strategy to reduce the vulnerability of the country to the negative effects of climate change and to avail of positive impacts. In November 2025, ten sectoral adaptation plans covering 13 key sectors developed under the 2024 NAF were approved by the Government. These contain measurable actions to improve the resilience of key sectors over the next five years. The Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment holds the responsibility for the NAF and the electricity and gas network sectoral adaptation plans. The other sectors are the responsibility of the relevant line Ministers. A new adaptation task force that was established at the end of last year recently commenced work to provide the senior level oversight and co-ordination of Ireland's approach to adaptation, including systematic delivery barriers and cross-cutting issues. Risk guidelines developed by the Department include as key principles a requirement that nature-based solutions be utilised where appropriate to improve resilience to climate impact. Nature-based solutions can build reliance into the priority risks that extreme wind and heat identified in the EPA's national climate change risk report published in June last year.

Deputy Pa Daly: I hope that in his next answer, the Minister of State actually tells us what type of nature-based solutions will be foreseen or utilised by Government. I refer to the area in Kerry between Knocknagoshel and Brosna. The older people there tell me that up to 20 to 30 years ago, when heavy rain came, it would be soaked up by the bogs and released slowly. That does not happen anymore, partly due to afforestation and vertical drainage, so huge volumes of water are coming into the basins there and causing the flooding downstream that occurred in Listowel just before the election. The Wild Woodbury project in Dorset in England cleans water, stores carbon and brings new wildlife habitats because the land is soaking up the water and filtering it. It is not enough on its own. There will obviously be hard engineering solutions as well but this needs to be considered in the Government's plans.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I can give a full response in writing but I agree that nature-based solutions are increasingly central to Ireland's adaptation policy. From my own experience, I know that examples are under way such as the wetland rehabilitation in the Shannon and Moy catchments. They are creating national flooding storage zones. I know we are under time constraints but I can send the Deputy the rest of the reply.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

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

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss funding for the breakfast club for St. Paul's SNS, Drogheda, County Louth.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss delays in waiting times for outpatient appointments with consultant orthopaedic surgeons in Cork.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss an application for port listing of Killybegs.

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

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

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the reduction in SNAs across schools in County Kerry.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the impact of the deemed disposal tax rule on savings and investment.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss redress for survivors of abuse in industrial and reformatory schools.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for increased resources for An Garda Síochána in the mid-west.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss regulatory and safety requirements for BESS installations and large-scale solar developments.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss holding of a State commemoration to mark 150 years since the escape onboard the *Catalpa* of six IRB prisoners of war from a British penal colony in Western Australia on 17 April 1876.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the capacity of child care provision in Cork North-Central.

Deputies Paul Murphy, Seán Crowe, Ciarán Ahern and John Lahart - To discuss the lack of sufficient SNA provision for a special school in Tallaght.

Deputies Aidan Farrelly, Naoise Ó Cearúil and Réada Cronin - To discuss emergency and capital works in respect of a school in Celbridge, County Kildare.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the need for neurodiversity early intervention classes in primary schools in Waterford.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss the return of the Midleton-Youghal rail corridor.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss access to Tramore Valley Park across the South Link Road.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the need to review Circular 0030/2014 with regard to the role of special needs assistants.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss delivery of a permanent special school in County Monaghan.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss solutions to antisocial behaviour and the use of flares at League of Ireland games.

The matters raised by Deputies Paul Murphy, Seán Crowe, Ciarán Ahern and John Lahart, John Paul O'Shea, Albert Dolan, Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire and Ruairí Ó Murchú have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Active Travel

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This is an issue of huge concern that I hope can be resolved fairly easily over the coming year. Tramore Valley Park is a fantastic new park that has been developed in the past couple of years. It was officially opened in 2019 and was practically opened a bit before. It is a repurposed civic amenity on what was effectively a dump, and it has been repurposed into an excellent park with many tracks and routes. The difficulty is that initially it was not accessible by foot at all. It could only be accessed by car before it was subsequently opened at one side on the Half Moon Lane side on the Douglas end and, subsequently, in the past year or two by the opening of a bridge to the Grange side. Probably the neighbourhoods it is closest to are the areas of Ballyphehane and Turners Cross. People in those communities are unable to access Tramore Valley Park except by car. It is simply not safe to access. It is not legal for pedestrians to access it. Access from that direction would be across the link road that connects the Kinsale Road roundabout to the city. The Minister might possibly be familiar with some of these areas.

It is causing huge frustration that this fantastic park and terrific amenity has been provided by Cork City Council and the people in these neighbourhoods are able to look across the road at it but are unable to reach it other than in their cars. On top of that, the car park is very often full because it is so popular. I like to use it myself, although sometimes I like to ration it because I was there so often during Covid because it was within my 5 km that I spent too much time there. It is a fantastic park but it is frustrating for people when they can only go there by car and then the car park is full, so what is needed is a connection. Ultimately, this can potentially connect right across through the potential greenways that will exist right across through Ballyphehane and Togher and potentially linking up to the viaduct, which will be potentially very beneficial for those communities and commuters but also from the tourism point of view. Here and now, there is that short distance that needs to be crossed - the link road to bring people from Ballyphehane, Togher and Turners Cross to allow them to get across to Tramore Valley Park by foot and by bike.

There was a small allocation in the most recent round of funding but I think it was only a couple of thousand euro. Realistically, it is not going to do a lot. I understand that sometimes the approach is to try to put in a budget line that can be built upon in the coming years. I am taking this opportunity to convey to the Minister the benefits of what is a small investment. There are a number of ways this could be done. I think there are some underpasses that would have been there in the past but I think it is potentially more likely as a bridge across this link road. This is something that has to be delivered. It is very badly needed. I do not think it would break the bank but it would open up this park. A lot of the focus on these kind of projects and these NTA projects is about ensuring that people are able to walk and cycle to be able to go to work but also to access amenities. That sums it up. This is potentially very beneficial for the communities in question. The NTA funding for this year has now passed but I hope that as the Minister looks to prepare next year's NTA allocations, he will work with the NTA to ensure that there is a much more substantial allocation so that we can properly advance this project and ensure access.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for raising this because it gives me an opportunity to look into it. I am a big supporter of active travel. This year, we will spend about €363 million across the country on active travel. We have already invested over €1 billion in these programmes.

I am aware that Tramore Valley Park is a tremendous facility but I am also aware of the frustrations raised by the Deputy, namely, that there is no pedestrian access from the Ballyphehane side. The allocation this year is significant in this sense in that it is an allocation of €4,000. We have made contact with Cork City Council about this. It is very aware of the missing link into Tramore Valley Park across the South Link Road. In fact the, council has submitted a proposal to the NTA to help to address the issue. The proposed Kinsale Road to Tramore Valley Park pedestrian-cycle connection would provide that improved pedestrian and cycle infrastructure on the Kinsale Road and the Mick Barry Road as well as a pedestrian and cycle bridge into Tramore Valley Park. What has been allocated now, the €4,000 to support the development of options and a preliminary design for this project, is the first step. Obviously, the project itself will cost more than that, but what the Deputy has identified is what we are finding across the country, namely, that really good parts of networks are being delivered and then the gaps are identified. Some of them are being planned out and delivered in full but, more and more, we are seeing those networks link up together. People do respond to them.

This gap has been identified. It is a prime example of where intervention would actually join those dots. The allocation has been made at €4,000 to do the preliminary design work and to look at the options. That comes in and we can look towards funding that project into 2027 because we have committed to a minimum of €360 million per year for the term of this Government. It is important to note that Cork County Council was allocated €27 million this year to support approximately 70 active travel schemes, including that proposed severance link and the issues at Tramore Valley Park. I am aware of this now. I encourage the Deputy over the course of the year to make sure that the local authority progresses that preliminary design and the options. We can get it in for a full funding application for next year.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I find the Minister's response encouraging. It seems he understands the benefits of the project and I hope he will look at it favourably when the more

fleshed-out proposal comes to him. I appreciate him saying €4,000 is significant in the sense that it represents a commitment. It is obviously not going to go very far in this particular year, even in terms of detailed design and so on. The council is not going to be in a position to engage a contractor or subcontractor. For that kind of money it will have to do it inhouse, and figure out some kind of plan in that regard. I hope it is in a position to do something like that.

I will be engaging with the city council to ensure it is able to advance design during the course of the year. From what the Minister is saying, it sounds as if from the discussions his Department has had with the local authority, what is anticipated is pedestrian access via a bridge adjacent to the Mick Barry Road. That is what is being looked at. There are various options in terms of tunnels and things like that and there probably were difficulties in terms of that, but realistically we are looking at a bridge. I welcome that. It is vitally important. I will continue to engage with Cork City Council.

In terms of the Minister's experience, perhaps he could give us a sense - it is difficult to say at this point – in terms of delivery. Is he reasonably satisfied that within the envelope that is there over the coming two or three years, there is scope to support a project like this in the next couple of years from within the allocation provided to the NTA?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I find the Minister's response encouraging. It seems he understands the benefits of the project and I hope he will look at it favourably when the more fleshed-out proposal comes to him. I appreciate him saying €4,000 is significant in the sense that it represents a commitment. It is obviously not going to go very far in this particular year, even in terms of detailed design and so on. The council is not going to be in a position to engage a contractor or subcontractor. For that kind of money it will have to do it inhouse, and figure out some kind of plan in that regard. I hope it is in a position to do something like that.

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Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As I said, I am very supportive of these projects. I said Cork County Council area but it was Cork City Council area that was allocated €27 million this year under the NTA's active and sustainable transport investment programme. What happens is the NTA will do the allocations. The draft allocations come to us. We have a very good active travel team within the Department but the local authorities are the critical link to make sure proposals they have are prioritised. That design work is really important and the options. It looks to me from what I have read that it is likely it will be the bridge option, but this is a very

early stage. I am confident with the allocation we have through the revised NDP that we will be able to continue to deliver these projects at scale, including this one.

Last year approximately 200 kilometres of cycling and walking routes were delivered across the country. Interestingly, in the coming days the NTA will publish last year's 2025 walking and cycling index for Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. We hope to see positive signs of that continued modal shift arising, in part from the improvements to the active travel network, because people are responding to it. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. We will keep an eye on it and I am sure he will keep in touch with me. As he said it is important we work with colleagues in the local authority to ensure they get those options and designs done and get them submitted to the NTA so they can be given consideration for funding next year to advance the project. The preliminary design and planning has to go through and then we can move towards funding. We have the funds to deliver these projects.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Paul Murphy: People power has forced the Government into a retreat on SNAs. That is extremely welcome. However, the underlying problem of the basis allocation of SNAs and the insufficient number of SNAs remains. This special school in Tallaght illustrates the problem precisely. It received a letter on 11 February saying its allocation would be reduced from the 2025-26 academic year. It was withdrawn on the same day, but the rationale presented is quite telling. It is based on primary care needs. That is the basis. In other words, it is primarily medical as opposed to other needs.

I quote, “based on the evidence presented at review, many references to multiple adult-to-learner ratios were noted. This is not in line with a rights-based, regulation-first approach,” the idea being that there were too many SNAs and staff members to assist these children, when these are children with profound difficulties who may often need multiple adults. I add to that that the environment is not a purpose-built space but a shared campus. There are 600 kids and students on this campus and many cars coming and going. I saw videos of buses arriving, kids trying to get off and cars pulling in and out. It is a dangerous situation where multiple staff members are needed to keep children safe. That needs to be taken into account.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Our issue is about a special school for special children. It is a good example of the uncertainty, fear and distress being created around this SNA issue. The school was told in writing it was losing an SNA and then it was told it was not. There were two emails, with one withdrawn in 40 minutes. The NCSE asked parents to fill in a form outlining the care needs of their child. It is a difficult form to fill in. It is about what is wrong with your child rather than what is right. If a parent fills in the form wrong, the child could lose his or her SNA; so no pressure. Parents were told forms were needed for review and then that they were not needed. Some 30 forms were left in the school; we have seen them. A signed parental consent form was needed and then not required. We are told this is a pause and that suggests this process will resume and the school could lose its SNA. The system that allocates SNAs is utterly opaque and parents, SNAs and many schools feel it is deliberately made that way. We need clarity and a defined approach that gives certainty. Parents should not have to fight every day for their special needs child.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I wish to look at one example in the same special school in Tallaght and the broader shift in the model of what we expect an SNA's role to be, and the struggles that the school and staff go through on a daily basis. This school has a student with type 1 diabetes and epilepsy. The child has increasingly complex needs and seizures approximately every fortnight. The school is dealing with all of this. The student cannot wear a glucose monitor or an insulin pump as his needs are so complex. He is non-verbal. He has no communication device or access to CDNT services. He is completely reliant on staff. In this case SNAs monitor his presentation and bloods and the only way they can do that is by taking a sample and intervening themselves. SNAs routinely support children with diabetes and will monitor bloods. That type of supervision is not possible in this case. Staff are increasingly anxious about taking on responsibilities which would usually be given to nurses. They are involved in decision making when it comes to this child's medical needs. There are serious concerns in the school about who is responsible and the school is looking for a nurse.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for his presence tonight. I wish to focus in on one particular aspect as well, that is, serious concerns regarding the credibility of the review process that was initiated. In the absence of nursing provision in the school, the school engaged in what was an extremely detailed and arduous SNA review process in an effort to secure additional SNA support. Deputy Crowe referred to this. Parents were asked to complete extensive questionnaires outlining in detail the significant and complex needs of their children. These are families we know are already under enormous strain. That documentation identified as part of the review process was not considered by the review panel. It is still sitting in the principal's office. Despite this, a determination was made to reduce that school's allocation. When it was challenged by the principal and pointed out it had made a determination without the full documentation, the decision was subsequently reversed. That alone really needs to be investigated. We all have a few other points to make in the second round.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I am always encouraged when we have cross-party Members bringing issues to the floor of the Dáil, and the sincerity of it.

At the outset, I know of the school the Deputies are referring to, and I have engaged with the principal previously on some issues. Deputy Lahart brought this to my attention last week as well. I will talk through the issues. I have a script that will be handed out, and Members can take that as read.

I want to talk through the issues. Deputy Lahart gave further information on an issue. Deputy Crowe mentioned 40 minutes between the taking and giving back of an SNA. I need further clarification from all of the Deputies on that. I want to understand this. We were in St. Michael's House in Baldoyle this morning. I have visited many special schools and I know the enormity of the work they do there and the huge complex care and medical needs of children across the system.

The work that is being done there is second to none in regard to the school leadership, teachers and SNAs. A lot of the SNAs, as Deputy Ahern pointed out, are doing enormous work in regard to it.

While the SNA review has been paused, we need to get under the bonnet in regard to this issue. I need to get an understanding of it. I am really concerned that, when you have special schools and the complex needs that are being presented in special schools, the school the Deputies referred to and every other one are going way above and beyond the call of duty in regard to the administration of it.

If it is possible, and when it is convenient to all four Deputies, I might convene a meeting with them. I would ask them to bring as much information as possible on the matter. I can give the stock answer the Deputies have received there but that is not sufficient in terms of what they are looking for. As I understand it, the Deputies' concern is about additional SNA support but also a particular SNA or one who may have qualifications. They are non-medical but they would have qualifications.

I want to be very clear. We understand what the challenges and the issues are. In the Deputies' closing contributions, they might dig a small bit deeper until they get to the exact medical needs that were presented but were not taken into account. I might take it that, when the letter was issued on 11 February, the principal returned documentation by email to the NCSE at that point and then the subsequent letter was withdrawn 40 minutes later. The Deputies might confirm that for me and, if it is possible at a convenient time for all four of them, we could meet, try to thrash it out and try to come, first of all, to an understanding of what the issues are. I have no difficulty because I believe a part of my job that is very fundamental is that I should be out looking at what is happening in special schools, and I do not have any difficulty in visiting that school either. I have engaged with the principal previously but maybe if the Deputies expand on that point in the short few minutes they have, I will try to respond to it. Then we could have a further meeting to expand on that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Minister of State and I would very much welcome the idea of a meeting. I also invite him to come and visit the school and meet with the principal, teachers, SNAs and so on.

On the bottom-line point, what happened in the 40 minutes between the letter removing the SNAs and the letter saying that no SNAs would be removed was that the principal contacted the NCSE to say that all the parents' questionnaires that the NCSE had asked the school to fill out, that the parents had gone to fill out, as explained, and that the NCSE had supposedly taken into account in making its decision could not have been taken into account because the school still had them and they were all still sitting there. We saw them when we visited the school. The principal still has them at this stage. That was what happened in the intervening 40 minutes, which raises a question about whether this applied elsewhere as well.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The other worrying thing is that I believe there is a parental consent form, and that was not taken up either. We can furnish the Minister of State with the information in relation to this case but it raises issues as to whether this is happening in other schools. I have never heard of this type of thing happening before now. What is worrying is the point Deputy Murphy made in relation to the idea that there were too many adults. We are talking about a special school and special circumstances. The replies that seem to be in the letter itself are really worrying. However, it is the wider issue: how many schools are impacted by the fact that the forms have not been collected?

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister of State for his engagement tonight. We would be delighted to meet. Regarding this particular medical issue, there are concerns around a lack of training for SNAs in dealing with issues like this. My colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, has brought in a Bill on emergency medical care training for SNAs but this is an ongoing issue. This is an emergency and something they have to deal with on an almost daily basis. There are concerns around liability if something goes wrong, and things will inevitably go wrong in these high-pressure, immediate, decision-making situations.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State for that and I would be very positive about meeting him. The first issue is the complex and high-risk needs of pupils, which were not considered by the review panel prior to the decision. That raises the credibility, transparency and integrity of the review process, unfortunately generally, because if it happened there, as previous Deputies said, where else has it happened? The school has been formally requesting access to nursing support since June 2025. During this time, the needs of the child in question have become more complex and safety risks have escalated. The board of management is not sure, for example, whether the school is covered from an insurance point of view because of the possible clinical needs of the student. That is it in a nutshell, along with all the other things my colleagues have said.

To finish, the Minister of State is very popular in the school. He did visit the school and following his visit, the school invested €2 million in the actual campus and this is one of the shames of the thing. That has not been forgotten by the school either.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In the few minutes available to me, I will say that I will meet with the Deputies and further engage with the principal as well because we did engage. I will go through that.

The worrying thing is that because there is one student or students within it - we will just say "students" - there is a medical need that is developing within the school and that has become more profound or needy. Is one of the issues that this was not taken into account? I will go back in relation to it.

I know that all the forms, including consent forms, are hard won in special schools because of the complexity of what has to be put on them. Parents have a lot of other challenges in regard to having children with profound needs and trying to meet those. That is something I will certainly look at.

Am I clear in saying that they are looking for a particular type of support within the school? When special schools are looked at, the ratio of staff to pupils is quite high because of the complex needs within the schools. The Deputies will know from working in their communities that some of the special schools are providing very high-end medical care as well within the school communities. It is not fair to say that there are ratios of 2:1. That can vary depending on the needs of the child.

What I will undertake is that I will meet with the Deputies. We could liaise with the principal and the school authorities as well during the meeting to get a sense of it. There is not much point in my standing up here, but we are committed to this and very serious about it. I am desperately serious about trying to do the right thing here and what I will do is undertake to

liaise with the Deputies and the school community. I am glad to see they had the bit of investment but we have to continue that investment in the overall sense. To get an understanding of this particular issue, I will engage with the Deputies and we will take it from there.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I am here tonight to highlight an issue that is causing real pain, distress and uncertainty for families right across Cork city and county. I refer to the unacceptably long waiting times for patients seeking to be seen as outpatients by a consultant orthopaedic surgeon in the South Infirmary Victoria University Hospital, SIVUH, in Cork. The SIVUH plays a vital role in delivering specialist orthopaedic care to people not just in Cork city but across the wider region. Every week, my office is contacted by patients, young people with sports injuries, older people waiting for hip and knee assessments and workers unable to return to their jobs due to chronic pain, all of whom are stuck in limbo waiting months and in many cases far longer than that, simply to be assessed at an outpatient clinic.

Behind every statistic is a person. It is that parent who cannot lift their child because of an untreated shoulder injury. It is that farmer who cannot get through a day's work because of a deteriorating hip. It is the older person whose mobility is declining while they wait to even begin the process towards surgery or treatment. Orthopaedic conditions are not minor inconveniences. They directly impact mobility, independence, mental health and the ability to work. When outpatient appointments are delayed, diagnoses are delayed. When diagnoses are delayed, treatment is delayed.

When treatment is delayed, conditions worsen, often becoming more complex and costly to treat. The simple reality is that demand for orthopaedic services in Cork has increased significantly. We have an ageing population, higher participation and support, and more people living longer with degenerative conditions, yet the resources allocated have not kept pace with that demand.

Consultants and front-line staff at the SIVUH are working tirelessly. They are not the problem. They are doing everything they can within the constraints placed upon them. However, the goodwill and dedication cannot replace adequate staffing levels, theatre capacity, clinic space and funding. We need targeted investment. We need additional consultant orthopaedic posts approved and filled. We need expanded outpatient clinical capacity. We need protected theatre time to ensure that when patients are assessed, they can be moved forward for surgery without delay. We need to ensure that diagnostic supports, such as MRI and radiology, are properly resourced, so bottlenecks do not simply move elsewhere in the system.

Early intervention is not just better for patients; it is more cost-effective for the health service. Treating conditions early prevents complications, reduces emergency admissions and supports people to remain independent and work independently in their communities. Patients in Cork deserve timely access to orthopaedic care. They should not have to travel long distances or consider private treatment because the public system cannot see the patient within a reasonable timeframe.

I call on the House to take this genuine request and insist that the HSE prioritise additional funding and workforce supports specifically for orthopaedic services at the South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital. A focused plan must be developed to reduce outpatient waiting lists and restore confidence in the system. I do not see this plan at the moment, which worries me. Pain should not be prolonged by process. Mobility should not be sacrificed for bureaucracy. No patient should be forgotten while waiting for care. We owe it to the people of Cork to act urgently. I ask the House to address this matter tonight.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I welcome the opportunity to address the House. The Government recognises that waiting times for many scheduled appointments and procedures are too long, not only in Cork, but in hospitals throughout the country. The multi-annual action plan approach was initiated in September 2021 to substantially reduce and reform hospital waiting lists and waiting times. Since the commencement of the action plan approach, the health service has seen significant progress in reducing the length of time patients are waiting, including a reduction of 56%, or 157,000, in the number of patients waiting over 12 months.

Orthopaedic services are provided in Cork by Cork University Hospital and South Infirmity Victoria University Hospital, with CUH being the trauma centre and South Infirmity providing elective procedures. I was interested to read that the waiting lists in CUH and the South Infirmity are like chalk and cheese. There are currently 199 patients waiting for an outpatient appointment at CUH and 7,444 patients waiting at the South Infirmity. Staffing at the South infirmity has increased by 232 whole-time equivalents since the end of December, from 804 to 1,033, an increase of 28%. The budget increased from €62 million in 2020 to €97 million in 2025, which is a significant increase of 56%. The Deputy can see that a lot of investment has gone in, although the demand is still significant.

The Government remains fully committed to increasing elective care capacity through the elective ambulatory care programme. This is being delivered in two phases: with a national network of surgical hubs in the first instance to meet medium-term demand and capacity and, in the longer term, a national network of elective treatment centres in Cork, Dublin and Galway. In Cork, construction of the surgical hub at CUH is well advanced and is expected to open in quarter 3 of this year. Once fully operational, it is anticipated that the hub will deliver annual activity of 8,000 day-case procedures, 5,700 minor operations and some 18,500 outpatient appointments.

The Deputy will know that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, published the capital plan today, and that €34.5 million was allocated to complete the surgical hub in Cork. That should make a significant difference. I was delighted to see that it will open in quarter 3 of this year. There are several hubs that are midway through construction, and the sooner we get them open, the better. They will not be affected by issues in the acute level 4 hospitals or, for example, by procedures having to be cancelled because of staffing. We can already see the impact they have made in Dublin.

Until the capacity is in place in the public system to meet the increased levels of demand being experienced, it is appropriate that we make use of all available additional capacity to ensure that patients have access to the care they need. Accordingly, the multi-annual action plan approach targets the delivery of additional capacity for patients in the public and private

systems through a co-ordinated approach by the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund. The NTPF works with hospitals throughout the country to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable, long-waiting patients.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State for her encouragement and engagement in the response. There is a glimmer of hope for orthopaedic patients in Cork. I know we had the fantastic publication of the service plan this week, where the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, announced €34 million for the surgical hub, which will allow capacity for up to 18,500 outpatient appointments. I hope that will reduce some of the orthopaedic waiting list for outpatient clinics. As the Minister of State said, it is currently at 7,444. I am glad this figure was brought before the House tonight because it outlines clearly that there is a big challenge in Cork to address the orthopaedic waiting lists.

I want to mention two people who have come to my office. I have received correspondence on them from the South Infirmity and the HSE. One person, a lady in her 80s, was referred for an urgent outpatient appointment, but she cannot even get an indicative date. A lady in her 60s has been to the GP twice to get a more urgent referral to the outpatient clinic. In both cases, the management of the hospital and the HSE still cannot guarantee appointments for my two constituents. I am doing my very best to represent them but, unfortunately, I cannot get an appointment time.

There is some glimmer of hope with regard to outsourcing theatre capacity in Cork to private hospitals over the coming months to cater for the long waiting lists while we wait for the surgical hub to open in CUH in quarter 3. I would encourage the Minister of State to engage with the HSE and ask it to facilitate some private capacity in private hospitals to deal with the emergent outpatient waiting list. It is chronic. To have 7,444 people waiting in Cork for a basic outpatient appointment for orthopaedics is unacceptable and must be dealt with as soon as possible.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Deputy for the manner in which he has raised this issue. I can give him a bit of good news. The HSE south-west region employs 12 whole-time equivalent consultant orthopaedic surgeons based at Cork University Hospital and the South Infirmity Hospital. One vacant whole-time equivalent post is due to be filled by March 2026, which should have an impact.

To return to the waiting list, in the last six months, 3,174 people have come onto the waiting list, and a significant number are waiting over 18 months. The Deputy might send on the details of the two cases that he raised, and we will see if we can do anything to expedite that. The quality of life of somebody who is waiting for orthopaedic surgery is very much impaired, especially people in their later years. Nobody can stand over a situation where people have to wait for that length of time. We will see if we can do anything to expedite that, and there might be a cancellation or something like that. It would make a big difference.

We will have the funding for the waiting list initiative. It will be in place and will make a significant difference. I have no doubt the South Infirmity will receive its fair share with regard to the 12 orthopaedic surgeons being put in place and the surgical hub being opened in the third quarter. I am happy to engage with the Deputy on the two cases he raised.

Tax Code

Deputy Albert Dolan: The deemed disposal tax on unrealised gains for exchange-traded funds, ETFs, is simply madness. We often speak in this House about opportunity, fairness and giving people a real stake in our economy. We need to ask ourselves honestly what kind of Ireland we are shaping through our current tax system. Do we want an Ireland where ordinary workers can build wealth slowly and steadily over time, where someone on an average income with €100 or €200 he or she can put into a savings account a month can participate in the markets and benefit from long-term growth? Are we content with a system where real tax efficiency is saved for the few who can afford complex advice and sophisticated structures? At the moment, when it comes to ETF investing, that is the signal we are sending. If a young person decides to invest modest savings into a diversified fund and hold it for the long term, they can be taxed on gains they have not even realised. They have not sold, they have not received income, they may not have even seen a cent in their account, yet they face a tax charge simply because time has passed. That cuts across a basic principle that we have in this country, that is, we tax income or gains when they are actually realised.

It also undermines compounding, which is how ordinary people build security. It is how small, consistent investments over 20 or 30 years turn into something meaningful; a deposit, a cushion, a sense of independence. It is vital to say that, as I understand it, approximately €66 million a year is raised from the deemed disposal tax. The Government is leaving a lot of money on the table by not allowing people to compound over time and actually tax the gain when people are ready to realise it. Taxing an unrealised gain is an unfair principle. As we all know, the markets can go any way, any day and nobody knows the better but the reality is that people who are patient and wait for the long term are rewarded. If we are serious about broadening ownership, spreading opportunity and building long-term capital in this country, we cannot penalise patience and discipline. We have to remember that we are in a global competition when it comes to capital markets and with the opportunities that exist at the moment. It is important to highlight as well that young people primarily see the benefits of investing in a pension from a tax efficiency perspective. The problem is that not everybody wants to wait until they are 66 years old to draw down money or to avail of the money they have accumulated. They want to be able to live life as and when they need to. They never know when a crisis or an opportunity might arise whereby they need to access their money. I think people want to have that freedom to be able to do so.

A fairer system would reward long-term investment, as opposed to penalising it. It would treat people consistently and give every worker a genuine chance to accumulate. It is time to reform this rule and build an Ireland where ownership is not concentrated in the hands of a few but is shared more widely across society.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank Deputy Dolan for raising this important issue of supporting savings and investment. I fully agree with everything he has said. We need to look at areas where we can incentivise wider participation in retail investment and to activate the €170-odd billion that is sitting idly on demand deposits in this country. According to the Central Bank of Ireland's retail investor participation report, published in December of last year, Ireland has one of the lowest levels of direct retail participation in capital markets in the EU. Encouraging retail investment is set out in the

programme for Government and is consistent with the work at an EU level on the savings and investment union. Ireland will be taking a leadership role in this regard during our Presidency of the EU Council later this year.

The deemed disposal rule is a part of the current taxation regime for investments in Irish-domiciled investment funds and life assurance products, as well as equivalent offshore funds and certain foreign life assurance products, and generally applies to ETFs, as Deputy Dolan has said. Under deemed disposal, tax is levied eight years after an investment is made and every subsequent eight years, regardless of whether a disposal has in fact occurred. The tax is levied on any gain in the value of the investment from the date of acquisition to the date of the deemed disposal. On the ultimate disposal of the investment, any tax paid is allowed as a credit against the final tax liability.

Surprisingly, I must admit that as it stands now, we do not have a full, clear picture of exactly how much deemed disposal generates annually in tax. That is something we are going to have to ask Revenue to figure out and come back with the precise details. However, I do believe we need to start thinking about the cost of not doing something and the opportunity missed out on. More favourable tax drives economic activity.

Prior to budget 2026, I advocated strongly to our then Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, that deemed disposal be removed in its entirety and that we reduce the associated tax rate to be in line with our capital gains tax rate. I accept it was easy for me to say, as I was not framing the budget, and a Minister for Finance has competing demands. To his credit, he did signal elements of the funds review recommendations to be actioned. Budget 2026, in addition to reducing the rate of tax that applies to these forms of investment, included a commitment to publish a roadmap for the taxation of retail investment as included in that funds review. The roadmap will set out an approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to further support retail investment while applying necessary and important anti-avoidance protections in a proportionate manner. It is expected to be published shortly. There was also a commitment in budget 2026 to launch a forum looking specifically at a savings and investment account product. That forum will kick off later in March, convened by the Tánaiste and me. Later this week, I will convene a round table with senior industry leaders to discuss the Ireland for finance strategy. I have no doubt that a supplementary item on the agenda will be how we mobilise people to look at better returns on their savings.

It is a concept that is easy to announce for headlines but the devil will be in the detail. Any product or package we introduce must be attractive, simple and something that the people want to participate in. It is vital that we get this right.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really appreciate the sentiment the Minister of State has delivered before this House. There is an opportunity here for the Government to send a clear signal that for people who are working and contributing to our society and who want to accumulate a security buffer or a cushion, we will support them to do so, not just for their pension but for when other things arise in life as well. I believe that the deemed disposal must go because I fundamentally believe it is unfair to tax somebody on an unrealised gain. I also agree that it is vital that whatever we put in place has to benefit people and work properly. In the UK they have the ISA-style saving account. In the US they have a Roth IRA account. These are unique

and novel ideas where you can give tax efficiency on smaller investment amounts or you can decide not to tax the capital gain or you can decide to allow people to accumulate more.

We have to acknowledge in this House that we do not have the same stock exchange here in Ireland that we once had. Our stock exchange is weak and companies are choosing to list on markets where they can access greater capital. We have to look at that. Perhaps it would make sense to incentivise people to invest in Irish companies. I believe the employment investment incentive scheme, EIIS, works really well but it is a very concentrated risk. You invest in a company with EIIS and it ultimately is a start-up with a higher probability of failing than a diversified fund. If you invest in a fund, you have an opportunity to spread your risk across multiple companies. I really do believe that if we encourage people to invest in the Irish stock exchange tax efficiently, we would see more Irish companies investing here in Ireland and raising capital in Ireland. We would also see Irish people being very proud to have a share and ownership in Irish companies.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy again for the opportunity to discuss this important topic.

While the Deputy's question focuses on one aspect of the current tax regime, it is clear that the overall approach to taxation of retail investments needs to be considered. Stakeholders including individual investors and industry participants have made their position on the current approach, including deemed disposal, clear. Capital markets provide an opportunity for savings to be more productive for both the individual and the wider economy. Taxation plays an important part in what has to be considered when looking at how to encourage retail investment.

As I alluded to in my opening remarks, the Department of Finance is closely examining the concept of a savings and investment account. It can provide framework, as the Deputy alluded to, for ordinary savers to benefit from the opportunities available through participation in the capital markets, but we must get the detail right. Those details are within the funds review recommendations. As a Government, we cannot be looking for reviews only not to implement their findings.

The roadmap on taxation of retail investment will be published shortly and will set out the intended approach to encourage retail investment in Ireland, including consideration of savings and investment accounts. I expect further discussions will be had on savings and investments as the development of a new approach to taxation of retail investment proceeds. I look forward to continuing engagement with the Deputy on these issues.

Sports Organisations

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome that the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, is here to answer this question. It is a very important issue. I think everyone has seen it or heard about it on the airwaves. A number of us were at the match in Oriel Park on Friday night. I like to make Dundalk FC's home games as much as I possibly can. The Louth derby is something you look forward to. We were there and it was good to have the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, there for the opening of a fabulous pitch with the new lights. It was provided by sports capital funding. It is fair to say that the deposit was paid by the Dundalk FC Supporters Trust, a group of Dundalk fans who have come together to be there in case anything is needed.

Dundalk FC has had its issues, as people have seen, over the past number of years. Now we think we are in a fairly positive place.

Obviously what happened on Friday night was an absolute disgrace. It needs to be called out. We all welcome that Dundalk FC and Drogheda United are working together. A 12-year-old boy was burnt badly. In saying that, it could have been worse. We know there is nerve damage and facial burns, and his clothes were burnt. He could have literally been up in flames. My thoughts go out to him. I commend the work of the Order of Malta. There was also violence in Clarke Station. The Garda has to be given whatever information there is. From a security point of view, the Garda has to review what needs to be reviewed and what can be improved. Security needs to be looked at. Everybody will tell you - I am sure the Minister of State has heard this before - that the problem is that minors cannot be patted down. Unfortunately, some people will use minors and some minors will attempt to take flares into games. We have all seen flares used. As much as the FAI might have a zero-tolerance approach, people have seen them. They are used for dramatic effect with lots of colour, etc. What was different in this scenario is that it was very organised and flares were used to burn a pitch. This has to be called out. It has brought the issue to a head.

It is vital that the Minister is meeting the FAI tomorrow. A solution has to be addressed. There have to be serious consequences. We could be talking about tens of thousands of euro worth of damage. As much as I welcome Drogheda United working with Dundalk FC, there is a necessity for Drogheda United to pay this money. We have to look at means of imposing a penalty. It is hard to call these guys "fans". A small number of them destroy everything for everyone else. It has to become utterly unacceptable. Their own peer group must not accept any element of this in any way. I have to say that the senior Minister, in saying "a plague on all your houses" and stalling or pausing funding for AstroTurf pitches, has not helped. We know that there has been underfunding of the FAI over many years. I do not think it was not helpful in any way. I hope the Minister of State is here to state that that will be rowed back on. I assume there is not a huge number of projects that fall into that bracket. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, need to work alongside the FAI and other stakeholders - in this case, Dundalk FC and Drogheda United - to find a real solution to something that is a problem across the League of Ireland, which does not have the money for security that English Premier League teams have.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this matter. What happened in Oriel Park on Friday evening was an abhorrent and criminal act. It involved taking flares to the stadium, setting them alight and throwing them onto the pitch. It led to a very tragic injury to a young 12-year-old boy. All of our thoughts are with him and his family for his recovery. Our thoughts are also with those who were distressed by what happened on the night. What we saw was criminal damage to a wonderful new facility. We must stamp out that behaviour. I know that the Garda is following up the criminal behaviour that took place on the night. I have no doubt it will do that thoroughly. We must all work to address these unacceptable instances. Unfortunately, this is not the first time we have seen them. It is incumbent on clubs, the FAI, the Government and community and political leaders to work together to achieve that. In that vein, I am disappointed not to see the Sinn Féin spokesperson for sport and Deputy Ó Murchú's constituency colleague, Deputy Joanna Byrne, with him this evening. It is often

common practice to do joint Topical Issues. It would have sent out a very strong message if they were both here, one from Dundalk and one from Drogheda, from the same party, and with Deputy Byrne also being the chairperson of Drogheda United, to provide leadership jointly on this issue. Deputy Byrne has made limited enough comments on this matter in the past few days. It would have been very helpful to hear from her tonight that Drogheda United will step up to the responsibility for the cost of repairing the damage to the pitch, as should be the case.

What happened marred what should have otherwise been a very positive night. I was glad to visit Oriel Park just the week after Dundalk FC was promoted. They won the First Division and were promoted to the Premier Division. I saw the great pride they took in that wonderful achievement. I discussed with the club that night the fact that their pitch needed to be registered for the Premier Division, and worked with them to make sure that work could be done. It was completed two matches into the season. Dundalk's first two matches were played away from home as a result of time it was taking. It was terrible to see what should have been a great night turn into what happened instead.

We have seen great progress. It is a really positive time for the League of Ireland. The Government backs football in Ireland wants to back the development of Irish football and the development of the league. That is why in the most recent budget we committed €3 million to develop academies to support young players and our clubs. We must ensure it is safe for all, in particular families, to attend these games. The announcement by the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, of a pause of funding to all League of Ireland clubs was made with this objective in mind. The decision was the Minister's and announced before consulting me as the Minister of State with responsibility for sport. I agree with him absolutely on the need to come down like a tonne of bricks to stamp out this behaviour. However, I do not believe we should collectively punish all clubs for the criminal behaviour of a small number of people participating in hooliganism.

We must come down forcefully on this behaviour. There must be consequences for the people carrying out these acts, and indeed, the responsible club. We must also make sure that clubs that are not responsible are supported and not affected by the recklessness of others. I look forward to meeting with the FAI with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, tomorrow to ensure that we can find a satisfactory way forward that achieves this objective.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Byrne has put out a statement. I have spoken to her many times on this. She calls out what was abject criminal activity. Everyone will be aware that Deputy Byrne is the co-chair of Drogheda United. People will also know that she called on the FAI to ensure that Ireland would not play genocidal Israel. On that basis, action has been taken by Drogheda United. That is being dealt with at the minute. It probably limits what Deputy Byrne can speak about, but she has 100% said that this has been an ongoing problem with the League of Ireland. I will tell the Minister of State what she told me on the day. We were both there in Oriel Park. The first thing she was worried about was getting to that child, which was the right thing to do, because she had been contacted by the parents. The next thing she queried was: what do you think is going to happen when I ask about League of Ireland funding, of which there has been a shortage over a number of years? I see this being thrown back as an excuse on why that money would not be spent. It sounds like the Minister of State is not in complete agreement with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. The Minister went over the top in saying, "plague on all your houses". I hope what he is doing is a shot across the bow.

There is a responsibility on the FAI, League of Ireland and clubs to find a solution to this. All information has to be provided to the Garda but legislative changes that need to be considered. The two Ministers would need to do work on that. There are legislative powers in Britain relating to those who would ever consider doing some of the actions that happened in Oriel Park.

Regarding families, I agree. I was contacted by one man who I know very well. He said that his daughter said, "I don't want to go to a game ever again." The daughter of another friend of mine, who is even younger, was doing ball girl. He said, "Imagine, she was over there." That is a rethink. That is not good enough. I hope those people will rethink. I hope the Minister, never mind worrying about myself and Deputy Byrne, would worry about the issue and a back track that should happen by him. Money needs to be supplied to the League of Ireland. The Minister of State agreed previously that there has been underinvestment over many years. I welcome this investment. We need to see more. We need to make sure that we work alongside the League of Ireland and the FAI to find a solution.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I absolutely agree with the Deputy that it has been fantastic to see people of all ages and families coming to League of Ireland matches and the growth both in Premier Division and First Division attendances, and indeed, as well as the introduction of a new third tier to the League of Ireland, which will happen imminently. That is something that we want to see encouraged. It is down to the quality of the product on the pitch as well. One of the side effects of Brexit has been that we are seeing our young players staying in the country. It is about the only benefit of Brexit that I can think of. Of course, there is a responsibility on all of us as a result to make sure that the pathways are put in place for those young players not only to be able to play within League of Ireland clubs until they are 18 years of age, but also to be supported to be able to become the best players they possibly can and to reach the highest level that they can in that process. That is why the Government on budget day is giving a vote of confidence to Irish football through the investment of €3 million in academies.

We must all collectively make sure that it is a safe environment. The Deputy is absolutely right. People will stop going to matches unless this is stamped out. That is our objective here. We want to support football. We want to support the continuing growth of the League of Ireland. We want to support our clubs. We want to ensure that it is a safe environment. We will work with the clubs and FAI as a national governing body to make sure that a satisfactory way forward is achieved that will deliver on that and will ensure the wonderful momentum that we have seen in Irish football and the League of Ireland is continued for the rest of this year, and indeed, into the years ahead.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A successful year for Dundalk FC as well.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.15 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 25 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.15 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 February 2026.